ASTQB™

AMERICAN SOFTWARE TESTING QUALIFICATIONS BOARD

7 Things a Software Testing Manager Wants in an Employee

By Judy McKay, CTFL-AT, CTAL Full, CTEL-TM Full

Learn how ASTQB can help you get a software testing job or pave the way for promotion.

1 Competence

2 Good Communication — Always

3 Independence

4 Honesty

5 A Sense of Adventure

6 Adaptability

7 Initiative

I've recently been doing performance reviews and hiring. It forced me to put some serious thought into what I look for and value in a software testing employee. It comes down to 7 primary characteristics (we could even think of these as quality characteristics for people!).

1 | Competence

A software tester working for me needs to be able to apply what they know in varying situations. This includes testing knowledge, project management, development skills, business analysis, and, our good friend, diplomacy. Being a good tester is not just about knowing how to test, but also how to be effective in an environment. This requires leveraging everything you've learned and applying it to the current situation or project.

You have to be willing to learn. Without that, technology, techniques and tools will pass you by and you will be less valuable and certainly less flexible. Being willing to learn doesn't mean waiting for your testing manager to arrange training for you; it means getting out there and reading software testing articles, attending webinars, going to conferences, talking to your buddies in the industry, absorbing what's happening out there in the world. It's particularly

important to look after your own learning when you've been with one organization for a long time. It's easy to become static in your knowledge and feel "safe". It's an ever-changing world out there and you need to know what's new and interesting as well as what's new and foolish. Bring ideas back to your manager who is probably struggling to stay current as well.

In addition to being willing to learn, you should be willing to teach others what you have learned. If you have just learned a new testing technique, share that knowledge. Show how it can be applied. Teach the BAs and developers how to use decision tables. Talk to the developers about this dev op stuff and see what they think. Are they interested in implementing continuous integration? Should you be working with them on test automation? This is your career – plan to build and grow!

2 | Good Communication — Always

Communication is a common buzzword and is frequently a subject for "needs improvement" on software tester performance reviews, but what does your manager really need from you? Your manager wants to be sure that you will raise an important issue or risk, not just sit back and assume others will see it too. You wouldn't go to your doctor and not report your symptoms, would you? A project has symptoms of problems as well and those need to be raised to be sure everyone is

1 Competence

2 Good Communication — Always

3 Independence

4 Honesty

5 A Sense of Adventure

6 Adaptability

7 Initiative

aware and ready to address them. Don't assume everyone knows about a brewing problem. They might not. On your project, in your assignment, you are the eyes and ears of the testing team.

In addition to communicating issues and risks, there is also a time when you should, quite frankly, shut up. Complaining about something that is known and can't be fixed, such as a tight schedule, doesn't help anyone. Raise the issue, make sure it is understood and then do your job as best you can. Testing managers deal with impossible problems all the time. Being nagged about it doesn't help and will tend to make your manager classify you more as part of the problem than part of the solution.

You also want to be sure that issues are raised to the appropriate person. If you're not sure who that is, then check first. Some project managers or development managers are very touchy and reactive. It might be better to let your testing manager raise an issue, particularly a controversial one, rather than doing it yourself. When in doubt, ask.

And a bit about reporting: If you are asked to do a weekly status report, just do it! This is your chance to remind your boss on a weekly basis how wonderful you are and how good your work is. It's just a little reminder. One of my people always sends his status report, always formats it exactly as I want it (so I can easily cut and paste it into the department report) and always words it appropriately. Every Friday afternoon he is my favorite employee. This is an easy way to buy favor without much effort. Just do it.

1

Competence

2

**Good Communication —
Always**

3

Independence

4

Honesty

5

A Sense of Adventure

6

Adaptability

7

Initiative

3 | **Independence**

This is always a tough one. Too much independence may get you into trouble. Trying to manage your own issues can be a good thing, but it can backfire when something you thought was under control suddenly isn't any more. Have you ever had a manager say "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" If so, you might be trying to be too independent. Or, maybe you have the right amount of independence, but you didn't let your manager know there was an issue that you were dealing with already.

What I want to see is a person trying to handle situations and problems, but also letting me know. I might be able to offer some advice, or maybe just sympathy, but I do need to know. Often the problem that you see may be a symptom of a much bigger issue, one that really should be dealt with at the management level. Either way, just let me know. That provides the opportunity to get some guidance and maybe some air cover before you jump into the issue and potentially stir up other problems.

Let me give you an example that has been altered to protect the clearly guilty. One of my testers was working with a development manager who was rude, at best, and abusive, at worst. My tester dealt with this very professionally and avoided an open conflict. That's the right thing to do. She also blew off steam to me about it. That's also the right thing to do. Let me deal with this type of issue through the management layers because this is a personnel issue that has to be handled properly.

1 **Competence**

2 **Good Communication — Always**

3 **Independence**

4 **Honesty**

5 **A Sense of Adventure**

6 **Adaptability**

7 **Initiative**

By avoiding an open conflict, my person allowed the management team time to deal with the problem. By keeping me clued in, she provided the information we needed for the personnel action. It was a bad situation, but it built my respect for my employee for the professional way she dealt with it.

Independence is good. It shows growth. It shows a willingness to take on responsibility. It shows that you are ready to advance to the next position. But it is risky. Use good judgment and when you're not sure what to do, ask.

