Best practice: Ethical issues in using the FIRO instrument – what to consider during the administration and feedback

Pre-contracting

When using the FIRO instrument with a client, you should first establish why the questionnaire is being used and how it will be applied. Whether using the questionnaire with an individual or a group, it is important to establish and confirm a purpose or current issue at the outset. When using the FIRO instrument for assessment, there are some specific aspects of contracting and the purpose of the session that need to be clear – see Chapter 6 of your FIRO User's Guide for more information. For information on contracting specifically for the FIRO-B and FIRO Business instruments, see pages 36–38 and 82–84 of the User's Guide respectively.

Administration

Administration of the FIRO instrument is the process of presenting an individual with the questionnaire and ensuring that they understand how to complete it. It is important that this is done in an appropriate way so that the results of the questionnaire can be relied upon to produce as accurate a reflection of the individual's FIRO scores as possible. Once the questionnaire has been completed (if in electronic format), an electronic report can be generated.

Why is good administration important?

Careful administration to respondents of any personality questionnaire will produce a more reliable result, and the FIRO instrument is no exception. Whilst in some ways the administration of a personality questionnaire is less difficult than an ability test (there are no precise time limits, for example), it is still important to get it right for a number of reasons:

- By developing a comfortable rapport with the respondent(s), the administrator can reduce anxiety and create a favourable attitude that will promote accuracy in the answering of the questionnaire.
- Good administration can reduce distortion. It is important that respondents know that they should answer openly and honestly, and that they should answer as they actually are, rather than how they would like to be or believe they should be.
- Any errors in the way the questionnaire is completed can be corrected; for example, not correctly filling in the answer sheet.
- It is important that everyone is treated in the same way and given the same administration instructions, especially if using the FIRO questionnaire in assessment.

Who can use the FIRO instrument?

The FIRO questionnaire is designed to be administered to adults (aged 16 or over), individually or in a group setting. Whether the questionnaire is appropriate for an individual younger than 16 is a decision that should be based on professional consideration of the client's maturity level. The FIRO questionnaire can be used in clinical settings as well as organisational settings, but please note that the OPP FIRO Foundation Programme qualifies practitioners to use the instrument in an organisational setting. Clinical qualifications and expertise are needed before using the FIRO questionnaire in a clinical setting.

Completion time

The FIRO questionnaire is untimed, but people typically take 15 minutes to complete it. However, respondents are able to take as much time as they need.

In case you are using the FIRO instrument with disabled candidates, please read 'Guidelines for the use of psychometric assessment with disabled people', which you will find in the FIRO Knowledge Bank in the ethical guidelines section.

Procedure and best practice in administering the FIRO questionnaire

General administration

Listed below are the key issues that need to be covered in administering psychometric instruments. To ensure that the FIRO instrument is used as effectively as possible, the administrator should familiarise themselves with OPPassessment™, the online administration platform, and prepare an email introducing the session before the questionnaire is filled in. When introducing the questionnaire, the administrator should:

- Encourage the respondent to complete the questionnaire in a quiet, well-lit, comfortable area.
- Properly inform the respondent about the nature of the process: why and for what purpose the questionnaire is being used.
- Provide information about who will see the data, how it will be used and stored, and for how long.
- Ensure that the respondent's informed consent has been obtained.
- Ask the respondent if they have done anything like this before and, if so, explore their reaction to that experience.
- Obtain relevant background information about the respondent.
- Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers; it is therefore important to refer throughout the process to the FIRO instrument as a 'questionnaire', not a 'test'.
- Describe the FIRO instrument in very brief terms – for example, explain that the FIRO questionnaire measures how you typically behave towards other people and the behaviours you want back from them.
- Clarify that there is no time limit, but that people typically take about 10–15 minutes to complete the questionnaire; encourage the respondent not to dwell too long on each question.
- Explain that the respondent should choose the number from the options that most applies to them.

Explain that you will provide feedback on their FIRO profile and they will have the opportunity to see their results and explore their profile during a feedback session. Clarify the frame of reference they should use when completing the questionnaire – for example, as if they were at work or at home, should you wish to specify this. When using the FIRO questionnaire for recruitment, ensure that you adopt a standard, consistent approach to the administration instructions for all candidates and be explicit about the required frame of reference – most likely to be a work context.

