Are You Using Your ISTQB Certification?

By Judy McKay, President, ASTQB

An ISTQB certification is a nice thing to have. It decorates your office. It tells your co-workers that you have pursued education and have achieved a level of knowledge in testing. At the Advanced level, it shows that you have selected an area of specialization and have demonstrated your knowledge. At the Expert level, it provides evidence that you have set yourself apart from others—that you have acquired and demonstrated expertise in a particular area. But, are you really using your knowledge and expertise? Let's look at how the benefits of the certification can be used in your regular job and your career.

At the Foundation level, you learned solid practices that should provide the basis for good testing processes. This includes implementing a testing lifecycle that is supported by internationally recognized testing documentation. It includes the ability to determine the best testing strategies for a particular project and to select the most effective techniques for that project. With that Foundation level certification, you should be able to differentiate between good, sustainable practices and short-term, short-thinking, ad hoc practices. Are you starting to feel guilty? Have you found yourself slipping back into your old habits under the pressure of schedules and lack of management support? Are you falling for the easy ways of accepting "let's just keep doing what we've been doing because it's been good enough"? It's time to stop. Right now. Just stop.

It's a common problem to leave a conference or a class or a certification adventure with lots of shiny new ideas and good intentions. And then reality runs over you. And, you crawl out from under the tires, dust yourself off and realize that implementing what you learned and know to be a better way isn't necessarily easy. The status quo is hard to change. It's safe. It's known. And we can do it without too much effort, at least in the short term. But you did not pursue your certification to become a follower and to adhere to poor practices. You got your certification to prove you are an important part of a vitally important industry. So let's talk about changes.

First of all, change takes time. If you are working in an organization with tight schedules and a lot of pressure, change will be difficult. In order to get support for change, you need to build an understanding that there will be long term improvements. I know, we are in a short-term business environment these days and long-term thinking isn't always popular, so maybe we need to break those long-term changes into short-term, quantifiable goals. Start with the easy stuff. Here's my order of attack and a rough schedule:

In the next six months:

1. Change your document templates to ones that are standardized and usable. Take a look at the IEEE 829-1998 templates and tailor those to suit your needs. At a minimum, get the Test Plan, Test Summary Report and Test Case documents under control. If you're using a tool for test management, you can probably configure the fields in that tool to get the information you need for good test cases and good test logs.

2. Take a look at your defect tracking system. Are you gathering data no one uses? If so, get rid of those fields and make everyone happy (some systems won't let you delete fields that have data, but you may be able to hide them).

3. Look at your defect reporting. What reports are you using and which ones could you or should you be using? Are you gathering the information you need to calculate cost of quality? You need to be tracking, at a minimum, when a defect was introduced and when it was detected. Once you have about six months of that data, you can do some real cost of quality calculations and that will get some attention!

In the next six to eighteen months:

1. Start with the cost of quality reports. Look at the other metrics you have. Can you use that information to make informative reports? Is there other information in the test management or defect management systems that you should be tracking? Are you able to determine how many defects are escaping to the customer? Do you know what those defects are costing your organization and the customer? Sit down with your management and figure out what they need to see to understand the testing process (including presenting the excellent work you are doing as well as facilitating your ability to determine where you need to improve).

2. Tune the tools to provide the data you need. Figure out the intervals for reporting. Make sure everyone who is entering information understands why they are doing it and how it will be used.

Ah, we've reached the two year mark! (I'm assuming the schedule slipped and the eighteen month items took a bit longer than planned. Might as well be realistic!) Now you can see that the changes you have made are becoming accepted process and it's no longer a matter of policing and making sure people are using the right forms and entering data correctly into the right tools. As they say in New Zealand, "Good on ya."

In the next two to three years:

1. Time to start rolling out those improved testing techniques. Start using decision tables as part of requirements reviews. Get away from the detailed scripted test cases (if you can) and move to leaner test documentation using decision tables, use cases, state diagrams and tables. Less documentation means faster start up times, less maintenance and often better coverage.

2. How are you using exploratory testing? Are you allocating a set amount of time each day for exploratory testing? You should. Use that time to find new issues and develop new test cases to patch the holes in your current testing.

Yes, I'm aware that you've probably rolled through a number of projects during this timeframe, but that's fine. It takes time to evolve process and technique changes and the changes need to span projects. A process that only works for one project may not be worth the effort. Remember, we're looking for long-term changes and that means changes that will work for a lot of projects.

In the next three to five years:

1. Now what? Are you Advanced certified? Are you an Advanced Technical Test Analyst? How are you doing with test automation? How is your white box testing looking? Have you invested in API testing tools? Static analysis? It's time to expand into more technical testing areas. Are you an Advanced Test Analyst? You should have the testing techniques and processes in good shape. Time to investigate usability testing. Are your products being developed for usability? Can you help influence the design to make better and more likeable products? Are you an Advanced Test Manager? Are you encouraging the development of your team and providing opportunities for them to utilize and build their skills? Is your department growing in the right direction? Are your folks getting the recognition they deserve? Can you improve your reporting and your team's visibility?

2. And on to Expert! Maybe it's time to look at the skills in the team and figure out areas where skills can be developed. Test automation is certainly an area of expertise. The tools are always changing and generally improving to help us build more maintainable automation. How about security? Does your team know enough to be effective as security testers? Should some people be trained to become security experts? And, if you're a manager, how about pursing the Expert Test Management certification. You might want to look at the Improving the Test Process certification as well.

There's a world of software testing out there that is waiting to be improved. Don't get your certification and let it gather dust: Use it! Remember, you are a software testing professional. Use that professionalism and training to make software testing in your organization the best it can be. But make a realistic plan. You're not going to make momentous changes in only six months. Figure on having at least a two to five year plan. That way you can set realistic and measurable goals without frustrating yourself and everyone who works (or lives) with you. We can make changes to improve our futures. Don't settle for the status quo. You're too good for that.