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Application Problems Plague Coders

A survey found that developers spent more time troubleshooting application problems than programming

By Dave Worthington

It seems counterintuitive to think that the biggest time-sink in the application production life cycle would receive the least regard from development managers. However, a survey published by Forrester Consulting has revealed that this conundrum is the cold hard fact for many organizations.

The objective of Forrester's "Problem Resolution Survey Results and Analysis" was to determine where developers and testers are spending their time and to learn what is automated and what is not. The biggest time drain, according to the managers, directors and executives who responded: investigating and resolving application problems.

According to Forrester, almost half of the respondents require more than an hour to document a problem, and a problem report uses six types of media on average. "That is interesting to us, given the large number of problems," remarked Eldad Maniv, vice president of BMC's Identify Software Business Unit.

The respondents spend almost three out of every 10 hours (29 percent) in various stages of troubleshooting: documenting, reproducing or testing. On the average, a problem takes six days or more to resolve, and one in four of the problems reported by a QA or test group are returned as irreproducible.

Of the time spent on defect resolution, 26 percent is spent reviewing information, 34 percent on reproducing the behavior, and the remaining 40 percent goes toward isolating the root cause of the problem.

The trend is universal: Forrester's survey found no statistically significant difference across verticals or between enterprises and ISVs. 150 organizations were interviewed: 100 enterprises and 50 ISVs, all in Canada or the United States.

"We were surprised by this survey," said Maniv. "We looked into how well this is known within an organization, and one-third of managers underestimate time, and another third don't think about it or don't care about it."

He added that two-thirds of the responding managers indicated that a solution that reduced the time spent on resolving application problems would be of interest if it created significant efficiencies and improved quality.

To Maniv, one solution is test automation, because much like an aircraft's black box, automation solutions record everything that happened in the environment during a test. This could slash the time needed to gather information. "80 [percent] to 90 percent of people are still hitting the keyboard" to gather data, he quipped.