# Interview GH

## What is the role of NEN in the standardisation process?

NEN serves a neutral role and actually functions as a platform for the development of standards. It concerns subjects where there are conflicting interests in which NEN wants to create a level playing field so that everyone can contribute meaningfully. In addition, they guarantee the steps in which everyone is actually heard. NEN has such an authority because of its long-held reputation. The goal of NEN in this respect is for stakeholders to find NEN; NEN does not create standards out of some idealistic viewpoint. Although there is a discussion within NEN about the desirability of NEN stimulating certain societal themes. This also happens in the context of circular economy in which NEN actively takes up certain projects.

## What are NEN's interests?

How to get as many people involved as possible under conditions that are appropriate for them. The current standardization processes are dusty and not very useful in the fast way in which information is shared these days. NEN is looking for methods, e.g. events, forums and lectures, to better communicate the importance of standardisation as well as finding ways to involve parties in standardisation. Consensus is baseline and non-negotiable. This means that projects can sometimes take years, but consensus is necessary to safeguard interests.

Standards are not required by law, so it is important that broad support is necessary for their application. The application of standards is part of NEN and a good example of this. Originally it was only a publishing house, but nowadays it is also involved in providing training and developing web applications: other products for the application of standards.

Nowadays, NEN does find it important that there are enough people at the table to arrive at a qualitative standard. One-man committees are less present these days. NEN has taken a critical look at the business case as a service provider, despite its role as a platform for standards creation. Continuity plays a role here, projects are only taken up if there is sufficient funding in return.

## How important is responsibility for NEN?

NEN will only leave its mark on a document if all the steps have actually been taken. Sometimes it turns out that the end product is not quite what it was hoped for. In that case it’s important to be honest about it and look for other more suitable forms (e.g. NTA) to publish something meaningful when the outcome of a standardisation process is perhaps not so coherent.

## What is qualitative standardisation process?

The quality of standards is guaranteed by a system of rounds in which proposals are presented, revised and negotiated. To a certain extent, quality is a formalised process. There is an obligation to inform and involve stakeholders in advance. NEN is obliged to report this to the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Quality lies in the transparency and consistency of the formalised format (word use, text formatting, editing) through stakeholder engagement. Ultimately, there is also a public consultation round, in which anyone who has not participated can view the document and comment on it for publication. Consensus is a precondition for this; if documentation is not sufficient, it is returned to the drawing board/negotiation table.

## What is the argument for participation, why is it so important for NEN?

On the one hand, participation is important to create support for standards; without support NEN actually has no raison d'être for their development, because without support the standards will not be adopted. NEN is convinced that standards can only contribute to a better world if they are actually applied. The success of a standard is therefore important. It is not always possible or necessary to have all parties at the table. If not all parties are at the table, there can still be qualitative standards.

## How important is diversity in the participation of standardisation processes?

It is important to have parties at the table in certain proportions, because it is seen that some parties (often producers) will dominate/overshadow less represented parties. Balanced discussions are important in order not to end up in a push and pull situation in which, at the end of a round, objections are raised by smaller parties. NEN is committed to individual initiatives to involve yet other stakeholder categories. In addition, the aforementioned reporting obligation to EZK also applies when participation threatens to result in the overinclusion of a certain type of stakeholder (producer).

## How important is it to give participants the feeling that they can make a meaningful contribution to standardisation?

All feedback is treated equally by NEN and the chairman of the relevant committee. Power asymmetries are no so bad in generally because of the consensus precondition for taking decisions. However, it appears that certain persons/parties other stakeholders. NEN monitors this during the process by actively offering the floor to less talkative parties. In addition, when there is a conflict of interests between parties that cannot be resolved in the committee, individual contact for solutions can be offered as well as providing more parties for the committee in order to find a better balance. Giving personal space is important to express certain underlying interests and motivations and to give space when these cannot easily be expressed in a consensual setting. Feedback mechanisms are present in the form of comment tables in which all interests and objections are expressed. The whole committee will treat and discuss any criticism on an equal footing. Party members are actively encouraged to participate, as they part of the committee for a reason.

## How important is it to involve stakeholders in the standardisation process from the start?

It is definitely preferable. In the case of long drawn out standardisation processe, it is less important when people join or leave. However, some smaller and short-term standardisation activities call for participation from the outset. Because some standards committees set deadlines for drawing up standards and it is simply not desirable from a pragmatic point of view to have new insights and objections from late participants.

## Is the intensity (how often one meets) of the discussion important?

Meeting quality is not directly influenced by intensity. Intensity depends very much on the (technical) complexity of an issue and sometimes also on the urgency. Examples are the NEN spec, this is a trajectory that is about the non-medical masks. The intensity of this standards committee is very high because of the relevance/urgency of the subject in the current situation. Intensity can, however, contribute to the progress of standards creation, since committees don’t have to wait for documents and comments. But for some processes speed is not essential, but rather ensuring a thorough process.

## To what extent is it important to look at the impact of standards on society/economy/etc?

NEN itself finds it very difficult to define the impact of standards. Social desirability is expressed in the alignment of NEN towards these goal and their uptake of certain projects. But NEN remains neutral: no normative preference for solutions/standards. The aim is to find out where the interests overlap and where common ground can be found. Social desirability can be the starting point, but it’s defined by NEN.

## Does NEN consider more than one standard during the standardisation process?

In standardization this is difficult, because there can’t be two standards on the same subject at the same time. Standards have room for changes and new developments, but several standards are not developed at the same time. This is also not necessary, as standards can be reformulated, adapted and retired as opposed to innovation. Standards are adaptive/flexible. Ongoing insight results in ever new requirements. Example of this are a set of standards for playground equipment: 10 standards that are continuously reviewed. Corrigenda or addenda help to always adapt a standard in the short term, in the long term standards can reformulated.

## What is the role of transparency?

By taking a neutral role, they hope that parties share openly and honestly about their goals and motivations/interests. However, parties often have a hidden agenda or other goals than those indicated. But over time, over various feedback rounds and revisions, you learn more about certain parties and the transparency increases. The prolonged exposure to discussions clarifies a lot of things. In the end, most issues come to light. In addition, NEN provides an open platform for documents for comments and technical documents and all old versions of the standards and comment tables even after the standard has been published. In this way, feedback becomes an important component and participants can see how comments have been incorporated into new documents.

## How important is the sharing of motivations, interests and information

Many competitors sit at the table and are usually reluctant. However, legal NDAs are used to protect parties when they run off with information. So NEN tries to encourage transparency and avoid undesirable strategic behaviour in order to generate an open field in which everyone can share in the discussion.

## How is the role of information organised in a standardisation process?

The exchange of knowledge is an essential added value of a standards committee. Every participant has access to unique (sometimes specific) and relevant information. People who have a lot of information are usually asked to submit a first version of a document for discussion in order to raise the level of knowledge. Stakeholders generally have different needs from their context and therefore different input. This enriches the exchange of knowledge. Subjectivity and high-tech information asymmetry are kept in check by the consensus decision-making process. If something is incomprehensible or not true, everyone has the right to refer the proposal back to the drawing board/negotiation table. Fewer candidates can often also add value by playing devil's advocate and questioning the assumptions and knowledge of experts. Ultimately, the standards will have to be applied, so they will have to be readable and understandable by all.