

QUESTIONNAIRES: designs that deserve a rather than a

Many of us use self-assessment questionnaires as a part of training, coaching or other developmental activities. We use off-the-shelf materials but often feel tempted to put together something of our own to meet a particular need. **Clare Llewellyn West** encourages you to have a go.



Questionnaires can come in all shapes and sizes – from a series of short quick-fire questions with yes/no answers to a few serious open questions designed to encourage someone to think hard about some aspect of themselves or their situation. This article is not a manual for designing a particular type of questionnaire; nor is it a guide to the detailed process of checking validity and reliability (which would require another whole article). It is a set of guidelines for tackling the process and producing something you can use.

Naturally, when asked to write about designing questionnaires, I could not resist creating a questionnaire on the topic, so let's see how you get on with the first question.

1 Why do you do questionnaires?

A *To give participants a change of pace and approach during training events.*

B *To encourage participants to reflect on their own personality or behaviour.*

C *To provide data for research or evaluation.*

D *To give a foolproof basis for recruitment, team membership or advancement.*

E *To provide a positive language for our ongoing discussions.*

F *I don't!*

(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

A Giving participants a change of pace and approach during training events is undoubtedly one very good reason for using questionnaires. They provide a useful shift from group work or formal presentation and allow participants some introverted time.

B Encouraging participants to reflect on their own personality or behaviour is another real plus. Discussion and group activities are excellent for looking at issues, problems and ideas but this is a great technique for encouraging people to think seriously about themselves. In order to achieve this outcome

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- **Before designing a questionnaire you need to consider what you want it to achieve.**
- **As you design it, and test it, you need to consider who will be using it.**
- **Think carefully about the structure, the scoring system and the best way to implement it to ensure that you keep things simple but avoid creating a questionnaire where the outcomes are immediately obvious.**

you need to be really clear about what you want to measure and then describe it in detail; that gives you the basis for your questions. One way of short-circuiting the process – and getting a really solid base – is to use existing standards or competences. So, for example, one of my own management questionnaires is based on the behaviours outlined in the management standards published by the Institute of Leadership and Management.

C You may well want to use a questionnaire for research or evaluation purposes. What you need to consider here is what is in it for the participant. Of course, in some cases the questionnaire may also meet criteria a and b; in other words, the questionnaire is giving the participants immediate feedback but you are also collecting data. The key here is to be clear about your purpose and about issues like confidentiality whether it is a course evaluation or a serious piece of psychological research.

D Personally, I think you are optimistic and possibly rash if you rely on any questionnaire to give a foolproof basis for recruitment, team membership or advancement. Psychometric tests have a useful place as part of selection or promotion, but they need to be rigorously tested, valid and reliable. So unless you are a fully paid-up and trained psychologist and have access to proper testing procedures, you need to stick with approved published tests and have them administered by specialists.

E One of the gains from a good questionnaire is that it can provide a positive language for discussions within a group or with an individual. To take a well-established example, the Strengths Deployment Inventory® examines the deep motivation systems that underpin our beliefs and behaviour. It is exploring quite a subtle and profound aspect of our humanity, but it does so by creating broad categories and labelling them with specific colours. It is wonderful to see how quickly a group picks up this simple non-judgemental language and uses it for genuinely useful discussions of differences in behaviour and motivation.

F If you never use questionnaires in your training, assessment or coaching work, stop and think about the reason and consider whether they might not have a really useful part to play. One thing we all know as development professionals is that questions are often the most potent tool we have, so clearly it makes sense to consider using questionnaires.

