

## **ARTICLE: CV CHEATS BEWARE: PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYERS COULD BE WATCHING**

More companies are using services that probe candidates' employment histories. In a tight labour market, it can be tempting to hire someone who can start as soon as possible, without doing a thorough check of their references, says Peter Sherwin, New Zealand spokesman for Grant Thornton, which recently published a survey on undiscovered fraud in New Zealand private companies.

Some people are lax when they take someone on. "It's, oh yeah, I know that firm, when can you start?" And some of us may have grown up with the idea that it was fine to "massage the facts" when writing our CV. Once we had our foot in the door, it wouldn't matter any more; we'd just work hard and prove they were right to hire us.

But these days, embroidering details of your employment history is not a smart move. Increasing numbers of companies are using what are called pre-employment background screening organisations – companies that are trained to root out the anomalies in people's employment histories. As a result, you are unlikely to get offered the job – and may suffer some embarrassment as well. If there's a suggestion that you have blatantly lied about a key factor, like your qualifications, it can even lead to police investigation, as in the admittedly extreme case of Immigration Service head Mary Anne Thompson.

James Sutherland, Managing Director of Resumé Check, says New Zealand companies are, like other around the world, taking recruitment more seriously in a market where human capital is so precious.

"They are bringing on an asset to take the business into the future," says Sutherland, whose background is in insurance and risk management. "They want to make sure that what they are buying is going to add value to the company". Sutherland's clients are right across the board, from listed companies to not-for-profits, private sector and government institutions.

What they want to check is: has this person delivered in their previous jobs and what will they deliver in the future? Hence the increasingly common use of psychometric checks and professional reference checking. As well as employment history and qualifications, Sutherland looks at people's integrity and honesty, and financial backgrounds. Have they ever been bankrupt? Perhaps not the best life history for a chief financial officer.

As part of its research, Resumé Check also does global media checks. If a candidate has more negative than positive media reports about their performance, this is noted. Sutherland says the client needs to be aware of anything that might come back to them in the future. "I think companies are seeing human capital as a competitive advantage. At such a high level, you need to make sure of what you are buying" he says.

And a tip for job-seekers: make sure your referees really are fans of yours. When checking references, says Sutherland, quite frequently the referee will say: "They're not that great".

With Kiwi businesses setting up offices overseas and internationals coming to jobs here, Sutherland does about 22 per cent of his work overseas – such as checking references in Britain. In about 22-25 per cent of cases, there is some inconsistency around the qualifications. People may say they have two majors when, in truth, they only have one.

In 30-40 per cent of the cases Resumé Check generally has something to report back. It's usually an inconsistency, possibly a personal grievance or something small, or "it could be a real red flag. They could have been in jail". And Kiwis coming back from high powered jobs overseas tend to over-sell the results they have delivered – something Sutherland finds out about when he calls the referees.

You might assume that background check companies are used just for top management but Sutherland says he is working right across the board, from the receptionist to the general manager for some companies.

Even if the person is reasonably well known to the management, they are still using background check companies. Sutherland says boards don't "want any surprises". That's why there is a procedure in place.

Companies prefer to find out about a problem, rather than have a journalist discover the issue. Be warned about changing your story or reinventing yourself when you go for a new job. "We do have people who come through our system once or twice already and it's a good comparison to what they are saying now," says Sutherland.

The problem in New Zealand, of course, is that if you have blotted your copybook, you can never escape. Peter Ross, Search Principal at executive recruitment firm Sheffield, says "It is pretty hard to hide if you have done things which are untoward".

He doesn't believe an intensive background check is necessary for a director, because, presumably, the industry will know a lot about them. But it is more important for people who have "access to the chequebook", such as chief financial officers.

Ross points out that the problem areas, such as a person's behaviour in the workplace, are often not to be found anywhere on a CV and those are the things that can make someone a poor fit. Do they use bully boy tactics in the office? Do they regularly slope off home at 4.30 to go to a "meeting"?

"We are always digging, if we see someone has written something exaggerated, it immediately puts my antenna up for something else," says Ross. But the consultant is not against people changing their CVs around. In fact, he encourages it, telling candidates to arrange their CV so it reflects their experience relevant to the job in question.

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