# Growing Your Career in Tough Times

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Times are tough. For those who have jobs, training budgets are minimal and there is no travel money for activities not directly contributing to the bottom line. Most can't afford to pay their own professional education costs, and so this year many conferences and courses are running at half their usual attendance. Some courses have been cancelled.

If you can't take courses or attend conferences, do you put professional development on hold until money starts flowing again? Or do you look for other ways to keep yourself and your skills growing?

In reality, courses and conferences can't teach everything you need to be a great tester. There are so many ways you can learn new skills and enhance your personal effectiveness that you should never limit yourself to formal training—whatever the state of the economy.

What follows is an outline of career-enhancing things I've done, heard of, or thought of that cost little or nothing in monetary terms.

### Think About How You Want to Grow
Whether you're a planner who plots out your career development or someone who's happier with a less structured approach, it's helpful to sit back occasionally and assess where you are now, where you want to get to, and what you could do to close the gaps.

Don't limit your thinking. It's good to start with skills, but look also at the personal qualities of a great tester, such as courage, empathy, and adaptability.

### Books and Web Resources
Reading is free, though books are not. If you can't afford to build your own library with the many excellent testing books available, ask your colleagues if they have books they're willing to lend. Will your company fund an in-house library? Likely your company already has programming language manuals. If your technical skills could use a boost, why not use the manuals to teach yourself programming or improve your SQL?

If you're reading this column on StickyMinds.com, you already take advantage of at least some of the free resources available on the Web. A StickyMinds Powerpass is an inexpensive pathway to a rich storehouse of material. Look also at Web sites belonging to authors you admire. Besides blogs, many feature papers, articles, and links to sites they value, including free journals. There are also many online lists and groups where testers discuss everything from practical experiences to theories and philosophies about their craft.

## Free (or Almost) Training

The most comprehensive test training I know of is the series of Black Box Software Testing courses offered online by the Association for Software Testing (AST). Free to members, these are serious courses with student-instructor interaction and exams. Aspiring students should be prepared to devote substantial time to learning and completing assignments.

Several organizations (e.g., SQE, ComputerAid, EuroSTAR) offer free webinars on software and testing topics. Typically, these give an overview of a topic that should help you decide whether to explore it in more detail.

Some groups specialize in people skills. Toastmasters, for example, teaches presentation skills and helps participants overcome inhibitions about public speaking.

## Live Testing

Open source development projects often welcome testers. Mozilla is an obvious example, with its QMO site. There is also uTest, a commercial site that hosts "crowdtests." Registered testers get paid for the approved bugs they find on customer-submitted applications. Particularly for new testers, this can be a useful way to gain hands-on experience. For experienced testers, sites like these provide opportunities to try out techniques away from their work.

## Networking

Joining your local quality group is a great way to share experiences (and job opportunities) with a wider group of testers than you usually work with. Such groups often have interesting speakers, and they also provide opportunities for their members to present. Search on ASQ, SPIN, QAI, and APLN (and in Canada, CIPS) for local chapters.

## Start Your Own Group

If your community doesn't have a quality group, why not start one? You'll gain opportunities to learn from the speakers you engage and get valuable management experience.

Do you need practice in negotiating, or perhaps in saying "no"? Create a group with others who are similarly interested, to share tips, role play scenarios, and critique each other. You could base sessions on problems your members face or on lessons from books.

Or start a lunch-hour book club with tester colleagues, reading and discussing the ideas in professional books and trying them out in your work.

A test manager I know hosts weekly "thinking" sessions with her team, where they play games and do puzzles and exercises designed to enhance their thinking skills while having fun together.

## Volunteer Work

Most communities have innumerable opportunities for volunteer work where you can learn new skills, as well as gaining the satisfaction of making a contribution. Both hands-on and management work have benefits for volunteers.

Charities such as women's shelters, legal clinics, hospices, humane societies, housing cooperatives, amateur cultural organizations, sports clubs, and all sorts of other community organizations are usually run by volunteer boards. Many would love to give you opportunities to develop and explain a budget, work on a marketing campaign, hire staff, negotiate agreements, or do a myriad of other tasks that will enhance your business skills and teach you new ones. Some organizations have seasoned professionals happy to teach you; at others, you might have to figure it out by yourself.

Hands-on work has special rewards, whether you're answering a suicide help line, joining others to build community housing, or helping seniors fill out forms. An activity that helps you grow as a human being will also make you a better tester.

## Hobbies and Avocations

Nothing teaches patience and flexibility like the heartbreaks and triumphs of gardening. Every gardener learns to work with less-than-perfect conditions of soil, lighting, weather, finicky plants, and pests. They must constantly adapt their strategies and plans, balancing the inevitable risks against their visions—and sometimes they win. (Do I need to draw the parallels with test management?)

People who make music with others learn to listen and blend their sound with the group. Sometimes your voice or instrument should stand out; other times, you support someone else or contribute your sound to the harmonic whole. Similarly with theater—individuals pool their efforts to build an ensemble performance none could achieve alone. Each concert and theater performance is the result of an iterative project, with testing integral to the process.

Besides teaching collaboration and teamwork, learning music has important benefits for the brain and hence for thinking abilities. Learning lines for a play improves memory. A play or a piece of music is a system, with its own logic. A play is a model of some piece of real life. And improvisation, in music or theater, enhances creativity and collaboration.

Playing and coaching team sports can teach important skills and enhance professional effectiveness. Sports generally are good places to develop valuable qualities, such as perseverance, independence, self-reliance, adaptability, and courage. Hikers, rock climbers, distance swimmers—all have opportunities to solve problems alone or with others.

And don't discount dog training if you want to learn patience! People who work with animals (or children) develop empathy, flexibility, problem-solving skills, teaching skills, and more.

## About Those Conferences ...

Of course, it's still good to share ideas at conferences when you can. Most conferences let speakers in for free, though you have to fund your own travel. Conferences may also let organizations share registrations, where each individual attends on a different day.

## Share Your Ideas with Other Testers

I've only scratched the surface, and I'll bet StickyMinds.com readers have plenty of good ideas to share. What low-dollar things are you doing to grow professionally? Join the conversation by leaving a comment below.