

ARTICLE: OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE – IS CV CHEATING REALLY SO RISKY

Given that most of us fudge our resumes to get ahead, is CV cheating really so risky?

Five years ago, before his CV was exposed as a lie, a fraudster tricked his way into the top job at Maori Television. Yet today, the lessons of John Davy have not been fully taken on board by New Zealand bosses and employees. Nearly half of us still fudge our resumes and employers often neglect to confirm basic details in the rush to fill long-standing vacancies.

And overseas, examples of dishonesty on job applications abound. Just last week the Dean of Admissions at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the academic gatekeeper for incoming students, resigned after admitting she had fabricated her own educational credentials.

Giles Burch from the University of Auckland's Business School, says international research shows that up to half of CVs aren't kosher. "Between 20 and 50 percent have exaggerations or lies" says Burch, a senior lecturer in human resource management. "I think it's the blatant lies that are the problem, and people do do it".

John Peebles, who runs headhunting firm John Peebles Associates, says, "You'd be staggered how many people don't get references checked at all and just rely on the old boys' network to get something".

After observing the fallout for his competition (the recruitment firm that soon after he was ousted), Peebles now employs the services of Resume Check, a relatively new firm whose managing director James Sutherland says the international figures for fudged credentials are mirrored here.

"After doing thousands of assignments so far," says Sutherland, "42.6% have come back with some sort of inconsistency or red flag". Red flags have included bad credit histories for people applying for financial roles, undisclosed injuries for physical jobs and criminal convictions.

Sutherland recalls a recent assignment where he was asked to check the background of an employee who had said during the interview process that he'd never been convicted. "He had three pages of convictions!" Minor stuff? "No, major stuff. From theft to using a document with false pretences, but also male assaults female." Sutherland says action was swift: "The person failed to disclose, and subject to that, they were dismissed."

University of Auckland associate professor in law Bill Hodge says that making false declarations during a job interview is often grounds for justifiable dismissal. As Hodge, also an employment arbitrator has said of several such false declarations, "this statement poisons the well of trust and confidence before it even begins to flow".

Fortunately most of the 42.6% of CV's flagged by Sutherland get orange flags – what many would consider merely "selling yourself", but what Sutherland and Peebles call "resume inflation". Sutherland says that omissions and puffery are common – as is exaggeration of past salary. Dates of employment are often fudged to cover time out of the workforce, but Sutherland warns that checking back with prior employers confirms precisely when work started.

"Where were you for six months?" he says of a typical gap. "It could be completely legitimate you could have gone to Fiji for six months on a holiday. But if you can't fill in those gaps, then questions need to be asked". Some job applicants might see puffery as inconsequential, and even Burch admits that most embellishment is not clear-cut lying. "It is borderline, a very grey area. If you're describing being a consultant and put the word 'international' or 'global' in there to make the company appear bigger than it is, is that a lie? Or are you just inflating things a bit?"

However seemingly benign the exaggerations, Burch says that issues of character are raised by fraudulent claims. "If someone's going to distort reality, do they have integrity?"

Beyond moral issues, lives can be put at risk by employing CV cheats. An inquiry is underway at Queensland Cairns Base Hospital after it was discovered that four unqualified junior doctors had been employed to order pathology tests and issue prescriptions.

A Russian woman employed as a nurse had submitted an online medical degree from the Caribbean with her job application, while another could not speak English and was unable to communicate with anyone on the hospital wards.

Closer to home a decade ago Polish fraudster Linda Astor used fraudulent qualifications to secure a position as Nelson-Marlborough's clinical director of mental health. Before being exposed, Astor authorised the release of Les Parr. Parr went on to murder Fiona Maulolo by decapitation, and was later acquitted on grounds of insanity.

For other businesses, the consequences of hiring unqualified staff may not be fatal, but they can still be costly. Peebles, whose firm head-hunts executives earning up to \$8 million says that his business would be in tatters if a conman were to slip through the selection process. "You saw what happened to people in Davy's case. Are they still in business? No. Our reputation is always on the line".

Given the costs, why are background checks such a neglected part of New Zealand Business culture? Sutherland says that while we're catching up – Resume Check now employs five staff, up from just himself a year ago – we're still well behind Australia and the US.

Part of the reason for this, he says, is our low unemployment rate. "Now we've got the lowest employment for the past 30 years, if you believe the papers, and the competitiveness to get the right people on board is significant".

Another explanation is the Privacy Act, a piece of legislation that carefully governs what personal information can be gathered about individuals. Calling references not listed on a CV – even if questions are raised about why an applicant left their last job – can land employers in hot water.

Victoria University law professor Gordon Anderson says that "people are paranoid about the Act, more so than they have to be. Generally, you're supposed to compile information with the knowledge of the person." This paranoia is evident in the disclosure forms that Resume Check asks job applicants to sign. For a deluxe \$1200 background check, the form stretches 16 pages long and covers the gamut of credit, immigration, criminal, and health and employment history. "The Privacy Act is our bible," says Sutherland. "It's there to protect everybody and it's there for a reason."

Hodge says that prospective employees are within their rights to refuse permission for the checks to be conducted – but when this occurs employers are also entitled not to proceed

with the employment process. "Privacy rights can't be used to overwhelm the hiring process." Privacy rights can't be used to overwhelm the hiring process," he says. But the onus is on the employer to ask about any suspected omissions, says Hodge. "You're not obliged to volunteer information. For instance, they have to ask whether you have a criminal record." Which, in light of the Clean Slate Act, raises an interesting loophole about lying. Under the Act, job applicants do not have to disclose criminal convictions if such convictions are minor and more than seven years old.

And more broadly, Hodge says questions unrelated to the job do not demand brutally honest answers. "Do you have a right to lie?" he asks. "You do if the questioner does not have a right to ask, because the question is intended to break the law." Although you might get away with fibbing when a racist boss asks whether you're Maori, you wouldn't be able to with outright lies like those perpetrated by Davy and Astor. But despite being named and shamed here, both have successfully taken their confidence tricks elsewhere. After fleeing the country in 1997, Astor resurfaced in New Hampshire in 2002 after being arrested for shoplifting. She was deported back to Poland. TV1's *Sunday* programme learnt she had found employment two years later in the tow of Prushkow as a senior psychiatrist, and until New Zealand journalists interviewed her bosses they were ignorant of her past.

Meanwhile, Davy, convicted of fraud and deported from New Zealand, was found working in Afghanistan in 2003. He was dismissed after a couple of Kiwis working for the same firm as him showed their boss a page of the *New Zealand Herald*.

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