

Are We Done Yet?

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During the release process of a software development project, every test manager will be asked to answer the question, “Are we done yet?” several times. More often than not, important stakeholders pay scant attention to this question until it’s very difficult to expand the test effort. Stakeholder views vary widely, all the way from “All we need is one more smoke test by the whole team” to “we can’t even call this a beta yet”.

In general, the development team tends to be bullish about ship-readiness and the marketing team, which is usually under tremendous pressure to deliver the goods yesterday, is even more bullish. A skilled test manager’s opinion, based on actual test data, may not be welcome. There may even be attempts to “kill the messenger” instead of centering the decision on verifiable information that would ensure the release of high quality software. But a good test manager should never be rattled or confused by this question, and in fact should always, throughout the release process, be prepared to develop and deliver a well-informed response.

It is impossible to answer “Are we done yet?” though without fully understanding the destination itself. Surprisingly, not many organizations spend enough time clearly defining success criteria. The most uncomfortable discussions often revolve around heated debates about the readiness of the product: the test manager believes she has good reasons to not sign off, while the marketing executive doesn’t think the primary target customers particularly care about those reasons, and the senior executive decision-maker who has ultimate profit-and-loss responsibility for the business unit is more concerned about color coordination in the splash screen. Which brings us to another aspect of test strategy - are there features deemed critical for the product’s success that have not been included in the test effort?

There’s nothing wrong - indeed, there is much in favor of - questioning the test manager’s judgement. But if no one has invested in defining the success criteria, if the engineering teams are repeatedly forced to tweak the code one more time, there is a very high probability that revisions will continue until the budget is exhausted, or delays are so extensive that customers threaten to desert, or key players get fed up and start working on the next cool project. Without a clear definition up front of what success looks like, it is impossible to declare victory with a clean exit.

Business goals should be translated into measurable quality metrics. There should be good mapping between the agreed-upon business goals and objectives of the product, and quality metrics used to measure the excellence of the product. This linkage helps the test manager provide the quality assessment of the product in a language that is better understood by all stakeholders. If the quality metrics are defined without this linkage, there is always the danger of measuring the wrong criteria

and using scarce test resources inefficiently. In these situations, while the test manager may have a crisp answer about the product's readiness, others will lack confidence in the decision makers' ability to make the right decision.

At Aztecsoft, we have developed guidelines for preparing a crisp, objective, and actionable answer to the inevitable question, "Are we done yet?" Test managers should always be prepared to answer the following questions, at the beginning and at all stages of every project:

1. Is the test strategy and planning consistent with the business objectives of the software being tested?
2. Are the test efforts and test areas partitioned into manageable sections, which in turn would discover data that is granular enough for the test team to deal with?
3. Are ALL stakeholders on board with the test strategy and release criteria?
4. Is the right set of criteria being accurately measured? Appropriate trends under close observation?
5. Are all stakeholders in agreement with the success criteria of the test effort and the product? For example, is there a specific goal to limit the sustained engineering and support costs after the release? Or perhaps a stated goal around levels of desired customer satisfaction?
6. Is there sufficient, actionable information from the marketing team to help prioritize the test coverage and efforts?
7. Are there processes and controls in place that will enable the development team to understand precisely, regulate and track the changes and additions that must be made to the software code base?
8. Is there an information-knowledge system in place to capture data and trends around quality metrics and retrieve this information on demand?
9. Is there ample access, visibility and authority within the test organization to effectively contribute to and help manage the change-control process of the project?
10. Saving the most important for last: is there access to at least a sample of potential end-customers, along with their availability and commitment for feedback during the various stages of the project? Because if they don't tell you now, they will surely tell you later (at great cost to you) if the product is not ready!

So - are you done yet? Be sure you can answer all 10 questions. Then you can defend your judgement in discussions with everyone - including the most exacting CTO or CEO.