

BENELUX

Consistency – and contrasts

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Assessing survey data involves determining averages, and also identifying trends – both of which require a degree of generalization. This means the headline figures may sometimes obscure wide high-low ranges, as well as variations between individual sub-categories.

In some cases, we see this point illustrated in our appraisal of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg (aka Benelux). For example, last year, we noted that the region was facing some challenges with its implementations of test automation. This year, our experience in the field suggests that in the Netherlands, while there are still challenges, there are growing signs of maturity. In Belgium, too, there are signs of improvement.

In other cases, trends are indeed more general. For instance, across Benelux this year, we've seen organizations finding it difficult to build and maintain their CI/CD pipelines, and there is also a broadly expressed need to increase in-house quality assurance (QA) skills.

It's therefore interesting to gauge the extent to which this year's survey results provide any consistency of insight.

A question of confidence

In fact, key elements of general IT strategy in Benelux do show signs of consistency in this year's data. When asked to rank their importance, the largest number (59%) of the region's respondents gave high ratings to enhancing security, while 57% gave high scores to enhancing customer experience, to the higher quality of software solutions, to higher responsiveness to business demands, and also to faster time to market. The only category deemed to be highly significant by fewer (46%) of our respondents was the cost optimization of IT. We see these

weightings reflected in our own experience across the region: cost is less of a focus for organizations than the other criteria we see listed here.

There is also much consistency in evidence in the region's testing and QA objectives – but in this case, we would expect to see greater variation. For example, the two categories rated highly by most Benelux respondents were the importance of making testing and QA a smarter automated process (63%), and the importance of ensuring end-user satisfaction and good customer experience (61%). Among the options given high ratings by fewer people was the extent to which QA contributes to growth and business outcomes (55%), which is quite some degree below our survey-wide average. These responses all reflect what we see across the region, but we would have expected to see the high figures higher, and the low figures lower.

We were a little surprised by some of the region's views of the extent to which they felt they were achieving their application development targets. Well over half (59%) of them said their testing tools and methods are always or almost always sufficient and available, and almost as many (56%) said their testing always or almost always covers everything that is needed. This confidence is much higher than the evidence we see in the field, especially as far as testing completeness is concerned.

There are several different possible approaches to improving the efficiency of testing. In spite of the emphasis we saw just now on making testing smarter and more automated, we were disappointed to see only just over a third (37%) of Benelux respondents saying that increasing test automation levels was a good path to efficiency. Sadly, it corroborates what we see in the field: the proportion of test scenarios in the region that are automated is really quite low.

Similarly, as an area deserving more focus in the post-COVID world, it was a shame to see automation of QA was rated highly by only a third (34%) of Benelux respondents. We suspect, first, that many organizations in the region feel their automation activities are already at the right level, and second, that they will come to realize that much more can be done – in which case, we can expect to see these levels rise in years to come.

Progress in agile and DevOps: business-driven, but fairly slow

Last year, we noted that agile was pretty well established in the Benelux region as a development environment, and indeed it is. But that doesn't mean that organizations face no challenges in this area. Almost half (48%) of them said they face difficulties in getting the right test environments and test data, which we have ourselves observed: many Benelux enterprises are looking for guidance here.

Almost as many (46%) said their agile teams lack professional test expertise, and a similar proportion (44%) said they face difficulties in achieving the right level of test coverage. This may seem odd, when we noted just now how many of them believed their testing coverage is complete. Perhaps those with agile teams are more clear-sighted about their challenges.

Benelux organizations use a number of methods to accelerate and optimize their testing in agile and DevOps environments. Approaches used always or frequently included shift left (rated highly by 43% of the region's respondents); production testing (42%); and using smart or automated dashboards to enable continuous quality monitoring (40%).

Are these approaches paying off? More than half of Benelux organizations surveyed thought so. Very good or excellent improvements in software quality were reported by 57% of the region's respondents; similarly high improvements in cost of quality were reported by 54%, and speed to market by 57%. All these figures were considerably lower than our survey-wide averages, and indeed, we have ourselves seen some Benelux teams struggling with quality and time-to-market issues.

We also asked for people's views on critical success factors in agile and DevOps adoption. It was encouraging to see that the options ranked most important in Benelux were all business-driven: the culture and agility of the business (ranked high by 50%); talent and skill set (48%); a quality mindset (47%); and executive support (46%). If anything, we would have expected these results to be higher still.

Intelligent industry: anticipated productivity gains

This year, we introduced a section on intelligent industry to the World Quality Report, by which we mean the development and use of key technologies such as 5G, edge computing, automation, and the internet of things (IoT).

We asked people which key drivers would be most important in the next stage of digital transformation for their organizations. Ranked equally highly by 44% of Benelux respondents were increased service and product quality; better agility and flexibility; and enhanced customer experience – but the driver ranked highly by most people (52%) was, as we would expect, improved productivity and efficiency.

Which aspects of quality engineering are likely to make the biggest impact on the evolution of Intelligent Industry? It was no surprise to us to see test tools and test infrastructure ranked high by so many of the region's respondents (56% on both cases). Team skills were rated highly by 50%, and test strategy by 47%. Given the business imperative implicit in the intelligent industry concept, we would have expected this strategic element of testing to have been given more weight.

Taking stock

In general, in some areas of quality assurance, there are differences between the constituent countries of Benelux; in others, developments are taking place at a slower pace than in other parts of the world.

In general, though, there is a clear direction of travel – and the mood is positive.



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