

ICANN CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST (EOIs)

New gTLD Process: Applicant Evaluation Teams (Technical and Financial Evaluation)

2 April 2009

1. Introduction

Generic top-level domains (gTLDs) are an important part of the structure of the DNS. Examples of existing gTLDs include .BIZ, .COM, .INFO and .JOBS. A complete listing of all gTLDs is available at <http://www.iana.org/gtld/gtld.htm>. The responsibility for operating each gTLD (including maintaining the authoritative registry of all domain names registered within that gTLD) is delegated to a particular organization. These organizations are referred to as "registry operators" or "sponsors," depending upon the type of agreement they have with ICANN.

Following years of community-driven policy development that recommended the introduction of new gTLDs, ICANN is preparing a process to receive applications to operate new generic top-level domain (gTLD) registries. This new program is described in detail at <http://www.icann.org/en/topics/new-gtld-program.htm>. ICANN has published a draft Applicant Guidebook at <http://www.icann.org/en/topics/new-gtlds/comments-2-en.htm> that provides detailed information about the process for applying to operate a new gTLD. The Applicant Guidebook will constitute the request for proposals (RFP) for new gTLDs.

The Applicant Guidebook is still in development and ICANN is seeking public comment on draft versions. Although ICANN has prepared a revised Applicant Guidebook, the information in the Guidebook is not yet settled. While that work goes forward, steps are being taken to assure there will be a robust, effective and timely evaluation process in place to review applications once the round is launched. Retaining competent evaluation panels with sufficient expertise, resources and geographic diversity is key to an effective launch. Therefore, steps such as the publication of this call for expressions of interest are being taken now, even as final decisions regarding the application and evaluation process are still being considered.

ICANN is now seeking expertise to enable the formation of panels to evaluate applications against the criteria published in the Applicant Guidebook. Expressions of Interest (EOIs) in providing management and evaluation services are sought in the following five areas of assessment:

1. Has the applicant demonstrated their technical capability to run a registry for the purpose specified in the application as defined by the criteria in the Applicant Guidebook?
2. Has the applicant demonstrated their financial and organizational capability as defined by the criteria in the Applicant Guidebook?
3. In the context of the criteria specified in the Applicant Guidebook, does the gTLD represent a geographical name, and if so, have authenticated support from the appropriate government?
4. Will the introduction of the proposed gTLD string likely result in user confusion with (i.e., due to similarity with) (i) a reserved name; (ii) an existing TLD; or (iii) other proposed gTLDs?

5. In the context of resolving contention among two or more applicants for the same or similar gTLD string, does an applicant claim to represent a community and if so, satisfy the criteria for prevailing in a comparative evaluation?

ICANN also seeks information from potential providers regarding estimation of reasonable timeframes for each type of evaluation (e.g., per string or per application) and anticipated costs associated with conducting the evaluation. The cost and time to process an application are critical factors that must be carefully considered in the information provided by the interested parties.

This EOI describes the criteria and requirements for providers that seeking to perform the first and second of these four assessments for ICANN, i.e., with respect to Applicant Evaluation for responses to technical and financial criteria. Providers should respond by 11 June 2009 23:59 UTC with the required information that is described below. From the information provided, ICANN will invite respondents to exchange additional information.

Contracts will not be awarded from this EOI, but ICANN expects to use the responses to identify entities capable of providing the various evaluation roles and better refine the costs and time frames for conducting evaluation as part of the new gTLD process.

2. Background

The [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](http://www.icann.org) (ICANN) is a not-for-profit, multi-stakeholder, international organization that has responsibility for Internet Protocol (IP) address space allocation, protocol identifier assignment, generic (gTLD) and country code (ccTLD) top-level domain name system management, and root server system management functions. ICANN's mission is to coordinate, at the overall level, the global Internet's systems of unique identifiers, and in particular to ensure the stable and secure operation of these systems. It coordinates policy development reasonably and appropriately related to these technical functions, consistent with ICANN's core values. Among these values are:

- Preserving and enhancing the operational stability, reliability, security, and global interoperability of the Internet;
- Where feasible and appropriate, depending on market mechanisms to promote and sustain a competitive environment;
- Introducing and promoting competition in the registration of domain names where practicable and beneficial in the public interest; and
- Seeking and supporting broad, informed participation reflecting the functional, geographic, and cultural diversity of the Internet at all levels of policy development and decision-making.

