

Future of the PAB

From the Governance Review Paper:

Nominet does make provision for some participation by stakeholders in its affairs via the Policy Advisory Body. However, this body is not referred to in the constitution, and at least in theory it could be ignored by the Board. It would be logical for the body (such as the PAB) representing members in the governance to have a more substantial role, so that it can play a greater part in the overall governance. The composition of the Policy Advisory Body is itself dominated by members (ten out of eighteen). Furthermore, the rules governing the PAB appear to be subject to the approval of the Board (which is dominated by members of Nominet). These arrangements are not conducive to allowing other voices and constituencies to be heard.

The recent published governance review has highlighted several shortfalls within the Nominet structure that result in inadequate representation of the divergent Nominet stakeholder voices. One among these is the PAB. Having read the report, spoken with a variety of stakeholders and analysed previously published Nominet papers (Governance Review 2006, Composition of the PAB paper) I feel now is a good time to explore the future of the PAB.

I believe the current structure, scope and composition of the PAB represents several key issues:

1. Nominet's membership appears to have "electorate fatigue" with the PAB, which affects both its engagement with the PAB and the future quality and quantity of members standing for election
2. This in turn theoretically facilitates people standing for election on the basis of self-interest or voicing own opinions rather than that of the wider community for the long term good of Nominet, which can be reflected in a lack of diversity of appropriate experience.
3. PAB discussions can focus on very specialist topics, rather than on broad-interest, strategic policies. These often veer toward rather pedantic and operational considerations and away from the vision and mission of the PAB.
4. The PAB in its current format is viewed by some as "irrelevant", "lacking teeth", while its role is described as "navel gazing" with some members reporting a lack of "payback" for PAB involvement (2009 Nominet governance review) – this again reflected in election statistics. Its lack of visibility and the lack of stakeholder understanding of the PAB's role and purpose is underscored by a study undertaken at Internet World, which found that out of 250 interviewees, just under 8% had heard of the Nominet PAB.
5. The PAB's scope is constantly in flux and its remit is too fluid. This lack of structure and the ambiguity of the PAB's stated purpose could cause the PAB to become a dumping ground for undesirable issues, which can be discussed in a "harmless" environment for appearance's sake.

6. The PAB currently fails to represent several key stakeholder groups (e.g. advertising, charity, registrars (small, medium and large), “silver surfers”, online retail)
7. The PAB does not engage in meaningful, formalized stakeholder research/surveying.

It is therefore, my conclusion that the PAB in its current format and composition does not adequately meet the needs of the organization, nor of the membership. I do not believe that it is representational of the current .uk namespace nor of its commercial uses. The PAB, in my opinion, is in danger of becoming at best, irrelevant, and at worst, obsolete if it remains inert. It would be great to grab the opportunity posed by the governance review and to re-evaluate the PAB as a value adding construct by exploring meaningful and realistic ways to improve the PAB’s structure, purpose and profile so that it is prepared to meet the challenges posed by likely changes to Nominet, its members and the constantly evolving .uk namespace.

I would like to suggest a working group to consider the following:

1. The remit of Nominet’s PAB
2. A clear vision and mission for Nominet’s PAB, for the Board’s consideration
3. A recommendation for future PAB composition (elected/appointed)
4. Alternative PAB structures for suggestion, for example:
 - a. Subgroups/working groups
 - b. Expertise pool
 - c. Member segment representatives (declared affiliations)
5. Benchmarking against relevant advisory committees (e.g. ccTLDs, organizations from governance review)
6. Collaborating with Nominet HR on architecting PAB Job descriptions and requirements
7. Visibility of the PAB
 - a. Stakeholder engagement for the PAB
8. Target-setting and KPIs for PAB