



viewpoint

TESTING: ARE BUSINESSES SIMPLY TICKING BOXES OR ARE THEY REALLY FOCUSED ON DELIVERING ROBUST SOLUTIONS?

We look at ways to make sure your approach to testing systems and processes does not leave your business exposed.

You have only to look at the problems experienced by the opening of Heathrow's Terminal 5 to the general public to appreciate how easy it is for a seemingly straight forward process to end in complete chaos. Blame it on teething problems or unforeseen circumstances if you will, but the fact remains, had adequate and effective operational readiness testing been put in place prior to the grand opening, would Terminal 5 have experienced quite so many initial issues?

Most of the problems associated with testing generally arise from the mindset that is taken in defining the overall approach. The question begs, is it to tick boxes or to ensure that a business has a robust solution in place? The real purpose of testing should be to ensure that the solution that's being delivered (people, processes and systems) does exactly what is expected of it. That means understanding and managing the real risks and costs of problems being found after the solution goes live. In some 'mission critical' situations, the true cost of getting this judgement wrong can be huge.

- For many businesses testing usually fails because it has either been defined with the wrong scope (for example, choosing to rule out of scope aspects that are hard to test), or because an unrealistic view is taken as to what the solution is going to have to contend with in real life. These narrow interpretations can mean that the real life operational scenarios are not properly considered until it's too late.
- The sad truth is that all problems and weaknesses inherent in a solution will ultimately come to light during its operational life. This is often out of your control and the cost of testing everything before 'go live' is likely to be uneconomic. So ultimately it comes down to a judgement call between the cost of more testing and the risk of suffering a failure once in operation. Businesses therefore have to decide what failures they cannot afford to discover after they go live, and what problems they might be willing or able to work around.
- No matter how painful, it is always better in the long run to discover problems during testing than to discover them in operation - finding defects is an achievement to be celebrated and not a failure to be scorned. Sadly, commercial imperatives such as payment milestones tied to passing testing stages can all too often drive the wrong attitudes and behaviours when it comes to testing.

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Quortex are business change experts who bring a refreshingly different approach to the more traditional management and IT consultancy space. Quortex is a privately owned and completely vendor independent professional services firm. It helps companies face the constant challenge to deliver improved and sustainable business performance, where success depends on clarity of vision, astute planning and superb execution. Quortex provides expertise to drive business change ranging from small scale business process enhancements to setting up global transformation programmes. Its pragmatic approach and active transfer of knowledge to client teams is what sets it apart from the crowd. Quortex' difference is best summed up by one of their clients: "The difference with you guys is that you really care about what you do."

Quortex

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- Operational Readiness Testing (ORT) is the 'sharp' end of testing. It's about ensuring that everything is ready for live operation – that people are properly trained, systems are ready and processes are in place. Not only must ORT focus be on 'sunny day' operations when everything goes to plan, but even more importantly, it has to ensure that likely failure scenarios have been accounted for. Whilst most of the previous stages of testing may have taken a largely 'purest' view – testing against documented technical requirements of the system for example – at this stage a much broader approach is required where full operational scenarios need to be tested. This is after all, the final safety net before going live and all that this entails.
- One of the final challenges is the inevitable pressure on timescales. Testing by its very nature comes towards the end of the project lifecycle and failures can delay the release of the solution. Often pressures to meet fixed deadlines result in a desire to claim back previous slippage by compressing testing timescales. The key to managing this is to be in a position to articulate the risk to the business in reducing the amount of testing, and to ensure that those who ultimately carry that business risk understand fully what they are signing up to.
- When looking at where to focus in the final stages of testing, it can be useful to consider two key areas. The first is performance testing and the second is failure mode testing. They are probably the hardest to get right since they involve the exploration of the operating boundaries of the solution in multiple dimensions (e.g. number of users combined with throughput). Deciding where to focus performance and failure mode testing requires both a sound understanding of the solution design (and therefore an understanding of where weaknesses might lie), as well as the real operational environment (the way in which the solution is most likely to be stressed in real life). Failure to incorporate both sides of this equation into the planning means businesses can be assured of encountering problems later down the line.

Good testing requires significant thought and planning, but can be hugely rewarding. At the very least it serves to build confidence in the robustness of the solution and could protect the reputation of a business not to mention save huge amounts of money long term.