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When it comes to CVs honesty is the best policy

The recent downturn in the economy and the impact this has had on the job market has meant that changing jobs has now become a much more labour intensive process, and competition for new jobs is more fierce than ever. Little wonder, therefore, that CV fraud increases in more challenging economic times. So have you ever fibbed on your CV? Were you found out? What were the consequences? Is there such a thing as acceptable 'white lie'? And what's a big no – no?

Psychologist and author of the book "Happy at Work" Sophie Rowan urges you to re-think your temptation to tell porkys on your CV.

The Apprentice – what NOT to do.....

There was widespread outrage, particularly from industry and HR professionals, when the winner of the BBC's reality programme The Apprentice was found to have lied on his CV. Lee McQueen, 30, beat 15 other candidates to the £100,000 a year job with the multi-millionaire business tycoon, Sir Alan Sugar, after a 12 week selection process. But the recruitment sales manager's victory was marred by the revelation that he had lied on his CV, pretending to have spent two years at university when he only stayed there four months.

When asked why he lied on his CV, Lee admitted that he was insecure about his formal education, and when grilled at interview, he couldn't remember what he had written. 'I don't condone lying, the message is clear to everyone – don't fib on your CV'. So have we taken the repentant winners advice? I think not....

How common is CV fraud?

According to the experts one in four CV's will contain anything from a simple embellishment to an out and out lie. In fact, Employee screening specialists the Risk Advisory Group put the figure even higher. They carried out a study into more than 3,800 CVs submitted by job applicants in 2007, the results of which reveal the rather sad fact that more than 50% of CVs submitted for job applications contain inaccuracies. In the past, employers have been partially responsible for this, by being overly lax when it came to verifying qualifications or reference checking.

However, those days are long gone, and many employers, particularly those in professional services, now undertake the services of specialist agencies to do this checking for them. That means that every fact on your CV from your result in your degree course to the scope of your most recent role can be trawled over by professionals who know what questions to ask to spot the fibbers.

What do people typically lie about?

Well everything really! But by far the most common things to lie about are job titles and length of service. So although Office Manager has of course a more impressive ring to it than Senior Administrator, bigging up your job title might get you into hot water.

Denise Grant, Manager of HR and Office Divisions at Eden Recruitment, in Dublin advises that unless it's the job title on your contract don't use it. 'Even if your job title doesn't fully represent what you do – explain that at interview rather than misrepresent your title, particularly if it involves implying you are more senior than you are'.

Interviewers will pay particularly close attention to the prefix 'Acting' or 'Deputises for....' and they will want to know if this is a formal arrangement and sanctioned by management or have you assumed this de facto promotion yourself based on your own interpretation of your day to day responsibilities?

Salaries are also often exaggerated by up to 50% and this is really an elementary mistake as most employers will request your P60 to set you up on the payroll system – and of course your P60 has your salary details in black and white. So you would be well advised to try and enhance your salary by outlining how you will add value in your new role rather than creating an imaginary salary.

'Surely a little white lie is OK?'

Well, no actually, it's more serious than that. 'Tell the truth and you never have to remember anything'. So said Mark Twain. This good advice is particularly pertinent when it comes to writing your CV. Grant agrees saying 'even the smallest mistruth, for example misrepresenting your hobbies or interests, if discovered, will plant a seed of doubt in your employer's minds, and they will question your overall integrity and honesty'. So instead of nominating yourself Active Member of the City Centre Film Society, just admit you like 'going to the cinema'!

How will I get caught?

As well as the professional checking agencies that are likely to trawl through your CV. Skilled interviewers can spot a fibber a mile off – they'll be looking out for vague or ambiguous answers; contradicting yourself; an obvious mismatch between the information you give in relation to your current role; being unable to remember events in sufficient details; and of course your body language can be a dead giveaway. Slip up on any of these and they all point towards one thing – is the information really true?

And remember, Ireland is but a village – and it would seem to be three and not six degrees of separation that applies here. So when you hear that your neighbour's cousin's ex-girlfriend has applied for a job as a language instructor at your language school and you know she's been sunning herself on a Thai beach for the six months of her career break, and not doing a TEFL course as advertised on her CV, do you put her CV in the yes or no pile?

Mind the Gap.....

and speaking of career breaks and gaps in your CV, how do you get around that? Grant points out that employers would much prefer to see a gap explained honestly. 'It will become more common to see periods of 'job search' listed on your CV given the current climate, and you are much better off being upfront about this than covering it up – an employer may well admire your honesty'.

But what about more sensitive absences, for example stress induced leave, long term sick leave, a stint in rehab? Competency based interviews which are now the norm, are designed to investigate a person's fit for the job, both technically and behaviourally so questions focus primarily on performance.

If you are the right person for the job, and you can prove it through hard and fast examples from your previous

experience, you will there is less focus on extraneous information such as career gaps, and more focus on your capability to do the job competently. This makes the interview a much more level playing field for those with perhaps less conventional career backgrounds.

What happens if I'm found out?

Consequences range from mild embarrassment on the topic of 'member of film society' versus 'going to the cinema' to more pronounced humiliation if you've been put forward for a job by a mutual contact and promoted your pass degree to first class honours. On a more serious note, you may well be disciplined or even fired. In essence, lying on your CV invalidates your working contract – plain and simple.

One story that hit the headlines some years ago was football club Manchester United when they recruited Alison Ryan as their £125,000-a-year head of communications. Less than two weeks after joining the superstar club, Ryan's CV was exposed as a pack of lies and she was sacked. Among her embellishments were a first-class degree from Cambridge, a distinction in her common professional examination and a forged reference. In reality, she had been disbarred by the Bar Council after being charged with nine counts of professional misconduct the previous year.

Suffice to say you won't survive the discovery of CV fraud without a large portion of egg on your chin.

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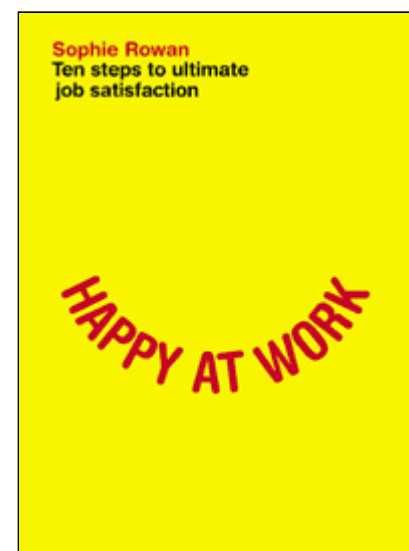
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