

Misrepresentation on Resumes

Be completely honest on all parts of your resume. Many people recently have lied to grab an employer's attention. This may work for them at first, but it usually backfires during the interview. Employers may even set this as a trap to see whether or not you will be honest. It can be a very embarrassing moment when the interview is taking place. There are certain things that you can or cannot stretch the truth on. You should never fill in gaps of time to make it look as if you were not unemployed. However, it is okay to leave previous jobs off of your resume. It is your resume and you can put what you want on it. Be sure that what you put on it is honest. One of the worst things to do is Resume Theft. This is when someone takes all of the information from someone else's resume to make theirs look better. This is not only unethical, but can be very damaging for future job opportunities. Remember that the resume and cover letter are only stepping stones to employment and don't guarantee a job. Be honest in sincere in all that you put on your resume.

Sara, a recent graduate, decided that she would write "Loves horseback riding" on her resume because a friend of hers who worked in the company she was applying to tipped her off that the hiring director was an avid horseback rider. She knew enough about horses that she felt she could carry on a brief conversation about them without giving away that she'd never ridden a horse in her life.

Sure enough, Sara got an interview. Her plan worked a little too well, though, when the hiring director spent the majority of the interview asking her questions about horseback riding. When he began asking detailed questions—such as, "What do you think is the best trail in Southern California?"—Sara began to panic, as she couldn't come up with anything to say. At the end of the interview, the man revealed that the only reason he told people in his company about his "interest" was to see how many applicants wrote about their similar, albeit fake, interests just to get an edge. Sara was mortified, and she never heard from the company again.

Stories like these have appeared more frequently in the media lately, particularly regarding those in or applying for high-level or highly technical positions for which competition is fierce. Most often, these stories surround misrepresentation of academic credentials, but more and more often they tell of people padding their duties and accomplishments work they never performed. It is now told to all as a warning against putting anything that's not absolutely true on your resume. This is actually good. If there weren't checks and balances in place, everyone applying for a job would be a valedictorian from Harvard.

This is probably the trickiest area to navigate with regard to resume preparation. That's because a certain amount of creativity is necessary in order to present yourself in the best light, and the difference between creativity and deceitfulness is often hard to detect.

Below are two groups of questions asked fairly often pertaining to misrepresentation:

Group 1:

1. Is it okay if I leave old jobs off of my resume?
2. Is it okay if focus heavily on something that was a fairly small portion of my total responsibilities?
3. Is it okay to say I want to relocate to California, when I'm also considering New Mexico and Las Vegas?
4. Is it okay to only include the school I graduated from, even if I only transferred there my last year?

5. Is it okay to leave off an A.A. degree?
6. Is it okay to say I have family in Wisconsin when only one distant relative lives there?

Group 2:

1. Is it okay to say I prepared numerous proposals, when I only prepared one?
2. Is it okay to say I was laid off when I was actually fired?
3. Is it okay to say I'm fluent in Spanish if I'm only actually semi-proficient?
4. Is it okay to say I was an associate at a firm, when I was actually working on a contract basis?
5. Is it okay to indicate that I'm still employed if my job ended a week ago?
6. Is it okay to say that I worked on intellectual property matters if I didn't?
7. Is it okay to fudge the dates of employment for older jobs to cover a gap?
8. Is it okay if I leave dates off of my resume?

The questions in Group 1 might not seem so different from Group 2. But the answers to the Group 1 questions are all yes, and the answers to the Group 2 questions are all no.

But wait. Isn't leaving 10 years of experience off of your resume more misleading than saying you prepared numerous depositions instead of one? While it may seem so at first glance, the first issue represents an exclusion of information, while the second issue represents an outright lie.

It is never okay to lie. NEVER. It is, however, okay to leave off information. Remember, a resume is a piece (or two) of paper that shows off those qualities that will be most attractive to a potential employer. This means that it's okay not to include certain things. Just because you spent the bulk of your day sending faxes doesn't mean you need to convey that to employers. But you shouldn't pad your job description with things you haven't done.

When evaluating whether something is a misrepresentation, the simple question you need to ask yourself is, "Is this true?" After you've ascertained that everything in your resume and cover letter is true, you then need to make sure that you can talk in expanded detail about each thing you wrote. Nothing is more embarrassing than not being able to discuss what you claim to have worked so hard on, especially if that experience is someone else's.

In a recent article listed on www.abcnews.com, a columnist told of a man who wrote to him about his experience with "resume theft." As a consultant in his industry, he was often asked by companies to review applicants' resumes and interview them. His own resume happened to be available online for people to review his experience. In a brief time period, twice he came face to face with his resume with another person's name on it. His own experiences were just copied and pasted onto these applicants' resumes. In one case, he contacted one of the applicants and proceeded to ask him detailed questions about the experiences, which of course, the applicant could not accurately answer. The applicant finally confessed that he had taken pieces of someone else's resume to beef up his own. Needless to say, the applicant did not get the job, but vowed never to do this again.

We have come across clients who have literally asked us to just go onto the Internet and do just what this applicant did: find a person with a similar background, since they all do the same thing anyway, and copy those experiences. As you can see, this can backfire in the most embarrassing way possible.

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Remember, your resume and cover letter are stepping stones to an interview. If you can't explain something you wrote about without sounding foolish, it shouldn't be there! If, however, you feel confident that you can talk honestly about everything that appears on your materials in an interview, and all of it is 100% true, you can feel confident that you haven't misrepresented yourself.