

Nordics

There is still a quality assurance road to travel in the Nordic region, but there are signs of progress – and of increasing determination

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A regional summary of viewpoints on testing and quality assurance (QA) can sometimes obscure national differences. Between the Nordic countries, for instance – comprising Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway – we note varying degrees of progress this year in agile and DevOps developments, and different levels of emphasis in areas including test data management, security testing, and performance testing.

However, there are plenty of similarities that we observe in the field. As we might expect, cost control is never far away for most organizations in most places. Across the region, we also see a major focus on test automation in particular. This is part of a general and continuing determination in Nordic countries to make progress in quality assurance as a whole. As we shall see in this year's survey data, there is still a road to travel.

Signs of optimism

Nordic countries seem clear about where the emphasis needs to be. The QA objectives rated by respondents as most essential in this year's data included ensuring end-user satisfaction (73%), contributing to business growth, and protecting corporate image (both at 71%), and supporting everybody in the team to achieve higher quality (68%). The focus here is very much commercial and outward-looking. Similarly, as far as IT strategy in general is concerned, the areas rated highest were enhancing customer experience (79%) and achieving higher quality of software solutions (74%).

The determination evident in these responses seems sometimes to stray into over-optimism. For example, two-thirds of Nordic respondents said their application development requirements were always clearly defined, while the figure for our survey participants as a whole stood at just

50%. Also, the progress our Nordic respondents perceive in some key areas is not matched by what we see in the field: for instance, over two-thirds (69%) of them said they always have the right level of test automation, and almost as many (67%) said they always have the in-house testing environments they need.

Mixed picture in agile and DevOps adoption

In the introduction to this article, we noted varying degrees of progress across the region in the adoption of agile and DevOps environments, and that seems to be reflected in the mixed picture that emerges in this year's data.

For example, we asked about approaches being used to accelerate and optimize testing in agile and DevOps developments, and a fairly high proportion (56%) of the region's respondents said they always aim to shift left. We have observed in the field that this is more the case in Sweden than elsewhere. The proportion of respondents who said they always implement automated quality dashboards to facilitate continuous quality monitoring (49%) seemed too high to us.

The mixed picture continued with respect to the challenges organizations face in testing within agile developments. The greatest challenge for Nordic respondents was the difficulty in deciding which tests are actually needed. This is an issue we have seen in Denmark, in particular.

In terms of quality metrics, it was interesting to note the fairly high level of importance given to the detection of defects leaking into production. By contrast, far fewer Nordic organizations said they kept track of the percentage of testing that they automate. We suspect that if more testing were automated, there would be less need to monitor defects leaking into go-live applications.

Cost efficiency focus

We've also already noted the continuing need for cost control. Several approaches to test efficiency were deemed by Nordic respondents to be particularly important, including enhancing test environment provisioning, the implementation of intelligent autonomous test solutions, shift-left and shift-right testing, and enhancing test data generation and provisioning solutions. Between 50% and 60% of the region's respondents classed all these responses as essential. If anything, we would have expected the figures to be higher still.

A higher-than-average proportion of Nordic survey participants also said it was essential in efficiency terms to be more critical in the early stages about which tests are really required. Given the focus in the region on test automation, it's a surprise this response isn't lower.

AI, machine learning, and test automation

Interest in artificial intelligence and machine learning in testing and QA is growing in the Nordic region. It's to be expected, perhaps, that options for this year included the provision of test data and of test environments that are fit for purpose, but responses were not at the levels we would have expected. In our experience, the last of these is an especial pain point for organizations in the region. The low numbers might indicate that these options are still on the to-do list.

In fact, we sense that as far as AI and machine learning in general are concerned, there is still a great deal that is on that QA and testing wishlist. When asked about plans for this year, over three-quarters (78%) said yes, AI will be used to generate those test environments and that test data, and almost as many (74%) said yes, they will have more AI trials and proofs of concept in place. In our view, the excitement is outpacing reality here. Organizations may be keen, but there is little evidence that they are ready to put plans into action.

We see similar aspirations for test automation. As we observed above, there is a focus on this approach in the region, but plans don't seem quite yet to be reaching maturity. For instance, while 70% of Nordic respondents said they always have the necessary automation tools, only 39% of them said they also have a corresponding strategy for their use. Even fewer respondents in the region (30%) said they are getting a return on their test automation investment.

Recalibrating after COVID-19

This year's survey data shows that, as a proportion of overall IT budget, testing and quality assurance haven't moved since last year (22%) in the Nordic region – but it also shows that an average decrease of 13% is anticipated once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed. In our experience, many large projects in the region have indeed been delayed, but we expect things to ramp up again in 2021, and for sufficient investment to be made to support this.

Will QA and testing practices change in a post-COVID world? In the Nordic region, as elsewhere, it does seem probable. A high proportion of respondents said there would be a significant change of focus towards more and better collaboration tools, and that they would need to improve the orchestration of QA activities across their teams. This is highly likely to be the result of the normalization of remote working that we have seen this year.

In short, the quiet and continuing determination we have seen in the Nordic region to make general progress in quality assurance shows no sign of diminishing. If anything, the events of 2020 are likely to increase it.



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