

The Resume: Reality or Razzle-Dazzle?

Companies that provide background information on applicants estimate that between 40% and 90% (!) of resumes contain falsifications ranging from mild (stretching dates of employment to shorten the time gap between jobs) to unethical (creating fictional jobs, educational attainment, etc., out of thin air.)

A few past examples of people in the news who you would not think would need to falsify their qualifications:

- The president of a major computer firm claimed a Ph.D. from a top tier school when in reality he got it from an unaccredited correspondence school.
- The CEO of a major software firm claimed an MBA from Stanford that he did not have. In addition, he claimed an undergraduate degree from one university but received it from a different university.
- A Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Dean of twenty-eight years' tenure never received the undergraduate or master's degrees she had claimed on her resume.

The most important thing you can do to insure the resume you are reading is accurate is to "verify, verify, verify." In each of these cases the false claims were not verified prior to employment, even though a few phone calls would have exposed them.

The consequences for the institutions ranged from great embarrassment due to their high profile to a loss of credibility. In the worst cases, some companies even suffered a downgrade in their credit rating and a drop in share price.

According to an article in Forbes magazine, the most common ways applicants stretch the truth on resumes are:

- Lying about educational attainment: a high school diploma, college degree or advanced degrees; claiming unearned technical training certifications.
- Manipulating dates of employment: making up fake dates of employment to close the time gap between jobs or to lengthen tenure in a prestigious job.
- Exaggerating numbers: GPA, high school or college class ranking, percent of revenue, sales earnings, bonuses, etc.
- Increasing previous income: adding amount of bonus to base income to inflate base income or simply lying about income from previous employers.

- Inflating job titles: “Manager”, “Professional”, “V-P” or any C-suite designation.
- Falsely claiming technical abilities: Information technologist, coder, software competency, etc.
- Claiming second language fluency: Spanish, French, etc.
- Providing a fake, more prestigious, home address.

To complicate matters even further, the resume you are looking at may not be written by the applicant whose name is on it.

There are many online resume writing companies that will take an applicant’s information and plug it into a standard resume format. There are even companies that will simply make up a resume from scratch to fit the applicant’s specifications, including telephone numbers for his or her fictional references. These phone numbers will be answered by a person claiming to have worked with the applicant and who will give a glowing summary of the applicant’s fictional experience, education, etc.

If all that weren’t depressing enough, there are companies that provide guidance in how to fake a resume so cleverly that the deceptions are difficult to detect. They even provide logical sounding explanations to justify any of the falsifications that are detected.

Given the opportunities an applicant has to falsify his or her resume, here are some things you can do to increase the odds that you end up with a more accurate picture of what an applicant brings to your company.

1. Most importantly, *verify* education, work history, claimed attainments and everything else you can verify.
2. Do a background check including work history, education claimed and criminal record.
3. Do reference checks. Contact previous employers to verify as many aspects of employment as you can.
4. Online search: for example, Google search the candidate’s name (“Applicant’s Name”)
5. Social media sleuthing: Look at the applicant’s Facebook page, Twitter feed, etc.
6. Make sure information in the resume matches that in all other sources of information, such as the cover letter and the application form.
7. Have the applicant do a work sample of the job-relevant skills, knowledge or capabilities he or she claims.
8. Pay attention to “red flags”: Job titles that don’t match the applicant’s age and/or experience, or the use of vague terms to describe skill or experience (use of “familiar with” or “involved in” to cover up lack of direct experience.”)

Think of the resume as being like your teenage son's report card if your son filled it in himself. You want to trust that he really did get all "A"s, and that the glowing comments really did come from his teachers. But before you buy him that new car, verify, verify, verify.

As the 40th president of the United States said, "Trust, but verify."