Personality Questionnaires



The results of personality questionnaires depend on how you answer the questions; in fact, most of the associated reports start with something like, "*the information used to generate this report was obtained solely from the questionnaire you completed*".

The first personality questionnaires I used almost forty years ago were from Transactional Analysis related (PAC profile, Drivers and Life-Positions) and they were "pencil & paper" versions and completed during, i.e., not before, learning & development interventions.

Most of the people I used the questionnaires with had no knowledge of Transactional Analysis and, to avoid any "unconscious" influence in their answers to the questions, I always asked them to answer the questionnaire(s) before explaining anything about the subject.

As time went on, I also used pencil & paper versions of Belbin, MBTI, Social Styles and a number of others; always with the same approach, i.e., complete the questionnaire during the session, talk about the subject and then analyse the results.

Even with this very "immediate" approach, simply knowing that the questionnaire is some kind of "personality assessment" will cause some people, albeit unconsciously, to "think" about the impact of their responses.

Today, the vast majority of questionnaires are completed not only online but also before any kind of training or coaching session; this has the benefits of both saving time during the session itself and generating, usually, a very detailed & personalised report; but it also has a drawback.

The drawback is that people can take a look at the "subject" of the questionnaire before actually clicking on the link and answering the questions. Someone who is asked to complete an Insights or MBTI or Mental Toughness questionnaire for example, can "Google" them, and they will find a lot of information on "colours", "styles", "types", "C's" and the like.

Now, learning about the subject of the questionnaire is not the real drawback, the real drawback is the unconscious impact of knowing "a little" about the subject and the impact of that knowledge, on how the questions are answered.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not insinuating that people will cheat; in a learning & development environment the vast majority of people I come across want to learn about themselves; however, most people like to be seen in "their best light" and their unconscious bias will have an impact on their answers; maybe not enough impact to "substantially change the results", but, none the less, an impact.

This is, at least for me, the reason that all the reports generated need to be debriefed with the person concerned – the report is not the person's personality!

Another issue with online questionnaires is their use in the recruitment process. Some recruiters use the results of the questionnaire (the report) as the sole input on the personality of the candidate.

I remember a case (not a recruitment) some years ago, where the person answering the questions, got the "ordering" of her answers the wrong way around; she was completely the opposite

to everything in her report. Fortunately, the debriefing identified this; had it been a recruitment ……..

As much as I like using online questionnaires, I still like the spontaneity of distributing an A4 sheet of questions, asking people to answer the questions and then saying, “put your questionnaire somewhere safe, we will come back to it later”

What are your thoughts on the use of online, or even pencil & paper personality questionnaires?