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Rehumanising Quality

The QA Role as Orchestrator in AI-Accelerated Testing

Conference Reading Edition · A faithful 25-minute reading version preserving the voice and sequence of the BCS SIGiST Summer Conference 2026 presentation

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Conference reading sequence

This edition is intentionally shaped for spoken delivery at a measured conference pace. It preserves the argument, voice and progression of the full publication while removing front matter, repetition and written-medium expansion.

CONFERENCE READING

Opening

When I was invited to speak at the BCS SIGiST Summer Conference, I found myself returning to a question that had quietly occupied my thinking for some time.

> Not a question about technology.
> Not a question about testing techniques.
> Not even a question about Artificial Intelligence itself.
> Instead, it was a question about us.

> What remains our responsibility when more and more of what we do can be delegated to machines?

It is an uncomfortable question because every profession built upon knowledge, judgement and repeatable practice is now beginning to ask something similar. The software quality profession is no exception.

Throughout its history, our profession has evolved alongside the technologies it supports. Agile changed where quality was created. DevOps changed how continuously it had to be sustained. Automation transformed practices that once depended almost entirely upon manual effort.

Artificial Intelligence represents the latest—and perhaps the most profound—of those transitions. It can analyse information at extraordinary scale, generate software, identify patterns, propose tests and support decisions in ways that would have seemed remarkable only a few years ago.

For many people, the obvious response is to ask what Artificial Intelligence will eventually be capable of doing.

I believe there is a more important question.

> What should remain uniquely ours?

My purpose is neither to celebrate Artificial Intelligence uncritically nor to resist its adoption. I use these technologies extensively myself because they offer extraordinary opportunities to improve the way we build, test and deliver software.

The challenge lies elsewhere. As Artificial Intelligence assumes an increasing number of activities that once defined our profession, we are compelled to reconsider where our greatest value truly resides.

I believe the answer lies not in the activities themselves, but in the responsibilities that surround them.

PART 1

1. Users Experience Journeys, Not Components

Every discussion about quality must begin with the people we ultimately serve.

Within large and complex organisations, it is easy to become preoccupied with the health of individual systems. We monitor services, verify interfaces, assess performance, measure availability and examine logs and test results in remarkable detail.

> Each of these activities is valuable.
> Yet none of them represents what users actually experience.
> Users do not experience databases.
> They do not experience APIs.
> They do not experience deployment pipelines.

They experience journeys.

They experience whether they were able to accomplish what they set out to do. From the user's perspective, every underlying component becomes part of one continuous interaction. They neither know nor care which application processed a request or which service returned a response. They care whether the journey felt coherent, dependable and trustworthy.

When we define quality primarily in terms of technical components, we naturally optimise those components. Each team may achieve its objectives. Each service may satisfy its measures. Every component may perform exactly as intended.

Yet the user may still experience confusion, interruption or frustration.

Quality cannot therefore be understood simply by examining the parts. It emerges from the relationships between them. It emerges from continuity, and from confidence that every decision made throughout delivery contributes towards a coherent experience.

If we lose sight of the journey, we risk optimising everything except the experience that ultimately matters.

PART 2

2. How Did We Get Here?

The questions we face today did not appear suddenly. They are the latest chapter in a much longer story of continuous evolution.

Many of us began in environments where quality assurance was viewed as a distinct phase towards the end of delivery. Testing followed implementation. Feedback arrived late. Responsibility appeared concentrated within specialist teams.

Then came Agile. Delivery became iterative, collaboration increased and quality became a shared responsibility.

DevOps extended that philosophy further. Development and operations became increasingly connected. Continuous Integration and Continuous Delivery transformed release cycles from occasional events into routine activities.

Each transition challenged assumptions that had previously felt fundamental. Each required new skills. Each encouraged us to rethink where quality was created.

Artificial Intelligence now represents the next stage. Unlike previous transitions, however, it is not simply changing how we perform existing activities.

