

Boredom in Software Testing

The motivation for this write-up came from a tester who recently told me that he was bored and his job seemed monotonous.

Before jumping right in at trying to suggest possible solutions, lets digress a bit to take a closer look at the concept of boredom ! (*as if it weren't boring enough to talk about*)

According to psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, boredom occurs, "When we must not do what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do." Though the feelings of being bored by routine tasks are often transitory, longer-term boredom can set in from a lack of meaning or purpose in life.

Most people blame boredom on the circumstances, but psychologists say this emotion is highly subjective and rooted in aspects of consciousness and that levels of boredom vary among people. Some individuals are less and others considerably more likely to be bored than others. Boredom is not a unified concept but may comprise several varieties, including the transient type that occurs while waiting in line and so-called existential boredom that accompanies a profound dissatisfaction with life. Boredom is linked to both emotional factors and personality traits. A person may feel bored when the individual

- thinks that there is little value in doing the job
- feels that what is being done is not challenging
- feels there is not much to contribute

These are not the only reasons for boredom. Boredom could occur when a person feels that their skills or talents are not being used, their efforts are not valued or what they do is of little or no value. Sometimes people lose motivation, are closed to new ideas or only consider things that fit into their "comfort zone". Some people have problems with attention that also play a role, and thus techniques that improve a person's ability to focus may diminish boredom.

Boredom can be a motivator too: It may be telling you that it is time to wake up and make some changes to what you are doing.

Can software testing ever be boring?

As someone who claims to be a software testing professional ! I am tempted to say "never". Testing is fun and challenging. However, the fact is that testing can at times seem tedious and monotonous. Good software testers must be able and willing to accept a certain

degree of repetitive activity as part of their testing job. Monotony becomes a problem when it becomes a regular part of the testers job. There may be times when your job requires performing tasks that may seem boring. For example, being asked to execute a set of tests manually on the same version of a product across multiple platforms to check for compatibility. When boredom sets in, the normal human tendency is to try to short-circuit the testing activity. For example, it may be in terms of executing fewer tests than required, not paying close attention to the test results, assuming that a test that has passed in the previous run will pass now, not being open to any new issues that may be lurking around, etc; all of which are detrimental to the quality of the product being tested.

A generally suggested solution to overcome boredom in manual test execution is to automate the tests. My advice is to not jump in immediately to automate tests. Manual testing has a lot of value. Of course, on the face of it test automation does make sense but there are considerations to be made before embarking on such an exercise. Test automation must be approached with the same rigor and discipline as your organization would approach a software development project for its customers.

Also, having your tests automated does not mean that testers will no longer face tedium or boredom. Ask around with those testers who need to code and regularly maintain test automation for feedback and you would realize that some element of fatigue and boredom will creep in even with automated testing.

So, as testers do we resign ourselves to the fact that some part of a testers job will always be boring? Is there a choice? What can you do if you're frequently bored?

"Don't blame your job, the traffic or your mindless chores," says Anna Gosline in a December 2007 article at *Scientific American*. Instead, look to yourself for options you may have to relieve boredom. Find a way to inject variety and stimulation into routine tasks.

We operate at our best when we are utilizing our strengths. Look for creative ways to alter your tasks or the way you approach your work to utilize your strengths.

If you feel that you do not have enough to do, talk with your manager and ask for more work, including more challenging responsibilities. A positive conversation with your manager could lead to a altered job description which may alleviate any feeling of boredom you might have.

If you are part of a larger testing team, check if you can exchange some tasks with your colleagues. That way both of you get to work on something different.

Constantly ask yourself as to how you can add more value to what you are doing. Adding value will result in at least two things – one, you will definitely feel much better and satisfied and two, the organization will view you as being enthusiastic, interested and pro-active. All very good qualities to exhibit which may in turn lead to better responsibilities going forward.

The power of your thoughts cannot be emphasized enough. Begin to think differently about your work. Realize how your thoughts drive your actions.

When working continuously, take a break. It often helps to clear your mind and relieve some stress.

Be the employee who takes active interest in not just individual performance but also keeps the larger interest of the group or organization in mind. Look for opportunities to suggest changes and try something different.

It is a good idea to find a mentor. Someone who can coach and guide you will prove very useful. Do not think that coaches and mentors are just for the junior employees. Even CEOs need mentors and coaches. Everyone at any level in the organization can benefit

from a good mentoring relationship.

Of course, a list of tips to alleviate boredom at work should have this one – learn more about your product and area of work. Do you already know your product well? If yes, then set a goal to be the master of your product; strive to learn all that you possibly can. If no, start learning more. Being in software testing does not put you at a disadvantage in mastering your product. As a matter of fact, you have a head start at mastering your area since you would have a greater breadth of knowledge of most areas of the product which your development counterparts may not. Strive to become the “go-to” person of your group, the one everyone turns to when they need information about the product. I have been and seen such an expert many times and the satisfaction you get is tremendous.

Finally, always aim to improvise. "Restructure the job in your own mind," says renowned psychology professor Csikszentmihalyi. "Approach it with the discipline of an Olympic athlete. Develop strategies for doing it as fast and as elegantly as you can. Constantly strive to improve performance - doing it in the fewest moves, with the least effort, and with the least time between moves."

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