

RESUME FRAUD: THE TOP 10 LIES

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Patrick Couwenberg appeared to be the obvious choice for a judicial appointment to the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1997. According to his resume, Mr. Couwenberg led an impressive life marked by advanced education, undercover government operations, and combat heroism. He regularly described his experiences in the Vietnam War, during which he said he was awarded a Purple Heart. He claimed that he had attended the prestigious California Institute of Technology on the G.I. Bill, as well as the Loyola Law School and California State University, Los Angeles, where he was awarded a Master's Degree in Psychology. Mr. Couwenberg also claimed that he had been recruited from the Navy to the Army, where he attained the rank of corporal and that he was also recruited by the CIA for covert operations in Southeast Asia between 1968 and 1969 and in Africa in 1984. He also claimed experience in private legal practice, which rounded out this apparently remarkable career.

The only problem with Mr. Couwenberg's representations was that they were nearly all lies.

Mr. Couwenberg was removed from the bench in August of 2001 after extensive public hearings. It was determined that while he did serve in the Navy Reserves, he never served in the Army, in any capacity, nor was he engaged in combat in the Vietnam War and was never awarded a Purple Heart. It was California Polytechnic State University where he was awarded his undergraduate degree rather than the prestigious CalTech (and not on the G.I. Bill). He attended La Verne and Western Law Schools (neither of which were accredited), not Loyola Law School. He never attended Cal State, Los Angeles, and does not, in fact, hold a Master's Degree from any school. The dates he claimed to have studied at Cal State were fabricated to hide the fact that he did not pass the bar exam until his fifth try. CIA officials denied Couwenberg was ever employed by the Agency and the law practice for which Mr. Couwenberg claims to have worked in 1976 does not have a record of him.

It may seem shocking that a high-profile individual in such an important position would be able to fool so many people. After all, not only did Mr. Couwenberg represent these claims in countless casual conversations, his signed Judicial Data Questionnaire included this information. This begs the question; *didn't anyone ever check his background before appointing him as a Superior Court Judge?* The answer, obviously, is no. This example is particularly appalling, since trustworthiness and honesty are important characteristics for judges in the courts of our nation. We expect these traits in our corporate executives as well. Unfortunately, many corporations still rely on the "old boys' network" and the word of a headhunter – relaxing standards when someone comes highly recommended.

As a firm that vets numerous corporate executives, conducts extensive due diligence investigations of corporate directors and management teams, we see an astonishing amount of resume fraud. When executive lies go unchecked, an organization can be tremendously damaged and embarrassed by negative press, lost revenue, loss of reputation and plunging stock prices.

Based upon our experience and extensive research, we have identified the ten most common resume lies and have provided some advice on how to deal with them.

1. Stretching Dates of Employment

Stretching dates of past employment or even inventing jobs to cover real gaps in employment is the most common type of resume fraud. When verifying the facts by contacting prior employers, alarms should sound when the dates of employment given by the applicant do not match the dates of employment in the records of the employer. *What is the applicant hiding?* Typically, the false dates cover anything from an extended stretch of unemployment, to a job from which they were fired to jail time. This is not something to be taken lightly.

2. Inflating Past Accomplishments & Skills

According to his *curriculum vitae*, Warren Cook was Vice President of Government Relations and Special Projects at The Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine. He was once the owner of Sugarloaf/USA ski resort. He was appointed co-chair of Governor John Baldacci's Transition Advisory Council when the Governor took office. Mr. Cook has been recognized as one of Maine's leading business figures. In addition to his impressive professional career, Mr. Cook also earned a Master's Degree from the University of Massachusetts, earned the prestigious Navy Cross for his service in Vietnam, and played on the 1968 U.S. Olympic hockey team.

Only he didn't.

While Mr. Cook's professional career was impressive, he resigned from The Jackson Laboratory after admitting he lied on his resume about receiving the Navy Cross and playing on the 1968 U.S. Olympic hockey team. He later admitted that he also did not receive a Master's Degree from UMass.

Past accomplishments, professional skills, language fluency and proficiency in such areas as computer skills are more difficult for a company to verify than areas like professional and educational histories. As such, applicants often inflate their resumes in these areas. One way past accomplishments can be verified is through media reports. Another way is to speak to former colleagues and managers. As for skill sets, if it is germane to the position, companies may choose to incorporate a test into the application process through which these professional skills and proficiencies can be verified.

3. Enhancing Job Titles & Responsibilities

It is quite common for applicants to tailor a resume to a specific prospective employer's needs. There is a fine line between tailoring a resume to highlight those aspects of the applicant's history that would be most interesting to the potential employer and lying about a former job title or responsibilities at that job. However, this line is often crossed and potential employers should be aware of this. Be sure to confirm positions held and the responsibilities of that position through interviews of colleagues and superiors.

4. Education Exaggeration & Fabricating Degrees

Many high-profile examples of degree fabrication and misstatements about education have surfaced in the media over the past several years. Sandra Baldwin had to resign her position at the head of the US Olympic Committee in 2000 over falsified educational background. Likewise, Laura Callahan, who was hired as a Senior Director in the US Department of Homeland Security, was forced to resign in 2004 when it was revealed that her "degree" was actually from an online diploma mill. A review of 2.6 million job applications in 2001 by ADP revealed that 41% of the applicants lied about their education in some form. Many of the "diploma mills" now provide toll-free phone numbers for their "students" to provide prospective employers – which will provide everything from grades in specific (but fictitious) classes to a fake graduation date and fabricated honors received by the applicant. Prospective employers must identify the school online, rather than calling a number provided to them by the applicant, particularly if the employer does not recognize the school name.

