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Shorter Personality Questionnaires: A User's Guide Part 1

In this two part series, James Bywater and Anna Brown summarise some of the issues involved in determining the correct length of assessment in a personality questionnaire (PQ). In the first instalment they discuss the general issues that test designers face, and in the second they cover some more modern solutions to these, with associated disadvantages.

It is aimed at practitioners rather than hard core psychometricians and can not be exhaustive. However wherever possible it attempts to distil out practical messages for the audience.

How Long Should a Personality Questionnaire (PQ) Be?

This is a key question that has long exercised PQ designers. There is a balance to be struck between the speed and the quality of the assessment. In his recent article, Sijtsma (2009) explains why “very short tests are highly inaccurate measurement instruments, no matter how good the quality of items used”. This is because the amount of statistical information is too small. So a questionnaire with just a single question would clearly be weak, but one with a thousand questions would clearly be excessive in terms of demands placed on the test taker. Somewhere between these two extremes lies a design choice.

Long questionnaires pose problems in terms of attention span, reading load, motivation, and negative employer brand. Thus, as a very general rule, test publishers have attempted to keep assessments down to below one hour (although there are some exceptions.)

Shortening questionnaires can be achieved in three broad ways:

- Measuring fewer dimensions - in general the more things one attempts to measure, the longer the questionnaire becomes. Broad Big 5 questionnaires not measuring any sub-facets such as NEO-FFI, IMAGES, RPQ and similar are usually much shorter than other questionnaires that measure more scales.
- Asking fewer questions for each of the scales – although this brevity comes at a cost. As a very general rule, more questions (if chosen well) can make the scales broader and more reliable, and thus potentially more valid.
- Shortening the questions (to adjective checklists) – which keeps the questions down to single adjectives, which reduces reading time and consequently test time significantly.

Top Tips:

- Be clear what you want to measure and measure just that
- Be clear about potential uses and the required precision level of your questionnaire
- Know the typical reading level of your applicant pool
- Know the typical assessment time expected by your applicant pool.

What Do Candidates Prefer?

There has been much written about short attention spans, and a need to keep candidates engaged. There is certainly evidence that candidates are getting less tolerant of very long assessment processes in a recruitment setting, especially in “hot” talent markets. However this does depend on the nature of the assessment,

the candidate and the setting. If you are fighting for talent or if your recruitment brand image is mixed, you would be well advised to keep your assessment processes quite short.

However, there is also evidence from “ultra high stakes” assessments (Bywater, 2006) such as for promotion or restructure, that candidates feel a need to be assessed “properly.” Interestingly, in these contexts they seem to favour longer assessments.

Top Tips:

- In general shorter questionnaires are more popular, for most purposes, most of the time
- Keep longer, harder or more resource hungry selection methods back until later in the process. They will be applied to fewer candidates, and the candidates by this stage will be more engaged by you as an employer
- Keep up to date with the internet and developments in networking, communication and global communities (the BBC “Digital Planet” podcast is good for this)
- For “Ultra High Stakes assessments,” brevity of assessment is less important than other factors such as the validity of assessment and good communication.
- Talk to your applicants - ask them what they think.

Do Candidates Ever “Love” Personality Questionnaires?

On balance it is likely that “resigned acceptance” may be the best outcome you can hope for in your use of PQs. While interviews, resumes and work samples typically receive favourable reactions (Steiner and Gilliland, 2001), PQs usually score modestly in surveys of candidates’ likes and dislikes. Candidates tend to like the fact that they are asked to think about themselves, and they frequently enjoy the opportunity to receive feedback. However they tend to dislike irrelevant, intrusive or “weird” questions. They also tend to prefer “disagree-agree” type questions to forced-choice questionnaire formats.

So the challenge when designing PQs is making them be seen as procedurally fair, as well as making the format truly engaging. Good organisations have responded to this by:

- Selling the benefits of the approach to candidates (fairness, consistency, job satisfaction etc)
- Using PQs strongly related to the assessment purpose (for example measuring traits that are clearly job-relevant, if the assessment is used in work settings).
- Ensuring the opportunity for feedback to candidates (everyone gets something.)

In summary, candidates are rarely going to find personality questionnaires exciting. Questionnaires may always feel slightly mystifying and out of the candidates’ control. Tangible tools such as the interview, where candidates feel more in control, may always be slightly preferred. However, by careful choice of questionnaire and candidate handling we find that job relevant PQs are accepted by all candidates, almost all of the time. Strong objections are very rare.

Top Tips:

- Review the questionnaire. Ask yourself how you would feel being asked to do this under similar circumstances. Better – ask how a critical friend might feel (engineer, accountant, etc.)
- Ensure you offer feedback
- Ask for feedback from your candidates and respond to this – what could you do differently?

- Investigate complaints before the process to ensure the process remains fit for purpose and does not become “carcinogenic” (Bywater & Bard, 2009.)

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