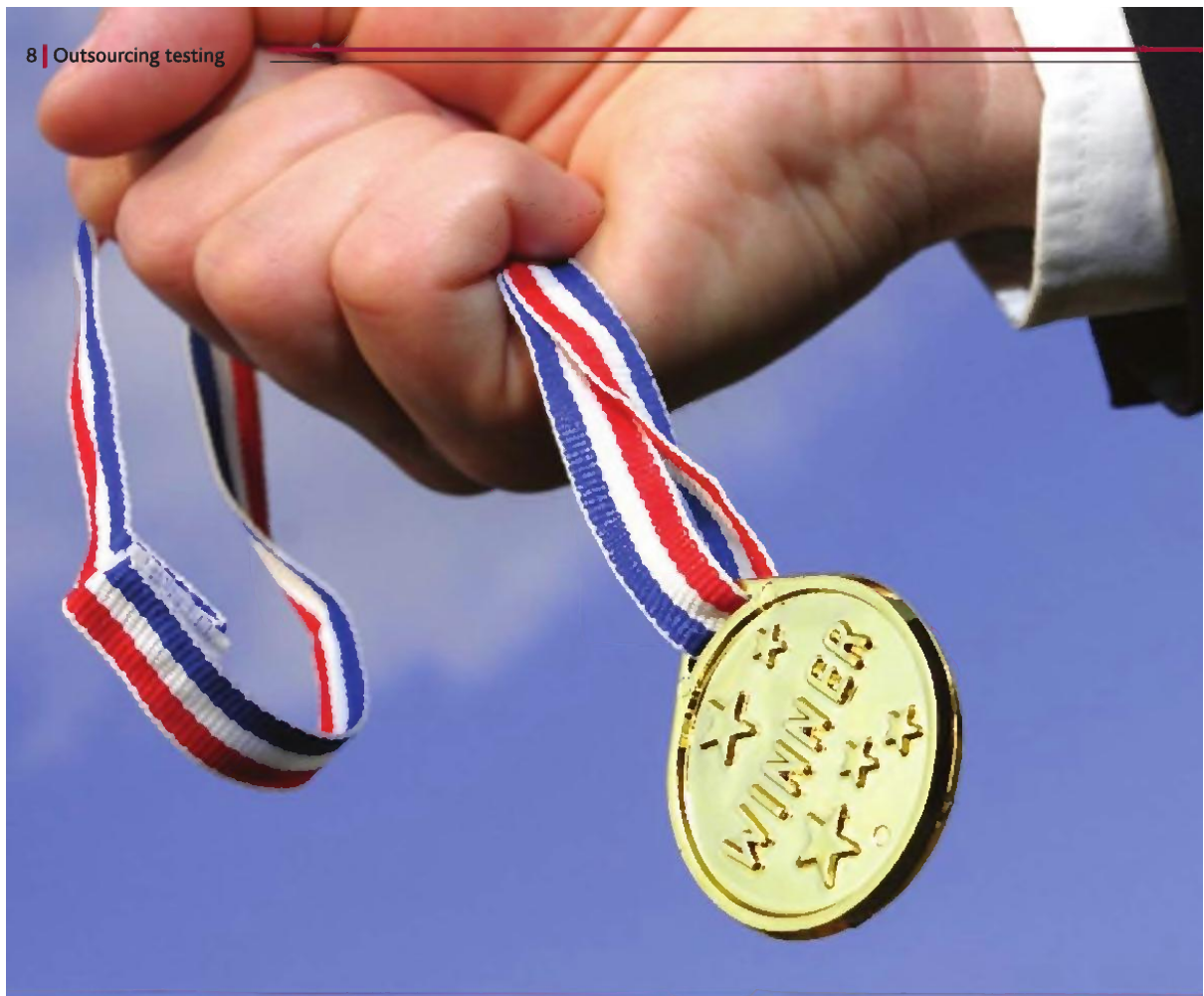




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Use the best to test

Managing director and co-founder of IT asset management specialist Certero, **John Lunt**, discusses the importance of software testing, the possible pitfalls and challenges of outsourcing, and how to conduct it in-house.

There is no point in companies investing large amounts of money in developing software when it can potentially cause costly problems in the future. Testing is a vital part of the software development lifecycle and ensures that once installed it is error-free. Over-looking this important stage from the outset can seriously affect sales, customer satisfaction, the brand name, and potentially increase the workload to fix unscheduled problems. Although testing does take time and effort, it

reduces any unnecessary risk and cost in the future. In fact, fixing a problem is often more expensive if left until the product has gone to market. Prevention is better than cure!

