

QUALITY, TESTING AND SHIPPING

Where it started

Before the carriers, the data centers and the executive roles, Frank Robles spent seven years making software that shipped and worked. Build the test harness before the product. Document it so anyone can step in.

<div>200,000</div> <div>Coactive LAN units deployed</div>	<div>5 min</div> <div>For a small office to build its own LAN</div>	<div>70%+</div> <div>Drop in inbound support calls at Netcom</div>	<div>Dec 1994</div> <div>Netcom IPO</div>
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FIVE COMPANIES, ONE DISCIPLINE

- **Tecla Software, Santa Cruz. Founder and President, 1990 to 1992.** He developed and marketed Hexpert, an interactive binary file editor, and led a multilingual educational software package. He built the beta applications used to raise the company's funding, and did the testing, documentation, packaging and shipping of Hexpert himself. Tecla was underfunded and shut down. The lesson was how much of a product is everything after the code.
- **Coactive Computing, Belmont. QA Manager, 1992 to 1994.** An easy-install LAN for small and home offices. He built the network QA lab and the automated test suites, and helped design the install process that let a small office build its own network in under five minutes. More than 200,000 units were deployed.
- **Apple, Cupertino. SQA Lead, Newton, 1994.** Test plans and automated test harnesses in NewtonScript for Newton applications, including the Digital Book Player and fax send and receive.
- **Netcom On-Line Communications, San Jose. Director of QA and Server-side Engineering, 1994 to 1995.** NetCruiser, the first integrated Internet browser product, had taken Netcom from about 10,000 Unix shell customers to more than 200,000 within months, and the company went public in December 1994. Ahead of the IPO he led the move from a homegrown accounting system to Oracle Financials. He helped design and deploy the first ix.netcom.com server, designed an approach to scaling the file system, reorganized customer support and cut inbound support calls by more than 70 percent, and designed and led the first online fax service.
- **Alphablox. Manager of QA and Documentation, 1996 to 1997.** Embedded analytics software. He held key roles in the development, production and shipping of the first versions. Alphablox was later acquired by IBM.

WHY A BUYER SHOULD CARE

A 70 percent drop in support calls is a test and documentation result, not a support result. The calls stopped because the product and its instructions stopped generating them.

The same thinking shows up in every system he has built since: decide how you will prove it works, then build it.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE ON A PROJECT TODAY

- **The harness first.** Acceptance tests defined before the feature.
- **Documentation as a deliverable**, so the next engineer, or the client, can step in.
- **Shipping counts.** Install, packaging and support are part of the product.

THE THROUGH LINE

Netcom had grown twentyfold in months and still had to keep its books, its servers and its customers working. He arrived in the middle of that and made the systems hold.

WHAT WE CAN START ON

A QA and release review of a product that ships but keeps breaking. Test harnesses and documentation for a codebase only one person understands. Or software built by Robles Industries with the tests written first.

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