



# Skillware: a buyer's guide

Testing specialist and trainer Bogdan Bereza-Jarociński has a healthily cynical view of testing training

*“Training in testing reduces long term costs. It is not uncommon for less than 1% of an organisation's training budget to be dedicated to testing ... Formal training in test management, test design, static and dynamic techniques, to name but a few of many testing activities, will put systematic and structured method into ... tests. If testing is an average 40% of project budget, why is training investment so low?”*

– Andy Redwood (*Golden Rules for Quality Testing*, Professional Tester March 2002)

## Framework

“Who saves money on test training knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing”, said Oscar Wilde (well, not really, but he might have if he had lived today).

Andy Redwood's statement above provides a frightening message. Obviously, never in the history of human technical endeavour have so many tested so much for so little! Understaffed, underpaid, under-budgeted and underdogs, testers have nevertheless killed many dragons, traced many monsters to their lairs and often saved the world... or at least the day.

So you are a tester. You have known all along, or discovered only recently, that testing requires specialised skills. You have some of them already, but you want and need more. Somewhere in your mailbox, buried under heaps of spam, there is an advertisement of some test training course. Its title has caught your eye: *Survival Kit for Test Managers on the Verge of Nervous Collapse* (3 days, £1,200).

A good course title is like an inviting entrance. An entrance to what: a shortcut on the way to skills and knowledge or a maze that will only delay you?

Well, both. If you take the right path, turn in the right direction at the right moment, you will surely arrive long before others, who stumble and fall on their arduous journey through the wilderness of hands-on experience. On the other hand, signposts may be misleading and many comfortable paths may tempt you away from your primary goal,

which should be better testing based on more comprehensive testing skill.

Practical experience cannot replace training, but training cannot replace practical experience, either. You need them both to become an expert tester (or test manager, or QA specialist, or whatever you choose to call yourself in order to avoid being tester-labelled).

## Five golden rules for finding test training

### 1. Decide what you need: requirements procurement

Decide what your short-term and long-term career goals are. What skill do you need to achieve them? This applies for individuals; for companies, just remove the word 'career' from the sentence above.

### 2. Decide how to get what you need: requirements breakdown

To get or enhance some skills, practical experience is the best teacher. For others, self-study may suffice, but beware - it may be easier to retain your motivation during a few days on a training course than during long-time, late-night reading. Finally, there are skills that are best obtained by attending appropriate training courses.

### 3. What is appropriate: design

Various test-training courses abound. To choose the best, you must first of all differentiate between your short-term and long-term goals.

To satisfy your short-term goals, you would be sorely tempted to find a cookbook course. Immediate satisfaction, obvious return on investment - very promising. Therefore, many training providers offer that kind of training - after all, they are there to supply what customers want!

So, what if you have difficulties implementing bug-tracking system in your current project? Probably, some provider somewhere offers exactly what you think that you need, like *Implementing a Bug Tracking System in Middle Sized IT-projects* (2 days, £750).

Wait a minute - this training course may be what you want at the moment, but it is emphatically not what you really need. To solve this particular immediate problem, you have more suitable options available: Internet search, talking with your colleagues, discussion forums, visiting bug tracking tools vendors' sites.

The purpose of training is to provide long-lasting, generic knowledge, which is flexible enough to be (i) used in many different situations, (ii) adopted to various needs, and (iii) developed on your own when new challenges arise.

For example, narrow “bug tracking knowledge” is rather useless in the long term without related knowledge about change and configuration management. Useful test training should cover a sufficiently broad area.

Otherwise, after attending your *Implementing a Bug Tracking System in Middle Sized IT-projects* course you will soon have to continue with *Performance Requirement Change Management for Web Applications* (2 days, £750). After that, perhaps *Interface Testing for Embedded Systems* (3 days, £1,200), or why not *What Every Test Manager Must Know about State-Transition GUI Testing* (1 day, £350)?

The artificial examples above are exaggerations, but some test-training vendors seem to have already gone too far in this direction! In their efforts to please customers, they offer training with “verifiably” high short-term ROI. My advice to you as customer is: think in terms of long-term benefits, not immediate profit.

This is what training is for: providing you with the tools of your (ie a tester's) trade, not with quick solutions to specific, transient needs!