Software Quality Assurance (SQA) is incredibly important to ensure products are designed and developed to a high quality that meets regulatory standards. A company that ignores this, runs the risk of non-tested software failing. As customers look at ways to modernise their back-office operations and IT infrastructure to support their growth, they look for



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software that is reliable and fully compliant without risks attached. Products below quality assurance levels can put customers off and force them to look elsewhere for a solution. It is easy for an organisation to gain a negative reputation for providing unreliable software products and the hazards of launching a product that is not fully prepared can be catastrophic and cause irreversible damage.

Outside help

Companies increasingly hire third parties to carry out testing on their behalf, particularly in tough financial times. Outsourcing is an attractive option as it means companies do not have the burden or costs associated with employing an in-house testing team or investing in internal testing technology. Third parties offer access to a skilled team of specialist testers who have the ability and knowledge to use specially designed software-testing tools.

Improved turnaround times and reduced software delays ensure

deadlines are met and product releases take place on time. When deciding to outsource testing, businesses need to determine how project delays affect their bottom line profits compared to the costs involved.

The pitfalls

Although an enticing option, outsourcing does have its problems. Outsourcing needs constant management, which can be extremely time consuming and, in general, is the most common reason why outsourced projects fail. If a company does decide to outsource testing, it needs to dedicate a manager to be responsible for the relationship. This manager needs to have the capacity to be in constant communication with the supplier in order to build a close working relationship and effectively manage the project. In some instances, outsourcing can compromise the quality of testing, where a company can be left feeling dissatisfied. To avoid this, and ensure quality testing is delivered and continuous product improvements are met, the manager needs to check that the outsourced company understands the testing requirements at every level.

There are offshore software testing companies all around the world, including the UK, US and technology-rich countries such as Japan, India and Singapore. Geographical locations can create further frustrations when managing a relationship that spans from one country to another. This can increase workloads and can be more time consuming than working with someone in the same country. Time differences can put additional strain on the relationship and cause delays, especially when a problem needs resolving quickly. Constant communication can combat this and by arranging scheduled telephone meetings every day or week, issues can be identified and resolved in a timely manner.



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In-house: the belt and braces approach

Conducted comprehensively, in-house testing should ensure quality and standards are met and should provide value for money. Not having an outside relationship to manage can also lead to a happier workforce.

If companies decide to carry out their software testing in-house, they need to embrace a 'belt and braces' approach to guarantee quality assurance. This involves a strict and uncompromising method - once a product, or an enhancement to an existing product, is made, then it needs to be tested by a separate testing function, not by the development function.

After passing all set criteria, the product should be driven through an external beta testing programme where companies can use a selected number of existing customers to identify any performance issues or bugs prior to an official product release. Software should never be released without beta testing, as it is impossible for developers to test their own products in all environments or predict how a new product will react with particular software and hardware. Only when this process is complete, should the software be made available for general release.

There is the perception that it is hard for companies to be critical of their own developments. However,

having two separate teams in place - one to write the software and one to conduct testing - means that products are examined exhaustively. Testing technicians that employ scripts and plans to check every software function, guarantee systematic analysis and precise examination.

Essential testing

Software testing is an integral part of the development system and is not an afterthought. Whether a company decides to conduct software testing in-house or outsource to an external tester depends on its needs and resources. Software development companies should assess what they aim to get out of testing to help them evaluate the costs involved and help them determine what approach to take. Regardless of which route an organisation decides upon, software testing is essential. It enhances the quality of the product offering and ultimately, guarantees customer satisfaction.

What is the point of developing something that is unreliable and may cause future headaches? Software testing reduces unnecessary risks for the long term and ensures that companies are offering solutions they can be proud of. Producing a product that fails and is unreliable not only leaves you red faced, but it can damage your brand immensely.

Some considerations

Outsourcing:

Do not outsource just because it is a financially attractive option. Think about what you want to get out of it before entering into a partnership with anyone.

Sourcing overseas help:

How would you manage a long distance relationship from one country to another? Do you have someone that can dedicate time to managing this relationship?

Keeping it in-house:

Remember to use a method that ensures you are critical of your own development and find those all important beta testers!



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