New gTLDs have previously been established based on proposals that were submitted to ICANN during two specific application periods. Materials from the 2000 application round, which led to the delegation of .AERO, .BIZ, .COOP, .INFO, .MUSEUM, .NAME and .PRO, are available at <http://www.icann.org/tlds/app-index.htm>. Materials from the 2003 round, which led to the delegation of .ASIA, .CAT, .JOBS, .MOBI, .TEL and .TRAVEL, are available at

<http://www.icann.org/tlds/stld-apps-19mar04>. Applications received during both of these rounds were evaluated on the basis of instructions and criteria contained in the respective RFPs published by ICANN. Applicants that were successful went on to negotiate and enter gTLD agreements with ICANN.

ICANN's Board approved policy that guides this implementation states that:

- Applicants must be able to demonstrate their technical capability to run a registry operation for the purpose that the applicant sets out, and
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate their financial and organisational operational capability.

In execution of this direction, ICANN is now seeking one or more providers to supply independent evaluation teams to assess each applicant for a new gTLD on the basis of the specified:

- technical and operational criteria, or
- financial criteria

as defined in the Applicant Guidebook.

(Note: Separate RFIs are being issued for experts to assist with the assessment of geographic names, comparative evaluation and string similarity).

One evaluation team will be asked to evaluate the applications against the technical and operational criteria specified in the Applicant Guidebook. The other team will be asked to evaluate the applications against the financial criteria specified in the applicant Guidebook. There are areas where each evaluation considers applicant responses to the other. So, for example, the answer to the financial question regarding start-up costs must consider the response to the operational question regarding proposed network architecture. Therefore, responses to this request to perform both the technical and operational evaluation, and the financial evaluation will be considered. In the alternative where the response proposes to perform one of the evaluations, the response must explain the method for coordinating with another evaluator.

The number of applications that will be received is unknown; however it is estimated to be several hundred or more. It is therefore vital that the provider be able to convene – or have the capacity to convene - as many panels of evaluators as is necessary to evaluate all the applications, in a timely and complete manner. For example, the provider may wish to consider the process it will use to evaluate applications, and how that process will scale if 100, 250, 700, 900 or more applications are received. There should be a statement describing how 2000 applications would be processed (even though this is thought to be highly unlikely). The provider should also consider how the number of applications may impact evaluation timeframes and costs of evaluations.

It is expected that there will be more than one application round. Therefore, there may be an opportunity for cyclical work in evaluating applications. In the longer term, the work may become continuous with new gTLD applications being submitted and evaluated at any time.

In addition, given the international nature of the ICANN community and the likelihood that applications will be received for both ASCII and non-ASCII new gTLDs, it will be important that the provider can convene – or have the capacity to convene - globally diverse panels familiar with internationalized domain names (IDNs). A non-ASCII domain name, also called an IDN, is

one that utilizes characters from the full Unicode set rather than just the “letter-digit-hyphen” characters specified in the original DNS standards. Using IDNs, for example, make it possible to add TLDs in Arabic, Hebrew, Cyrillic and other scripts. For more information on IDNs, please visit <http://www.icann.org/en/topics/idn/>.

3. Evaluation Process

The date on which applications will be accepted has not yet been set. The Initial Evaluation of the applications will begin immediately after ICANN concludes a check for administrative completeness. It will be the role of the provider(s) selected through this EOI to determine whether an applicant has the requisite technical and business/financial/operational capability to operate a registry.

One provider may be selected to conduct both the technical/operational and the financial evaluations. Alternatively, two providers may be chosen to conduct these evaluations.

The evaluation teams will perform their review based on the information provided by each applicant in its application. There will be an “Initial Evaluation” and, for those applicants who fail that phase, and “Extended Evaluation.” There may be one round of questions and answers from the evaluators to the applicants to clarify information contained in the application. Each of the evaluation teams will report whether an applicant satisfies (“passes”) this part of the Initial Evaluation. These reports will be available in the online application system. At the conclusion of the Initial Evaluation period, ICANN will post a notice of all applications that have passed. Depending on the volume of applications received, ICANN may post such notices in batches over the course of the Initial Evaluation period.

Applicants that do not satisfy the criteria during the Initial Evaluation have the option of selecting an Extended Evaluation, which may be at an additional cost to the applicant. If the applicant does not expressly request an Extended Evaluation, the application will not proceed further. The Extended Evaluation period allows for an additional round questions and answers from the evaluators to the applicants to clarify information contained in the application. The reviews performed in Extended Evaluation do not introduce additional evaluation criteria.

If an application does not pass the Extended Evaluation, it will not proceed further. A detailed description of the evaluation process is provided in Module 2 of the draft Applicant Guidebook.

Before a new gTLD can be awarded, the applicant must meet the technical/operational criteria and the financial criteria, as well as meet other criteria.

4. Criteria

A. General

ICANN anticipates expressions of interest (i.e., answers to questions posed in section 5 below) from providers to conduct the evaluation of applications against the technical and/or financial requirements specified in the Applicant Guidebook must meet the following criteria:

- The provider must be an internationally recognized for-profit or non-profit organization with significant expertise and experience in the evaluation and assessment of the technical and/or financial components described below.

