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Don't Hire a Liar: who's really telling the truth? writes Valerie Khoo

Many years ago, when I was deputy editor of a women's magazine, a model came into my office to show me her portfolio.

I flicked through the pages, commented positively on her work and then came across a page that featured her on the cover of the French edition of *Elle* magazine.

The cover was lovely. But something wasn't right.

I looked at the issue date: it was a year ago. The model told me she was living in Paris at the time and, indeed, her portfolio boasted some pages of her modelling in other French magazines. But then it hit me. By pure coincidence, I had actually been reading that copy of *Elle* the night before - and this model was definitely not on the cover.

It was only when I quizzed her further that she admitted that her boyfriend had photoshopped the entire thing.

You don't have to be an eager model to resort to this kind of fraudulent activity in an attempt to get jobs. In a competitive job market, some applicants may be tempted to embellish or even lie outright about their experience.

Before you doubt whether much of this goes on, talk to Hosay Mangal, manager and business partner at Verify, a finalist in last year's NSW Telstra Business Awards.

ARE YOU FOR REAL?

Verify provides background checks on candidates and employees, including potential criminal records, credit history, medical, and educational qualifications.

Mangal says that up to 30 per cent of resumes contain outright false information, while up to 80 per cent are likely to have been embellished.

"The most typical issues people exaggerate or lie about are their past employment details," says Mangal.

"For instance, they will exaggerate position title(s), extend their dates of employment and inflate their level of remuneration. Other ones we regularly come across are fake or incomplete qualifications and not omitting details about disclosable criminal record history relevant to the role."

She says 40 per cent of clients are small to medium-sized businesses.

"I am finding a lot more SMEs becoming aware and interested in implementing background checking even though they may have only two to 15 staff," says Mangal.

"Due to the nature of most SME operations being contained within a small number of staff, most are discovering that it is vital that the person taking care of core parts of their business is who they say they are, otherwise they expose themselves to unnecessary risk which is quite closely linked to their personal finances."

Verify performs about 1000 different types of checks each week, and it seems that some job applicants have no problem lying about their achievements.

"(We) recently uncovered a case of a falsified qualification put forward by a candidate for a position with a global pharmaceutical firm – a Bachelor of Applied Science from a university in Queensland," says Mangal.

But the candidate and recruiter were adamant Verify had got it wrong.

''So we asked the candidate to produce their certificate which was forwarded onto the university,'' Mangal says.

"They came back to us and advised that the university seal was in the wrong place, that no vice-chancellor by the name listed on the parchment had worked there and the font used was incorrect.''

This blatantly fraudulent behaviour is even more perplexing considering that permission is sought from candidates to perform background checks.

"Most people think that checks won't be carried out, however ... individuals are slowly coming to realise that they can't fabricate their past to give themselves a competitive edge in the recruitment market," Mangal says.

TAPPED INTO DATABASES

Mangal says that while the checking process may sound like exciting investigative work, much of it is done online, through databases such as CrimTrac.

If you want to check on your job applicants or employees, you can select the specific areas that you want checked.

"Our clients need to ensure that they are only checking items that are relevant to the role and for successful performance in it," says Mangal.

"For example, with an accountant role, one of our clients may request services such as criminal history, credit history, academic qualifications, professional memberships and bankruptcy. Other clients will only request one check."

It's clearly a far more sophisticated approach than simply calling referees included because they are likely to give a glowing testimonial. But while trust is very important in business, it's important to remember that some people don't have a problem abusing that trust.

Mangal tells the story of a client that wanted background checks on all staff. Even though the person who was head of credit had been in the role for year, no one knew of his past.

"He was frogmarched off their premises because he had been in jail for fraud and embezzlement – quite important disclosures for a role managing credit operations!"

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Aaron Dodd is a consultant at Mindset Group www.mindsetgroup.com.au, which provides executive sourcing and recruitment services. Dodd says that while some candidates may fabricate job positions, the most common lies are those claiming an academic qualification.

"I've seen a few fraudulently claimed MBAs and CPAs," says Dodd.

Dodd says that employers or their agents need to be vigilant in verifying claims made by applicants. He says sometimes the problem is not that people fabricate material - but deliberately omit it.

"For example, someone who started a role and then left after only a few months for any reason, will often leave the position out of their CV and will massage the beginning and end dates of other roles to cover it," says Dodd.

"They are usually quite hard to spot. Good reference checking helps, but also some good structured interviewing technique around why they left a role will also uncover."

Dodd also commonly sees people inflate their achievements.

"Late last year Mindset rejected a candidate for a sales position that a client was interested in when their referees provided us with sales figures that were vastly different from the ones she was claiming in her CV and interviews."

Employers should also be wary of applicants who give themselves a promotion.

"This is particularly common as time marches on and candidates gain confidence that five-year-old-plus positions won't be checked,'' Dodd says.

''I once saw a CV where an accountant claimed to have been a CFO at a past company and on questioning references was told he was only the payroll officer when employed there."

Finally, Dodd says to be alert for "weasel words" that convey the impression that they have a qualification without actually having one.

For example: "Attended Melbourne University School of Business 2002-2005, studying economics" means just that. They attended … but they didn't actually graduate!

MINDSET