> Increasingly, it is performing some of those activities itself.
> It can assist with requirements analysis.
> Generate implementation.
> Propose tests.
> Analyse outcomes.
> Identify anomalies.
> Summarise findings.

The more important question is not whether our activities will change. History suggests they always do.

> Have we defined Quality Assurance primarily by the tasks we perform rather than by the outcomes we seek to create?

If so, perhaps Artificial Intelligence is not exposing the decline of our profession. Perhaps it is inviting us to rediscover its true purpose.

PART 3

3. What Have We Been Protecting?

For many years, we have become exceptionally good at protecting the artefacts of software delivery.

> We protect requirements through review.
> Code through testing.
> Releases through governance.
> Infrastructure through monitoring.
> Services through resilience engineering.

Every one of these activities remains valuable. Yet perhaps we became so effective at protecting the individual components of delivery that we overlooked the thing they collectively exist to serve.

The user's journey.

Users evaluate quality differently from those who build systems. They rarely ask whether an interface complied with a specification, whether a deployment pipeline completed successfully, or which supplier and department owned a failure.

> They ask simpler questions.
> Did the service work?
> Could I achieve what I came to do?
> Did the organisation understand what I needed?
> Could I trust the outcome?

These are questions about journeys rather than technology.

Technical metrics remain important: availability, performance, coverage, deployment frequency and recovery time all reveal something valuable. But none, by itself, confirms that the user experienced a successful journey.

Our responsibility is therefore not simply to determine whether individual components perform correctly. It is to help ensure that every component contributes towards an experience users encounter as coherent, trustworthy and complete.

That, I believe, is what we should have been protecting all along.

PART 4

4. Delegatable and Non-Delegatable

This leads to one of the most important distinctions our profession must now make.

Not between manual testing and automation.

Not between traditional engineering and Artificial Intelligence.

But between activities that can increasingly be delegated and responsibilities that ultimately cannot.

Artificial Intelligence can generate implementation, analyse requirements, propose tests, execute checks, identify anomalies and recognise patterns across volumes of information that would overwhelm even experienced practitioners.

These capabilities are remarkable, and I believe we should embrace them. They allow us to reduce repetitive effort and devote more attention to problems that genuinely require human understanding.

The difficulty arises only when we continue to define our professional value primarily by activities that technology is becoming increasingly capable of performing.

> Artificial Intelligence can increasingly assist us in reaching conclusions. It cannot accept responsibility for those conclusions.

It can recommend actions. It cannot own their consequences.

It can identify possibilities. It cannot determine what an organisation should value.

Those responsibilities remain fundamentally human. They require judgement, context, empathy, ethics and experience. They require an understanding of people rather than simply information.

Technology increasingly enables us to know more.

Human judgement determines what matters.

This is where I believe the profession finds its future—not by competing with Artificial Intelligence, but by embracing its capabilities while recognising that responsibility itself cannot meaningfully be delegated.

PART 5

5. From Gatekeeper to Steward

If the responsibilities of the profession are changing, then so too must the way we describe its purpose.

For many years, Quality Assurance has been characterised as the final safeguard before software reaches production: quality control, governance or, sometimes rather unfairly, gatekeeping.

That description reflected a world in which development was sequential, responsibilities were separated and testing often occurred after implementation.

Modern software delivery bears little resemblance to that world. Products now emerge through continuous collaboration between product managers, developers, architects, researchers, security specialists, operations, domain experts, service managers and many others.

Each contributes decisions that influence the experience delivered to the user. Quality can no longer be inserted at the end of delivery, nor can it belong exclusively to one profession.

Perhaps, then, we should see Quality Assurance not as standing at the end deciding whether work should proceed, but as maintaining coherence throughout delivery itself.

I chose the word *steward* deliberately.

A steward does not own what has been entrusted to them. Stewardship is responsibility exercised on behalf of something larger than oneself. The concern is not whether an isolated activity succeeded, but whether the integrity of the whole has been preserved.

