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“Retro” Overview of Software Project Retrospectives hosted by BenchmarkQA

March 4, 2011, Minneapolis, MN . Senior Consultant and Training Practice Lead Betty Schaar engaged a broad audience at BenchmarkQA’s first Quality Forum of 2011, sharing her knowledge of why, when and how to conduct software project retrospectives. A large portion of the presentation was dedicated to sharing the many lessons that have been learned by BenchmarkQA’s experienced QA consultants and peers about how to make a retrospective more effective and productive. The attendees enthusiastically participated a retrospective of retrospectives, incorporating many components of software project retrospectives to a discussion about the challenges of retrospectives.

A retrospective is a structured opportunity for software project team members from all disciplines to come together to discuss what worked, what didn’t work and what could be improved for upcoming projects. Although the term retrospective is typically associated with agile methodology, this is an activity that creates value regardless of the methodology used by your project team (it’s typically known as a post mortem in waterfall methodology).

Quoting Norman Kerth, author of [Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews](#) and an expert in the field, *“No one knows the whole story of the project. Each person has a piece of the story. The retrospective ritual is the collective telling of the story and mining the experience for wisdom.”* As an aspect and adapt ritual, the retrospective allows team members to celebrate their successes as well as openly discuss any stumbling blocks that affected their project.

A dozen QA practitioners contributed to the Lessons Learned portion of the presentation, providing their advice on what to do and what not to do to make a retrospective a positive learning experience for team members. Queried peers, past co-workers and fellow consultants and was delighted with the variety of tips and tricks they provided, from planning the meeting to post-retrospective task lists, says Schaar. All the lessons learned contributions are available within the presentation. here’s a preview:

- É A retrospective allows aggrieved team members to let off steam and not carry it over to the next round of work.
- É It really helps to have an agenda and rules of conduct.
- É It can take time to get the thoughts out of everyone in the group. Solicit the input ahead of the group session; this can also help with anonymity.
- É Items might come out that the group feels are important to their success, but not in their control to resolve. Still capture these, someone should own, but the group should also take on one or more other items that are in their control.
- É Bring in a moderator who knows nothing about the project. Having a neutral moderator helps keep things on track and not get steered in a particular direction.
- É Bring in a scribe not involved in the project. If the scribe knows nothing of the project, they can focus on taking notes.
- É Create a standard checklist or questionnaire which helps team to stick to the point during retrospective. (e.g. requirements/user stories, communications, development, unit test, database, QA testing, data preparation, inter team dependencies, test environment etc. . focused topics).

To put Schaar's recommended retrospective process into action, attendees participated in an activity to identify the most important issues that teams experience when conducting retrospectives. Participants voted for what they thought were the top three challenges. The issue with the highest votes was discussed by event attendees to identify possible root causes, possible solutions, and action steps to resolve the problem. "It was an interesting experiment," reports Schaar. "Participants got a good feel for how an issue should be dissected to create a workable action plan."

"Conducting a retrospective is a critical component of improving software quality," says Molly Decklever, BenchmarkQA senior vice president. "If companies skip this important step, or don't conduct the retrospective effectively, they miss the opportunity to repair process issues that lead to delayed releases and higher project costs. A two hour retrospective can save teams an incredible amount of time and money on their next project. By bringing issues to the surface, brainstorming ways to overcome them, and setting an action plan for change, the process becomes stronger and so does the team."

The Quality Forum slide presentation is available for download on SlideShare at <http://www.slideshare.net/BenchmarkQA/tools-for-managing-quality-benchmark-qa-software-quality-forum-slideshare>.

BenchmarkQA, headquartered in Minneapolis, MN, has provided exceptional quality assurance consulting and testing services to its clients for 24 years. They help software project teams deliver high-caliber software with greater efficiency and cost control, through process improvement strategies, training, guidance, and the productivity of highly-skilled QA professionals. As a service to the Twin Cities QA community, BenchmarkQA offers Software Quality Forums on a quarterly basis. For more information, please visit www.benchmarkqa.com.

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