- The provider must be able to convene – or have the capacity to convene - globally diverse panels and be able to evaluate applications from all regions of the world, including proposals for IDN gTLDs.
- The provider should be familiar with the IETF IDNA standards, Unicode standards, relevant RFCs and the terminology associated with IDNs.
- The provider must be able to scale quickly to meet the demands of the evaluation of an unknown number of applications. At present it is not known how many applications will be received, how complex they will be, and whether they will be predominantly for ASCII or non-ASCII gTLDs. As a result, the provider should describe how it will organize and field panels to evaluate 100, 250, 500, 700, 900 or more applications. There should be a statement describing how 2000 applications would be processed (even though this is thought to be highly unlikely). It must also make clear the time-frame necessary for it to complete a thorough and careful evaluation of each application, for each of these potential numbers of applications that may be received.
- The provider must be able to evaluate the applications during the Initial Evaluation period and, as necessary, during the Extended Evaluation period with respect to technical/operational or financial issues.
- The provider may engage technical, financial, linguistic or other experts to assist in the evaluation and review of the applications. Panelists will be required to disclose any potential conflicts of interest that may arise during the period of the evaluation. The provider selected and each of its evaluators must execute a confidentiality agreement with regard to material contained in the applications under review.
- The provider should be comfortable that the Applicant Guidebook is comprehensive and satisfactorily expresses all selection criteria. Because the provider will likely be selected before the Applicant Guidebook is finalized, it will have the opportunity to review the text to ensure that the basis for the evaluation is clear. The criteria must be objective, measurable, publicly available at the outset of the evaluation process, and described fully in the Applicant Guidebook. All applications will be evaluated against these criteria.
- The evaluation process for selection of new gTLDs will respect the principles of fairness, transparency and non-discrimination.

B. Technical

The evaluation panels that comprise the team will review the technical components of each application against the criteria contained in the Applicant Guidebook, in order to determine whether the applicant is technically capable of operating a new gTLD registry. The overarching concern in the introduction of any new TLD is to ensure that it does not negatively affect the stability and integrity of the DNS. The technical evaluation panel may therefore raise issues that relate to the stability and security of the DNS, as pertaining to a specific application.

Each evaluation panel must have the ability, in the aggregate, to evaluate applications based on the criteria below.

Each member of an evaluation panel must have the requisite skills and experiences developed through the implementation, management and design of complex systems and demonstrated, at both standard-protocol and operational levels, understanding of the components, process and features of the DNS.

Specifically (to restate the current version of the Applicant Guidebook), each evaluator identified by the provider must demonstrate, to the satisfaction of ICANN, the ability, based upon experience and education, to review system designs while considering the following:

- General description of proposed facilities and systems, including all system locations;
- The specific types of systems being used, their capacity and interoperability, general availability and level of security. Further consideration of buildings, hardware, software systems, environmental equipment and Internet connectivity;
- Registry-registrar model and protocols;
- The requirement to keep information synchronized across the various aspects of a gTLD's operations;
- Implications of scalability, impact on caches not under registry control, DNSSEC operations, and DNS reliability and scalability in the absence of DNSSEC;
- Database capabilities, including database software, size, throughput, scalability, procedures for object creation, editing, and deletion, change notifications, registrar transfer procedures, grace period implementation and reporting capabilities;
- Zone-file generation, including procedures for changes, editing by registrars and updates;
- Address frequency, security, process, interface, user authentication, logging and data back-up;
- Zone file distribution and publication: locations of name servers, procedures for and means of distributing zone files to them;
- Billing and collection systems: technical characteristics, system security, accessibility;
- Backup: frequency and procedures for backup of data, hardware and systems used, data format, escrow or other data back-up features and procedures for retrieval of data/rebuild of database;
- Data escrow: escrow arrangements, data formats, insurance arrangements and backup plans for data recovery;
- Publicly accessible Whois service: address software and hardware, connection speed, search capabilities and coordination with other Whois systems;
- System security and physical security: technical and physical capabilities and procedures to prevent system hacks, break-ins, data tampering and other disruptions to operations;

- Peak capacities: technical capability for handling a larger-than-projected demand for registration or load, and effects of load on servers, databases, back-up systems, support systems, escrow systems, maintenance and personnel;
- System reliability: define, analyze and quantify quality of planned service;
- System outage prevention: procedures for problem detection, redundancy of all systems, backup power supply, facility security and technical security; the availability of backup software, operating system and hardware, the system monitoring, technical maintenance staff and server locations;
- System recovery procedures: procedures for restoring the system to operation in the event of a system outage, both expected and unexpected, redundant/diverse systems for providing service in the event of an outage and describe the process for recovery from various types of failures, training of technical staff who will perform these tasks, the availability and backup of software and operating systems needed to restore the system to operation and the availability of the hardware needed to restore and run the system, backup electrical power systems and the projected time for system restoration, procedures for testing the process of restoring the system to operation in the event of an outage, documentation kept on system outages and on potential system problems that could result in outages; and
- Technical and other support for registrars, Internet users and registrants: technical help systems, personnel accessibility, web-based, telephone and other support services to be offered; time availability of support and language-availability of support.

