

A few months ago, the long list of senior executives found to have faked their résumés got a bit longer, when it was reported that RadioShack Corp. president and CEO David Edmondson had not received two degrees he claimed to have earned years ago—in, of all things, theology and psychology. Edmondson soon publicly acknowledged the falsehood and “resigned,” but not before causing serious damage to the reputations of his company and his board.

An executive's CV is not just a personal and private document—it is, or should be, a testament to the honesty and integrity of the entire company. That—and the potential legal liability if a faked résumé lands the faker in the executive suite—is why it is incumbent on search committees to validate the résumé of every finalist for a senior position. It also behooves every up-and-coming executive to think long and hard before embedding in his CV even a “little white lie” that may later be difficult or impossible to explain—or remove. In the age of Google

How to spot red flags on an executive's CV.

Résumé Fraud Starts at the Top

and archived Web pages, any inconsistency or exaggeration may eventually be brought to light, probably at the least opportune moment.

Do these cautions seem obvious and commonsense? They're not. In checking the backgrounds and reputations of hundreds of business executives and board candidates each year, we find numerous falsehoods both big and “small,” which tend to turn up over and over at certain specific places in the résumés we examine.

Finding those fallacies is one of the things we do for a living. Evaluating their seriousness, and what they say about the character and qualifications of the management or board candidate who tells them, is another matter that we'll delve into below.

Needless to say, many of the candidates we check out for board- and “C”-level corporate positions are scrupulously honest in describing their backgrounds. But we find a surprising number who prove to have been presenting themselves falsely for their whole careers—and whose view seems to be “Catch me if you can.” Want to know how to spot the red flags in executive résumés? Here's a mocked-up résumé that can help you do exactly that.

By James B. Mintz

JAMES B. MINTZ is president of James Mintz Group, an investigative firm headquartered in New York. The Mintz Group's James Rowe, Andrew Melnick, and Peter Lagomarsino assisted in the preparation of this article.

Beware references in a résumé's Employment History to obscure consulting firms—these can sometimes be traced back to the résumé-writer herself. Understandably reluctant to acknowledge a period during which they were unemployed, some executives create phantom companies to fill gaps in résumés between the last, and the next, actual job.

One dead giveaway: when we see a past "employer" on a résumé whose name matches the road where the résumé-writer has a summer house.

insurance and

Sanderson Houlihan

Partner

(1989-1993)

Staff Accountant

(1983-1989)

- Conducted reviews and audits for the firm's clients.
- Compiled and prepared financial statements.

BOARD AFFILIATIONS

SouthCo Systems

(2003-Present)

Blue Plains Partners

(1999-2000)

PROFESSIONAL LICENSING

Certified Public Accountant

INTERESTS

Modern art, Civil War reenactments, competitive table tennis

We find that the end dates on a person's board affiliations can be interesting, like the member who turned out to have suddenly resigned from a board after it began investigating an accounting scandal that later engulfed the company.

And sins of omission are common, like the résumé boasting prominent board memberships going back many years but blithely omitting the recent one at a company that went bankrupt during the candidate's tenure.

While an isolated omission of a board membership is unlikely to derail a candidacy, it can still be worth asking the candidate to explain.

New York Life Insurance Co. discovered recently that one of its deputy general counsels, ten-year company veteran Michael Watson, had never been admitted to practice law. His previous two employers, both prominent law firms, apparently had never checked his credentials to confirm he was really a lawyer.

You no longer have to visit the local courthouse to check—a few minutes in the New York State Office of Court Administration's Internet directory would have revealed the problem.

While résumés don't often lie about hobbies, we still sometimes encounter interesting complexities in a résumé's Interests section. In one case, checking out an executive whose résumé said that he collects vintage automobiles revealed online DMV records indicating that his background included a half-dozen speeding tickets.

Why do so many seemingly successful people lie about their backgrounds? Because they started doing it early in their careers—before they became successful—and then couldn't stop. Let's hear from two who got caught:

Coach O'Leary: "Many years ago, as a young married father . . . [i]n seeking employment, I prepared a résumé that contained inaccuracies. . . . These misstatements were never stricken from my résumé or biographical sketch in later years."

Sandra Baldwin, the first woman to become president of the U.S. Olympic Committee, resigned a day after admitting falsifying her academic credentials: "I should have changed it a long time ago, but once it was published it got paralyzing."

In other words, it takes a good deal of digging to find résumé fraud, because its roots go deep.

And a word of advice for young professionals who aspire to the executive suite: Don't assume that falsehood buried in your résumé will never be caught—will never, one day, blow up in your face. Because, in this age of huge elec-

tronic databases where both facts and falsehoods live forever, trust me: Sooner or later, it probably will.

Should any exaggeration on a résumé be grounds for a job candidate's automatic disqualification? That's something every hiring committee must decide for itself. One useful test we would venture to suggest: Does the lie appear to be a conscious and calculated effort to falsify one's past for the specific purpose of deceiving prospective employers? If so, we'd recommend a thumbs-down vote.

Or is the lie an understandable, arguably forgivable, omission apparently aimed at simplifying and clarifying an otherwise complicated personal and/or professional history? If so—and if an otherwise outstanding candidate, when confronted by the truth, acknowledges the error and provides a satisfactory, credible explanation—we'd probably be inclined to keep her candidacy alive.

At the end of the day, it's the hiring committee's decision whether to take or not take a zero-tolerance approach. For the aspiring job candidate or prospective board member, the best advice we can give is: Don't ever put a hiring committee in the position of having to make that choice. ♦

of a
The
jobs
right
w-
me
The
jobs
scu-