2 What shape is your questionnaire?

A *It is short and sweet and keeps the energy levels up.*

B *It is fairly lengthy but sufficiently engaging to encourage genuine reflection.*

C *It is absolutely obvious which are the 'right' answers.*

D *It is a rambling monster that takes ages to fill in.*

E *Does it matter?*

(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

Be aware that a good questionnaire does become **a really valuable resource in your toolkit**

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E

To comment on the last answer first, yes it does matter. Clearly shape and structure are important in a questionnaire, and they need to relate directly to your answers to our first question – the purpose of the questionnaire. If you are aiming to provide a light introduction to a topic, then you will want it to be short and sweet. If you are using a questionnaire to help participants reflect on their own personality or behaviour and its impact, then you will probably want something more detailed and more challenging. What you need to avoid on the whole is a format that makes it perfectly clear what the ‘right’ answers are. That is partly a question of language and style, and as you put a questionnaire together you need to be constantly on the lookout for embedded value judgements. Clues to ‘right’ answers are also a matter of structure. People spot patterns very quickly and if they can see that every third answer looks like the ‘wrong’ one, then they will tend to act accordingly.

If you want people to challenge themselves you may want to move beyond straightforward yes/no answers to methods like paired statements where participants make choices in order to clarify their views. For example, choose one of the following statements.

- Lunch is for wimps.
- Lunch is a chance to relax, build relationships and talk through problems.

Another option is a forced choice format where a situation is posed followed by a series of options and participants are required to choose the option closest to their own preference. For example, choose one of the following endings to the sentence: ‘When I am invited out to lunch by my colleagues ...’

Think hard about clarity, **avoid ambiguity** and be aware of the impact of the structure on the syntax

- ‘... I always say yes.’
- ‘... I never say yes.’
- ‘... I say yes if the boss is going.’
- ‘... I say no if the boss is going.’

If you really want to provoke thought – and perhaps to provide the basis for serious discussion – you may move to a completely open-ended format. The downside of this approach is that it is hard to score and difficult to use for making comparisons. The advantage is that it reduces the element of suggestion, allowing people to focus on an issue. One of my favourite questionnaires, which I have used many times in the context of time management, stress and personal resource management, only has four questions – but they are very challenging questions and do encourage real reflection.

3 Who will fill in your questionnaire?

- A** *Confident and competent individuals who are used to this kind of material.*
- B** *People who have a good vocabulary and a sound grasp of syntax.*
- C** *People who are not very confident with written material.*
- D** *Participants who are nervous about learning situations.*
- E** *People who are nervous about being caught out in some way.*

(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

- A
- B
- C



- D
- E

If you are using questionnaires in a coaching or mentoring situation you may be able to answer this question in advance, but in a training context there are generally no right or wrong answers here – any or all of these could be the case in a single group. So you have the same challenge you will have encountered if you write your own training materials – making it friendly and accessible without ‘dumbing down’. Think hard about clarity, avoid ambiguity and be aware of the impact of the structure on the syntax.

A couple of classic problems are the sneaky double negative and the superfluous adverb. Think about the problem for the respondent if you have a range of possible answers like: ‘Never’, ‘Rarely’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Often’ in response to a sentence such as: ‘I do not often interrupt people.’ That gives them a choice of the following.

- I never don’t often interrupt people.
- I rarely don’t often interrupt people.
- I sometimes don’t often interrupt people.
- I often don’t often interrupt people.

This way madness lies! Of course, if the sentence they were asked to respond to said, ‘I interrupt people’, then there is no longer a problem. You avoid the double negative and you clear out the unnecessary adverb

‘often’, which confuses the issue further. Now we have a much better range of possibilities.

- I never interrupt people.
- I rarely interrupt people.
- I sometimes interrupt people.
- I often interrupt people.

The main reason we fall into these syntactical traps is that we want to make all our questions work in the same direction to make the marking system easy. In this case we want ‘never’ to be bad and ‘often’ to be good.

The next section gives some ideas about scoring systems, but remember there is almost always a different way of asking the question. For example, you could replace ‘I interrupt people’ with ‘I let people finish what they are saying before giving my opinion’. This has two virtues:

- it allows you to stick with ‘never’ = low score, and ‘always’ = high score
- it avoids the word ‘interrupt’, which has negative connotations and so is less likely to be chosen as an option. (I know people who would interrupt you to tell you they never interrupt!)

How good is your scoring system?

