

OFFICE SPACE: CAREER COUCH; Served as King of England, Said the Résumé

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Q. You need to update your résumé. To what degree is it acceptable to embellish your skills and experience?

A. A résumé is your best shot at persuading prospective employers to meet you in person and learn more about you, but if you veer from the truth, you're out of line.

"A résumé can be attention-grabbing, startling, interesting, intriguing, provocative, entertaining, wry, amusing or funny," said Barry A. Liebling, president of Liebling Associates, a management consulting firm in New York. "But all of that means nothing if the content isn't real."

Q. How often do people falsify résumés?

A. Evidently, fairly often. Nick Fishman, executive vice president of Background Information Services, a pre-employment screening company in Cleveland, said his organization found that 56 percent of résumés contained falsehoods of some kind. "When you consider these numbers," Mr. Fishman said, "if you're not the one who's falsifying something, your neighbor probably is."

Even high-level employees sometimes engage in false advertising. Last month, for example, David J. Edmondson, the former chief executive of RadioShack, the electronics retail chain based in Fort Worth, resigned after acknowledging that he had claimed to have two college degrees but actually had none.

Q. Why do people lie on their résumés?

A. Most applicants do it because they are insecure about their experiences and want to seem more qualified, said Robert S. Feldman, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. "When we want to try to be likable, we shade things to put them in the best possible

light," Mr. Feldman said. "Unless people are pretty sure that résumé is going to be checked, it's tempting to shade reality and make one's prior experiences more flowery."

Rachel Weingarten, president of GTK Marketing Group, an entertainment marketing firm in Brooklyn, says one lie begets another. "With a lot of people, when they first put in something that's untrue, it's not a grandiose lie, but instead a minor detail," she said. "Over time, they add to it until they've got a completely different experience, and they believe every word."

Q. Which facts are commonly misrepresented?

A. You name it, people have made it up. A 2003 survey by the Society of Human Resource Management, a trade association in Alexandria, Va., found that 44 percent of 2.6 million respondents said they had misstated their work experience on their résumés. And a 2004 report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimated, based on a sampling, that 500,000 people in the United States had listed false college degrees on their résumés and work applications.

Donna Flagg, a principal of the Krysalis Group, a human resources consulting firm in New York, said grade point averages were often liberally rounded upward, turning a 3.6 into a 4.0.

Then there's the nebulous timeline, which Michelle Roccia, vice president of Human Resources at Authoria, a staffing company in Waltham, Mass., described as stretching the duration of employment to eliminate gaps.

"A candidate might say they worked at a company 'from 2004-5,' but in fact, that person only worked at the company from November 2004 to January 2005, which is hardly a full year," Ms. Roccia said.

People also tend to exaggerate their skills. Anna Ivey, author of "The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions" (Harcourt, 2005), says unscrupulous applicants may falsely claim knowledge of a language or a computer program.

"All it takes is one interviewer who happens to speak the language to call your bluff, and that one fudge undermines the credibility of everything else you say about yourself," Ms. Ivey, who lives in Orlando, Fla., said.

Q. Is it wrong to omit certain facts or experiences to disguise age?

A. If the information on your résumé is accurate, you are free to leave in or take out whatever you like. George F. Brenlla, a partner at the New York law firm Clifton Budd & DeMaria, said it was perfectly acceptable to list a degree that you earned from a particular school without revealing when you received it. Under the Civil Rights Act and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, he said, the only age-related question employers are legally allowed to ask is whether an applicant is over 18.

"Disguising age might look suspicious," he said, "but it's perfectly within an employee's rights under the law."

Q. What precautions should you expect an employer to take against fraud?

A. The federal Fair Credit Reporting Act allows employers to verify everything on an applicant's résumé. Many managers run simple background checks on the Internet before the hiring process concludes. On rare occasions, a company will retain a screening company to verify a résumé after an employee has been hired.

Vance, an investigation and security firm in Oakton, Va., requires its new hires to sign documents indicating that everything on their résumé and job application is true. Drew McKay, senior vice president and deputy general counsel, said that a later discovery that an employee had violated this contract was clear grounds for termination.

"Our system is all about the facts," Mr. McKay said. "If you tell the truth from the beginning, you have nothing to worry about."

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