

Doctored CV leads to hiring makeover

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The State Services Commission has tightened hiring procedures in the public sector following an inquiry by the Auditor-General into its recruitment processes.

The inquiry was instigated after it was revealed disgraced former Immigration head Mary Anne Thompson had embellished her CV by claiming a doctorate qualification in “International Politics Economy” from the London School of Economics.

State Services Minister Tony Ryall says the State Services Commission has reviewed its preferred panel of suppliers for executive consultants, and requested reports to confirm the accuracy of candidates’ CVs, including the results of checking educational qualifications and positions held.

Thompson resigned in May last year and is due to appear in the Wellington District Court again next month on fraud charges.

Thompson, however, is not alone in padding out her employment profile.

The number of job candidates embellishing their CVs is on the rise and public and private sector employers need to be judicious in

checking the facts, says security specialist Craig Gubbins.

A former New Zealand Security Intelligence Service officer, Gubbins later managed the Government’s security vetting programme, assessing the trustworthiness and reliability of department chief executives.

He now runs pre-employment screening company Personal Verification.

Gubbins says between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of CVs in New Zealand include fabrications of some kind, and the number is growing as jobs become more scarce.

“As the recession kicks in there is more of a tendency for people to embellish or lie on their CVs because people are desperate to get a job.” And the more senior position a person holds, the less likely it is their former qualifications have been checked.

“There’s a feeling that you only need to check out people on the counter, [when] the real damage is often done higher up.” One of the reasons Thompson was able to get away with claiming to hold a PhD was the qualification was not con-

sidered essential to the positions she applied for; and therefore wasn’t checked.

Thompson was also a known applicant with 14 years’ experience in the public sector and was primarily assessed on work experience.

The Auditor-General, Kevin Brady, criticised this approach in his report.

“An individual having previously worked in the public sector cannot be a reason for not carrying out a proper recruitment process with the appropriate checks,” Brady said.

Gubbins says all candidate qualifications should be checked as a matter of course to confirm the applicant’s integrity.

“A lot of employers like to think they can use their gut instinct to make a decision about whether somebody’s going to be good.

“People spend more going to the AA to get their car checked out if they’re interested in buying than they will getting a basic check done with an employment screening company.”

The false PhD

Mary Anne Thompson’s public-service career began in 1990 with a two-year stint as economic development manager at the Ministry of Maori Affairs.

She progressed to the Treasury, taking various roles over a six-year period, before being appointed Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) policy advisory group director, a position she held from 1998 to 2004. She was acting chief executive from March to June 2004.

According to the Auditor-General’s report, State Services Commissioner Michael Wintringham first

became aware of “an uncertainty” about Thompson’s claim to hold a PhD in 2004, when she applied for the role of DPMC chief executive.

During an interview for the role, a recruitment consultant raised doubts about Thompson’s PhD and asked her to provide proof. Thompson withdrew her application soon afterwards.

Wintringham was aware of the concern around Thompson’s qualification, but told the Office of the Auditor-General that it was important she be satisfied with the recruitment process.

He told the consultant to have coffee with Thompson to “minimise any

outstanding ill feeling” on Thompson’s part. Thompson then applied for and was appointed head of Immigration New Zealand, before any reference checks were made.

Wintringham advised the Department of Labour then chief executive James Buwalda in 2007 of the PhD concerns during a review into immigration decisions made about Thompson’s family members.

In the Auditor-General’s view, Wintringham should have taken the matter further by passing the concerns about Thompson’s PhD on to his successor.