



Tips for Creating Surveys and Writing Survey Questions

June 2017

SURVEY BUILDING TIPS

- Keep it short – not more than 30 items.
- Stay focused on the objective of your survey. Eliminate unnecessary items, or those that do not contribute unique information of relevance.
- Limit the number of questions (perhaps to 1-2 per survey) that use open-ended text boxes and thus require writing.
- Decide if you want to make it mandatory (or not) for the respondent to answer each survey question.
- In general, if you want to get a better understanding of a behavior or a given topic, avoid “yes/no” questions as they do not provide much information.
- Group items together that address the same topic, such as those that ask about Interpersonal Skills (such as: collaborating, communicating, building relationships, speaking, listening, presenting, negotiating, etc.)
- Within the same topic, group items together that have the same format (e.g., group multiple-choice questions with other multiple-choice questions, and group yes/no/don’t know items with other yes/no/don’t know items).

QUESTION WRITING TIPS

- Write questions that are simple and to the point.
- Use words, not numbers, for your response options. For example, if you want to measure level of agreement to a statement, instead of using 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 as the possible response options, use instead: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree.
- Try to avoid items that have negative phrasing, or that use the word “not” -- these become confusing very fast.
- Use words with clear meanings – and spell out what you mean. For example, not everyone will have the same meaning for “team player” or “problem solving.”
- If a respondent is being asked to rank something, say the importance of a given competency over another, limit the number of ranking options to 5 or 6
- If you want a deeper understanding of a topic, limit your use of questions that require a simple “yes/no/don’t know” response option.

- In a multiple-choice question, cover all response options without overlapping. For example, do not use these three response options, b/c they overlap: 0-5 years, 5-10 years, and 10-15 years (and so forth).
- If you ask respondents to check a list of, say 7 items, and you are not sure that you have provided an exhaustive list, make sure to add “Other” as your final response option. You may even want to provide the ability for the respondent to specify what “other” stands for, by giving them the opportunity to write in this information.
- Avoid double- or triple-barreled questions. For example, do not ask, in one question, about the Candidate’s attendance and integrity (double-barreled), or the Candidate’s attendance, integrity, and ability to problem solve (triple-barreled). The respondent will not know which concept to focus on when providing their answer, and thus you will not get a meaningful response to your question.
- Many questions will need a response option such as “does not apply” or “don’t know” or “no opportunity to observe” – adding these response options will lead to more truthful and accurate responses, as you are not forcing the respondent to pick either “yes” or “no” when they actually do not know the answer to the question.
- Do not ask questions that relate to an applicant’s age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, medical condition, finances, family life, marital status, religious beliefs, politics, personal hygiene, or psychological state. (This is not an exhaustive list, but it does indicate the nature of the topics that are inappropriate.)
- Keep the reading level of the items very simple, such as at the 5th grade reading level.
- Avoid using technical terms or words unless you are specifically asking about a certain technical skill or behavior.
- Avoid using business slang or buzzwords like “defends own turf” or “at the end of the day” or “step up to the plate” or “deep dive” or “flavor of the month” -- these may not be understood by the respondent, or have more than one meaning, depending upon who is responding.