

# Résumé fraud getting more tempting

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By JACK KATZANEK  
The Press-Enterprise

As the job market gets tighter, there's often a temptation to put on a résumé that you "went to Stanford" when, actually you once went to a Stanford football game.

Ever more prevalent, experts in the job market say, is the urge to embellish. Job-seekers who once worked on the outer fringes of former employers' executive suites could be lured into suggesting on a résumé that they actually played key parts in that company's success.

Chicago-based corporate headhunters Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. said that much of this fraud gets by human resources screeners simply because the firms don't bother to check the work experience, education and references listed on a résumé. But the ones who do check -- and many firms now use outside consultants for this research -- found more falsehoods or exaggerations in 2008, when the most recent study was conducted.

One of those consultants, Dallas-based **Automatic Data Processing Inc.**, found that 46 percent of all the fact checks they did in 2008 revealed some discrepancies, up from 41 percent in 2007.

Those numbers are probably higher now. There are about 14.8 million unemployed Americans, and more than four in 10 of them have been out of work for six months or longer. Desperate times do lead to desperate measures.

"It is something that is pretty prevalent right now," said Vikita Poindexter, owner of a human resources consulting firm in Temecula. "I try to educate my clients to do full background screening, but you'd be surprised how many don't."

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Poindexter said one of the dodges job applicants are doing now is listing made-up former employers that conveniently are no longer in operation.

"Someone presents a list of past employers, and every one has gone out of business, so there's no way to check? Every one," she said incredulously. "That's a huge red flag."

More Inland Southern California employers seem to be paying more attention to applicants' backgrounds, even many of the small firms.

Thoro Packaging, a Corona firm that makes folding cardboard boxes, uses a consultant to do background checks, depending on the nature of the job, longtime Chief Executive Officer Janet Steiner said. To date, only one fraud has been caught, and it was a person

Thoro had not hired yet.

### **worth checking**

"Whatever we're paying for that service, it's worth it," Steiner said.

There are a couple of levels of screening at San Bernardino-based Arrowhead Credit Union, said Max Arbolida, vice president for employee relations. The résumés are checked in-house by his department, then turned over to an outside consultant, who checks all the past positions, colleges and references.

Also, the applicants whose résumés are not discarded immediately are told that they will be thoroughly combed over.

So far Arbolida said applicants seem to be playing it straight. He's been with Arrowhead for four years, and he's only come across two or three with embellishments. And, he said, that kind of honesty should help make up an employer's mind about who to hire.

"I think in this job market, they should want to be accurate," Arbolida said. "For a financial institution like us, it does matter. So does ethics."

### **'Gray area'**

Jeffery Smith, a professor of ethics at the University of Redlands School of Business, said he hasn't heard of too many outright lies on résumés lately, but embellishments are something he called a "gray area."

"That's like, when someone has been assigned a position on a leadership team, and he uses that to describe himself as 'project leader,' " Smith said. "Those sort of small embellishments are different from things that can be easily verified."

A smart interviewer should be able to determine whether the person actually has done the accomplishments the applicant is touting. But, Smith said, even if the person can fabricate his way into being hired, sometimes it backfires, maybe years later, because these stories can stick with you.

Embellishments are more of a problem for workers in certain industries. Smith said public relations, advertising and entertainment tend to be close-knit industries where the staffs of different firms all know one another. That means, if a person has a habit of inflating titles and accomplishments, the word tends to get around.

Challenger's well-read employment blog adds that the bigger the position, the more likely it will damage a person's career. If the company is large enough, the word will get out that it hired a ranking executive who lied about his college degree. The publicity could kill that person's chance of ever finding a job in the field again.

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### **fact or fiction?**

Here are some of the prevalent ways job applicants invent things to pad their résumés:

**Job titles:** Making or boosting a title in order to command a better salary. One person claimed to be a chief financial officer but held a minor job in the accounting department.

**Education:** Listing a degree from a school not attended; mentioning a school that is not accredited; inflating GPA or embellishing honors. Many claim to be Cal State grads

**Reason for leaving:** Saying you were a victim of a mass downsizing when in reality you were let go for poor performance.

**References:** Some try to pawn off family members as business references, which can backfire when it turns out your uncle actually doesn't think much of you.

Sources: Challenger, Gray & Christmas; Poindexter Consulting

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