

Careers & Leadership -- Work & Life: The Lies We Tell During Job Interviews

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FULL TEXT

Is a job interview really an exercise in deception? Career coaches and researchers who study falsehoods say yes. Even as children we're socialized to tell white lies about the gifts that Grandma brings or how dinner tastes. Job interviews are simply a high-stakes extension of that dynamic, says Robert Feldman, a professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "It's a situation almost designed to encourage lying," he says. Candidates must put their best foot forward, and managers need to sell the job.

Mistruths exist on a spectrum, from slight exaggerations to complete fabrications. Omissions can help to avert potential bias. They can also destroy careers.

Follow along with our fictional job interview below as we dissect the obfuscations, misdirects and boldfaced lies coming from both sides, with analysis drawn from recent academic research and conversations with career experts.

Candidate: Great to meet you. Love that photo on your desk. I just hiked at Yosemite this summer. 1

Interviewer: Tell me more about why you want to work here at New Co.

Candidate: I've wanted to be an associate project manager ever since I was a kid. 2 I've just always been incredibly passionate about widgets. 3

Interviewer: As you know, we're one of the most innovative makers of widgets in the country.

Candidate: Experimentation's in my DNA. In my last job, I was known as the new ideas guy.

Interviewer: Ah, right, you spent two years at Old Co. Why did you end up leaving?

Candidate: I was just ready for a new challenge.

Interviewer: So it was your decision to leave? Even with nothing else lined up?

Candidate: Yup, it just felt like the right moment. 4

Interviewer: I see here 5 that you have experience with foreign languages. That could be helpful with our expansion in South America.

Candidate: Yes, I'm fluent in Spanish, and Python too. 6

Interviewer: Excellent. 7 What questions do you have for me?

Candidate: I'd love to hear more about the culture here at New Co.

Interviewer: We're like family here. Great work-life balance. 8

Candidate: What are the hours like?

Interviewer: Not bad, no nights or weekends really. 9 I mean, we work hard, but we keep it fun.

Candidate: Are there any downsides at all?

Interviewer: Sometimes we just care too much about the mission, I'd say. But it's a small price to pay when you're changing the world. Look, as we get further along here, I have to ask, how much did you make at your last job?

Candidate: About \$100,000. 10

Interviewer: Ah, I don't know if we could match that. But there's tons of opportunities for growth here. You'd move up super fast. 11

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1. One way people deceive is by ingratiation, says Nicolas Roulin, an associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and author of the book "The Psychology of Job Interviews." "This is really about trying to make a connection with the interviewer and appear more likable or similar to the interviewer," he says. People laugh at jokes they don't find funny or twist their own interests to fit what the interviewer likes. This candidate has gone on the occasional weekend hike, but he hasn't visited Yosemite.
 2. Kathryn Minshew, chief executive of careers site the Muse, says candidates frequently mislead when it comes to their expressions of interest. "Perhaps they just actually need a paycheck," she says. But no one's going to confess that if they want to be hired.
 3. Candidates tell two to three lies, on average, in a 10-to-15 minute interview, Dr. Feldman's research finds.
 4. In a 2019 paper from a group of researchers at University of Guelph in Ontario, each of 775 participants surveyed admitted they would exaggerate or conceal at least something in a job interview. Here, the candidate is trying to cover up for a messy back story about his departure.
Fewer people fabricate entire stories than fudge little details. Dr. Roulin estimates that up to 80% of people embellish some experiences while 20% to 30% of people would do things like invent a degree.
 5. Sometimes, a resume is a font of mistruths, like if someone invents a degree or award. But resumes may also be dotted with omissions that are warranted. Ms. Minshew says it's sometimes prudent to remove information like your graduation year or address to prevent bias. You don't want to be passed over for a job because of your age, or the fact that you live in a different city, if you're dedicated to moving.
 6. People tend to inflate language skills or even computer programming skills, Dr. Roulin says. After all, the term "proficient" can be ambiguous.
 7. Dr. Feldman says that there's often a sort of conspiracy going on between the liar and the person who's being lied to: They both want the lie to be true. When that's the case – say, in the case of a compliment – we just accept it, he says. Here, the interviewer is hungry for someone who speaks Spanish, so she buys the candidate's claim of fluency without even attempting to converse with him in the language or asking more about his experience.
 8. "Every interviewer swears that they've got a fabulous corporate culture," says Judson Vaughn, an impression-management consultant and CEO of First Impressions HQ in Atlanta. Companies often cherry-pick the corporate cheerleaders among their ranks to meet with candidates.
 9. It's easy for hiring managers to gloss over the fact that a team's putting in long hours, especially if they're desperate to fill an open role. Ms. Minshew recommends asking very specific questions to try to get a sense of company culture. Queries like, "What were the last two team-bonding activities that were held here?" force concrete answers.
 10. People lie about things that are hard to verify, Dr. Feldman says, and past salaries often fall into that bucket. Still, this is one of those occasions where it might be OK to try to avoid spilling the beans. After all, Ms. Minshew says, there's a reason some states, cities and companies have banned salary-history questions. "Groups that have historically been discriminated against in the workplace are often disadvantaged by questions like this," Ms. Minshew says.
 11. This is a classic fib, Mr. Vaughn says – an interviewer swears folks move up quickly at the company, when there may be scant opportunities to ascend and you'll be stagnant for years.
That lie can backfire on the employer, he says. The disgruntled hire will eventually complain to colleagues, and folks who also haven't gotten a raise or promotion after being made similar promises will feel deflated, realizing they were fed the same lies. Morale will plummet. Ask what percentage of people they've hired have taken a rapid path up the corporate ladder.

Credit: By Rachel Feintzeig

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