



# Managing Expectations: The Hidden Art in Test Consulting

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## Introduction

This paper aims to explore managing expectations in test consulting. One of the greatest challenges in test consulting is engaging the client; establishing a shared vision, understanding their requirements and meeting their expectations. How often have you heard a client say “That’s not quite what I had in mind...”, or how often have you delivered what a client wanted, but they were still not satisfied? Sometimes it is not what you deliver, but the process and manner in which you deliver it (i.e. the ability to match their expectations).

For test professionals, the focus is often steered entirely towards technical competence and expertise, when, in reality, more attention should be focused on consulting skills. The ability to establish trust and rapport with a client from day one is crucial in establishing successful test projects and longer term client/supplier relationships. Managing expectations is one of the core components in establishing this relationship and must be performed effectively to maximise the business and IT benefits for the client and the test consultancy.

## Expectations in Testing

Expectations are the belief of a future state of what will most likely happen. In consulting, expectations are the success criteria through which a client will measure your work regarding a future target or goal. They are inherent in all of us from our own personal expectations to the expectations of an organisation. They can never be switched off, should not be ignored or dismissed, but more importantly should never be underestimated.

With an increasing focus on quality assurance and continuous process improvement, testing is becoming more and more important to companies worldwide. However, some common challenges faced today start with a client’s understanding of what testing is, what purpose it serves and the time and resources it takes to complete. It is not uncommon to hear a client say “how hard can testing be?”, or “the code’s taken 3 weeks to develop, how can testing take 6 weeks?”. Inherent in all these challenges is the test consultant’s ability to communicate and educate a client on the testing process:

- ▶ What it involves – exercising software to identify defects and ensuring the application, system or product is fit for purpose

- ▶ What each test phase will cover and, equally as importantly, what each phase will not cover
- ▶ How long testing takes and the resources required throughout the testing lifecycle
- ▶ The common terms and definitions used in testing.

The aim is to establish the concept of a shared vision or goal through effectively setting their expectations from the start of any new client/supplier relationship

All test consultants must have expectations at the forefront of their day to day activities. Testing is not a static or rigid process and needs to be tailored from client to client. On any given day, issues with requirements, development (e.g. quality of code), resources, outages etc. mean that you need to react to an ever changing environment. The key to managing this successfully is setting expectations for all concerned. This extends to the members of the test team, the project manager, development teams, requirements etc. Consultants who incorrectly communicate through an off the cuff remark, may be perceived by the client in one way, when intended to mean something else.

## Understanding Client Expectations and Goals

The old adage of “we hear, but do not listen” is prevalent within the IT industry. Failure to listen to your client’s needs is a path towards failure in itself. Testing is an iterative process and so is managing expectations. It is one thing to listen to your client and another to learn. Again, a failure to learn could lead to failure itself. It is therefore essential to truly understand your client’s needs, but then be able to set, manage and influence their expectations, and learn from such experiences.

A challenge often faced is when expectations are misaligned to the overall goal (realistic or otherwise). Take for example, a client project which has a development budget of £50k and where only a maximum of £5k is assigned to testing. The requirement is to integrate 4 applications each written in a unique programming language into a new bespoke solution with a web-based front end (GUI). It is expected that this will be developed, tested and implemented to the highest quality possible, with zero tolerance on budget, in 6 weeks, and with the minimal number of resources available. The goal is unrealistic but the expectations are high (see figure 1 below).

Left unaddressed, the likelihood is that the project will not be completed to the required standards and expectations

of the client, and hence be deemed a failure. However, raising the issue of unrealistic goals early in the lifecycle can influence and realign both the goal and expectations, whilst establishing a level of trust and a sense of unity that you are working in partnership. That is not to say that all goals and expectations will always change but if raised early enough, and supported by the associated risks involved then all parties are aware of the possible outcomes.

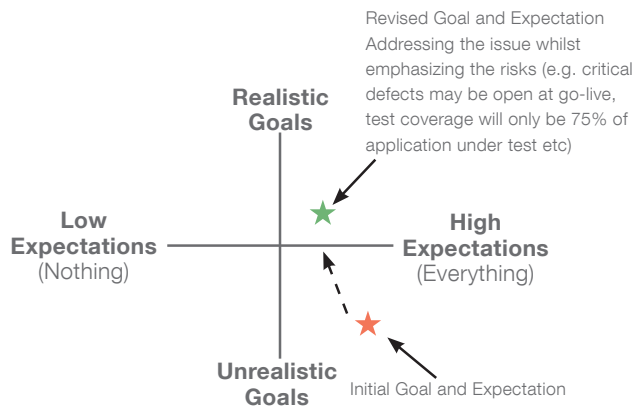


Figure 1: Expectations and Goals Matrix

Wherever we perceive a client is on the above matrix it is important to understand that this can be influenced by ourselves and is subject to change at any particular time. Open communication is encouraged throughout the testing lifecycle between the test team and key client stakeholders to ensure that when goals and expectations shift, we are prepared to change respectively.