### 4. Training forms: implementation

Learning new skills fast is often boring. Skilled teachers can make this experience somewhat less painful with the help of jokes, anecdotes, exercises, practical examples, discussions and demos, but such methods are not free. A training course full of pleasing didactic diversions either takes more time or

contains less material. Besides, it typically presents information in less structured, more chaotic way.

It is up to you - the student - to decide which form suits you better. Beware of flashy "hands-on" training. Sometimes, it gives you great dexterity in your fingers, but much less in your head. On the other hand, a course with an impressive syllabus but delivered with a dull, colourless voice and slides packed with small text may simply fail to deposit its contents safely in your head.

Personally, I am rather cynical about so-called "workshops". They are manna from heaven for overworked test training instructors, but are they really good for students? A few slides with "theoretical background", then a question, then half an hour group-work, five minutes' presentations of groups' results and voilà! - the instructor goes home with great course evaluation forms. Participants are happy, too, having talked with understanding, sympathetic peers for so many hours. The question is, has anyone actually learned anything new?

Test training should not be like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, where participants mainly vent their feelings of inadequacy, confess their failings, complain about the unsympathetic world and finally go home feeling relieved and happier!

Teachers can make or break almost any course material. Generally, there are two extremes: different, but equally hopeless.

The first extreme is superb practitioners, grizzled super-consultants who "have seen it all" and can approach any problem with superior confidence in their inexhaustible experience. Their approach to teaching is giving heaps of "tips and tricks", but hardly any systematic knowledge. Trivia like structured lectures, legible notes and appropriate pacing of their talking are typically below their dignity. Commonly found among teachers provided by companies whose main business is consulting, and who find test training may be useful for marketing purposes - but hardly a goal in itself.

The second extreme are car-seller types. They have little practical experience outside their immediate expertise area. They have often received very intensive training in this particular tool or method which they are supposed to teach, so they can deliver their mantras with breakneck speed. However, any deeper questions typically put them off balance, so they pretend not to understand them or wave them off as irrelevant.

Avoid both types and look for teachers with lots of practical experience, appropriate knowledge about teaching, and enthusiasm for their task deeper than pretending to be gurus or

achieving a marketing goal. Ask others, do not be afraid to ask for references, asking who teachers are etc. You are the customer, remember!

## 5. Testing Test Training (3T)

Feeling slightly empty-headed and elated, like primary school pupils on Friday afternoon, you head away from the training centre back to your ordinary work. Course binder becomes dustware, enthusiasm quickly wanes.

It need not be so! After all, no project is complete without going through the right-hand side of the V Model, so why should test training be any different?

Component testing test training: read through your course binder again. Write the most important points down (at this moment, not much may be left from that wonderful, interactive workshop you enjoyed so much!). Prepare your own summary, make a short presentation for your colleagues. Only then your knowledge becomes really "internalised" and available when needed.

Integration and system testing test training: try to employ in practice some (but not all in one go!) of the new things that you have learned. You will probably encounter unexpected difficulties. Hopefully, the teacher gave you his or her email address, urging you to contact him/her (and hoping that you will not). Use it now! PT

## Wanted: Automated Testers with Mercury Toolset Experience

### About Cresta

Cresta tests and implements mission-critical systems minimising risk, cost and time. We successfully deliver test solutions to our market leading clients across numerous industries including finance, telecommunications, pharmaceutical and petro-chemical industries. Cresta pride ourselves in the quality and calibre of our consultants whose credentials speak for themselves. We run a continuous education program so that our consultants are kept up-to-date with the latest industry best practice, technologies and toolsets.

### The role

We currently have a number of permanent and/or contract opportunities to join our team. As a Cresta Consultant you will be responsible for working at various client sites, executing testing of software systems in accordance with the Test Strategy as determined between the Client and Cresta.

### The Candidate

Successful candidates will:

- Have 2+ years Mercury Toolset experience in any of: Winrunner, TestDirector, QuickTestPro or LoadRunner.
- Be personable, enthusiastic and diligent
- Enjoy travel throughout the UK
- Currently have a Mercury CPS/CPC or the desire to study towards one
- Be client facing with an ability to add value to the client and Cresta to each and every assignment

Please send your covering letter and CV to [kristy.mcshane@cresta.net](mailto:kristy.mcshane@cresta.net) with reference PT0023/AT/MP. No agencies.

