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## Business

### Top 5 software quality problems with HR roots

D. Murali and G. Padmanaban

Chennai: While it is generally true that anyone who is knowledgeable in a programming language can program, the biggest challenge is to find individuals with a combination of domain and IT (information technology) competencies, who can articulate the vision for a software product, and take it from the drawing board down to the last design detail.

"What we currently face is a yawning gap between the short supply and the huge demand for the right IT talent and competency profiles," rues **Mr Raghav S. Nandyal**, author of '*Making Sense of Software Quality Assurance*' ([www.tatamcgrawhill.com](http://www.tatamcgrawhill.com)).

"Our biggest software quality problems or concerns stem from this issue, forcing organisations to recruit talent from the proverbial 'School of Hard-Knocks'! Such talent in most cases comes unfinished and raw, professionally," he adds, during a recent e-mail interaction with *Business Line*, on what the top 5 software quality problems are. "Investing in such hard-to-find resources is a near term solution. Of course, it must be coupled with long-term retention strategies," he suggests, as antidote.

Mr Nandyal, the Founder and CEO of SITARA Technologies – 'a professional services company with core competencies in strategic management consulting, process assessment and web-based product development' – earlier held several software and management positions ranging from software engineer to Chief Process and Quality Officer with leading multinationals worldwide.

Excerpts from the interview, in which he discusses four other major HR factors impacting software quality, viz. compensation, attrition, accountability, and the star-performer myth, all of which have their roots in HR (human resources).

#### On compensation.

Compensating individuals for displaying wrong behaviours is the second issue that merits attention. In an industry that boasts of 20-30 per cent profit margins, wealth distribution that is disproportionate to the contribution of an individual is very common.

I believe that the biggest challenge comes from the manner in which compensation adjustments and revisions are made. Guess who gets the biggest raise? The person who whines and holds out threats of quitting around Christmas – when it is time for New Year Resolutions and annual compensation revisions!

Based on my experience managing large software projects, it is an irony that organisations invest time and money to train and prepare an individual to come to grips with both the domain and project requirements. And this very investment becomes counterproductive.

After acquiring the needed competencies, the person becomes indispensable – at least in the short term – and holds the organisation to ransom with the quit-threats. The systems archetype of 'Fixes that Fail' best describes the underlying structure, wherein, a compensation revision, effective in retaining talent in the short-term has unforeseen long-term consequences which requires, even more use of the same fix.

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Unless the compensation and reward structure favours an individual who displays both performance and loyalty, eroding competencies due to attrition is bound to add up to the woes of quality.

#### **On attrition.**

Attrition is a major cause that affects software quality. It affects team morale and building teams that have constancy of purpose. Imagine the fate of any team-oriented activity with a revolving door defining the team composition.

In the last 12 years since I have been involved in process appraisals, I find the notions of team-based work practices and the definitions of team-based processes almost elusive even among high maturity sites. This means, organisations have thrown up their arms helplessly while dealing with problems of attrition and their effects on team dynamics. This is very disturbing.

While organisations have policies in place to ensure documentation of project data and knowledge transfer prior to letting-go of people, such articulations on paper are poor substitutes for the individual who is leaving. Again, the solution lies in rewarding and compensating high performance teams keeping a long-term view.

#### **On accountability.**

The next biggest challenge posed to software quality is a lack of ownership and accountability for an individual's actions. This is primarily due to lack of pride, passion and perseverance in one's work. Jim Collins writes very well in his book, '*Good to Great*,' which I feel is very relevant in addressing this software quality concern. Collins notes that 'Good' is the enemy of 'Great'. What a concept!

#### **On star-performers.**

Finally, a mistaken belief and the rubbing-off of too much of Jack Welch! Why are we so hung-up that only 10 per cent can be star performers? Just because the legendary Jack Welch said so?

I was brutally taken aback when I was delivering an introductory course on People CMM to a large multinational where I found confused looks on the faces of the management when I proposed and asked, 'Why cannot every individual in your organisation be a star performer? For you recruit high-quality talent from top-notch Indian Universities.'

I feel that many star performers are born to win, but are conditioned to lose because of such untested beliefs imposed by organisational structures.

#### **How can staffing be made effective?**

I recently stumbled upon a very well-researched book based on personality types using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), titled '*Do What You are*' by Paul Tieger and Barbara Barron. If I had to make my staffing decisions all over again, for that perfect software quality assurance professional based purely on the MBTI preferences, I would choose an ENTJ (Extroverted, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging) or an INTJ (Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging) combination without a question.

I recommend this book to professionals who are caught up in the viscous circle of defining that perfect career. And of course, Jim Collins '*Good to Great*' is a recommended reading for those who are excellence oriented in their approach to leading disciplined lives and who would like to gain from what he calls the "rinsing your cottage cheese" factor, in their work.

Jim Collins illustrates this factor with an analogy of a disciplined world-class athlete named Dave Scott, who won the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon six times. Dave Scott believed that despite a rigorous training that could easily burn-off 5,000 calories a day, a low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet would give him an extra edge. So, he would literally rinse his cottage cheese to get the extra fat off, since he believed that it was one more small step that would make him just that much

better. One more small step added to all other small steps to create a consistent program of super-discipline!

We need such thinking across the board if we have to make excellence in execution a reality – what my book calls – strategic execution.

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<http://InterviewsInsights.blogspot.com>

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