

Resume fraud common, experts say

By David Ortiz

Sue Murphy tells the story of a publishing company that picked a candidate with a strong resume for a business development position, only to learn after making the hire that the new employee was woefully incapable of doing the job.

So the company did something it had failed to do during the hiring process, and verified its new employee's academic history. It turns out the employee didn't have the marketing degree that he claimed on his resume.

He was promptly fired.

"Number one, he lied on his resume. Number two, he was not able to meet the needs of the job," said Murphy, manager of the National Human Resources Association.

Many companies that don't screen job applicants learn the hard way that a candidate's resume does not always match reality. Resume fraud is a persistent concern for those who interview and hire; more than half of human resource managers said they unearth inconsistencies on resumes either sometimes or always, according to a 2004 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, a national trade association for HR managers.

Job applicants lie on their resumes about a variety of things, according to the survey. Fifty-eight percent of HR managers who check a candidate's previous employment said they sometimes or always find inconsistencies; 54 percent of those who perform criminal background checks on job candidates said they sometimes or always find inconsistencies; 45 percent said they sometimes or always uncover inflated claims of past salary.

Thirty-four percent said they sometimes or always find inconsistencies on claims of former employers, and 20 percent reported they sometimes or always find inconsistencies in claims of eligibility to work in the United States, according to the survey.

Thirty-two percent of HR managers who verify academic credentials said they sometimes or always find inconsistencies on claims of degrees and diplomas, according to the survey. Some applicants simply claim

to have a degree that they don't.

In recent years, many job candidates have begun to claim academic degrees that were actually conferred by "diploma mills," unaccredited institutions and shady Internet businesses that offer bogus diplomas for a price, said Alan Sklar, president of 3, a background screening company in Mansfield, Mass.

"A lot of people will mislead about having diplomas or degrees. They just don't think people will check," Sklar said.

But the most common problem HR managers deal with when reviewing resumes is embellishment, said Murphy. In such cases, a job candidate doesn't lie overtly, but exaggerates information in an attempt to become more appealing – such as a bookkeeper who lists his job description as "financial officer."

"Resumes are all about making yourself look good, and there's a lot of 'wordsmithing' that occurs," Murphy said.

Human resource managers who check references and other information on resumes often find the task complicated by the fact that former employers are unwilling to provide information for fear of legal liability. Fifty-four percent of HR managers who participated in the survey indicated their organization has a policy not to provide any references or information about current or former employees.

The action that a company takes when it does discover an instance of resume fraud varies, largely according to the severity of the inconsistency and the employee's record of accomplishment on the job, Murphy said. In some cases, employees who are discovered to have lied about having an academic degree are allowed to keep their job with the understanding that they will not advance in the company until they have completed the course work, she said.

But job candidates should not count on such lenient treatment, said Frank Scanlan, media affairs manager for the Society for Human Resource Management.

"A lot of HR managers say if they find inconsistencies on a resume," Scanlan said. "They won't consider that candidate or they'll terminate employment. It's a trust issue."

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