

Benelux

Reality seems to have caught up on last year's enthusiasm in Benelux – but the post-COVID signs are promising

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It's interesting to see how trends can develop. Sometimes, they follow a logical path, at a logical pace. Other times, they can take us by surprise.

For instance, last year in the Benelux countries – Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg – we noted that levels of commitment to quality assurance (QA) were high, and that it was regarded as value, rather than a cost. We also noted an investment in automation.

This year, it seems, the commitment is still there, but the achievement is proving difficult. In the field, we've seen organizations in the Netherlands and Belgium making less progress than expected in automation. What we might assume is that their domain knowledge is good – in other words, their own product knowledge being used by their own experts for (mostly) manual test execution – but their ability to apply automation to those circumstances is limited. Automation may be desirable, but it needs to be implemented in a way that is aligned with organizational strategy and business drivers. (In Luxembourg, by contrast, we've seen signs of useful in-house investment in this area.)

We've also seen Benelux organizations experiencing challenges with identifying business drivers for QA, and with deriving an approach to QA from those drivers.

A focus on process more than outcomes?

This last point is reflected in some of the survey responses for this year. When asked about the importance of various testing and QA objectives, there was a marked difference between Benelux respondents and the survey average on the extent to which the contribution to business growth was considered essential: just 57% of Benelux respondents saw it this way, against almost three-quarters (74%) for our survey as a whole.

Similarly, on the relative importance of different aspects of overall IT strategy, around half (52%) of Benelux respondents said higher responsiveness to business demands was vital, against two-thirds (67%) for the global average. There was a similar gap on the perceived importance of enhancing customer experience, with far fewer Benelux respondents rating it highly.

By contrast, and as we'd expect, Benelux was much closer to mean figures with respect to the importance of cost optimization, and also of enhancing security. Compared to organizations in other regions, it seems that in Benelux, there is still room to strengthen approaches to QA so as to support organizational strategy and business drivers.

Progress in test automation seems to have slowed since last year: fewer than half (48%) of Benelux respondents said they pretty much always achieve the right level of automation, against 58% for our survey as a whole. Even fewer (43%) of the region's survey participants felt they always had the right testing strategy, process, or methodology. The problem here, we believe, is that the increasing combination of operational technology (OT) and IT is creating more complex products and solutions. Some countries, including Benelux, are finding it harder to formulate their approach, and also to apply automation techniques. Indeed, when asked about plans for individual automation techniques over the coming year, Benelux respondents said they were much less likely than other countries to adopt them – in categories including test environment virtualization, non-GUI-based automation, and robotics automation. We have seen this trend reflected in the field, especially in Luxembourg. It seems reality has caught up on last year's enthusiasm.

Progress in agile and DevOps

The signs are that the agile development environment is fairly well established in Benelux now, and that more effort is being put into the adoption of DevOps. The growth in DevOps could be because companies with strengths in operational technologies are adept at process automation, and these skills are now being applied in their IT functions, too. This probably explains why organizations in the region are so keen to extend their build and deployment tool knowledge, and to improve their data analytics and AI skills.

The preponderance of operational technology in the region is also a factor in the high level of importance attached to the technology stack as a factor in successful agile and DevOps development. A massive 94% of Benelux survey participants gave this a high rating, against just 65% for our survey cohort as a whole. Another factor might be the region's strong emphasis on SAP platforms.

Although the average use of waterfall has dropped considerably – from 30% of Benelux team effort last year to just 21% this year – we note that this average hides some considerable differences. For instance, more than half (53%) of Benelux respondents said they were still putting more than half their effort into waterfall.

The challenges faced by Benelux organizations when applying testing to agile developments are interesting. More than half (51%) of respondents in the region said they didn't have an appropriate testing approach. This suggests that, despite the fact that agile is well established, a comprehensive management strategy is lacking. It's a trait we've seen in Belgium, especially. By contrast, the greatest challenge we've witnessed in Luxembourg is a lack of professional test expertise in agile teams.

COVID-19: cautiously optimistic

Some of the greatest differences in the survey between Benelux and other regions can be found in questions relating to the effect of the pandemic on quality assurance. Far fewer respondents in the region anticipated changes of focus in the post-COVID world. For instance, only 15% of respondents in the region said they would need greater remote access to test systems and test environments, against 34% for our survey as a whole. This is possibly because the region has had a less strict lockdown regime than in many other parts of the world. Indeed, the economic impact of the pandemic on the Netherlands, in particular, seems to have been less severe.

Similarly, the impact on QA and testing budgets in the post-COVID period seems to have been much less of a problem than for other countries. Indeed, in many organizations in the Netherlands and Luxembourg, we have seen greater investment in hiring.

The mood is positive. For our survey as a whole, a high proportion of respondents expressed high levels of determination to do things differently in the post-pandemic world – and for Benelux, the figures were higher still. As many as 92% of respondents in the region emphatically agreed that they needed to build a stronger QA community culture, and 90% of them said the same about needing to measure the quality of the work of their teams differently. They also agreed that they needed to improve their collaboration tools, and that they needed to empower their teams with more responsibility for quality. In what has been a difficult year, all of this is very good news indeed.



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