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## **Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire**

*In the wake of the recession, more job seekers are succumbing to the temptation of embellishing their résumés to impress potential employers*

by Suzanne Wintrob

On paper, his résumé was impressive: He had earned an MBA, was a past vice-president of Hudson's Bay Co., and a holder of the prestigious Order of Toronto. But after he was hired and complaints started rolling in about his performance at work, his employer decided to dig a little deeper into his background.

After some phone calls were made, "the school [where he claimed to have earned an MBA] had never heard of him, the Bay had never heard of him, and there is no such thing as the Order of Toronto. It was just a completely fabricated past."

So recounts Dave Dinesen, founder, president and chief executive officer of BackCheck, a Vancouver-based firm that conducts pre-employment screening for companies, about one worker his firm was hired checked out.

Many job seekers take liberties with the truth on their résumés to look more impressive to potential employers. In the wake of the recession, and with the competition for jobs getting tougher, more of those on the hunt for employment are succumbing to the temptation of bending the truth - from embellishments to omissions to outright lies - in hopes of landing a job, experts say.

"People that are desperate will do desperate things," Mr. Dinesen said.

From the more than three million résumés his company has scoured over the years, Mr. Dinesen estimates that one in three has raised red flags, whether for false statements, exaggerated claims or important omissions. Since the economy began its downward spiral in September, 2008, he estimates the figure has crept up to about 40 per cent.

Brad Bates, president and founder of recruitment firm Premium Staffing Solutions in Vancouver, said truth bending is especially prevalent in an unstable economy. It happens regardless of age or job level, and most often when people have been out of work for a while, he said.

"Most people aren't doing it necessarily for evil," Mr. Bates said. "It's just because they really want the job."

But employers are onto them, and are digging deeper into the declared backgrounds of applicants, experts say.

"Almost all of our clients are hypervigilant these days in terms of background checks to confirm the validity of the candidate's claims," said Mike Davis, recruitment consultant at Toronto-based recruitment firm Lock Search Group.

The truth stretching usually falls into five areas, pros say: education, experience, responsibilities, work dates and salaries.

Education refers to academic achievement - university degrees but also skill-building courses and professional affiliations. More than 10 per cent of candidates whose backgrounds he's checked exaggerate or falsify education information, Mr. Dinesen said.

The number may be even higher: 20 per cent of résumés have false information about a degree or credential earned, according to a March, 2009, survey from HireRight, which also provides employment background screening.

Candidates may be a course or thesis shy of a degree, but claim to have it to avoid having to explain a gap in their résumé or look better to employers. Experience and responsibilities include what candidates have done during their careers, and the amount of decision-making and supervision involved. Some people say they managed a team of 10 people when they actually had only two reporting directly to them, Mr. Davis said. Or they might claim to be managers when they were actually account representatives or assistant managers, he said.

Work dates are also problematic, said Alan Kearns, founder of Toronto-based career-coaching firm Career Joy. People who are fired, laid off or quit their jobs often leave out portions of their work experience because they don't know how to explain it, he said. Older candidates sometimes leave out the early portion of their careers because they don't want to show their age or have a résumé that appears too stale or lengthy, Mr. Davis said.

As for money matters, many candidates tend to inflate salary and compensation so they can garner more from the next employer, Mr. Davis said.

Mr. Dinesen estimates that on matters related to "employment verification," about 30 per cent of résumés contain embellishments. HireRight's survey found 34 per cent of résumés include discrepancies about previous employment.

"People lie because they're afraid of what the story is or how the story might be interpreted. ... You could not tell the truth, you could tell the story in a different kind of way, or you could plain outright lie. People do all of the above," Career Joy's Mr. Kearns said.

It's easier than ever for companies to catch candidates in a lie.

"We have a big long list of real universities that we know how to interact with, but, just as important, we have a big long list of fake schools and universities and diplomas," Mr. Dinesen said.

Aside from simply calling a school or a reference to check information, the Internet and social media sites are increasingly used as tools to help unearth the truth.

Many exaggerations and fibs come to light when a candidate has made it to the interview process. There, it's all about asking the right questions, said Harold Lenfesty, who runs Toronto mediation firm Upper Canada ADR and has served on the hiring committees of numerous boards. He said asking rigorous, probing questions is critical to finding out if what candidates have claimed on paper matches up with what they have to say during the interview.

As manager of protection and control planning at Hydro One Networks Inc. in Toronto, Aaron Cooperberg regularly interviews engineers, many of whom have studied outside of North America. He said it would be difficult and time-consuming to follow up on the calibre and quality of education at those universities, let alone whether applicants actually obtained the degree they claim.

Instead, he looks at a candidate's employment experience and then asks probing questions to determine their expertise.

"Stated academic achievement is just that: academic," he said. "What really matters takes place during the interview when I challenge the job applicant with ever more difficult technical questions until I obtain a measure of technical acumen. ... Through well-placed questions, I can ascertain whether the applicant is telling the truth or is covering something up."

Getting caught in a lie doesn't always mean it's all over. Mr. Bates said that if a candidate is basically honest but had made a "slight exaggeration," he would find out why but reconsider the candidate for other positions. Mr. Davis said most fabrications are unintentional and can be corrected.

It's the life-sized lies, though, that can ruin a career.

"We're not in the business of educating our clients on ethics," said Danica Keravica, senior associate at Lecours Wolfson, a Toronto-based recruiter of hospitality executives, managers and chefs. "Our job is to source, screen and select on our clients' behalf. Candidates who are dishonest are eliminated from our system altogether, or at least flagged that we're not to represent them."

What's the best defence when you're caught in an offence? Be forthright and professional because it will ultimately earn respect, the experts say.

"Most hiring managers can smell a rat a mile away," said Toronto career coach Randall Craig, author of the career planning book *Personal Balance Sheet*.

"It's better to handle it in a quiet way and come clean and pay the consequences right then and there, than to be living the lie and be found out and possibly fired, with all the public humiliation that goes along with it."

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## **The Best Policy**

### EMPLOYERS

**Look for gaps:** This may indicate a problem with or between jobs.

**Ask rigorous questions:** Hard questions related to skills will reveal whether the candidate has the experience he claims.

**Follow your gut:** If the facts don't add up, question them. If something seems unlikely, it probably is.

**Check references:** Ask to corroborate a candidate's claims, and ask about the reference's position to establish him as legitimate.

**Check credentials:** Did the applicant really graduate? Does she really belong to that professional association? Check credentials yourself, or hire a fact-checker.

**Do a social media check:** Is the applicant's profile on Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn consistent with what's on her résumé?

### JOB SEEKERS

**Be truthful about education:** Don't say you have earned a degree if you have not. But mention the partial education you did undertake toward it.

**Fill in the gaps:** Being honest and forthright about negative experiences can open up the conversation with employers or recruiters. Figure out your story and tell it honestly and confidently.

Use authentic references:

Managers make stronger references than same-level team members, friends and relatives. Be sure references can support your claims.

**Be realistic:** If the job isn't a close fit, think twice about applying rather than embellishing your credentials.

**Be honest:** A lie could follow you for the rest of your career. You're far more credible when you're transparent in your responses. And it earns respect.

Work toward your dream job:

If you're in finance but want to move into marketing, take related courses, and ask to work on related projects. Build up experience by volunteering on the marketing team of a non-profit organization.

- *Suzanne Wintrob*