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More resumes read like works of fiction

People are prone to embellishment as job market stays tough

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As the uneven job recovery lumbers through its third year, more out-of-work people are embellishing their resumes in hopes of landing a job.

Jason Morris, president of Cleveland-based Background Information Services Inc., says his nationwide enterprise has seen a 6 percent jump this year in the number of people juicing their resumes. The company, founded in 1999, says it processes thousands of resumes annually.

"I've never seen an uptick like this before," says Morris, who's also a board member of the National Association of Professional Background Screeners, based in Durham. "A lot of people have been out of work for a while, and they're sick of getting turned down."

The average duration of unemployment was 19 weeks in August, nearly identical to the average duration for the same time last year, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Among the more common flights of fiction on resumes include expanding dates to conceal long gaps between jobs and boosting previous salaries to influence starting pay. A relatively new trick, Morris says, is claiming to have worked as a ranking member of a failed dot-com, believing there's no way to verify.

The thinking is that enough time has passed since the bubble imploded, and claiming to have an executive position in an entrepreneurial firm carries cachet.

"We simply request they provide a W-2" tax form, Morris says,

No matter how desperate you are, exaggerating achievements is never a good idea, background experts say. Ubiquitous databases and, of course, the Internet have made it easier to verify occupational history. And once a lie is discovered, applicants and even established CEOs are almost always doomed.

This year James Minder was forced to resign as CEO of Smith & Wesson Holding Corp. for failing to disclose that he served 15 years in prison in the 1950s and '60s for a string of armed robberies.

In 2001, former Georgia Tech football coach George O'Leary resigned from Notre Dame's program five days after being hired, admitting he lied about his academic and athletic background. O'Leary claimed to have earned a master's degree in education and to have played college football for three years, but checks into his background showed it wasn't true.

Bill Simms, one-time Charlotte civic leader and former president of Transamerica Life's reinsurance division, tainted an otherwise glowing career after he was forced to admit he lied about winning a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics and having run track with O.J. Simpson at the University of Southern California.

Dan Wilson, owner of Asset Protection Associates in Charlotte, says professionals increasingly are exaggerating on their resumes. His firm recently discovered that a human resources director applying for a position at a company in South Carolina had lied about his academic degree and even his work history.

Often those with criminal records believe concealing the fact they did time is the only way they'll get hired. However, Wilson says that last week a local employer denied employment to a qualified applicant because she lied about two felony drug convictions in the late 1990s.

That company, he says, has hired those with criminal records, but only when the applicant has disclosed circumstances.

His all-time classic creative resume story involved the job applicant who listed "farm work" in his job history.

"He did farm work, all right," says Wilson. "But it was farm work at a prison."

The Honest Approach

- If the application asks if you've been convicted of a crime, admit it, but include an explanatory letter.
- It's better to include stints at part-time jobs and volunteer positions rather than try to veil gaps by expanding dates of full-time employment
- If you were hired using an embellished resume, consider coming clean. If you're caught -- and chances are you will be -- you'll undoubtedly be fired. Fess up, and you'll likely get leniency.

SOURCE: Background Information Services Inc., Asset Protection Associates

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