

Time to Test: The Search for an Operations Manager

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Once in a while, I get a good idea. To be more accurate, once in a while I *steal* a good idea. Shortly after I moved back to Milwaukee, I started running around with a bad crowd—a group of rebels who didn't tolerate the status quo, who did things their own way, who had to be different. I'm talking, of course, about the gang from RDI: Grimsted, Kehoe, Hargreave, Leone, Florian, Lanzer, Oppenhauser, Koenecke, and some others.

These were the folk who thought that “software engineering” wasn't simply a catchy phrase that looked hot on a business card—folk who, as much as possible, actually walked their talk. And the cool idea that I, er, borrowed was having a separate testing department.

Of course, at the time, I was working out of my den while RDI had 30 or 40 people. They actually had a *department*, while I had two cats and a couple of kindergarteners. But somewhere the idea of hiring local high school kids popped into my head, and things around the shop were never the same.

First, I could no longer program in my skivvies. There was always a kid or two hanging around, waiting for the opportunity to bust some application that I thought was finished. Second, I stopped getting calls from customers asking “What does ‘Under Construction’ in the Operations/Import Transactions menu mean?” And third, I started sleeping better.

There were a ton of ancillary benefits to this process as well, and I've yammered on about them elsewhere. I highly recommend the process—I've never regretted any aspect.

But then growth set in. I moved into an office downtown (yes, where the lights are bright), and started hiring people. My first hire was a junior programmer—a couple years of Fox experience—and he helped out a lot. So it was just the two of us for a while, writing code, answering the phone, and shipping EXEs.

But the high school kids couldn't come downtown as easily as they could ride their bike over to my house. Quality began to slip, at first imperceptibly, but then a noticeable incident occurred here and there. At the same time, more people started showing up for work: an administrative assistant, some more technical people. All of a sudden, I'm no longer writing code, I'm running a company. And we're still not testing like we had been.

Time for a full-time QA person.

But we've got several developers who have been working without the discipline of having to send modules to test before shipping them, and it's easy to fall under the spell of customers who say “Of course I want it today! If I wanted it tomorrow, I would have called you tomorrow!”

So I find myself playing the role of production scheduler, controller, and chief Test Plan Writer-Upper. In addition to all that other stuff, right? So writing code happens at 2 a.m. (some of you will argue that 2 a.m. is the *only* proper time to write code, but work with me on this, will ya?). You can write an awful lot of code at 2 a.m. while Ozzy Osbourne wails in the background. And that's a very precise description: a lot of awful code.

So the next step, after I recover from the hate mail in response to last month's “Last Man Standing” editorial, is to find an operations manager—the person with whom I can share duties. I do the sales and R&D while they run the factory. Some may call it the business manager; others refer to this partner as “the handler.”

And here is where I'm supposed to come up with an ending for this column. But I don't have one. As of this writing, I'm looking for that person—to be sure, there are several good candidates—but the chapter hasn't been closed. The addition of an operations manager marks yet another turn in the road from one-man shop, to a couple of developers, to a “real” business, to a company with separate “departments” for sales and manufacturing.

Details at 11.