

An Experience Report Guideline

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The purpose of this guideline

The peer conferences of the Dutch Exploratory Workshop on Testing are based on experience reports. Because we believe that the value of any practice depends on its context, we prefer having conversations about how practices are applied in real-life situations over having philosophical or theoretical debates. We wrote this guideline because we think that a good experience report enables software testers to make better decisions about practices and practitioners. In this short article we explain what we consider to be an experience report.

Definition

An experience report is a presentation by a person on the subject of work that was done in real life and with a practical goal. The presenter is a practitioner, involved in doing the work that is described in the report. The presenter feels the desire to share the particular experience because he thinks it is important and is open to discuss the experience and to answer questions about it. The report may focus on the performance of the work, aiming to show an evaluation or analysis of the work that was done and the circumstances under which it was done. It may also reflect on the personal impression that the work made on the practitioner. Or it may show the practical application of methods, insights, tools or approaches to the work and, consequently, their results (for example, the lessons learned).

The goal of an experience report

The goal of an experience report is to submit the report for reflection, analysis, inspection or evaluation to an audience, and to present it in such a way that the experience is advantageous to learning by the audience, the presenter or both. Therefore the experience report is not a lecture; it does not aim at instruction or teaching. The analysis or evaluation usually takes the form of a facilitated discussion after the report has ended.

The value of an experience report

An experience report provides examples that are worth having a discussion about. The report is of greater value when it excites the senses, opens up new ways of thinking or deepens the understanding of a certain subject. For example, the report may show the use of a novel method, the refinement of a well-known method, or the use of a well-known method with an unexpected outcome or remarkable results. It may show the application of a known method in a less-known context. Or it may highlight aspects of a context that were not considered before.

The purpose of evaluation

The evaluation serves as a conduit for learning, in which the audience and the practitioner have a chance to reflect upon the experience and to personally come to awareness and realizations about the subject that is discussed. It is not the aim of the analysis or evaluation of the experience report to reach a decision or to come to a sensible conclusion. Neither is it aimed at abstractions or generalizations.

The scope of the report

The scope of the experience report should be clearly defined in such a way that focus on the subject of the experience can be achieved easily, both by the presenter and the audience. Being specific will enhance the learning experience. For example, within the topic of the test strategy there is a host of aspects that can be highlighted. Without limiting the number of aspects and being very clear about those from the start, the report and the ensuing discussion may follow a winding path. If this is the case, part of the discussion will eventually be spent on focusing. Generally, this should be considered lost time.

The description of the context

The context of a project or company should be described as much as it serves to explain the work that is done, and as long as it focuses on the aspects that are highlighted in the experience report. For example, on the topic of test strategy it may, in a certain context, be important that the test strategy is influenced by a certain architecture that is used within the project or the company. If, however, the report focuses on communicating the test strategy with higher level management, the architectural aspects of the system may only play a minor role, or no role at all, and the contextual aspects that influence communication with management should be highlighted.

Secondly, the description of the context should serve to explain why certain methods or tools were selected, how certain insights were acquired and why certain conclusions were drawn and decisions were made. While there is no need for the presenter to prove the correctness of his actions or his thinking, a description of the context should make it easier for the audience to understand how he arrived at certain conclusions.

Definitions, shallow agreements and clarification

It is assumed that the application or usage of general or abstract concepts can only be understood within a context. Within the domain of software testing there are many examples of concepts, such as 'test case', 'test strategy', 'white box testing' or 'regression testing', that cannot be transferred from one context to another without loss of meaning or the introduction of ambiguity and confusion. If he uses such concepts in his report, the presenter therefore is tasked to give meaning to them drawing from the context. He can be called upon to clarify an abstract concept or his use of it. This way, it should be possible to minimize shallow agreements, in which different parties have different assumptions about what appears to be, on the surface, the same thing.

It follows that an experience report is not an attempt to give a clear and complete, definitive meaning to a general or abstract concept. Therefore the presenter shall not be called upon to make general statements about definitions. It is considered to be less useful to try and (re)define the meaning of a general concept ('to discuss semantics') in the course of an experience report.

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