

Honesty is Still the Best Policy

I recently read a business journal account, which reported that the Chief Financial Officer of a major technology company resigned his position following the revelation that he did not have an MBA from a top tier university as he had previously claimed on his resume. I was intellectually insulted by the article's characterization since its writer stated that this CFO had "stepped down due to a misstatement on his resume, concerning his educational credentials". This was all very polite, but let's cut to the chase here, he lied, plain and simple. No one accidentally lists an ivy-league MBA on her or his resume when in fact they don't have one. This was no simple "typo". It was a deliberate act to deceive others and influence a hiring decision. The CEO, in an attempt at damage control, released a statement to the press saying that his CFO's error did not have any effect of the company's financial results, procedures and controls. I can only assume that some publicist wrote this for him, because if I were he, I would have been too furious to compose such a calm press release.

Resume inflation and misrepresentation have been with us for as long as we have used resumes. In the past few years we have heard of an ivy league Athletic Director, the President of the US Olympic Committee and the Chief of Naval Operations all "misstate" elements of their professional credentials. Some are able to get away with it for years. What I find puzzling is that now more than ever, it is too easy to check people out, and that makes it even more suicidal to contemplate such a foolish venture. Technology tools and investigative firms have made it simple and reasonably inexpensive for companies to check out new employees and review employment history, credit, arrest and driving records. So why do people do this?

- Some possess an attitude of arrogance and feel their misrepresentation will go undetected. What they fail to realize is that this type of indiscretion is typically revealed by accident. It may be possible to get away with resume inflation for a few years, but eventually the truth comes to light. Embezzlers operate much the same way. A former auditor once told me that the first time an embezzler goes undetected, they often continue their pattern of stealing, more confident that they will never be caught. Ultimately an auditor investigating an inconsistency or unrelated error unravels the secret and catches them.
- Others feel that everyone is doing it, which means no one really cares or has the time to bother to check out the facts contained in resumes.
- Yet others have an apparent sense of inadequacy and insecurity and feel they will not be competitive without having a resume loaded with more accomplishments and credentials than they possess in reality. Early in my recruiting career, one of my colleagues represented a high level marketing executive to a chemical company. Almost at the point that an offer was about to be made, it was revealed that the candidate had falsely claimed to have a Ph D. In reality, he had not completed his thesis. He should have reported this fact and offered an estimated completion date, if indeed he was still enrolled in a doctoral program. The client was deeply disappointed over losing an attractive candidate and commented that an advanced degree was not required for their position, but they would not hire him due to his dishonesty.

- People may be unaware or ignorant of the level of detail that companies pursue in employment background checks.

Lying on your resume is like playing “Russian Roulette” with an automatic pistol. You will be caught and in all likelihood, your career will die. There are too many other senior executives who do not lie on their resumes, so why should a company gamble on someone who does? What else will he or she misrepresent? If someone will lie to get a job, will they also lie to keep it? Consider these thoughts:

- Scrutiny of senior executives may intensify due to recent events in the business world. Companies want to appear “squeaky-clean” to the financial and business community in addition to the media. CEO’s and boards of directors will have little if any tolerance of erroneous representation of details and may overreact at the slightest perception of any misstatement. Make sure your details are correct.
- Retained search firms will be under greater pressure to check out candidates. The more prudent ones will verify college education, latest earnings and work history. A search firm will request a college transcript or the candidate’s Social Security Number. With a name and SSAN they then fax a letter to the registrar of his or her college or university to verify the degree(s). They will also request to see a recent pay stub or last W-2. They usually interview the candidate back through her or his entire work history to discover any gaps in employment, even if less than one month and will also speak with eight to ten business references. Clients then do their own criminal, credit, traffic and drug checks.
- Candidates who network into jobs or who are hired by former colleagues and superiors may have a false sense of security, because a trusting friend, without the scrutiny of a search firm, is hiring them. Many newly hired candidates sign releases permitting new employers to perform background checks, not realizing the level of detail being pursued. Six months later they are surprised when the head of Human Resources and a security guard visit their office to escort them out of the company. I have heard accounts like this more times than I care to remember.
- People who do this may never recover their professional livelihood and income. Such an error in judgment may mean the difference between earning a six-figure income and living near the poverty scale. I have seen this latter result occur and it is very sobering.
- Having your name in the business press for inflating your resume is almost tantamount to being accused of intellectual property theft. While mid-managers and lower level people are simply fired, any CXO-level executive or public figure that is caught being less than truthful on anything will be an immediate target for the business media. You can compare this to having your picture hanging in the US Post Office. While you won’t be led away in handcuffs, any negative press will be devastating to your reputation and future career. An executive coach recently told me that negative news about individuals is shared with four or more times as many people than is positive news.

If your resume includes any inaccurate information, correct it immediately. If you have sent an exaggerated resume to any recruiter or company, I suggest you contact them and remove yourself from further consideration, rather than face the disgrace and stinging humiliation of being caught. Treat this as a lesson learned. It is better to abandon a promising opportunity in order to protect your most important financial assets, namely your earning power, career and your reputation. In spite of the stress caused by career transition, it is preferable to extend your search than it is to end your career prematurely. Be sure that every fact on your resume is reported accurately. Have ironclad references that will corroborate and substantiate your performance.

No matter how difficult your present position, you have no justifiable reason to lie on your resume. All of us can look back on our lives and regret decisions and mistakes we have made. This is a conscious decision that should require no real deliberation. You know right from wrong, this choice is obvious and the downside risk is much too great. Ruining your career and suffering financial upheaval are only two outcomes. Your business colleagues will shun you and your loved ones may suffer. You will then get to regret this mistake for the rest of your life. No job, regardless of its pay and prestige is worth all that.

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