

Employers Crack Down On Candidates Who Lie

By Barbara Mende

Carl Norcross of Boulder, Colo., a corporate recruiter for high-tech companies, interviewed a sales-rep candidate who said he had a bachelor's degree.

On checking, Mr. Norcross discovered that the man had left college after three years. "My wife typed my resume," the candidate explained. "She thought I had a degree, and I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't." But he didn't get the job. "A person who lied on his resume is going to lie on sales reports," Mr. Norcross says.

But many job applicants don't seem to get the message about the risks of lying. Numerous surveys by search firms show that job applicants continue to falsify or embellish their credentials. "They lie most frequently about education and employment, particularly about duties and dates of employment," says Lisa Gallagher, vice president of operations at background-checking firm HireRight Inc., Irvine, Calif. "They try to hide gaps in employment and jobs that didn't go well. They tack time from those jobs onto previous periods of employment."

Executive-search firm Jude M. Werra & Associates LLC, Brookfield, Wis., has been tracking resume falsehoods about education in its "Liar's Index" for seven years. Mr. Werra says the index has shown consistently that more than 12% of candidates who send resumes to his firm misrepresent their education. The average over the past two years is 17.33%; the index has gone as high as 23.3%.

After discovering repeated falsehoods, CEO Jude Werra started checking credentials even before interviewing candidates. "In the old days, you assumed you could rely on what was represented and checked references at the end of the process when you and the client had already invested several hours," he says. The firm tracks education because it's easy to check. "It's hard to evaluate other representations," he says. For example, it's hard to argue with "I was responsible for the growth of my former employer."

Misrepresentations can be sly. "Someone told me he was on the Harvard football team," reports Richard Taylor, CEO of Stamford, Conn.-based executive-search firm Taylor-Rodgers & Associates LLC. "He actually attended summer courses, never graduated and was never on the team." Mr. Taylor has also been told of fictitious ranks in the armed forces and attainment of Eagle Scout status.

One man who claimed to have a master's of business administration degree from the University of Maryland was hired by a Maryland alumnus who enjoyed talking with him about campus life, Mr. Werra says. It turned out that the man had no degree but had tended bar near the campus. Mr. Werra and Mr. Norcross both have known candidates who, after being caught inventing credentials, explained that their records had been expunged because they had been in the federal-witness-protection program.

Count on Being Caught

With the rise in lawsuits resulting from failure to screen applicants properly, checking resumes has become more prevalent. "There used to be companies who would have signs saying, 'Guard dog inside,' and there never was a dog," says Dean Supross, vice president and general manager of ADP Screening and Selection Services in Fort Collins, Colo. "Now, there's a dog." Screening firms check credentials such as education, licenses, driving records, criminal records, credit history and past employment.

Online applications for employment may go directly to screening firms without first being seen by employers, so some applicants think they can inflate their credentials when applying online without being caught. "Applicants often state on their resumes that they have a degree but don't list it when they fill in the online application for background check," Ms. Gallagher reports. "They think the employer won't crosscheck. That's one reason why we train our clients to audit records."

Falsehoods often are discovered after employees are hired. "I've seen division presidents get fired because they falsely represented that they had a college degree," says Mr. Taylor. "If five years later the company is sold, the new people may do a check and find it out. They don't want someone with a character issue. Then, too, they'll have their own people and be looking for reasons to get rid of the old ones. Lying is just not an option. It will catch up with you."

These days recruiters check facts conscientiously because they can be held liable for bad hires. "That person you're sending in is your product," says Mr. Taylor. "If someone misrepresents himself, you'd better find out or you lose a client."

There's a need for careful checking because people in executive positions learn to be glib and well-spoken and "can make such a positive impression that you're tempted to take the shortcut" on verifying their claims, says Mr. Werra.

Search firms aren't immune to misrepresentation within their own ranks. Gene Shen was fired as CEO of Chicago-based A.T. Kearney Executive Search after alleged exaggerations of his education and work history surfaced. His successor, Stephen Fisher, strongly cautions candidates against misrepresenting credentials. "It typically results in punitive action by an existing employer or disqualification from consideration for a new position," Mr. Fisher says. "Often what they misrepresent isn't terribly relevant. A lot of successful people don't have M.B.A.s. But by breaching a trust, they torpedo themselves."

Mr. Werra's company surveyed employers on its mailing list last year on their tolerance for misrepresentations. The percentage of respondents who would pass over a candidate who falsely claimed a degree is a whopping 94.6%, while 80.4% would eliminate someone who falsified job assignments and titles.

University of Notre Dame athletic director Kevin White apparently felt that way in December 2001, when newly hired football coach George O'Leary was forced to resign after five days. He said in a statement, "George has acknowledged inaccuracies in his biographical materials, including his academic background. I understand that these inaccuracies represent a very human failing; nonetheless, they constitute a breach of trust that makes it impossible for us to go forward with our relationship."

More recently, Sandra Baldwin resigned her post as president of the U.S. Olympic Committee after admitting she misrepresented her academic credentials. Ms. Baldwin acknowledged that she'd lied about earning an undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado in 1962 and a doctorate from Arizona State in 1967. She actually attended Colorado in 1958-1959 without graduating and earned a bachelor's degree from Arizona State in 1962. She said she completed the course work for a doctorate but didn't finish her dissertation.

The Werra survey shows greater tolerance for lesser offenses. While 41% of respondents would eliminate a candidate who falsified dates of employment; the other 59% would give candidates a chance to explain. Claims of inflated results would be a total turnoff for 35.7% of respondents; only 21.4% would categorically disqualify someone who left employers off a resume.

Exaggerations aren't viewed as negatively as outright lying. "A common fudge is to take an accomplishment and spin it out as though the job candidate was totally responsible," says Laurence Stybel of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, an executive-outplacement and retained-search firm in Boston. For example, a CEO's resume might state "Turned around failing company from bankruptcy to \$40 million profit in 18 weeks," when in fact he had a large team helping him. Or a salesman might claim, "Sold \$3 million in widgets in 2000," when he actually worked on a team with technical people. If the numbers and the time frames are true, Mr. Stybel says, that's fudging rather than lying. While the whole picture is likely to emerge in the interview, fudging "does help get people through the interview door. And that is the purpose of the resume."

Claiming numbers that can't be verified is reasonable, Mr. Stybel says, "as long as the guess is in good faith." Human-resources executives, he explains, often say they took an action that "saved 15% on recruiting costs." While the company may not have tracked the results, he says,

"recruiters know when a number is beyond the bounds of reason. If the person didn't actually do what she said she did, that is called a lie."

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