C. Financial

The evaluation panels that comprise this team will review each application against the relevant business, financial, and organizational criteria contained in the Applicant Guidebook, to determine whether the applicant is capable of operating a registry.

Each evaluation panel must have the ability, in the aggregate, to evaluate applications based on the criteria below.

Each member of an evaluation panel must have the requisite skills and experiences developed through business experience, industry knowledge, and education that will enable them to evaluate the financial strength of each applicant and the viability of the applicant's business model for operating the registry.

Specifically (to restate the current version of the Applicant Guidebook), each evaluator identified by the provider must demonstrate, to the satisfaction of ICANN, the ability to evaluate applications based on business experience, industry knowledge, and education that will enable them to evaluate the financial strength of each applicant and the viability of the applicant's business model for operating the registry, including an understanding of the following:

- The full description of registry services to be provided and the associated costs;
- An outline of anticipated capital requirements and the availability of funds to meet these requirements;

- Business and financial model, including pricing and revenue assumptions, expense assumptions, capital expenditure projections and the like;
- The availability and cost of capital;
- A resource requirements projection; and
- Risk analysis, a disaster recovery plan and contingency provisions. In particular, securing a financial instrument to ensure funding of on-going registry operations for a period of time in case of failure.

5. Response to EOI Requirements

Interested parties should respond to each of the eight subject areas below. Responses will be gauged on the basis of the criteria defined in this document and Applicant Guidebook.

Candidates desiring to express their interest to ICANN in the Applicant Evaluation for financial and technical criteria in the new gTLD program should provide the following:

1. A Statement of Suitability that includes a detailed description of the candidate's ability to perform the work described in the previous section which demonstrates knowledge, experience and expertise, including but not limited to projects, consulting work, research, publications and other relevant information.
2. Evidence of the candidate's knowledge of and familiarity with ICANN, its role, structure and processes, including the Internet's Domain Name System (DNS) and past gTLD application and evaluation rounds.
3. The *curriculum vitae* for each person proposed by the candidate to manage or lead work on this project, the candidate's selection process for persons being proposed to ICANN, and explanation of the role that each named person would play. Also indicate the experience and availability of proposed panelists. The submission should identify any potential conflicts that would prevent them from making an objective evaluation of any application and how the conflict can be addressed.
4. A warrant that the candidate, if selected, will operate under ICANN's non-disclosure agreement and standard consulting agreement, and that neither the candidate nor any individual who might be engaged to work on this project (whether or not declared pursuant to (4) above) has a known conflict of interest.
5. A statement of the candidate's plan for ensuring fairness, nondiscrimination, avoiding conflicts of interest, and transparency.
6. Considering the nature of the expertise necessary for evaluating applications for technical/operational criteria and financial criteria at a global scale, a statement of the candidate's plan for ensuring that the evaluation teams will consist of qualified individuals and that the candidate will make every effort to ensure a consistently diverse and international panel.

7. Project and operational timelines.

- a. A proposed work schedule for planning and starting panel operations including key milestone dates, consistent with but more detailed than those specified in this document.
 - b. Projected targets for the time frame necessary for it to complete a thorough and careful evaluation of all applications. Identification of volumes of applications that can be processed in those timeframes and at what volumes batch processing of applications might be necessary.
8. Costs. The candidate should provide a detailed statement of the proposed fee structure, including any variable provisions that may be based on the number of applications received, the number of IDN applications, or the number of Extended Evaluations that are requested.

6. Deadline

Interested providers must submit expressions of interest by email to app-eval-eoi@icann.org by 11 June 2009 23:59 UTC. A confirmation email will be sent for each response received.

Also send queries regarding this request to app-eval-eoi@icann.org will be accepted until 5 June 2009, 23:59 UTC. Queries and answers will be posted to a page on the ICANN web site dedicated to this purpose.

If selected, the successful candidate is expected to be ready to assist ICANN with finalization of the Applicant Guidebook, prepare for the evaluation phase, and be ready to start the evaluation within four months after release of the final Applicant Guidebook.

Thank you for your interest.