5. Unexplained Gaps & Periods of "Self Employment"

Pay attention to gaps or periods of self-employment on resumes. Have the applicant describe exactly what occurred during this time period and verify the applicant's story. Again, these unexplained gaps could be covering something that would be dangerous for a company to take on – a job that ended very badly for the applicant, or a criminal history. Finally, it is crucial to check for a criminal record for the applicant at each of the addresses where he or she has lived, and especially so when there are unexplained gaps in the applicant's resume.

6. Omitting Past Employment

In 1996, Sunbeam Corp. a home appliance maker based in Boca Raton, Florida, recruited and hired Al "Chainsaw" Dunlap for its Chief Executive position. Two years later, Sunbeam's directors had "lost confidence" in Mr. Dunlap and he was fired. In 2001, while Mr. Dunlap prepared to defend himself in two court cases, one brought by Sunbeam shareholders and one by the S.E.C., both related to accounting fraud. Information became available that Mr. Dunlap had omitted two previous jobs from his resume. Both jobs occurred much earlier in his career – and the most shocking news to Sunbeam is the reason Mr. Dunlap omitted these employers from his resume - he was fired from both of these jobs amid allegations of accounting fraud.

7. Faking Credentials

Some applicants believe that a professional license or membership may boost their chances for obtaining a desired position and simply add them to their resume. In fact, the 2001 ADP study revealed that 23% of the applicants falsified credentials or licenses on their resumes. Most licensing bodies and professional groups have a website and/or a phone number that will verify the applicant's standing with the group. It is important to not only verify whether the applicant is licensed or a member, but also are they currently in good standing? Have they been the subject of any censures or disciplinary actions?

8. Fabricating Reasons for Leaving Previous Job

According to a recent survey by HireRight, 11% of applicants misrepresent the reason for leaving a previous job. In March of 1998, T'Challa Ross was recruited by Robert Half International Inc. as a temporary bookkeeper for Fox Associates Inc., a small Chicago advertising firm. She performed so well that she was hired permanently after 30 days. Ms. Ross then proceeded to take blank checks from her employer, forge signatures, and succeeded in embezzling \$70,688 between the fall of 1998 and the fall of 1999. While this caught her employer off guard, it should not have come as a surprise. Just two months before she began working for Fox Associates, Ms. Ross pled guilty to stealing \$192,873 from a previous employer and was sentenced to (only) four years of probation and 100 hours of community service.

Ms. Ross' background could have been determined by checking her criminal history and by calling her previous employers and inquiring whether she was eligible for rehire. If an employee is not eligible for rehire, an automatic red flag should go up and further inquiry is required.

9. Providing Fraudulent References

Fraud related to references seems to take many different forms. The most common involve the applicant submitting partial or incorrect information related to their references, perhaps in the hope that the potential employer will find it too time consuming to search for the complete information, and therefore not check the reference.

Reference checking is an area, however, where fraud becomes very creative. The applicant may submit a prepared reference letter, which the applicant may have created themselves, on their home computer. It is important, in this case, to reach out to the reference over the phone to verify that the reference wrote the reference letter and ask any additional questions that may apply. Similarly, if the applicant so desires to commit this type of fraud, he or she may pay a service that will provide a phone number for the applicant to submit to a potential employer. When the employer calls the provided phone number, they reach a service, which will verify the applicant's (false) former employment. As with education verifications, it is important to search the internet for the company's main phone number rather than taking a phone number provided by the applicant at face value.

Finally, in a similar vein, the applicant may provide a phone number which points to either a friend or family member, or even to the applicant's own phone number! It never hurts to attempt to verify this provided phone number with the main phone number of the company.

10. Misrepresenting Military Record

Joseph Cafasso was supposed to be a war hero. He claimed to have won the Silver Star for bravery, served in Vietnam and was part of the secret, failed mission to rescue hostages in Iran in 1980. He had spent years as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Special Forces. He had also been an organizer for the presidential campaign of Patrick Buchanan. Mr. Cafasso used his war experience and stories to make prestigious contacts throughout the ranks of the military and the government. Fox News was excited to hire Mr. Cafasso as a consultant to help in its coverage of the fighting in Afghanistan in late 2001.

Four months later, he left the network following allegations that he had overstepped his bounds. Mr. Cafasso had been able to connect Fox News with his high-profile contacts throughout the government. Since so many people at the Pentagon appeared to trust him, Fox News did not feel it was necessary to check his background. Fox News was shocked to find, shortly after Mr. Cafasso's departure, that he was not a war hero at all – in fact, the extent of his military background was 44 days of basic training in 1976.

Military service may be the most difficult part of a resume to verify. The employer needs to contact the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. The turn-around time for obtaining military records on an individual is often twelve weeks. Given the lag time, it is advisable to make employment offers contingent upon the receipt of verifying military records.

When it comes to resumes and employment applications, there is a simple three-step program for potential employers: Verify, Verify and Verify. By doing so, companies can increase the quality of the employee and management pool and decrease potential fraud, waste and abuse in the workplace.

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