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No Easy Solution For Lies on a Résumé

By JOANN S. LUBLIN
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You find yourself in the same boat as Marilee Jones, the ousted admissions dean at Massachusetts Institute of Technology because you fudged your résumé many years ago. Should you keep quiet or come clean?

Either way, experts say, you risk career suicide.

"You can't live in my world and cover up stuff" about qualifications, says Peter D. Crist, chief executive of recruiters Crist Associates in Hinsdale, Ill. "At some point in time, you will be found out if you don't come clean," he continues. "It doesn't matter if it was two days ago or 20 years ago."

More employers now conduct background checks for both newly hired and newly promoted staffers. In certain cases, they delve deeply into an individual's past -- and unearth the truth via the Internet.

Michael D. Allison, CEO of **International Business Research**, a Princeton, N.J., corporate-investigations firm, suggests that employees first present their problem as a hypothetical situation to officials in the human-resources department to gauge their reaction.

But Geoff Doyle, a managing director at IPSA International Inc., says savvy HR officials will see through your ruse -- and commence a fresh background check. The Phoenix business-risk consultancy's services include background checks on executives and board members.

Career specialists and investigators say you could also come clean before your employer learns about the lie from someone else, and cite your track record. A voluntary admission of guilt by Ms. Jones might have persuaded M.I.T. to let her quit quietly because she had served the university well for so long, says T. Lee Pomeroy II, president of Executive References LLC, a background-checking firm in New York.


During a routine check before an initial public offering, Mr. Allison discovered that the company's chief executive, who claimed to have a college degree, had in fact dropped out and fled to Canada to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War. The CEO admitted his cover-up and kept his post. Investors decided his falsified academic credentials "had no bearing on his entrepreneurial success," the investigator remembers.

Another tack might be to appeal to your boss's desire to avoid embarrassment over the disclosure.

Especially when fudged résumés involve top officials, many employers fear media coverage about their initial lack of due diligence. "The likelihood is they will let you go quietly into the night," says IPSA's Mr. Doyle.

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