

# Fibs flow on job applications

More companies are using sophisticated background checks to root out lies on résumés.

By Marilyn Gardner

**A**s a job placement director, Tony Beshara has read thousands of résumés over the years. But at least twice a month he comes across some containing false information. In such cases, he consigns the résumés to the reject pile, regardless of how qualified the applicants might be.

"I am positive it happens more times than that, but those are the only ones who get caught," says Mr. Beshara, president of Babich and Associates in Dallas. "We assume 50, maybe 65 percent of résumés that are sent to us have lies on them."

Call it lying, fibbing, embellishing the facts, or stretching the truth. Whatever the term, the practice of "enhancing" a résumé and inflating accomplishments or earnings flourishes.

In a Careerbuilder.com survey of hiring managers, 57 percent said they have found a lie on a candidate's application, even though only 5 percent of workers admitted to falsifying information. Ninety-three percent of managers who caught an applicant lying did not hire that person.

"The problem is, you don't know where they'll lie again," Beshara

says, noting that the practice raises concerns about a candidate's overall ethics.

Ironically, dishonesty is easier to detect than ever before. More companies are implementing comprehensive and sophisticated background checking mechanisms, says Tom Ruff, CEO of a recruiting firm that bears his name in Manhattan Beach, Calif.

In addition, résumés are frequently posted on the Internet. "Momentary mistakes in judgment can end up living on forever," says Michael Fertik, CEO of ReputationDefender Inc., an online reputation management company. "You have to assume not only that employers are finding your résumé online, but also that they are using the Web to verify the claims your résumé makes."

People embellish their work histories for a variety of reasons. "They think it makes them look better to get the job, and it does," Beshara says.

Mr. Ruff finds that the tighter the job market and the fiercer the competition for openings, the more tempting it is for some people to embellish their résumés to try to get an edge over other job candidates.

Declining workplace loyalty also encourages some applicants to stretch the truth, Beshara finds. The idea of career employment is a thing of the past, he says. "With globalization, competition, and subcontractors, you can be replaced any minute. If I don't have any loyalty to you, the employer, my loyalty is to me. The attitude is, 'I just need to get a job. I work for Me Inc.' "

## Puffery vs. fraud

Anna Ivey, a career counselor in Cambridge, Mass., who works with recent graduates, finds one question occurring repeatedly among applicants of all ages: What is the boundary between acceptable puffery on a résumé and fudging, dishonesty, or fraud?

"They're just confused about where you draw the line," Ms. Ivey says. "People assume there's always some inflation in a résumé. They feel pressure to inflate. They wonder: If everyone else is doing this, am I then hurting myself if I don't inflate?"

Some applicants lie about their education. "We always call the school, no matter where it is around the world," says **Dora Vell**, who runs an executive search firm in Boston, Mass. "We don't

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trust the certificate [an applicant] may provide. A CEO actually forged a degree from an institution. We called the school and they couldn't confirm the degree."

Misrepresenting dates of employment is another easy way to get caught, Ivey notes. "Even if an employer will say nothing else about your work there, they typically will confirm employment dates if they're asked to verify them."

Still other people omit companies they worked for, or say they were 'consulting' if they had a series of failed assignments, Ms. Vell says. That way, their work history appears more stable.

Ruff's firm had a candidate who was seeking a job in medical sales. He was hired, but when the company conducted a background check, it found he had held another job that was not on his résumé. The employer terminated him.

"If he had been honest and had listed the additional job, it would not have been a problem," Ruff says.

Some applicants pretend to know someone they don't. People drop names, Vell says. "I just had

someone call and say someone on the board of my client recommended him. Apparently, the board member had not referred him."

To be sure candidates are not misrepresenting their compensation, Vell usually asks, "What did your W-2 show last year?" It implies that she will check, even though she often doesn't.

Vell once caught a CEO lying about his personal status. "He had a spouse on the East Coast and a fiancée on the West Coast. In reference checking, we found two different family situations."

Many people think about fudging their foreign language skills, Ivey finds. "That's one of the easiest ways to get busted," she warns. "All it takes is one person in the interview saying, 'Great, let's conduct the interview in Spanish.' And there you are."

When Beshara confronts errant applicants by saying, "You lied on your résumé," their responses vary. "I've had people say, 'The registrar's office at the University of Oklahoma burned down.' Or, 'I'll look for my diploma.' That's the last you hear from them. Others say, 'I'll change the résumé.

Find me a job."

### 'I didn't mean to be unethical'

Yet many people reject those cavalier attitudes. Don Moore, associate professor of organizational behavior at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, finds great interest in ethical issues among the MBA students in his classes.

"They're both looking for guidance and trying to make sense of and define their own values," he says. "My own research on ethical judgment suggests that there are very few people who knowingly and intentionally engage in unethical behavior.... Evidence suggests that a lot of biased, incorrect statements are made by people who have convinced themselves they are true."

Although the temptation to embellish may be great, Ivey cautions that people do get caught. "It might not happen next week, but it could happen a year into your job, or seven years."

Nowhere is that more evident than in occasional headlines that shine a public spotlight on the potential consequences of misrepresenting the truth. In one recent high-profile case, Marilee Jones,

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dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, resigned after an investigation revealed that she did not hold the academic degrees she had claimed. And David Edmonson, CEO of Radio Shack, resigned after a Texas newspaper reported that his résumé listed a college degree he did not have.

Occasionally schools themselves make mistakes, as Michael Reinemer, now a vice president at American Association for Homecare in Arlington, Va., discovered some years ago.

He received a call from a human resources manager at a company where he had applied for a job. "She said the university where I said I had earned my graduate degree showed no record of me receiving that degree. I contacted the university and sure enough, they had me listed as a part-time, non-degree student. I had taken a class there after getting the graduate degree, and apparently that blocked out the fact that I had earned the degree."

After a few calls to set the university record straight, Mr. Reinemer received a job offer. "They did hire me, so I was very grateful to the HR person who had

the courtesy to call me," he says.

Human resources managers need to give applicants the opportunity to respond to the appearance of false information, Reinemer adds. And applicants must make sure the organizations they list on their résumés keep competent records.

Truth eventually emerges

Raj Khera, CEO of MailerMailer, an e-mail marketing service in Rockville, Md., recently had to fire a woman who apparently falsified material about her experience and qualifications.

"She had submitted one of the best résumés for one of our technical writing positions, and she interviewed very well," he says. "Her writing samples suggested that she would be a great fit."

But after her first week, Mr. Khera and his colleagues were "shocked" at the poor quality of work they were getting. "She was dedicated and appeared to work hard, but her writing was completely different than the samples she provided," he says. After giving her several more opportunities to improve, the company had to let her go.

To avoid such situations, Ruff tells people, "Just be honest on your résumé. Lying can come back to haunt you. My bottom line is: Don't lie. Just be up front."

Harold Boughton, a former senior executive in Greenwood, Ind., offers his own bottom line: "We cannot compromise our values or ourselves in order to make the next sale or get the next job. Practicing ethical behavior is not an option or part-time proposition. Ultimately,

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Dora Vell is the CEO of Vell Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in recruiting technology executives including: CEOs, COOs, CTOs, CMOs, CROs, board members and others. She works with VC-backed, PE-backed private companies and public companies. She can be reached at [dora@vell.com](mailto:dora@vell.com).