

# TEST & QA REPORT

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## Quality Assurance Pitfalls

By Lindsey Vereen

Everyone talks a good quality game, but it's important not to take the approach of Dilbert's pointy-headed boss and give it mere lip service. Even though advocating quality is sometimes denigrated as flag waving, quality assurance is a high priority in most companies because the right techniques can reduce costs and offer a competitive advantage.

But it's not easy to do. "Companies seeking to implement QA processes often find it daunting to develop and implement a strategy from scratch," says Shaun Bradshaw, director of quality solutions for Questcon Technologies. "It's normal for those involved in the implementation to run into various challenges along the way."

Let's take a look at the top five of those challenges, and how to surmount them.

### Get It Right From the Start

The most common pitfall? Starting off with an insufficient QA strategy. "Most organizations would not build a software product without a clear strategy and a solid plan, yet QA process implementation is often an afterthought," Bradshaw says. "To create software that performs as expected, reduces software development life cycle costs and mitigates the risks associated with poor quality software, establishing a QA process should be viewed as a strategic initiative with clear goals and attainable milestones."

### Detect vs. Prevent

A second common error that companies must overcome is the failure to distinguish between QA and testing. Some organizations seeking better QA think the solution is merely more testing. Even so, failure to distinguish between QA and testing may not be as detrimental to an organization's ability to put QA processes into place as some other problems that can arise. "Testing still needs to be performed," Bradshaw says. "It just shouldn't serve as a substitute for QA."

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Bradshaw defines QA as “a continuous process of activities that ensure the application being developed is fit for use,” whereas testing “is used to identify and remove existing defects and measure the success of other QA activities.” He says that testing merely spots the defects, but QA processes are designed to prevent them from occurring.

“As long as the organization clearly understands the difference between QA and testing,” he says, “it may be easier to first establish strong testing processes using results and metrics derived from testing to help identify trouble spots or the root cause of defects found in the application. With the proper QA strategy, having a strong test process can drive better QA activities earlier into the development life-cycle, ultimately achieving the desired result of QA implementation across the entire development organization.”

### The Right Person for the Job

A third pitfall looms for companies who assign QA management responsibility to people who aren't QA professionals. Bradshaw says that the job of developing and implementing QA processes shouldn't be delegated to untrained people who aren't committed to quality assurance. “QA is a career discipline requiring many years of experience and firsthand knowledge in best practices and techniques,” he says.

QA professionals have the perspective to examine a broad range of problems and evaluate which QA processes would best suit an organization, based on the size of the organization, its culture and its politics. “An individual with practical experience will be better suited to identify which processes will work now, which ones can be implemented later and which ones may never take hold,” Bradshaw says.

### Baby Steps

Some companies fall victim to the fourth folly: the urge to make sweeping changes in their processes. “Changing too many processes at once is a prescription for failure, as human nature tends to resist change,” Bradshaw says. He suggests focusing on a few recommended changes for early implementation. “Organizations are better served by initially making smaller modifications that have a higher probability of success,” he says. “Once the group experiences several small wins, more people will embrace the larger changes planned for the future.”

### Metrics Matter

A common fifth stumbling block is the failure to establish a system of measurements when designing a quality assurance program. “All successful QA improvement programs must have a way to measure program effectiveness,” Bradshaw advises. “No executive manager would—or should—continue investing money in such a program without some means to objectively measure the value and success of the new processes. For that reason, before implementing QA processes in an organization, first

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define and establish some key metrics to measure the success of the implementation.”

Bradshaw says that understanding and circumventing these common pitfalls will go a long way to ensure the quality of a company's products and success in the marketplace.

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HTML/Web Producer: Nicole Schnatz  
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