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INFLATED RESUME CAN COME BACK TO HAUNT YOU: EX- FEMA BOSS ONCE WORKED AS ASSISTANT 'TO' THE CITY MANAGER, NOT ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER.

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EDMONTON - So you're perfect for a job as a graphic designer. Your artistry rivals Roy Liechtenstein, but you lack that pesky degree the company wants in its job description. No harm with making one up, right?

Look south to the United States if you needed another reminder that the correct answer to that question is "wrong."

Late last week, already battered by heavy criticism over the Federal Emergency Management Agency's response to the massive disaster caused by hurricane Katrina, then-FEMA director Michael Brown found himself receiving more unwanted attention after his resume was called into question.

Brown denied padding his resume. But FEMA changed his official biography to say he served not as "assistant city manager" but "an assistant to the city manager" with emergency services oversight responsibility in Edmond, Okla., in the 1970s.

A city official in Edmond said the job is more like an intern.

Brown was relieved of his Katrina-related duties last Friday. He resigned his director's post on Monday.

In Alberta, a scandal erupted in 1996 after a controversial deputy health minister was accused of inflating some of her qualifications.

In Saskatchewan, the University of Regina was rocked by its own hiring debacle in 2001 after it was discovered that an assistant professor of software systems engineering had falsely claimed on her resume to be a professional engineer, with a PhD and a BA in engineering. The woman later pleaded guilty to three criminal charges, including one count of defrauding the university for 21/2 years.

"Canada is a very nice country, so if I present myself in a suit and tie and I'm well groomed, there's a tendency to accept you are who you say you are," said Ray Haywood, a director with PricewaterhouseCoopers' investigations and forensic services division.

"In addition to being nice folks, it would never occur to me to lie that I have a degree if I don't have one," Haywood said from his Toronto office. "We have to be aware out there that there are people who do that. Not just for gaining employment, but for business transactions."

Slowly, businesses such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, known best for its accounting and consulting work, are finding companies from all industries increasingly receptive to the background checking services they offer. Think of it as back-up for overtaxed human resources departments.

Bison Security Group, a Calgary-based investigations company with an office in Edmonton, reported a marked increase in the number of people asking for help fact-checking potential employees' resumes in the past three years.

Julie McLean, Bison's senior manager for pre-employment screening, said the reaction from potential clients seems to vary based on previous hiring experience.

There are some rules any potential resume fact-checker must follow under Alberta's privacy laws. For example, a company should have the applicant's permission to contact universities to verify credentials. Criminal background checks, credit checks and polygraphs also are allowed with the person's consent. But the checks should be "reasonable" for the job. So for example, a custodian with no access to sensitive information shouldn't expect to need a credit check.

"As long as you're upfront with the person and don't blind side them, it's reasonable to verify someone's credentials," Tim Chander, of the Alberta Office of Information and Privacy Commissioner, said.

McLean said most people she researches have accurately presented themselves to her clients. I do hundreds of these every month and I would say (there's) maybe half a per cent to one per cent where there's something that isn't quite what they said it was," she said.

The most common fibs, McLean said, fall under the categories of education or professional qualifications.

People have even been so brazen as to apply to PricewaterhouseCoopers with fabricated credentials, such as claiming to be chartered accountants when they are not, Haywood said.

So how do you walk that fine line between marketing yourself and making exaggerated claims?

Cathy Campbell, a professional resume writer and owner of The Resume People in west Edmonton, advises candidates to choose the verbs they use carefully. For example, if you were a member of a committee that developed an award-winning ad campaign, describe your role accurately. Say that you "contributed to the project" as a team member. Don't claim to have "led" or "spearheaded" the initiative.

Campbell said in her experience, people tend to undersell themselves, rather than exaggerate.

Still, in Alberta's booming economy, professional investigators warn that the potential for fakers to slide into jobs can increase if employers aren't careful

"It is red hot, everyone's in a hurry," Haywood said. "In that case, it is important that you have systems in place. Those people have systems, the economy doesn't affect them because that's the way they do business."

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