Soft Skills: The Forgotten Link!?

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A mature profession

The content of this first column in Testing Experiences is based on a number of recent practical experiences. More and more organizations are talking about professionalizing testing by means of defining job profiles, career paths, certification, etc (and rightly so!). The testing profession has become mature and we are being recognized and respected. Taking a closer look at most job profiles, training plans and courses, they are almost always about topics such test strategy, test planning, test techniques and test automation. Test analysts and test managers therefore often have a lot of knowledge and skills regarding testing methods and techniques.

Exciting projects

Most projects implicitly also ask for something else from a professional tester. Things tend to get "exciting" towards the end of a project; the project is delayed, budgets are overrun, users are not satisfied with the functionality, etc. Good reasons for some "problems" between the project sponsor, the business, development and other stakeholders. The tester is often a more or less independent person somewhere in the middle; sometimes more on the user side (acceptance testing) and sometimes slightly more on the development side (system testing). Especially in this type of situation, the tester needs to be able to communicate incidents in a politically correct way, write a test summary report in which the choice of words is of utmost importance, present the status regarding product quality to management, and participate in politically loaded meetings. All of these are activities where soft skills, e.g. on communication, are highly desirable. Possessing soft skills at the required level is not a trivial thing, but is necessary to survive in the complex project world of most testers.

The test training plan

A thorough training plan needs to address, in addition to the test topics mentioned earlier, issues like consultancy skills, written and oral communication, presentation skills, writing reports, and overall social skills. My personal experience with these so-called 'soft skills' is that they are highly underestimated in career paths and training plans of testers. I'm referring to training courses of at least three or four days and coaching (training-on-the-job) regarding these issues. Also some attention to soft skills in regular test training courses would help.

The next level for the test profession

Of course one can already evaluate the intrinsic characteristics of a person during the initial job interview. Someone who wants to become a professional tester should in fact already by nature have reasonable communication and social skills. Enhancing the soft skills is a step that needs (to get) a lot more attention. Only then can we fulfill our role in projects in a professional manner and show added value. By possessing these skills, we can use our testing method and techniques knowledge and skills to best effect. In practice, however, I see many testers not performing in the way they should; many would benefit from improved soft skills. Let's take the test profession to the next level!