

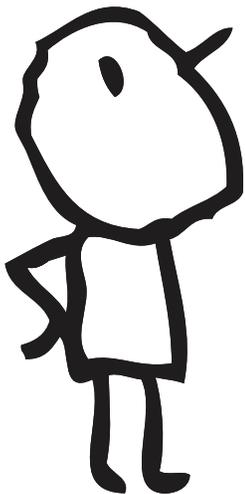
Zero in

ON KNOWLEDGE

Top 15 Questions to Ask when Purchasing an Employee Questionnaire

Written by Wendy Gordon

If you've spent any amount of time investigating employee testing, no doubt you have found the choices overwhelming. There are a multitude of questionnaires these days, each promising to be the magic key that will tell you everything you need to know about individuals and organizations. How do you wade through all the fanfare and choose one that really delivers? Here, industry experts offer 15 important questions to ask your vendor before you purchase a new assessment tool.



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#1. WHAT IS THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT?

Ask what the assessment is designed to do, and weigh the answer against your specific needs and goals. Investing in a tool is often tough to justify to stakeholders when solely framed in the context of what's being measured, but everyone can see the payoffs when you base your decision on specific outcomes. Ask your vendor for real-life applications and validation results for jobs that are similar to the ones under consideration.

#2. IS IT ONLINE?

Web-based questionnaires are usually less expensive than paper ones. You get real-time data collection with minimal data entry errors, integrated reporting, and much faster distribution. Plus, the perception that results are more confidential means you'll usually get better response rates. But not all web-based tests are created equal; be wary of free online questionnaires with no scientific backing.

#3. HOW IS MY INFORMATION PROTECTED?

Ensure that not just anyone can access the instrument or your group's results. Sophisticated designs allow you to create unique access passwords for different users. Look for a vendor that uses Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) technology to secure their web site by encrypting information and providing authentication. Finally, ask your provider where the information gets stored, how it gets backed up, and under what circumstances other parties would have access to your data.

Results are easier to interpret when accompanied by graphics and meaningful comments. Simplistic or sparse feedback materials might spell hours of report formatting, graph creation, and interpretation for you.

#4. CAN I SEE A SAMPLE REPORT?

Ask for a sample report before you purchase a test to ensure that the results are given in a format that's useful to you. Whether you prefer PDF, Excel, or something that you can modify and build upon, look for electronic reports that are available in a variety of formats.

#5. IS THE ASSESSMENT OFFERED IN MANY LANGUAGES?

Perhaps more specifically, is the test available in the language particular to your users? English alone differs significantly around the globe, and sophisticated publishers take pains to ensure that regional spelling and idioms don't skew your results. Even if you don't intend to use the questionnaire in a language other than English, a wide array of translations often indicates that a test is well-established, universal, has diverse or multiple normative samples, and that there exists a wealth of best-practice advice and research literature.

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If you don't wish to get involved in administration, inquire about scoring services, where the vendor can administer a test to a large group and handle report generation for you.

#6. IS IT EASY TO USE?

Just about any questionnaire will claim to be easy to administer and score. But how intuitive are setup and report generation really? Ask to see samples of the testing and reporting screens, or request a walkthrough to try it yourself. Get a feel for the program as a whole to ensure that it meets your needs all-round.

#7. WHAT KIND OF TECHNICAL SUPPORT DO YOU OFFER?

Some vendors offer multiple methods of tech support only to hit you with a big subscription rate or hidden fees. Look for a vendor with a portion of its website devoted to offering free support, updates, and downloadable information that you can access around the clock. For when you need to speak to someone, check to see if service is offered from multiple time zones that fit your working hours. Go with a free or tiered support plan to keep your costs down.

#8. WHAT PRICING OPTIONS DO YOU OFFER?

Your decision to purchase a test may come down to the final dollar figure per person. If answers to the other 14 questions here are equal, you should still investigate pricing options that might not be published in a vendor's catalog or e-commerce site. Ask whether you can get individual use versus subscription pricing, and if you are eligible for volume discounts. If a test is in the early phases of development, you could qualify for additional discounts by volunteering yourself as a data collection site or beta tester.

#9. TO WHAT EXTENT CAN I CUSTOMIZE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE?

You might feel that the survey you've chosen would benefit from a few extra questions, your organization's logo, or some personalized coaching examples in the report. Although excessive customization of test items would negate the benefits of using a standardized test, some specialized vendors offer customizable instruments. To fully integrate the test and its results into your computer environment, inquire about the vendor's hosting options.

#10. DOES IT HAVE HOSTING OPTIONS?

Are you obliged to use a third-party solution, or are there options for incorporating the test into your IT structure and adapting it to fit your organization? Some vendors allow you to attach your logo and brand to web-based tests; others can establish a license agreement allowing you to re-create the test, integrate it with existing databases, track completion rates, and store information on your own server. If you have strict rules about where your personnel information can reside, or need an integrated solution, ask your vendor about web services and software developer's kits.

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With a Star Performer analysis, you get customized selection criteria that not only stand up to rigorous scrutiny, but also pinpoint the candidates that are most likely to succeed.

#11. WHAT HAPPENS IF THERE IS A LEGAL CHALLENGE TO MY USE OF THE ASSESSMENT?

Look for a vendor that has specific guidelines in place to support customers in the event of a legal challenge to the use of the test. In recruiting and promotion situations, test results should never be used as the sole decision-making criteria. Choose a vendor that can provide you with scientific evidence backing up the test's relevance to the position you're hiring for. Some providers can conduct a Star Performer analysis or validation study of the position before you begin, and augment selection procedures with a predictive scoring algorithm.

#12. DOES THE VENDOR COMPLY WITH PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS?

Ask if the provider has members in the American Psychological Association (APA), Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology (SIOP), or other professional organization that provides standards for test development and use. These organizations, along with organizations such as The Association of Test Publishers (ATP), provide in-depth information about legal and government requirements and testing best practices. Test review organizations (e.g., the Buros Institute of Mental Measurements) offer objective evaluations of popular tests for a nominal fee.

#13. DOES IT HAVE A TECHNICAL MANUAL?

Not only should an instrument be accompanied by published statistics and information on its development, it should also have guidelines for its administration and scoring. Look for a technical manual with adequate data to evaluate the test itself, as well as case studies and guidelines about interpretation and application. Ask about what free, upfront normative information is available without having to purchase the manual.

#14. DO I NEED CERTIFICATION TO USE THIS INSTRUMENT?

It's common for human resource assessments to fall into high, medium, and low qualification levels based upon the administrator's required training in psychological testing. In all organizational testing situations, the administrator must adhere to standards and codes of ethics related to test delivery and feedback, including being able to explain the science behind the assessment. For these reasons, vendors often require that users have a certain level of post-secondary education or attend a training workshop. Your vendor should be able to direct you to affordable certification classes in your area taught by qualified professionals.

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#15. DOES IT HAVE SOLID PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES?

Choose a test that was constructed through a scientific methodology with published norms and reliability and validity information. To have relevance, an assessment must be tested and developed on a representative cross-section of the population, providing a benchmark against which to interpret scores.

For expert guidelines on analyzing the psychometric properties of a test and determining its performance, please refer to the article Top 10 Ways to Evaluate an Instrument.



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