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The Future of Testing

The Future of a Tester: Broaden or Specialize

by Erik van Veenendaal

Can we predict the future? I was at the StarWest conference recently, running a tutorial on PRISMA [1], where I attended a keynote from James Whittaker. He predicted that in five years from now there would be no jobs any more for testers. Being as controversial as ever, he also stated that "users do not care about product quality". It made me think of a course I ran some 15 years ago, where the developers stated that testing would no longer be needed as soon as they would change their process using the new tool. It was interesting to listen to the keynote from follow-up speaker kiwi David Hayman opening his talk with the statement, "thanks James, but I work in the real world…..". My thoughts are more in line with David Hayman's; yes, things are changing but only slowly, and if we look back 20 years, many of the things we were doing back then are still valid today.

Can we predict the future? Interesting enough I wrote a column on trends in software testing [2] in 2002. In preparing for this column I read the old column again to find out how we perceived the future of software testing almost 10 years ago. What was new in 2002?

a) Conferences were filled with talks on *risk-based testing* and testing was trying to relate to the *business* in order to get them involved in making choices. Ten years later, I believe this is common practice although many organizations are still struggling to make risk-based testing practical and fit-for-use.

b) *Agile* was relatively new in 2002 and would have an impact on testing, e.g., techniques such as use cases and exploratory testing, module testing more important and rethinking independence of testing. Again, I believe this has happened, although we are still trying in many projects to find the right balance between structured testing and agile.

c) Finally, I discussed test *certification*, especially ISTQB. It goes without saying that this has happened with today almost 200.000 testers being certified world-wide. Again, the transition is not yet completed and today we are still waiting for the third level of the scheme, the Expert Level, to become fully operational.

We can recognize trends trying to predict the future, but day-to-day practices only change very slowly due to many reasons. One of them being that a change means that people have to change their behavior and leave behind things that they feel confident with. As a result there is resistance and change management activities are needed to make things happen.

Can we predict the future? Let's remember that in the real world changes take time and only go very slowly. I cannot see a revolution coming in the forthcoming years. Take a look at the testing book "The art of software testing" by Glenford Myers that dates back to 1979 [3]. Many of the principles and techniques that he describes are still the foundation of today's testing and taught in many testing courses around the world. An interesting quote in this context: "Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed." Nevertheless what are today's trends in software testing that the (traditional) tester needs to be aware of and respond to?

a) Knowledge and skills will be a challenge in the near future for many testers. It is just not good enough anymore to understand testing and hold an ISTQB certificate. We will not anymore work in our safe independent test team. We will work more closely together with business representatives and developers helping each other when needed and as a team trying to build a quality product. It is expected from testers to have domain knowledge, requirements engineering skills , development scripting skills, and strong soft skills, e.g., on communication and negotiation.

b) As products are becoming more and more complex, and are integrated in an almost open environment, many so-called non-functional testing issues will become extremely challenging. At the same time the business, users and customers do not want to compromise on quality. To be able to still test non-functional aspects such as security, interoperability, performance and reliability, highly specialized testers will be needed. Even more so than today, these specialists will be full-time test professionals with in-depth knowledge and skills in one non-functional testing area only.

As stated, I do not predict any revolution in testing. However, there are trends and we gradually change. You have the option to either broaden your knowledge and skills as a test professional or to become a test specialist in a certain (non-functional) area. In order for these changes to be successful, I would recommend testers to dare to be different and embrace change. After all: "If nothing ever changed, there'd be no butterflies."

References

[1] E. van Veenendaal (2011), Practical Risk-Based Testing , Euro-STAR eBook, April 2011

[2] E. van Veenendaal (2002), New developments and Trends, in: TestNet newsletter, Issue 6, No. 4

[3] G.J. Myers [1979], The Art of Software Testing, Wiley-Interscience

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