Giving feedback

It is best practice to provide feedback to clients whether you are using the instrument in an assessment or development setting.
FIRO feedback can be given in either a one-to-one or group context, even if they receive feedback in a group setting. In either situation, the following sections provide useful ethical guidelines to follow, from asking an individual to take the questionnaire through to delivering the feedback session.

Contracting during the feedback session

When giving feedback, the contracting undertaken at the outset can be revisited as a reminder to the client to allow them to raise any questions. The purpose of contracting is to establish rapport between you and the client, put the individual at ease, clarify expectations and explain the nature of the FIRO session.

Some of the questions you may ask could be:

- How will you use the FIRO data?
- What are your expectations of the instrument?
- What is your current situation?
- What are your development areas?
- How do you see the FIRO information fitting in with your current situation or development programme?

In addition, it is important to:

- Ensure that the client completed the FIRO questionnaire voluntarily
- Learn how they found this process
- Discuss the limits of confidentiality and agree the boundaries of the discussion, such as how this information will be recorded and who the information will be shared with
- Explain the process, structure and timings of the feedback session
- Emphasise that there are no good or bad profiles, and that the FIRO instrument is a questionnaire, not a test.

Be aware of your own skills and limitations when using the FIRO instrument. It is your responsibility to set the boundaries and to stay within those boundaries during the feedback session and your overall use of the instrument.

Make sure you outline the structure of the feedback session and approximate timings for the feedback. Explain that the feedback is a two-way discussion. The purpose is to explore the results of the FIRO profile and clarify what they mean for the client through their own behavioural examples.

When preparing for the feedback, as with all personality questionnaires, you should interpret an individual's profile with reference to any other information that you know about the individual, and to the context and purpose of using the questionnaire.

Confidentiality and storage of information

It is important that the person taking the FIRO questionnaire is clear on the context, what their results will be used for and who will have access to the results. This needs to be agreed with the individual and is likely to be different for selection and development purposes. Results can be used for up to 12 months, but should not be relied on beyond that time because they can be impacted by development or life changes.

Ethical considerations when using the FIRO instrument in assessment for selection

For assessment applications, the FIRO results will typically be interpreted either orally or in writing for a client. There is no need to provide the scores, as these may be interpreted incorrectly by those who have not been trained. Instead, it is best to provide a summary of the key strengths and weaknesses of a candidate and if appropriate include further questions for the client to use during an interview with the candidate.

As with all psychometrics, the FIRO instrument should only be used alongside other recruitment methods that assess the ability of the candidate to perform the job, such as competence-based interviews, ability tests and exercises relevant to the job content. This should be explained clearly to the client and the candidate. It is not appropriate to use personality questionnaires to de-select people from jobs in a redundancy situation, so the FIRO instrument should not be used in this context.

The feedback process outlined in Chapter 3 of your FIRO User's Guide is slightly different when using the FIRO questionnaire in recruitment. Typically, practitioners will discuss the results with the individual without asking them to predict their results. Although the individual will know the questionnaire is not a test and that there are no right or wrong answers, asking respondents to predict their results can be an unnerving experience, particularly during a selection process.

FIRO Business

Practitioners may also find using the FIRO Business instrument to be more agreeable in selection. For example, the business-focused terminology (Involvement, Influence and Connection) and the use of an international norm group lend themselves to an assessment process in global organisations. The FIRO Business norms are based on an international sample of working people in 10 languages groups, all of whom completed the FIRO questions along with a set of validation questions. An internet-based data collection approach was used. This norm group is known as the International Norm Sample and comprises 2801 employed people aged at least 18 years and who completed at least 51 of the 54 questions used in the research. A wider range of languages and cultures were sampled in creating this norm group, with 9000 individuals involved in the initial data collection. However, only countries for whom the criteria were achieved – that at least 100 men and 100 women completed the questions, were all aged at least 18 and employed, and completed at least 51 items – were retained in the final sample.

The language groups meeting the criteria are as follows:
North American English, European English, German, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, Latin/North American Spanish, French, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese.

Boundaries of professional practice

In one-to-one settings, the nature of the FIRO instrument can lead individuals to open up and reveal personal information about themselves. When this leads you to believe that counselling would help, it is important to know and be clear about the boundaries of the work you are doing. This is relevant even if you are a trained counsellor or therapist, because the contract with the person is based on their working context, or other specific context. If you agree with your client that further personal counselling or therapy would be helpful, then you should refer them to a qualified person or a professional body.