

STANDARDS
VERSUS
SPECIFICATIONS

Standards Versus Specifications

The term “standard” has been loosely applied to any agreed-upon way of doing things. However, there is a big difference in the way the standard has been developed and will be maintained, and often a big difference in who has agreed upon the contents of the standard.

There are essentially three principal types of standards:

Accredited standards generally have two important characteristics. They are developed and adopted as standards through an open consensus process, under the guidelines of national or international standards bodies. These procedures ensure that the concerns of all interested parties will be heard and addressed. In addition, accredited standards tend to distinguish more clearly the difference between requirements (normative elements) that must be met to conform to the standard, and descriptive material (informative elements) that provide additional information, but do not contain requirements. ISO, IEC, ANSI and other national standards bodies develop standards through this consensus process. Accredited standards are publicly available from the respective standards bodies.

Industry specifications often take the form of formalized industry practices. An example of this would be SWOP (Specifications for Web Offset Publications), which is a standardized printing specification. These specifications generally are developed by a group within the industry, but there are no formal guidelines or procedures that ensure that the work is open to any interested party or open to review and comment during the development process. Such groups are not bound to consider or respond to comments on the work. However, such publications are generally publicly available and can be referenced in accredited standards.

De facto standards are usually developed and owned by a single group or company, and gain credibility as the result of the use of a critical mass of people. The development of such work is done within a closed group and is not open to the consensus process. In addition, the resulting standards are subject to change, without notice, by the owner of the work. In some cases, the use of these standards requires payment of a licensing fee. PostScript is an example of a de facto standard. In many cases, de facto standards are developed by a company to serve a specific product line and target market.

This handbook focuses on the work of accredited standards bodies, specifically ISO, IEC and ANSI.

Most agree that the development of accredited standards is important to facilitate international exchange and trade. However, one complaint often heard is that their development takes too long. In general, this work is done by industry volunteers, whose companies support their participation in the standards development process as an important investment of time and manpower for the benefit of the company. It is often the case that the length of time it takes to develop a standard is directly proportional to the technical manpower available to do the work. So, if you are one who is unwilling to provide some of the manpower, it is hard to defend the complaint that standards development “takes too long.”