Writing your own survey questions

Although you should always *try* to find an existing survey question to use (so that you can be confident that it has been validated and tested), there may be situations in which you want to write your own questions

This short guide will help you decide when writing your own questions is appropriate, and how to go about it.

For more advice on how plan and carry out a wellbeing impact evaluation, and how to gather and use qualitative data, go to
https://measure.whatworkswellbeing.org/

1. Why write your own questions?

Sometimes standard measures can't fully capture the impact your organisation has on people. That's because many existing questions:

- are broad, and don't pick up changes to specific aspects of people's wellbeing
- are not designed for groups who need support answering questions, for example those with dementia or lower levels of literacy
- use a number scale for the answers, which not everyone is familiar with
- might not capture aspects specific to your activity or context.

If you can't collect good, relevant data, you won't be able to prove or improve the impact you have on the wellbeing of the people you support. So, if you design your own questions, you can measure the elements of wellbeing that really matter to them.

2. What you need to know

If you're going to design your own wellbeing questions, there are a few things to bear in mind:

- You'll need to test them on a small group before you include them in your survey to make sure they measure what you want them to measure.
- They may not be recognised or accepted by funders.
- You won't be able to benchmark your results with other data.

If you're happy to go ahead, follow our steps below to help you.

Step one: find out what's really changing for people

Your questions need to:

- measure the elements of wellbeing that are important to people
- make sense to the people answering them

So you need to listen to people and gather qualitative data about their wellbeing in general, and make sure to incorporate this when you create your theory of change. This will allow you to identify the changes you want to measure.

There are two ways you can get this qualitative data:

Using data you already have

You may already have case studies from service users, partners, staff and referral organisations. These are valuable because they often describe people's experiences of your organisation in their own words.

- Do the case studies explore wellbeing?
- Do people talk about how they feel about themselves and their lives?
- Do they talk about whether your organisation has made a difference?
- If they do, this can help you decide which elements of wellbeing to measure, and structure your questions around them.

Collecting new data

If you don't have any relevant data already, or you want to make sure your questions help people explain what's changed in their own words, you can collect new qualitative data.

To do this, you could:

- do an initial survey with open questions about how people feel about themselves and their lives, and whether your organisation has made a difference
- run a workshop or do one-to-one interviews – if someone who's not connected to the organisation can do this, people are more likely to give honest answers.

Step two: identify different elements of wellbeing

Once you have the qualitative data, you can start coding. This is where you look through your notes or transcripts to pick out key themes. Organising your data like this will help you decide what elements of wellbeing are important to people and create your questions.

- Make a list of things to look out for before you start coding, for example outcomes from a model of wellbeing. This is called deductive coding. It will

help you explain how you decided on themes to explore when you write up your approach. If you notice anything interesting that's not in the model, you can add it and explain why it's a new idea. This is called inductive coding.

- Look through the data to get a general sense of what people are saying about their wellbeing. Pull out phrases and terms people use to describe their wellbeing.
- See if you can group people's responses into categories.
- Note down what's important to people and how they describe it in their own words.

Step three: develop some pilot questions

You can now use the elements of wellbeing you've identified to develop new questions for your survey.

When you design your questions, make sure they:

- are clear and concise
- help you capture the level of someone's wellbeing and how this changes over time – you can do this by asking people to agree or disagree with a statement on a scale rather than just asking for a yes or no answer
- are not leading questions – so they don't encourage people to answer a question in a certain way.

Dr Mark Robinson's guide to **designing questionnaires using multi-item psychometric scales** can help you write these pilot questions.

Avoiding leading questions

It's important you don't put words in people's mouths or only give them the chance to answer a question in a certain way.

For example, these questions are limiting, and don't allow people to answer accurately:

- Have the computer classes made you feel more optimistic about your chances of finding work?
- How much more optimistic do you feel about your chances of finding work since you started computer classes?
- By saying 'more optimistic', these questions assume the person is optimistic in the first place, so they can't say they don't feel optimistic in their answer.

Step four: test and adjust your questions

You need to make sure the questions you've developed reflect what people said about their wellbeing. Go back to people and see what they think of your questions.

Find out if:

- the questions talk about elements of wellbeing that are important to them
- the questions are written in a way that makes sense to them
- they interpret the questions in the same way.

Take what people say on board, and make any necessary tweaks to the wording, the layout and how people can answer the questions.

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