
Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines

1. Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines	2
1. 1 Code of Conduct	2
1.1.1 Principles	2
1.1.1.2 Bias	3
1.1.1.3 Compensation/Gifts	3
1.1.1.4 Conflicts of Interest	3
1.1.1.5 Confidentiality	4
1.1.1.6 Data Protection and Privacy	4
1.1.1.7 Affirmation	4
2. Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Vendors	4
2.1 Guidelines	5
3. Definitions	6
4. Code of Conduct Violations	6
Annex: Relevant Recommendations	8

1. Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines

1.1 Code of Conduct

The purpose of the New gTLD Program (“Program”) Code of Conduct (“Code”) is to prevent actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest and unethical behavior by any vendors contracted by ICANN org to support services or processes for the New gTLD Program (‘Vendors’) with regard to, including but not limited to application evaluation, objection processes, or dispute resolution processes. The Applicant Guidebook is intended to set forth the principles of the Code of Conduct and nothing in this Code should be considered or interpreted as limiting duties, obligations or legal requirements with which Vendors must comply.

The ethical obligations of the Vendors begin upon acceptance of the appointment. Vendors shall conduct themselves as thoughtful, competent, well prepared, and impartial professionals throughout the application evaluation, objection, and dispute resolution processes. Vendors are expected to comply with equity and high ethical standards while assuring the Internet community, its constituents, and the public, of the Vendor’s objectivity, integrity, confidentiality, and credibility. Unethical actions, or even the appearance of conflicts of interest, are not acceptable.

Once the Vendor has accepted an appointment, the Vendor should not withdraw or abandon the appointment unless compelled to do so by unanticipated circumstances that would render it impossible or impracticable to continue, or if the Vendor becomes aware of a conflicts of interest situation, as described in the “New gTLD Program Conflicts of Interest Guidelines” (see subsection 2.4.3.2).

A Vendor who withdraws prior to the completion of the application evaluation or objection and dispute resolution processes, whether upon the Vendor’s initiative or upon the request of one or more of the applicants, should take reasonable steps to protect the interests of the applicants/parties in the application evaluation or objection and dispute resolution processes, including return of evidentiary materials and maintaining the confidentiality of any confidential information or materials.

1.1.1 Principles

Vendors are expected to be guided by the following principles in carrying out their respective responsibilities.

1.1.1.2 Bias

Vendors shall:

- not advance personal agendas or non-ICANN approved agendas in the evaluation of applications or dispute resolution proceedings;
- examine facts as they exist and not be influenced by past reputation, media accounts, or unverified statements about the applications being evaluated or the matter(s) at issue in the dispute resolution proceeding;
- exclude themselves from participating in the evaluation of an application or a dispute resolution proceeding if, to their knowledge, there is some predisposing factor that could prejudice them with respect to such evaluation or proceeding;
- exclude themselves from evaluation activities or dispute resolution proceedings if they are philosophically opposed to or are on record as having made criticisms about a specific type of applicant, application, or matter at issue in the evaluation or the dispute resolution proceeding; and
- conduct themselves in a way that is fair to all parties and should not be swayed by outside pressure, public clamor, and fear of criticism or self-interest. Vendors should avoid conduct and statements that give the appearance of partiality toward or against any applicant, application, or party to the dispute resolution proceeding.

1.1.1.3 Compensation/Gifts

Vendors shall not request or accept any compensation whatsoever or any gifts of substance from the applicant being reviewed, anyone affiliated with the applicant, or any party or party affiliate involved in the dispute resolution proceeding. (Gifts of substance would include any gift greater than USD 25 in value). If in doubt, the Vendor should err on the side of caution by declining gifts of any kind. Note, however, that during a dispute resolution proceeding, an applicant who is the objector is required to submit payment directly to the applicable dispute resolution service provider to cover the applicant's share of fees and expenses of the members of the Panel. Accepting this payment does not mean a dispute resolution service provider panelist is in violation of the Code of Conduct in this section. Refer to the Dispute Resolution Procedures document contained in the Applicant Guidebook for more information about fees and payments.

1.1.1.4 Conflicts of Interest

Vendors shall act in accordance with the “New gTLD Program Conflicts of Interest Guidelines” (see subsection [\[cross-reference\]](#)).

1.1.1.5 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an integral part of the application evaluation as well as objection and dispute resolution processes. Vendors must have access to sensitive information in order to conduct evaluations or dispute resolution proceedings. Vendors must maintain confidentiality of information entrusted to them by ICANN and the applicant and any other confidential information provided to them from whatever source, except when disclosure is legally mandated or has been authorized by ICANN. “Confidential information” includes all elements of the Program and information gathered as part of the process – which includes but is not limited to: documents, interviews, discussions, interpretations, and analyses – related to the review of any new gTLD application.

1.1.1.6 Data Protection and Privacy

All Vendors are required to comply with the New gTLD Program’s data protection principles and retention procedures. For more information, see Section [cross-reference Data Protection and Privacy] in the Applicant Guidebook.

1.1.1.7 Affirmation

All Vendors shall read this Code prior to commencing evaluation or participating in a particular dispute resolution proceeding and shall certify in writing that they have done so and understand the Code.

2. Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Vendors

To safeguard against the potential for inappropriate influence and ensure applications are evaluated in an objective and independent manner, ICANN has established the following Conflict of Interest guidelines and procedures for the Vendors. ICANN will require the Independent Objector and service providers to ensure that all Panelists:

- Document acknowledgement and understanding of the Conflict of Interest guidelines.
- Disclose all business relationships engaged in at any time during the past six months from initial appointment that are directly or indirectly related to ICANN’s new gTLD Program

Where possible, ICANN will identify and secure primary and backup providers for evaluation and dispute resolution. In conjunction with the Vendors, ICANN will identify conflicts and re-assign applications as appropriate to secondary or contingent third-party providers to perform the reviews.

2.1 Guidelines

The following guidelines are the minimum standards with which all Vendors must comply. A fundamental principle underlying these Guidelines is that each Vendor must be impartial and independent of the application(s), applicant(s), and parties at the time they accept an appointment to act as a Vendor, and must remain so during the entire course of the application evaluation or dispute resolution processes.

A Vendor shall decline to accept an appointment or, if the evaluation or proceeding has already been commenced, refuse to continue to act as a Vendor, if they have any doubt as to their ability to be impartial or independent. The same principle applies if such facts or circumstances existed prior to appointment or have arisen since the appointment.

If facts or circumstances exist that may give rise to doubts as to the Vendor's impartiality or independence, the Vendor shall disclose such facts or circumstances to the applicant(s), parties, and the service provider or other appointing authority prior to accepting the appointment or, if thereafter, as soon as they learn of them. Any doubt as to whether a Vendor should disclose certain facts or circumstances should be resolved in favor of disclosure.

It is recognized that it is impossible to foresee and cover all circumstances in which a potential conflict of interest might arise. In these cases the Vendor should evaluate whether the existing facts and circumstances would lead a reasonable person to conclude that there is an actual conflict of interest. If conflicts of interest are found to exist, ICANN will work with Vendors to reassign applications as appropriate.

Vendors and Immediate Family Members:

- Must not be under contract, have or be included in a current proposal to provide Professional Services for or on behalf of the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding during the compliance period, which begins upon acceptance of the appointment.
- Must not currently hold or be committed to acquire any interest in a privately-held applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding.
- Must not currently hold or be committed to acquire more than 1% of any publicly listed applicant's or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding outstanding equity securities or other ownership interests.
- Must not be involved or have an interest in a joint venture, partnership or other business arrangement with the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding.
- Must not have been named in a lawsuit with or against the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding.

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- Must not be a:
 - Director, officer, or employee, or in any capacity equivalent to that of a member of management of the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding;
 - Promoter, underwriter, or voting trustee of the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding; or
 - Trustee for any pension or profit-sharing trust of the applicant or any party(ies) to a dispute resolution proceeding.

Note that service providers also maintain their own conflict of interest procedures that Panelists are required to comply with.¹

3. Definitions

Panelist: An Evaluation Panelist or a dispute resolution service provider panelist is any primary, secondary, and contingent third party Panelist engaged by ICANN to review new gTLD applications.

Immediate Family Member: Immediate Family Member is a spouse, spousal equivalent, or dependent (whether or not related) of an Evaluation Panelist or a dispute resolution service provider panelist.

Professional Services: Professional Services include but are not limited to legal services, financial audit, financial planning / investment, outsourced services, consulting services such as business / management / internal audit, tax, information technology, registry / registrar services.

Vendors: Vendors are contracted by ICANN org to support services or processes for the New gTLD Program, including but not limited to the application evaluation, objection processes, or dispute resolution processes.

4. Code of Conduct Violations

Vendor breaches of the Code of Conduct, whether intentional or not, shall be reviewed by ICANN, which may make recommendations for corrective action, if deemed necessary. Breaches of the Code may be cause for removal of the person, persons or provider committing the infraction.

¹ More information on the Code of Conduct and Conflicts of Interest guidelines of service providers can be found here: [\[link to page that will be published on the Next Round website including links to service provider's code of conduct and conflicts of interest guidelines\]](#)

In a case where ICANN determines that a Vendor has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, the results of that Vendor’s review for all assigned applications may be discarded and the affected applications will undergo a review by new Vendors.

Concerns of applicants regarding Vendors should be communicated via the defined support channels (see subsection 1.4.2). Concerns of the general public regarding the Code of Conduct (i.e., non-applicants) can be raised via the Community Action Forum, as described in Module [X] or through other avenues such as the Ombudsman and the Reconsideration Request process.

Annex: Relevant Recommendations

Recommendation 8.1: ICANN must develop a transparent process to ensure that dispute resolution service provider panelists, Independent Objectors, and application evaluators are free from conflicts of interest. This process must serve as a supplement to the existing Code of Conduct Guidelines for Panelists, Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Panelists, and ICANN Board Conflicts of Interest Policy.²

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<https://www.icann.org/resources/pages/governance/coi-en#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20this%20Board,the%20Internet%20community%2C%20as%20a>