- A** *There is no point in scoring; it’s all so obvious.*
- B** *Well, if you can do long multiplication and quadratic equations you won’t have any difficulty with my system.*
- C** *Doesn’t everyone carry a calculator these days?*
- D** *You need to be able to add to ten.*
- E** *The layout is very clear and there is feedback in the system so that mistakes are quickly spotted.*

(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E

Getting the balance between a questionnaire that is easy to score and one for which the

answers fall in such a predictable way that the whole thing is a waste of time is undoubtedly a key element of the art of designing questionnaires. You really don't want a group of participants engaged in advanced calculus when scoring, and even if you mark things yourself you want them to be straightforward. If you are using numerical systems then keep them simple and build in some checks. For example, I have one questionnaire that consists of ten questions. Each has a choice of answers – and ten points to distribute among them. This means that the final totals should come to 100 – a neat way of checking that the sums thus far have been done correctly.

Sometimes you can use the language to help with the scoring process. For example, I have one light-hearted questionnaire about stress. When the participants have answered all the questions, I point out that some questions begin with 'Do you ...?' and some begin with 'Have you ...?'. It then becomes a simple matter to note the number of 'Do you ...?' questions they selected in one box, the number of 'Have you ...?' questions they agreed with in a second and do a simple subtraction to arrive at their 'stress quotient'.

5 How do you implement questionnaires?

- A** With clear logical directions about the procedure.
- B** With reassurances about who will handle the results.
- C** Give it to participants, then tell them to read the directions and get on with it as quickly as possible.
- D** With cheerful patient reiteration of directions as required.
- E** Just before a break so there is less pressure on slower participants.

(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

- A**
- B**
- C**
- D**
- E**

Don't be afraid to tell groups a questionnaire is new and being tried out; in my experience they are quite flattered to be asked for feedback

Just be clear about one thing: however much time you spend sweating over the written instructions to ensure they are foolproof and clear, a fair percentage of the group *will not read them properly*. It is in the nature of things. So you really do need to introduce the questionnaire – and that means doing three things.

1. Explaining what the questionnaire is for.
2. Spelling out what participants need to do.
3. Reassuring them about issues like confidentiality.

You also need to be aware that a task like this can make some people really anxious – elastic banding them back to less-than-happy school days or badly handled recruitment situations. Make the situation as comfortable as possible. Where the questionnaire has a serious personal intent then it is a good idea to try to time it to be done before a break in the programme – so that people can leave the room as they finish. This takes the pressure off those who like to take things at a more reflective pace and saves the speedy ones from sitting twiddling their thumbs.

6 Why bother?

- A** To give participants a change of pace and approach during training events.
- B** To encourage participants to reflect on their own personality or behaviour.
- C** To provide data for research or evaluation.
- D** To give a foolproof basis for recruitment, team membership or advancement.
- E** To provide a positive language for our ongoing discussions.
- F** To show how clever I am.


(Tick as many letters as you wish, then read the comments that follow.)

- A**
- B**

- C**
- D**
- E**
- F**

And here we are back where we started – the good and not-so-good reasons to use and design questionnaires. As for question f, well it does require some effort and real work so it might show you are clever and industrious. Of course, you may feel that the message will be that you just don't know how to design questionnaires! If you feel that something you have designed is not doing the job, then please use this article to encourage you to try again. And don't be afraid to tell groups a questionnaire is new and being tried out; in my experience they are quite flattered to be asked

for feedback – and you will get some very useful ideas.

However, just proving how clever you are is not sufficient reason to do it. Consider the advantages and do the cost-benefit analysis. Is it worth the time and effort? There is a lot of work involved but be aware that a good questionnaire does become a really valuable resource in your toolkit. And remember, if you design your own you have three real advantages: you can design it to meet a very specific purpose; you can adapt it and incorporate feedback; and (best of all) no one is going to say 'Oh, I did this one last week.' 

Author's acknowledgement

With particular thanks to Peter Honey for his 'How to devise your own questionnaires' in his *Manual of Self-Assessment Questionnaires* (1993), which first taught me the rules and gave me the courage to have a go.

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