

BUSINESS TREND

Resume lies on rise Surveys show more applicants are fudging credentials, hurting their job prospects and costing firms money

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June 10, 2004

about two years ago, employment attorney Robert Lipman thought a sexual-harassment case he was litigating was a sure win.

The man accused of harassing Lipman's female client had been caught on audiotape at work. And several witnesses had corroborated the woman's allegations.

But during a "grueling deposition," the lawyers representing the company revealed that Lipman's client had lied on her resume about where she had worked and what position she held. Because of the fabrications, Lipman believes his client lost out on a six-figure award and had to opt for a four-figure settlement, or "pennies on the dollar."

"Courts don't look kindly on employees after an employer finds that they have lied on an application, even if they would have otherwise won a discrimination lawsuit," said Lipman, of Lipman & Plesur in Jericho.

Institutionalizing the lie

Fibbing on a resume seems like a harmless act to some, but it's serious business. And a pair of recent surveys suggests that the dishonesty is on the rise.

The act can cost perpetrators their jobs, or as Lipman's situation showed, even influence the outcome of a court case. Not only do plaintiffs face a loss of credibility when their resume lies surface, Lipman said, but they also face doubts about whether they would have gotten the job if not for their fabrications.

Fibbing on resumes can even hurt a company's bottom line. In 2002, after Ronald Zarrella, the chief executive of the Rochester eye-care company Bausch & Lomb, admitted that he falsely said he had an MBA from New York University, the company's stock tumbled 3 percent. Zarrella kept his job but lost his eligibility for a \$1.1-million bonus.

With the stakes so high why do people lie about their credentials? "I don't think people think about" the implications, Lipman said.

In addition, if a lie went undetected at a previous job, people sometimes "will institutionalize the lie and they believe it themselves," said Chuck Wardell, who works in Manhattan as the managing director for executive recruiting firm Korn/Ferry International's Northeast region.

Surveys show fraud trend

Growing numbers may be joining those ranks. In April, the Society for Human Resource Management in Alexandria, Va., conducted an online survey to determine how frequently resumes contained errors. More than 60 percent of the 373 human resources professionals responding said they found inaccuracies "often" (6 percent) or "sometimes" (55 percent). The survey didn't address why the inaccuracies occurred.

In a Korn/Ferry online survey last month, nearly half, or 44.7 percent, of the 300 respondents said they believed that resume fraud among executives is increasing.

The survey followed the release of a congressional report early last month showing that 28 high-level federal employees had bogus college degrees. Some are supervisors with security clearances and some oversee nuclear weapons safety, the General Accounting Office found.

The most common resume fabrications involve reasons for leaving a previous job, according to the Korn/Ferry survey. That's followed by claims about accomplishments, job responsibilities, compensation and education. Job applicants often embellish their credentials to give themselves a leg up in the fiercely competitive job market, Wardell said. "There has been a lot of pressure on people to find jobs," he said. "Downsizing has been real."

Preventing 'edu-fibs'

But it's become more difficult to ferret out the misrepresentations, Wardell said. Some candidates go so far as to hack into university Web sites to list their names among those of graduates. And candidates will present forged documents, as a director candidate interviewed by Korn/Ferry did recently. He claimed he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but he didn't, Wardell said.

After two workers in Suffolk County, one of them a town personnel director, were fired in the early 1980s for lying about having college degrees, the county's office of personnel began demanding that all candidates for jobs requiring a college education have their alma maters submit proof.

The information has to bear the university's stamp and arrive in a sealed envelope, said Alan Schneider, the county's current personnel director.

He said the policy has prevented the so-called 'edu-fibs.'

"We never had allegations of one since that day," he said.

Great numbers of resume lies could be uncovered because increasing numbers of employers are conducting background checks on job applicants.

"More and more employers are realizing the costs associated with a bad hire," Lipman, the attorney said.

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