



Offshore code-checker passes value test

Diplomacy is key to successful offshore application testing, argues AppLabs' chief executive

Gareth Morgan, IT Week, 19 Jun 2008

Amid the hype and hullabaloo that have accompanied the meteoric rise of Indian outsourcing providers over the past decade, there have been two constant features dampening some of the enthusiasm: wage inflation and high staff turnover. In the high-tech campuses that have sprung up on the outskirts of many of India's cities, it is not unusual for the brightest and best workers to be able to walk across the road and get a 30 per cent pay rise.

But Makarand Teje, the recently appointed chief executive of Indian-based application testing firm [AppLabs](#), thinks he has a handle on the problem, and can thus shield his customers from unexpected hikes in services costs. Application testing, he confided, is different; attrition rates at AppLabs are well below the Indian industry average and pay inflation is under control.

In truth, the main thing that sets application testing apart from other outsourcing functions is that compared with white-hot sectors such as software development or business process outsourcing, it can appear somewhat humdrum. When it comes to recruitment, Teje acknowledged that AppLabs has to target the second tier, but he is adamant that this does not result in second-rate service.

"We're careful to manage expectations, but then also build around that with career planning and emphasising people management skills," he said. For example, staff are encouraged to have regular one-to-ones with others in their team even if those team members are located on the other side of the planet. Social events, such as days out to watch the cricket are encouraged.

Such paternalism has helped minimise staff attrition but its main benefit comes in client relationships, said Teje. "Customer engagements require some delicate negotiations: it's not an easy thing to do to comment on someone else's code. Having those additional soft skills is an important part of our customer relationship," he added.

One of the criticisms frequently levelled at outsourcing arrangements is that too many focus on the technical issues and not enough attention is given to the interpersonal relationships that will make them work. This is doubly true of application testing, said Teje.

To many business leaders, software development can appear to be something of an arcane art: the very best developers create elegant and functional applications, but the creative process can be somewhat opaque. And often these artistes expect to be treated with a certain reverence testing their code can require the skills of a diplomat.

Consequently, AppLabs' focus on enhancing the soft skills of its employees helps them engage with their customers, making sure that not too many feathers get ruffled, explained Teje.

And as the process of software development evolves and new techniques such as agile development, where projects are delivered in small increments of functionality, come to the fore, so the relationship between developers and testers also changes. But the changes play to AppLabs' strengths, insisted Teje. "We've got a history of introducing best-in-class processes to software testing, bringing in more measurement," he added.

For some, that may mean the prospect of outsourcing the testing to India is too daunting. "In those cases we have the capability to deliver on-shore," explained Teje. "We have test centres in both London and Preston, so if customers are more comfortable with that, we can work with them."

Teje also hopes to make a virtue out of his company's independence. AppLabs offers testing capabilities for all major software development environments, including IBM Rational and Borland. So for those companies that are outsourcing their software development, having a third-party tester brings benefits akin to the relationship

between a finance department and their auditor, said Teje. "They both have the skills to do a similar job but the auditor adds a stamp of authority."

So while Teje is proud to be part of the Indian explosion redefining the IT industry, he is also happy to be distinct from it.