

Testimony from Peter F Brown, Chair of the Management Council and Board of the Identity Ecosystem Steering Group (IDESG Inc.)

Firstly let me thank the organizers of this hearing for extending to me an opportunity to present information about the IDESG and its work.

I offer this testimony in a personal capacity: the nature of IDESG makes it difficult to do otherwise. I am nonetheless an independent consultant – with no “dog in the fight” regarding IDESG’s work – and with a background of nearly three decades on the professional staff of European governmental organizations, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament where impartiality and an ability to work with and across diverse interest groups is a professional necessity. I serve as a non-voting Chair, elected by the plenary of the organization and have a responsibility to build consensus in our internal work and decision-making.

My credentials in the health care space are very modest: I have worked with the Office of the Attorney General in the State of California on a series of guides to HIEs and health care professionals on the vexing and complex issue of Medical ID Theft and Fraud; and I have cooperated in some of the foundational information modelling of HL7 and its subsequent frameworks. These experiences have nonetheless reinforced my commitment to the “long haul”. I do not believe there are any quick fixes or silver bullet when it comes to developing a lasting and stable trusted environment for transactions online.

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I would start with an important distinction between two acronyms: NSTIC and IDESG

NSTIC – the National Strategy for Trusted Identities in Cyberspace – is a national strategy approved by President Obama in April 2011 and that maps out an ambitious vision of how identity management and trust in online transaction *ought* to look like in the future. A National Program Office (NPO) has been established, hosted by NIST, which provides material support for advancing the practical aspects of NSTIC’s goals. NSTIC is nonetheless a realizable and realistic vision, containing very clear goals and objectives – one of which is the creation of a private sector led initiative to deliver a future “identity ecosystem framework”.

IDESG – the Identity Ecosystem Steering Group – is the private sector-led body that NSTIC calls for. It started life as an unincorporated organization with a secretariat and other support provided by the NSTIC NPO. Its birth and initial growth have been slow and sometimes painful but it is my belief that these are inevitable experiences in the development of any significant organization: if IDESG’s work were either simple or unimportant, we wouldn’t be here and there would not be so much energy – from the NSTIC NPO and volunteers alike – dedicated to this important work.

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The IDESG and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

IDESG has been structured from the outset to reflect a very broad range of stakeholder types – it is not just a “multistakeholder” group in the sense of hosting multiple stakeholders within the same industry or domain; it embraces groups of stakeholders from very diverse interests; consumer and privacy advocacy groups, banking and finance, technology solution providers, telcos, retailers, federal, state and

local government, both within the US and beyond. The organization's governance structure has built in protection to ensure that this diversity is reflected in its main governance and policy coordination body, the IDESG Management Council – 14 of the 17 elected members of that Council are individually elected from members who self-identify with respective “stakeholder categories”.

The ‘Magic Triangle’

This stakeholder diversity is important in order to respond to a very real problem that I have characterized as a “Triangle of Tensions” – or ‘The Magic Triangle’ to give it a more popular moniker. There are three important factors that work together (or against each other) in dynamic tension when attempting to arrive at, or at least approach, some ideal “trust in online transactions”:

- What is *feasible* – what technologies can actually provide or hope to deliver in the future;
- What is *desirable* – as a society, a ‘body politic’, or in any particular community;
- What is *acceptable* – to people, in their various roles as citizens, consumers, providers, etc.

If we pay most attention to the first two and neglect the third, there is a risk of potentially ‘totalitarian’ solutions in which the individual has little or no say; if we pay attention to the last two and neglect the first, we risk being left with unrealistic utopian visions with no grounding or traction in what technology can actually deliver; if we concentrate on the first and last while neglecting the second, we would witness a “Wild West” free-for-all absent any of the constraints required in any civilized body.

The challenge is thus to find a “sweet spot” between all three tensions – not easy (if it were, we would have seen it emerge by now) but not unimaginable either. The core mission of the IDESG is to “steer” the ecosystem of existing online transactions towards that sweet spot, with trust as a central feature.

