

White lie or CV fraud?

Honesty is the best policy - except, it seems, when it comes to your CV and that coveted job you're after. The recent spate of high-profile CV fraud cases in the media has highlighted the degree of subjectivity around what constitutes a lie and, ultimately, qualifications fraud.



Greg Brown, Director of Governance, Risk & Compliance of LexisNexis South Africa, provider of solutions including the Refcheck Advanced pre-employment screening tool, said that fraud cases are not always as straightforward and as clear-cut as they may seem.

"A lie doesn't necessarily have to be an outright false statement. Omissions can be just as dishonest. And if an employee did lie, how his employer responded to it is often just as important in upholding the integrity of the organisation," he said.

"An employer has a responsibility to carry out proper checks and balances before offering employment. But applicants should also not be mistaken: if you misrepresent information on your CV it is lying, it is fraud - and, most importantly, it is illegal," advised Brown.

Common misrepresentations

Brown said the most common CV misrepresentations, according to Refcheck Advanced data, are found in the education section of the CV.

Common embellishments include non-existent matric certificates, inflated education, unfinished degrees and even fake degree certificates.

Refcheck Advanced data showed that, in 2014, a quarter of all matric certificates checked through this online verification tool could not be confirmed and there was no record of the candidates having matriculated. One in 15 tertiary qualifications

could not be confirmed due to invalid data, incomplete courses or no record of candidate. One-third of all global qualifications checked through Refcheck Advanced could not be verified.

Other misrepresentations include fake employment certificates, providing incorrect past roles and responsibilities, inflated job titles, not disclosing criminal records, providing false reasons for changing jobs and inflating previous salary figures.

"There are instances where people might feel that it is acceptable to get a little creative with their CVs, because they feel they can actually do the job. They feel they should not be discounted because their skills are still on par with others who have the paperwork in place," said Brown.

Serious consequences

"But while an untruth or omission about your academic or professional qualifications may seem innocuous in the grand scheme of things, it's a high-risk strategy that can backfire badly," cautioned Brown.

Individuals often have to create more lies to cover the initial one, as co-workers ask questions about their backgrounds and they have to perpetuate the false information.

There is also a chance they would have difficulty meeting the expectations set out in the new position if they are not adequately qualified or experienced.

"There's no getting away from the fact that people in South Africa are applying for - and getting - jobs that they aren't qualified for, at the expense of those who are," said Brown.

This becomes even more prevalent the further away from graduation you get. Recruiters assume previous employers would have made the checks and that experience and skills, as demonstrated by an exemplary work track record, carry more weight.

"The employee/employer relationship is one that's built upon trust and, from an employer's point of view, it can be seen as a serious character flaw if an employee lied about something small. The employer may also seek out more information at a later date, especially if he feels the employee is not meeting expectations," said Brown.

He added: "A simple lie could have career-long reputational consequences. You can pretty much wave your employment references goodbye if you're found to have provided false information on your CV. Employees who have lied on their CVs also generally have no legal recourse against their former employers."

Avoiding the pitfalls

Employers must therefore ensure that an Employment Agreement is drawn up that includes a well-drafted clause stating that if an employee was found to misrepresent himself, and this misrepresentation had a material impact on the offer of employment, then that employee can be dismissed.

Certain industries and job functions also require ongoing screening of staff and this should also be considered as a part of the company's standard policies.

"I would urge businesses to dig a little deeper, not to take CVs at face value, and to realise that many times the standard practice of three checks per candidate is simply not enough to detect fraudulent documents," said Brown.

"Technology-based platforms can be instrumental in reducing risk and protecting businesses against qualifications fraud. Make automated and fully managed pre-employment screening part of your standard HR policy, regardless of the seniority or credibility of the applicant," he said.

RefCheck currently services thousands of clients via an online consent driven platform. Its services include verification of tertiary and secondary academic qualifications held by the individual from registered local and international institutions; identity and South African citizenship validation; fraud history checks via the South African Fraud Prevention Services; credit history checks through detailed TransUnion and Experian credit bureau reports; criminal history check via AFISwitch (electronic fingerprint collection and processing); verification of local and international employment history and professional association membership; verification of drivers' licence status; and matching of bank account against an identity number or registration number.

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