

The Ethics of Resume Writing

In many cases, ethical crossroads and challenges occur throughout a professional career, but sometimes they may actually present themselves right at the start. When it comes to honestly representing oneself, employing professional ethics should precede actually earning a job. It is estimated that 33% of resume information is misleading, embellished, or blatantly inaccurate, as career seekers “dress up” their resume to improve chances at landing a job. The ideal situation is to have followed the path of a strong candidate and therefore never trip over the ethical line. Most people though, vary in the level of education, academic achievement, public service, work experience, and professional aptitude. Due to the variability and the often known traits of an “ideal” candidate, individuals seeking gainful employment attempt to produce a resume that looks more like the “ideal” than the actual.

According to Harvard Business Review, over 50% of people lie on their resume. Part of the reason is due to the competitiveness of the job world, which ultimately drives unethical activity. The same Harvard article suggested almost 25% of respondents to a career site blog encouraged lying on one’s resume, justifying it with “everyone else is doing it” and “companies lie about job requirements”. In some cases, the information on the resume is mostly true, modified for an improved look and artfully rationalized, or what some consider only lying in a black and white analysis. Consider these types of “rationalized” falsifications:

Claiming certification. I can do the workouts and I know the material, the test was tricky, or I took the preparation workshop and just never took the test – close enough, or what’s the difference between a certificate of participation and a certification anyway?

Claiming a degree. I would have graduated with my degree but the school made it impossible, I was only 15 credits short anyway, or I’ll finish the degree eventually.

Creating a more impressive job title. I did the same work as the manager and half the time I did

their job when they were away. A supervisor and a director are the same thing, right?

Suggesting management or increasing the number of subordinates. I may not have had direct responsibility over them but they certainly relied on me to do their jobs.

Expanding the range of functions you performed. I helped out with a lot of different stuff and could have done it myself if asked to.

Embellishing presentations or authorship. The presentation had people from different areas, it could be considered a national presentation.

Claiming a group’s outcomes as solely your doing. I did the majority of the work, anyway, most of the time they did not carry their weight.

Adapted from (HBR 2006)

Many people take a lie and manipulate it to a level they are comfortable with via the process of rationalization. The reason that it is rationalized in the first place is because it is not truly factual. Suppressing the flaws to a point that is ethically digestible makes it much more palatable for many people, explaining why 50% of people lie on their resume. Some people though, just lie and require little to no constructive justification. They do not care about the fiduciary concept of business relationships, just the access to a position.

The easiest way to determine if the statements are factual and would pass the ethics test is to ask oneself if what is presented is 100% true and could it be validated by a third party audit. Most people though are not interested in presenting a resume that passes the ethical litmus test because it becomes a lesser tool of marketing oneself. Many people realize if they do not pass the resume stage they will not get an interview or even a chance to explain what they have done and what they can offer. A common test of reasonable self-marketing is to have a previous boss evaluate the resume for interpretation. If he or she is a discerning

person and comfortable with the language and statements used on the resume, it is likely not overly embellished and is a fair representation of oneself. Experienced administrators and human resource personnel can often translate resumes and identify areas of question. These areas are often marked to be addressed in the interview or if the resume seems over embellished removed from the pile and filed accordingly in the trash can. Likewise, quality companies will perform due diligence to validate the facts on a resume which could make one look dishonest if things do not match up.

A transparency test or “front page” test is another way to ensure a resume does not cross the line. This test suggests that if a resume were posted as the front page of the company’s newsletter all stakeholders would agree to its contents or if the resume was distributed to all previous bosses and colleagues it would not be viewed as a fictional document or generate laughter. Consider a role reversal. How would you feel about a person you were hiring if they “adjusted” their resume, or what would you think of a colleague if they embellished in the same fashion?

It is recommended when hiring for any position to validate resumes. This not only ensures factual information but also identifies people of questionable integrity. If your resume went through appropriate scrutiny would it pass all fact finding challenges? If it doesn’t, it may make an embellishment look like dishonesty and ensure the job opportunity is lost. Consider the following:

When performing due diligence a company representative will:

- 1) Validate previous company information

- 2) Talk to previous employers and verify titles and responsibilities
- 3) Identify the number of persons managed or supervised
- 4) Require transcripts to verify degrees
- 5) Validate accreditations of schools listed
- 6) Verify certifications and expiration dates
- 7) Evaluate the timeline of the resume and dates worked
- 8) Contact and validate references

If a company applied this evaluation process to your resume would it hold up? In today’s technologically advanced world, fact-finding data is much more efficiently gained and managed. Evaluators may review numerous resumes and simply discard any that come into question, particularly in the current economic environment where employers can be much pickier than in the past. Therefore it makes more sense to use the resume to promote aspects that are factual and relevant.

The reality is, making a fictitious background to look like the ideal candidate will never make one the ideal candidate. Most employers realize the challenges people face and the different opportunities and backgrounds from which they come. They also realize most hires are not “paper perfect” but rather people perfect. The best resume means an interview, not a job. Advertise strengths, show motivation and a willingness to work hard, learn, and cooperate and remember aptitude goes a long way. Whereas dishonest is a certainty – no one wants a person with questionable ethics. ●

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