The – or an? – Identity Ecosystem

So what is this “ecosystem” that IDESG wants to steer and that NSTIC holds so dear? The honest answer is: we don’t know yet. We certainly witness a steady stream of advocates for one approach or another, each convinced they have “the answer” – but they cannot all be right. In the memorable words of Douglas Adams, author of the Hitch-Hikers’ Guide to the Galaxy, “the problem...is that you’ve never actually known what the question is”. The metaphor of an ecosystem – in which a wide variety of identity providers, consumers, merchants and other stakeholders operate – is certainly useful and appropriate. Any ecosystem has its good, its bad, and its ugly and an identity ecosystem is no different, with organizations and operators dedicated to providing the highest levels of assurance of trust and integrity in a constant battle to outwit more malicious elements seeking to compromise or harm legitimate transactions.

A core initial task of the IDESG is therefore to be clear about what actually *is* the “identity ecosystem” that it is attempting to steer. There are those who would seem to advocate a new ecosystem in which only trusted and certified parties would be allowed to operate; others advocate rather for incentives to make the existing ecosystem more palatable and trustworthy; yet others, that there are and always will be multiple ecosystems and that ‘evolution’ and competition will result in greater take up but the best and most trusted.

An Identity Ecosystem Framework

Whichever scenario is adopted, it is nonetheless clear that some form of “Framework” is required that would direct the actions of the “good guys”. Such a Framework would be a collection of standards, policies, processes, best practices, etc. that together provide a recognizable “brand” and to which

various parties would be attracted and with which they would wish to engage. The development of such an “Identity Ecosystem Framework” is the core deliverable of the IDESG.

The actual contents of such a Framework, as much as the manner in which its components are developed and maintained, will inevitably influence the model of governance that is chosen. For the moment, IDESG is somewhat hybrid as a body: its internal processes and policy-making structures were very much the result of “bottom up” work of those active in the organization’s various committees and plenary; the central mission and vision are a reflection of the NSTIC Goals and Objectives and provide the basis for the organization’s incorporation as a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) and (c)(6) and serve as the lodestone for the organization’s Board of Directors.

IDESG Governance and Growth

We will need to be clear about what we are governing: if the Framework is “only” a set of rules, standards, and procedures, then the style of governance should reflect that. If the Framework evolves, as many hope that it will, into a “Trust Mark” program that validates and even certifies that anyone and everyone operating within the Framework actually is following the rules, IDESG will need to evolve accordingly and establish a business model that allows for such activity to be maintained and developed further. Its fiduciary responsibilities would be very different, as would its governance requirements.

Although it is more than a year and a half since its founding meeting in Chicago, IDESG is leaving its infancy and facing typical troubled adolescent years, establishing its own identity, *raison d’être*, and independence from its federal government parents. The NSTIC NPO has been very helpful in getting the organization on its feet and helping it through a troubled childhood. Like any good parent, it has sometimes had to step aside and let the growing organization learn from its own mistakes and experiences while keeping it true to its central mission – of delivering against the NSTIC guiding principles and goals.

National and International Perspectives

A final thought concerns the role of NSTIC and IDESG in the world beyond the USA. Granted that the “N” in NSTIC refers clearly to the strategy being a national priority but NSTIC itself recognizes and stresses the importance of cooperation with other national, regional and international efforts. IDESG has from the start been multinational in its membership (several leading figures in the organization are not US nationals, myself included) but also in its mission – establishing from the start an International Coordinating Committee whose job it is to identify and liaise with similar or related initiatives round the world. This is important for another reason.

Although many countries share the “common law” approach of the United States, many others are grounded in codified civil law. Common law countries have tended to see “identity management” as something provided by multiple, often private-sector, entities according to different requirements or responding to different market needs. In these countries there is no comfortable consensus about the role that government plays in managing identity credentials. In civil law countries on the other hand, the state has traditionally played a much stronger role in identity management, often being the issuer of the core credential against which all others are mapped or judged. In these countries, there is more concern about the role of the private sector in being an identity provider. The result of these very different approaches makes the challenges of interoperable identity all the more acute as even fundamental assumptions – taken as axiomatic in one country – are challenged when working between countries.

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These additional complexities make it all the harder to identify Magic Triangle's sweet spot and the answer may well be that its location varies according to the balance between the three tensions outlined. This is not a bad thing – "one size fits all" is rarely a useful solution – but it does mean that the organization has to be vigilant and remain perpetually aware of the different solutions that may be required. That is a central challenge for the IDESG and to which I am happy to continue to provide leadership and support.

Many thanks.