

Shibboleth Support Discussion
InCommon Steering Committee
11 September 2017
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I thought it would be useful to have an open discussion about Shibboleth support coming out of a recent announcement by the project.

Recently, the following e-mail was sent to the Shibboleth Announce email list and was subsequently discussed on the InCommon participants email list:

Dear all,

As many of you will be aware, the Shibboleth Consortium continually seeks to strengthen its financial sustainability via encouraging users of the software to join the Consortium and contribute to the costs expended on development, support and maintenance.

Over the last 12 months the Consortium Board has introduced new measures to ensure that the baseline costs of operating Shibboleth are met, whilst also investigating new initiatives to build on our financial position so as to increase development efforts, meeting the evolving requirements of the user community.

One such initiative, on which the Board has consulted with the Consortium Members, is to revise the model by which support is provided to users of the Shibboleth software at the direct expense of the Consortium. In order to lessen the burden on the core development team, and enhance the value of Membership, the model is being revised such that only Members of the Consortium will be eligible to receive support from the core development team using time paid for through the Consortium. Non-members will still have access to all existing mailing lists and the issue reporting system, however support queries raised by nonmembers will only be answered by members of the community, or, if by the core development team, by that person on their own time and not with time chargeable to the Consortium. A definitive date for this change has not yet been set, however the Board will give notice before introducing the revised model.

How the new Support Model will work There will be no increases in Membership fees to facilitate this new model. This change aims to enhance the value of Membership to existing Members, whilst encouraging non-member users of Shibboleth to join and simultaneously enable the core development team to spend more time on the development and maintenance of the software and documentation.

The mechanism by which this revised support model is expected to operate is two-fold:

Using a specialised workflow in our existing JIRA service to offer direct developer access. We are exploring the specifics of this, particularly the exact visibility of support issues and responses to the broader community, but we anticipate offering both “public” and “private” options for Members to use depending on their needs. Using JIRA will allow us to formalise

the delivery of support, particularly on more complex topics. A new invite-only Slack channel established for members that wish to ask simple questions in a more casual manner, subject to developer availability. We wish to experiment with this approach and will revisit whether a mailing list for informal member support is warranted.

As part of this transition, we will be enhancing our web presence and mailing list footers to better document our support options and clarify where those seeking support should turn, in particular when that involves their local federation or NREN.

Service Level Commitment The Consortium does not offer a formal service level commitment today, but is prepared to further incentivise Membership by offering some general guarantees on response time to the extent possible, when team members are available. The formal, JIRA-based, support mechanism will be subject to a 2 business day guarantee of acknowledgment and a 4 business day guarantee of some form of substantive response to the issue raised (general assessment, request for more specific log detail, etc.). This guarantee will not extend to the Slack channel.

Since holiday schedules vary by organisation and individual, the development team will endeavour to identify any gaps in availability via a Member-visible calendar.

Benefits The Consortium Board believes that a balance is needed between maintaining the open community support model intrinsic to open source while at the same time recognising that the level of support offered by the development team has a high inherent value, and a cost to the Membership when offered to everybody at our Members' expense.

The Board believes that maintaining an open support forum while adding a more formal support channel for Members directly to the development team will better strike that balance, while adding value for Members and in the long run may save developer time that will be used to enhance documentation, and the general support and maintenance of the software.

*Kind regards,
Shibboleth Consortium Board*

Some more background:

- In 2015, the Shib Board and consortium lowered the fees for becoming a principal member, in hopes of generating more revenue and richer guidance. This did not materialize and in fact, ended up reducing revenues
- In late 2015, expenditures were reduced by 20% to slow down the rate at which reserves were being drained.
- In late 2016, the Shib board increased fees for all membership levels and types so that the project could avoid financial peril in 2017.
- In 2017, a series of webinars were conducted by Shib board members. The goal was to educate the Shib user community to the financial state of the project and to solicit ideas for changes to the business model so that financial sustainability could be achieved.
- Some new members joined the Shib Consortium, helping to close the 2015 created gap.

- In 2017, the Shib board worked with existing consortium members to develop a changed support model (described in the text above).
- Shibboleth continues to be asked to take on new features and at an increased rate.

Some questions/comments that have arisen in the InCommon community have been:

- What is InCommon going to do to support Shibboleth?
- I thought that InCommon's being a member of the consortium means that my institution is a member of the consortium.
- Does this mean that InCommon's expectations of practices (efficacy of software support) might change?

These are gleaned from the participant's email list so can't be considered as representative of the whole.

Some ad-hoc, informal conversations have generated the idea of InCommon developing a support channel and business model.

Here's an incomplete rundown of some facts:

- The Shibboleth Project needs more resources to continue to meet the needs of those who depend upon the software.
- The Shibboleth Consortium Board is actively exploring ways to improve the value proposition of membership and raise new revenues.
- There is some, but we don't know how much, concern among InCommon participants about what this might mean re: their support needs for Shibboleth.