

Lies, damned lies and curriculum vitae

A North East hospital has admitted that its reference for a doctor it wanted rid of did not "tell the whole story". Nick Morrison reports on when a new employee might not be all he is cracked up to be. This article first appeared in the Northern Echo, Wednesday March 3rd 1999

A can of mushy peas was all that lay between one applicant and his dream job. The young man had applied for an engineer's post in the North East citing his BSc from a London university as evidence of his qualifications to do the job.

When the recruitment agency handling the application checked with the university they found there was no record of the young man ever having been a student.

But when the applicant sent his original degree certificate as proof, the university admitted a fire had wiped out many of its records. This young man, it said, must have been one of those unfortunates who had been erased and he would be added to their list of former students straight away.

It seemed to be a case of a job applicant being unfairly accused of exaggerating his qualifications. But then a secretary noticed the degree certificate stated that instead of being a Bachelor of Science, he was a Batchelor of Science, after the noted makers of mushy peas.

Antony Taylor, who runs his own recruitment consultancy in Darlington, said: "It was a very good forgery and had the guy been able to spell he would have been registered with a London university and maybe got a very good job."

But, while making up qualifications may be an extreme form of gilding a CV it seems it is not at all unusual to add a few extra touches.

And far from references giving an accurate picture of an employee's past performance, they frequently skirt around any bad points and focus on what good points remain.



To whom it may concern. Dr Richard Neale who was struck off in Canada after the death of a patient but came to England and secured a post at the Friarage, Northallerton

Richard Neale was able to get a new post in Leicester after persuading his employers at Northallerton's Friarage Hospital to give him a good reference, even though they had serious concerns about his performance and wanted to sack him.



Far left: Sion Jenkins, who invented most of his teaching qualifications, and Billie-Jo, the foster daughter he murdered

Since his move, a flood of patients have come forward claiming they had been left in severe pain after treatment at the hands of the obstetrician who had been Head of Maternity at the Friarage, and he is now facing an investigation by the General Medical Council.

And last year, after Sion Jenkins was convicted of the murder of his foster daughter Billie-Jo, it emerged he had invented most of his qualifications to get his job as a school deputy head teacher.

Mr Taylor, whose firm specialises in headhunting candidates for leading accountancy, legal and engineering firms, said many companies do not follow up references. Leicester Royal Infirmary, for example, doesn't appear to have seriously quizzed Northallerton about the reference until after it had developed concerns about Mr Neale's conduct.

Mr Taylor said: "There is a practice in industry and commerce and even Government circles that people see a written reference and just accept it at face value".

"People talk about using psychometric tests to predict future performance, the one thing you can be sure of is how somebody has performed in the past".

Most job applicants will only ask someone to write them a reference if they know it is going to be reasonably positive but references can be as significant for what they leave out as for what they include.

Mr Taylor said: "People are very reluctant to give somebody a bad reference and they do fear they could find themselves up in court if they do".

"The sort of instance where people are given a good reference where there are misgivings about them is not entirely uncommon". Indeed, the Friarage has conceded that its reference for Mr Neale did not "tell the whole story".

Mr Taylor said just six out of ten references were reasonably close to reality, the rest were highly suspect. But exaggerating can lead to legal problems when an employer realises it has been fooled.

Peter Hanafin, course leader on the MA in Human Resource Management at Teesside University, said there was a growing awareness of the dangers of covering up for an employee's faults.

In one recent case a university, not Teesside, was forced to pay £27,000 in damages after an employee was not all the reference had cracked him up to be.

And many firms are now putting disclaimers on the bottom of their references to avoid responsibility if the employee does not turn out as forecast.

Mr Hanafin said: "There is a tendency to put a bit of gilding on references but the other side is there have been occasions where organisations have been challenged if a reference was not felt to be accurate. And now there is the prospect of litigation, people might be a bit more careful about references".

Employees also face prosecution if they claim to have qualifications they do not have, as well as losing their jobs.

In recent case a local authority appointed a new director of housing who claimed to have a master's degree. When the council belatedly checked, it found out that its new employee had made the degree up and she resigned.

Mr Hanafin said: "It is quite clear that you are supposed to tell the truth and you can actually be prosecuted for not doing it because you have got your wages through false representation".

"There have been a number of occasions where the employing organisation has not just sacked the person but has reported them to the police for fraud. A lot of people don't realise the obligation they are under to be truthful".

But despite the penalties the temptation to lie to get that dream job proves overwhelming for some people.

A survey carried out for the Association of Search and Selection Consultants last year revealed one in four CVs was not to be trusted. Some had failed to mention jail sentences, county court judgements and dismissal due to fraud.

Mr Taylor said: "I know of one individual who went right to the top of a major company. He claimed to have a PhD from Harvard. He wrote books on the back of his degree but we did some research into him and found out his PhD had been obtained for \$20 from a back street in the U.S. He had no academic qualifications at all".

"Unless you are dealing with somebody who knows what they're about and what they're looking for it is very easy to bypass the system and claim qualifications".

Tony Taylor BA (Hons) FIRP FInstSMM has been involved in professional recruitment work for over 25 years and has travelled extensively throughout the world acting on behalf of clients ranging from small, independent companies through to large public corporations and government departments.

He has a particular interest in training and is dedicated to ensuring the highest professional standards are adopted throughout the recruitment industry. He regularly makes presentations on recruitment techniques and employment legislation.

He has appeared on television and radio on many occasions and has published articles on a range of management topics as well as football, (one of his other key interests). A member of The Kennel Club, he has judged gundogs at Championship Shows in the UK and Australia.

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'Labour can do nothing without capital, capital can do nothing without labour, and neither labour nor capital can do anything without the guiding genius of management'

MacKenzie King 1917

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