Become a Resume Lie Detector

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Society of Human Resource Management studies show that 53 percent of job applicants lie on their resumes. Other research has placed the number at between 30 percent and 50 percent, with one 2011 study saying that 80 percent of resumes are, at a minimum, "misleading."

Whatever the accurate statistic, it's clear that resume fabrication—from inflated salaries to embellished job titles to trumped-up education claims—are rampant. And the liars have help: Several websites offer tips for "smart ways" to manipulate or outright fake resume details.

If you're recruiting for an open position using an online job board, many job-seekers will be aware that the more of certain keywords their resumes include, the higher they'll rank on your list of potential candidates. That's all the incentive some of them need to exaggerate their skills and experience. To validate their claims, ask applicants to detail their expertise in an expanded resume, explaining whether they've attained the asserted skills through training courses alone or through on-the-job experience, and when and how they applied the skills in previous positions.

Verifying other information, such as previous employment dates and education, requires old-fashioned legwork: online research to make sure a listed company or university actually exists if you're not familiar with the name, and phone calls to verify employment and graduation dates. (Hundreds of websites offer to supply the "highest-quality custom-replicated diplomas," so don't accept a proffered diploma as irrefutable evidence of a degree.) To make sure an applicant isn't covering an employment gap by claiming to have been self-employed, ask for names and numbers of—and then call—former clients.

A customized application serves as the second means to uncover resume falsehoods. Drafted skillfully, an application can unearth information that a resume won't. Most people, for example, won't volunteer information about a criminal conviction on a resume, but, on an application, are forced either to address the question or leave it blank, which is a red flag in itself.

While a resume typically provides information about dates of employment and may list job responsibilities and achievements, an application can ask for the reasons the candidate left a previous position. An application also can request the names and phone numbers of previous supervisors, whom you then may contact to verify claims made on the resume. You also may get more information from the supervisor than from the previous employer's HR department, where personnel probably are well trained in dispensing no more than "name, rank and serial number."

If you suspect the applicant has falsified information on the resume or the application, or simply may have made an error in the submitted information, don't hesitate to ask for an explanation. But don't accept the response as a truthful representation of the facts without verifying its accuracy.

Hiring someone who has lied on his or her resume can contribute to costly employee turnover, endanger customer relationships, increase the risk of litigation and hurt your company's bottom line. You can avoid those potentially negative consequences by clarifying, verifying and becoming an insightful lie detector.

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