



What's New in the ISTQB CTFL 2018 Syllabus?

The following is a transcript of an interview with Rex Black. Rex is President of RBCS, a worldwide test consulting, training, and expert services company. He is also former President of ISTQB, and most recently served the ISTQB as Project Manager and Technical Editor for the ISTQB® Foundation 2018 syllabus release. The interview was conducted by Agustina Gay. She is a Key Account Manager at iSQL.

Agustina: Rex, thank you for being here. Would you please introduce yourself?

Rex: Yes, I am Rex Black. I am the president of a company called RBCS and we are a training, consulting, and expert services company based in Texas with clients around the world. I've been in software engineering since 1983 and RBCS has been around about almost 25 years, since 1994. I'm also the past president of the ISTQB, from 2005 to 2009, and most recently I was involved on the Foundation project. So I have many years involvement with the ISTQB program.

Agustina: Rex, the ISTQB has launched a new CTFL 2018 syllabus. What was the main focus for this update?

Rex: I would say the main focus was modernization, bringing it into the 2020s and really taking advantage of all the changes that have taken place in the last 20 years or so, in technology and development methods and so forth. Another major improvement was making sure we had good alignment across all of the other ISTQB intellectual property such as the glossary and the other syllabi. And then finally just making the concepts, the best practices that are being presented, easier for people to understand, so, improving the wording and the way that we express things and the flow of the ideas. I think people are going to find an all-in-all much improved product over the 2011 version.

Agustina: So the CTFL - new and improved.

Rex: New and improved - better than ever! It had been a number of years since there had been an update. Officially, the last version was the 2011 but that was actually a formatting fix for a problem that was introduced in the 2010 version so it had really been 8 years since an update.

A lot has happened in that time. Agile methods have become very prominent. You've had new technologies like IOT come along, you've had DevOps and CICD and Continuous Deployment, a lot of changes. These changes don't mean that the best practices that are embodied in the syllabus no longer apply, but the way you explain those best practices needed to be updated.

So, that was my main charter as the project manager and technical editor of the project. It was to bring it into the 2020s, to position us for that time, so that it didn't read like something that had been written in say 1995 or 2005, which a lot of the material had. So we solved that problem, which was a global problem.

Consistency was another big thing that we wanted to fix. It's always been a challenge to maintain consistency both internally within a syllabus, because there are multiple authors, and also externally across the ISTQB syllabi. So, you get contradictions between the Foundation and the Advanced syllabi, between the Foundation and the Agile Foundation syllabus, and so forth.

So, we took the opportunity to use a cross-review process to make sure that we had good alignment with the glossary and with all the other syllabi. We also streamlined the material quite a bit. Before there was a fair amount of – well, “redundancy” is not quite the right word – let's say “overlap” in terms of both the learning objectives and the material, so we eliminated that overlap. The same concepts are expressed in a much more compact presentation.

We also improved the wording, the way we expressed the ideas. We wanted to make sure the wording was very good, so we went through not just multiple rounds of reviews but also multiple rounds of technical edits. I was one of the technical editors and also Dorothy Graham participated in that process. So we really polished it quite a bit. I think it's been a real major step forward in a lot of different ways and I'm really happy with the material.

Agustina: Please tell us what the main differences between the 2011 and the 2018 syllabus are.

Rex: One of the main differences is making sure that the best practices are expressed using examples and wording that is relevant to the way that things are done now with Internet of Things, Continuous Deployment, Agile methods and so forth. That really applied throughout the syllabus, making sure it was expressed in modern terms.

We updated the test process section to be more consistent with the kinds of flexibility that you need to have to apply the test process in lots of different settings.

We explained the test types and test levels in a more method-agnostic kind of way, if you will, not tied to any particular methodology. We made the distinction between the types and the levels really clear. This is always an area where people get confused, so we did a better job of that.

We made the black-box and experience-based testing material more fully explained. The 2011 syllabus explanations were fairly cursory, so we wanted to make sure there was enough detail there for examinees and readers.

We tuned the material in the test management section, again to make it more relevant to modern ways of doing things.

We expanded the discussion and coverage of reviews.

We made the coverage of white-box testing more relevant to testers, more focused on understanding what coverage is, and how coverage tools and their results can be interpreted, and less about being able to read code.

Agustina: What value does it provide for an organization when their testers have important testing skills?

Rex: There are some interesting studies that have been done on the value of individual skills. As Tom DeMarco and Tim Lister described in their book, *Peopleware*, in the 1990s they found in their studies that the difference between a top performer and a bottom performer, in terms of effectiveness, is that the top performer about ten times more effective. In other words, a person who had all of the skills needed to do the job would be ten times more effective than somebody who was just barely competent.

I always explain it to clients this way: “Don’t think of training your testers as giving you a five to ten percent bump in terms of your effectiveness. Think of it as doubling or maybe even tripling the effectiveness of your team.”

A lot of our clients are resource constrained, and they don’t have the budget to hire as many testers as they might want, so maximizing the effectiveness of each one of the testers that they have is really critical. It’s a matter of improving the efficiency of their organizations. It really is a tremendous amount of value.

I think something that is great about the new syllabus is because it is tuned to what modern needs are, what modern skills are, it really allows an organization to use the syllabus as a standard, to say, “Okay, we’re going to measure against these skills, we’re going to optimize against these particular skills areas and that is going to lead to us having a very effective set of testers.”

Agustina: Okay, so for any organization, the CTFL is the way to go?

Rex: It’s a way to start. Definitely a way to start. It’s the root of the whole tree, if you will, and then they can from there pick various paths. The new CTFL 2018 syllabus is the perfect place for organizations to start. Also, if organizations haven’t been formally managing the skills of their testers, it’s a good place to baseline and say, “Okay, let’s measure people against the skills that are reflected in this syllabus.”

Agustina: From a career prospective, how will the new 2018 syllabus support the individuals that are involved in testing?

Rex: It will fill the same roll that the Foundation has always filled in that it is an entry point to a career in testing. From that entry point you can go in many different directions, both laterally into some of the Specialist tracks or the Agile track as well as upwards into Advanced level and ultimately into Expert level. We preserve that foundational aspect of it. All of the topics that were addressed previously are still addressed. The level of coverage has been tuned to be more appropriate to practitioners who are entering the field now.

If we look at the 2011 syllabus, a lot of that material really could be traced all the way back to the late 1990s, in the origin of the ISTQB program. The set of skills that was needed to be a tester were a little different at that time, the skills have evolved. So we've evolved the material now to be more applicable in a more modern type of setting.

Even for people who are not aspiring to be professional testers, but whose job may involve testing or intersect with testing, such as business analysts, requirements engineers, and SDETs [software development engineers in test, sometimes called development testers], will find the material useful. I think the way that we've presented the materials will make it accessible to a broader audience.

Agustina: So it's for now and for the next ten years?

Rex: Yes. Usually, there is an update about every 5 years but I think that we've done enough work with this 2018 version that come 2023 it will be an incremental update rather than requiring the same kind of dramatic changes that we made in this version. So, the 2018 version is much better positioned for the future.

Agustina: Thank you.

Rex: You're welcome!