The Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) makes the Internet work better by producing high quality, relevant technical documents that influence the way people design, use, and manage the Internet. But to be effective, those documents must be informed by operational realities. So in 2014, the Internet Society’s Deployment and Operationalization Team launched a three-phase project designed to foster more open communication between the operator community and the IETF to help refine requirements—and bolster engagement.

Conducted over the first half of 2014, the first phase of the project was a survey of the operator community. Phase two began in the second half of the year and included analyzing the survey responses and additional feedback and compiling it into an IETF Internet-Draft. The draft is divided into three main sections: Survey Respondents, which details who took the survey and their current level of IETF participation and knowledge; Potential Challenges, which identifies the areas and items that may be keeping operators (or others) from participating in the IETF today; and Possible Solutions, which introduces ideas for making the IETF more open to greater participation to a new audience.

Of the 350 survey participants, exactly half of the respondents do NOT currently participate in the IETF at all; nearly one third participate in the IETF via mailing lists only, while only 18% are active in the IETF via both mailing lists and in-person meetings. The group overwhelmingly identified as technical, with the vast majority operators. Respondents identified time, culture, finances, and awareness as potential challenges. And they suggested increased communication, broader outreach, and greater inclusion as possible solutions to encouraging IETF engagement.

Kicked off in November 2014 at IETF 91, the project’s third phase, which focuses on discussion and action, is ongoing. The initial conversations that began at IETF 91 have evolved into a road show of in-person discussions with operator groups around the globe as well as online discussions via the “synergy” mailing list. The goal: discuss potential challenges, identify and evaluate possible solutions, take action and celebrate quick wins.