

The Sunday Times, Pg 3 22 April 2007, Sunday

LYING TO GET A JOB

By: TAN DAWN WEI & CHERYL TAN

Employers here are wising up to tricksters who fabricate details on resumes and fake certs

WHEN restaurant owner Ang Song Kang hired an "executive chef" from China, he thought he was getting the real deal.

After all, the veteran cook claimed he ran a kitchen staffed with more than 20 workers, earned 10,000 yuan (\$1,950) a month and had the certificates to show for it.

But it soon emerged that the maestro was not much chop. He could not heat a hot plate, had no idea how to turn on a stove and even served crabs reeking of urine at the Canton Wok eatery.

"My customers almost wanted to sue me because of the crabs. In the end, he admitted that all he did in the past 10 years was wrap xiao long bao (pork dumplings)," said Mr Ang, who promptly sent the kitchen klutz packing.

Sadly, Mr Ang is not the first boss who has been lied to by prospective employees with more cheek than credentials.

The Straits Times reported last Thursday that Swiss bank Credit Suisse is suing a former worker who supposedly lied about having degrees from prestigious colleges.

Mr Bryan Lim, who was a fund manager, also claimed he was named the best officer cadet in the Singapore Armed Forces during his national service.

Human resource consultants said the problem is not a new one. But more firms are wising up to pre-employment screenings.

"Companies always have problems with people who misrepresent on their CVs. They are just becoming more aware of it," said Mr Philip Johnson, senior consultant at Control Risks, a British risk management consultancy that has just extended its screening division to Singapore.

About 12 to 16 per cent of Singaporean job applicants are not entirely truthful on their curricula vitae or CVs, estimates Mr Wayne Tollemache, the Asia-Pacific executive vice-

president of First Advantage, a United States-based firm specialising in resume detective work.

But that is still better than the 18 to 20 per cent across the Asia-Pacific region, he said.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) caught 374 people who lied to get employment passes and S-Passes last year, well up from the 97 in 2005. More than 60 per cent were for fibs over educational qualifications.

But MOM attributes the increase to better enforcement.

The most common kinds of deceit involve inflating current salaries, faking employment history, embellishing titles and omitting information.

St James Power Station's chief operating officer, Mr Andrew Ing, said job applicants also tend to scrub out details about any criminal records.

Mr Ing once caught a bartender stealing liquor and called the police. That was when he learnt the guy had served time, something he conveniently neglected to declare in his application form.

Deception can range from something as simple as not declaring you have a medical condition like asthma, to forging documents.

Mr Patrick Chan, China executive director for recruitment agency GMP Search International, said two candidates he interviewed for a job at a US computer giant had the same set of certificates and resumes, word for word and even the same typeface. Both were sent packing.

Indian national Nattuveetil Velayudhan Vinodkumar was even more clueless, applying whitener over his wife's name on her university certificate and inking in his name instead.

He spent two months in jail before being repatriated, kissing goodbye to a \$2,600-a-month job at a food firm.

Job applicants lie for a host of reasons – better pay, fear of prejudice or just plain desperation.

A 32-year-old unemployed man with two children, who wanted to be known only as Ashwin, said he has lied about "small things" like getting his friends with impressive job titles to be his referees and bloating his salary by \$300.

"Everybody will want to lie to get a better paying job. I think everyone lies," he said.

But faking it is harder now with more companies adopting pre-employment screenings as a standard practice.

Ms C.K. Goh Rosa, director and country manager of Manpower Staffing Services, said the public service, health, legal and finance sectors are more stringent “due to the sensitivity of their industry”.

Checks come at two levels. A basic one involves verifying CV information, including contacting schools, previous employers and referees.

A high-level probe that checks public records and even international blacklists is usually done for candidates handling money or confidential information.

First Advantage, for example, would charge anything from \$80 for a simple verification exercise to \$500 for a more complete one.

Companies have also made it routine for applicants to submit original documents.

United Overseas Bank has busted a few fakes who could not produce original papers to back information on application forms, such as latest pay slips.

Miss Edlyn Wee, key account manager of global HR consultancy Adecco, said its consultants get suspicious if a resume shows gaps in employment periods, a sudden increase or decrease in pay or a sudden change in roles.

HR personnel also study a candidate’s body language at interviews. “Shifty eyes, whether they fidget when they answer questions, or if the explanation is too smooth or too halting,” said one.

Screenings are now increasingly being done not just for middle to senior management but for every worker – a consequence of the Coke case.

Last year, a secretary at Coca-Cola’s Atlanta base was convicted of stealing a sample of a new Coke product which she tried to sell for a high price.

And more firms are embracing post-employment checks, said First Advantage’s Mr Tollemache.

“They didn’t do the pre-checks, and now realise they should have,” he said.

Those caught cheating could be prosecuted, fined and even jailed, said lawyer Philip Fong of Harry Elias Partnership, although dodgy workers are usually fired.

But not every job seeker tricks up his CV.

As recent business management graduate Cindy Tan, 23, put it: “It’s hard to continue a lie because you have to keep remembering what you lied about and I can’t be constantly doing that.”

Additional reporting by Cheryl Tan

dawntan@sph.com.sg

melodyz@sph.com.sg