> Not: “Did testing complete?”
> But: “Do we still understand the experience we are creating?”
> Not: “Has every requirement been implemented?”
> But: “Will people experience this service in the way we intended?”

These questions require conversations, shared understanding, curiosity and professional judgement.

Not ownership of quality.

Stewardship of quality.

The more capable our technology becomes, the more valuable that stewardship becomes. Technology can accelerate delivery. It cannot ensure that people remain aligned around a common purpose.

That remains our responsibility.

PART 6

6. Quality Is a Property of Journeys

Users experience journeys, not components.

Organisations naturally measure the artefacts they can observe: applications, interfaces, infrastructure, availability, performance, security and defects. Collectively these provide a detailed understanding of technical health.

Yet users evaluate something subtly different. They do not distinguish between organisational boundaries, suppliers or platforms. They experience one continuous interaction. To them, every technical boundary is invisible.

Only the journey remains visible.

This explains why an organisation can be surprised when users report poor experiences despite every operational measure appearing healthy.

> The organisation measured the components.
> The user experienced the continuity of the journey.
> Those are not always the same thing.

As software ecosystems become more complex, services increasingly span multiple suppliers, cloud platforms, products and teams. No single individual possesses complete visibility of every component.

Yet the user still experiences only one journey.

Someone must therefore retain responsibility for understanding the whole. That responsibility belongs to every discipline contributing to delivery, but Quality Assurance can help maintain the shared understanding: keeping the conversation connected and ensuring that local optimisation never undermines the wider experience.

Automated testing, performance monitoring, security assurance, observability and reliability engineering do not become less valuable.

They become indicators rather than destinations. Evidence rather than purpose.

The destination is confidence: confidence that technology behaves as intended, that organisations understand the people they serve, and that decisions made throughout delivery contribute towards coherent, dependable and trustworthy experiences.

Quality emerges from the relationships that connect people, processes and technology.

It emerges from journeys.

PART 7

7. How We Evolve

Whenever a profession experiences profound technological change, there is an understandable tendency to think in terms of replacement.

Will existing roles survive? Will new professions emerge? Will Artificial Intelligence eventually perform everything we do today?

History suggests these questions are incomplete. Technology changes the activities through which professionals create value, but rarely removes the underlying purpose of the profession itself.

> Medicine evolved without abandoning care.
> Architecture evolved without abandoning design.
> Education evolved without abandoning learning.
> The activities changed.
> The purpose endured.

I believe the same will prove true for Quality Assurance.

Many routine activities will increasingly be delegated to intelligent systems capable of performing them more quickly and at greater scale than any individual practitioner.

We should welcome that progress.

Every repetitive activity delegated to technology creates new space for human contribution. The opportunity is not to preserve yesterday's definition of Quality Assurance. It is to discover tomorrow's.

I do not believe that future will be defined primarily by executing tests, producing reports or owning particular tools.

It will be characterised by the ability to connect people, disciplines and perspectives that would otherwise remain disconnected; to ask questions others have not considered; to recognise unintended consequences before they become failures; and to help organisations understand not only whether systems function, but whether they continue to serve the people for whom they exist.

Artificial Intelligence becomes an extraordinary amplifier of capability.

Human beings become increasingly responsible for purpose.

This is not the end of Quality Assurance. It is the beginning of a broader understanding of what quality has always been.

PART 8

8. The Orchestrator

If I were asked to summarise this argument in a single word, it would not be testing.

Nor automation.

It would be orchestration.

An orchestra is not defined only by the excellence of its individual musicians. Each performer may possess exceptional technical ability. Each may execute their part flawlessly.

Yet beautiful music emerges only when every contribution remains connected to a shared interpretation of the whole.

Software delivery has become remarkably similar. Modern organisations bring together specialists from disciplines that scarcely existed a generation ago. Every discipline contributes knowledge the others do not possess. No single individual can master them all.