## Methods of Effectively Managing and Influencing Expectations

There are many ways to manage and influence expectations successfully. The basis for using such methods should always be focussed on building strong foundations, understanding the needs and demands of the other party, being honest and proactive, and instilling the belief of a shared goal. Test consultants should develop their own methods for setting, managing and influencing expectations, but the following provide examples of the tools and techniques that should be considered:

- ▶ Time, Cost, Quality – almost everything in testing is possible but there must be give and take (see figure 2 below). If a client expects a “Gold” style system but is only prepared to pay for a “Bronze”, there is an issue that needs to be addressed. Higher quality comes at a higher cost and may often take longer to

develop and subsequently test (from initial idea and requirements through to delivery). Using this concept can help generate tangible metrics to influence a client’s expectations (e.g. it can be done but will cost an extra £2500 and take a further 5 days)



Figure 2: Time, Cost and Quality Triangle

- ▶ Risk – projects bring about change and change incurs risk (this can be used in conjunction with the above concept of time, cost and quality). Articulating the risks and their overall impact and severity can significantly influence client decisions within a project and amend their expectations (e.g. if there is a risk of not completing testing then a client may opt to reduce scope)
- ▶ Communicate, educate and learn – discuss priorities, roles and responsibilities and jointly develop action plans. Educate the client on what is required for and during testing. The more they know, the better they will understand the complexity of your task
- ▶ Never assume – assumptions can lead to major problems. It may be that you assume a client understands why you are helping them, when in reality they are still questioning the value-add proposition they signed the contract for. Similarly, the client may assume that you understand their industry, business processes, systems, technical specifications or requirements when you are unsure. It is essential to remove assumptions and deal with facts. If these are unclear, seek clarification and agreement at the earliest possible instance, re-emphasizing the shared goal
- ▶ Remove ambiguity – avoid making generic statements that are open to interpretation by the client. Being specific and concise will ensure the message is heard and understood, avoiding misinterpretation
- ▶ Guidelines and templates – develop guidelines around the client’s expectations. What are their quality, testing, delivery, performance and consultancy expectations? These should be documented and regularly reviewed to ensure consistency and commonality
- ▶ Feedback – gather feedback to ensure you are still focusing on the same shared goals and deliverables. The longer a client/supplier relationship is, the more perception and expectations change and the greater the need to monitor such changes

- ▶ Generate solutions not identify problems – clients may expect problems to arise during a project lifecycle, but what test consultants must do is to think differently. We should not expect problems, but expect to derive solutions to every problem we encounter (e.g. problems with test environment access and/or stability, lack of documentation and/or requirements etc.), providing a viable work around.

## Beware of Setting False or Differing Expectations

Another key problem in consulting is when false expectations are set, or the expectations of the client and consultant are mismatched. Setting high expectations is always preferable, but they must be reasonable and achievable if they are to be successful. It is always better to under promise and over deliver than over promise and under deliver.

Expectations can be very emotive and personal. We all set our own personal and unique expectations; what we expect of ourselves, what we expect of others, and how we perceive when these have been satisfied. Expectations are intrinsic to our drive and determination to achieve our future goals. The project manager of a client may have differing expectations to that of the client as a whole. Misunderstandings between these can have serious repercussions when testing: relationships can be stretched, the client may become unhappy with the service received or, at the extreme, projects can fail. Juggling all of these can be a difficult task, especially in addition to your day to day testing tasks; writing test plans, delivering presentations, managing and motivating a test team, attending workshops, daily test progress reporting, defect management, configuration management, risk analysis and management etc.

The importance of written agreements (formal or otherwise), should not be underestimated and can certainly help alleviate the problem of setting false or mismatched expectations. Formal documents such as test strategies/plans clearly state the scope of what will be tested, by whom, when it will be done, where it will be done (i.e. the test environment), and any risks at the time of writing. This explicitly sets the expectations for the client, and incorporating formal review cycles ensures that you are all “singing from the same hymn sheet”. Equally important are the informal communications such as conversations or email. Opinions, views and expectations captured here should be duly noted, documented and then agreed to ensure consistency and commonality. This will also help reduce the “surprises” that so often appear during the testing lifecycle.

## Summary

Without doubt, expectations play a critical role in testing, projects and client engagements. A client will only be satisfied if their expectations are met.

Expectations must be reasonable, shared and monitored. We all have a responsibility to understand the importance of expectations and develop our own way of managing them. The ability to set, manage and influence expectations is imperative to ensure a shared vision and successful delivery, enabling you to establish longer term client/supplier partnerships. The following highlights some points test consultants should consider in relation to managing expectations - the Do's and Don'ts.

### Do's:

- ▶ Understand the importance of realistic and unrealistic goals and the need to influence client expectations accordingly. Without this you are not in a position to operate never mind manage their expectations
- ▶ Influence the client's expectations - this is the key way to manage them (apply tools/methods to achieve this)
- ▶ Establish trust from the start of any client engagement – be proactive and tackle the “difficult issues” head on
- ▶ Listen to your clients, and continually learn from such experiences
- ▶ Make concise and specific statements which are not open to interpretation
- ▶ Generate solutions not identify problems
- ▶ Under promise and over deliver

### Don'ts:

- ▶ Assume – assumptions lead to failures
- ▶ Mistake listening for hearing
- ▶ Impart your personal expectations too strongly, detracting from the shared vision or goal
- ▶ Always tell the client what they want to hear (diminishing the level of trust) – expectations need to be honest, realistic, reasonable and shared
- ▶ Use jargon the client is unfamiliar with
- ▶ Over promise and under deliver