4 | Honesty

We all make mistakes in our software testing careers and do things we shouldn't have done. That's part of growing and learning. What a good manager wants and needs is honesty. Your manager is on your side. If you've made an honest mistake, OK. We've all done it. Now work together to figure out what to do about it. Don't try to hide it and hope no one will find out. Just admit it and move on. I've made some awesome mistakes in my time, and the very best managers have been the ones who understood and helped me undo whatever foolish thing I had done. It's my job to pass on that level of understanding and encouragement.

Now, all that said, there are times when a mistake really causes a mess. As long as it was well-intentioned, working together is vital for recovery. If the mistake was intentional, then it's a whole different issue. So, be sure your intentions are good because you will, eventually, make a mistake and have to ask for forgiveness.

1 Competence

2 Good Communication — Always

3 Independence

4 Honesty

5 A Sense of Adventure

6 Adaptability

7 Initiative

5 | A Sense of Adventure

The very best testers are those that see each project as a new and exciting challenge. The core of finding this sense of adventure is to maintain a curiosity about the software, the project, the developers, the other stakeholders … everything about the project. If you can find this level of interest, you will be a happy employee. Nothing is really going to motivate you as well as enjoying the work. If you really like to see how you can break the software, you will have a wonderful time with the work. If you are happy to work with a team to produce a high quality product, it will be easy to get up for work in the morning. And, this sense of adventure will get you through the boring and monotonous work too. There are always boring parts of our job. Regression testing should be boring (it isn't always, but that's another issue). Writing test cases can be a snooze-fest. But, breaking stuff is fun. And seeing it get better is rewarding.

Think about what motivates you and be sure you find that in your job. I like to hire people who are self-motivated. They are happier. They aren't waiting for me to tell them they do good work. They know when they do good work and that motivates them. It is important to be realistic though. If testing were all fun and games and rewards, they wouldn't have to pay us to do it. Testing has its bad times, boring times and just plain frustrating times. It's important to understand that's part of the job too, just as finding the biggest, ugliest bug right before the final release to production. It should balance out to a level that you find interesting and enjoyable.

1

Competence

2

Good Communication — Always

3

Independence

4

Honesty

5

A Sense of Adventure

6

Adaptability

7

Initiative

6 | Adaptability

My favorite testers are the adaptable ones. People I can move between projects as needed and they just grab onto the new project and start in. I want people who can learn quickly and adapt to any project situation. That means the more lifecycle models you're comfortable with, the more I want to hire you. The more technologies and tools you know, the more I want you. And you can do test automation too? Great! Flexibility in assignments and adaptability to project situations is critically important in our industry. You won't ever know everything you need to know on a new project. But can you adapt? Can you learn? Will you be happy dealing with that period of time when you're not quite comfortable? Do you like the challenge? Then you will do really well in a testing organization. And you will be very attractive to a hiring manager.

1 Competence

2 Good Communication — Always

3 Independence

4 Honesty

5 A Sense of Adventure

6 Adaptability

7 Initiative

7 | Initiative

This overlaps with several of the other areas, but a good tester shows initiative. You find things that need to be done and you do them. You fill in your slack time (when you've broken all the software they gave you) with productive tasks such as creating new reports, putting the testing artifacts into a database, etc. A good tester always has something to do to keep them busy. And, if you absolutely can't find something to do, ask your manager for something. I always have a pile of tasks that I haven't been able to get to and I'd love some help. Unfortunately, all my people are showing great initiative on their projects and already have very, very full plates.

You should never be bored. If you are, you aren't looking hard enough for interesting things to do. Is the regression testing driving you mad? Why haven't you looked at test automation? Are the requirements really finished? Why aren't you using decision tables to help define the requirements? Look for ways to improve the project and the work products. Look for new things to learn and ways to expand your skills.

1 Competence

2 Good Communication — Always

3 Independence

4 Honesty

5 A Sense of Adventure

6 Adaptability

7 Initiative

Conclusion

We've looked at the traits that all good testing managers seek in their employees. You undoubtedly already have a number of these. You clearly have initiative and are working to build your competence or you wouldn't be reading this paper. Now how do you parlay these skills into a promotion or a new job? For a promotion, read back through what a testing manager looks for. Make sure your manager knows that you do these things and, without being a pain, mention these in your weekly status report. This information sinks in. Also, be sure you reference your fine characteristics on your performance appraisal. Get noticed for the good things you do. Testers all too often don't point out the good things they do and expect their bug counts to say it all.

When interviewing for a software testing job, a clever interviewer will probably touch on all of these items. Be sure you give examples of how you have delivered on each one of these. If they don't bring them up, be sure you do. But talk in terms of examples. That's much more believable. Everyone says they are adaptable, but it's a lot more interesting if you can give examples of situations in which you have had to prove your adaptability.

Managers look for these characteristics. You will find that you will be happier in your job if you pursue these as part of your normal work. Make a checklist and review it monthly to make sure you really are working to grow and learn and expand your independence. You will be a better employee and your testing manager will most certainly notice.

1

Competence

2

Good Communication —
Always

3

Independence

4

Honesty

5

A Sense of Adventure

6

Adaptability

7

Initiative

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy McKay, CTFL-AT, CTAL Full, CTEL-TM Full has spent the last 20+ years working in the high tech industry with particular focus on software quality assurance and software testing. She has managed departments encompassing all aspects of the software lifecycle including requirements design and analysis, software development, database design, software quality assurance, software testing, technical support, professional services, configuration management and technical publications. And she has hired a lot of people.

Learn how ASTQB can help you get a software testing job or pave the way for promotion.

Learn more now at www.astqb.org

or contact us at info@astqb.org

ASTQB™

AMERICAN SOFTWARE TESTING QUALIFICATIONS BOARD