> The challenge is no longer individual excellence alone.
> The challenge is collective coherence.

That is where I believe Quality Assurance can make one of its greatest contributions.

Not by attempting to control every decision. Not by becoming the owner of every aspect of quality. But by helping each discipline understand how its decisions influence every other.

By preserving context as complexity grows.

By recognising emerging risks before they become entrenched.

By continually returning conversations to the journeys experienced by users.

> The orchestrator does not perform every instrument. The orchestrator enables every instrument to perform together.

Perhaps that is the role towards which our profession has quietly been moving all along.

PART 9

9. Rehumanising Quality

The title of this talk was chosen carefully.

Some may assume it implies that technology has made quality less human. That is not the argument. Technology has always extended human capability. Artificial Intelligence is simply the latest and perhaps most significant expression of that evolution.

The challenge is that we sometimes risk measuring success using criteria detached from the people our systems ultimately serve.

To rehumanise quality is not to diminish technology.

It is to reconnect technology with purpose.

Software exists because people need to accomplish something.

> Every architectural decision.
> Every automated pipeline.
> Every deployment.
> Every algorithm.
> Every model.
> Every test.
> Every line of code.
> Exists in service of a human outcome.

That outcome may be safety, efficiency, convenience, understanding, communication or confidence. Whatever form it takes, technology remains a means rather than an end.

The more capable our technology becomes, the greater our responsibility to ensure those capabilities serve people wisely, fairly and responsibly.

Rehumanising quality is not about returning to the past. It is about ensuring we do not lose sight of the future we are trying to create.

CONFERENCE READING

Closing — An Invitation

I never expected everyone to agree with these conclusions. Nor did I hope they would.

Healthy professions evolve through constructive disagreement. They mature because practitioners challenge assumptions, refine ideas and collectively develop richer ways of thinking.

Artificial Intelligence will continue to evolve. New tools will appear. Existing roles will adapt. Practices we currently regard as fundamental will eventually become ordinary.

The enduring question is how we choose to evolve alongside those changes.

> Do we define ourselves by activities—or by responsibilities?
> Do we focus primarily on technical correctness—or on the experiences our work enables?
> Do we seek ownership—or stewardship?

Throughout this talk I have returned to one question:

> What remains our responsibility when more and more of what we do can be delegated to machines?

For Quality Assurance, the answer does not lie in preserving familiar activities simply because they defined us in the past. Nor does it lie in resisting technological change.

Artificial Intelligence will continue to transform software engineering. Its capabilities will continue to expand.

I hope they do.

Because every advance creates new opportunities to redirect our attention towards questions technology alone cannot answer: questions of purpose, judgement, responsibility and trust.

If there is one idea I hope you carry away, it is not that Quality Assurance has become less important.

Quite the opposite.

Its importance is increasing—not because we own quality, and not because we perform particular activities, but because we help organisations retain sight of the people their technology exists to serve.

> Users experience journeys.

Those journeys are created by increasingly complex ecosystems of people, organisations and technology. Artificial Intelligence now becomes part of those ecosystems.

So do we.

Our responsibility is to ensure those ecosystems continue to serve people with integrity.

Perhaps that has always been the true purpose of Quality Assurance. Artificial Intelligence has simply made it easier for us to recognise it.

The future of our profession will not be determined solely by the capabilities of our tools.

It will be determined by the quality of the questions we continue to ask.

If you agree with these ideas, I hope you will develop them further. If you disagree, I hope you will explain why.

Either way, the conversation continues.

PUBLICATION NOTE

About this edition

This Conference Reading Edition is derived from the full literary publication and is intended to be read aloud in approximately twenty-five minutes at a measured pace.

It preserves the original presentation's central question, sequence of ideas, rhetorical cadence and concluding invitation. Material written specifically for the expanded publication—such as the foreword, preface, acknowledgements, afterword and extended exposition—has been omitted or compressed.