

Lying on the job is a fact but dealing with it is tricky

By Amy Joyce, Washington Post | April 9, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Nancy Palazza faced a very unpleasant task. The owner of a firm that places workers in jobs throughout the region, she had received a call from a client saying a worker had lied on a time sheet, claiming 10 extra hours of overtime the client said never happened.

"Now we have to have a conversation with this person," Palazza said.

She will let the worker explain his actions and give him the benefit of the doubt. But if it's clear he lied, Palazza will say, "We can't work with you anymore."

When Palazza finds an employee has lied, she knows she shouldn't personalize it. That usually means she will fire the liar.

Lying in the workplace happens every day: little lies, big lies, white lies, resume lies. How a person handles a lie depends on the type of lie and usually the relationship between the liar and the person lied to. Sometimes, as in the case of Palazza's temporary worker, a lie is clearly wrong. Her company puts people in jobs. If an employee messes up, Palazza's relationship with a client could be ruined. Not good for business.

But in other cases, a lie might be a stretching of the truth or simply not telling the whole story. And in the workplace that happens quite frequently. At what point do people think they should forgive and move on?

Nearly 24 percent of managers say they have fired an employee for dishonesty.

Many lies stem from fudging on resumes. Last month, the chief executive of Radio Shack Corp. resigned after the Fort Worth Star-Telegram found false information on his resume. David Edmondson claimed he had degrees in theology and psychology from Pacific Coast Baptist College in California. The school had no record of the degrees, and Edmondson admitted the information was incorrect.

A study by ResumeDoctor.com last month found that 42.7 percent of resumes contain one or more major inaccuracies. Research staff tried to verify dates of employment, job titles, and education on more than 1,000 resumes. "What's a little ironic, nowadays companies won't give character references. . . . They will confirm and deny dates, job titles and overall duties," said Michael Worthington, cofounder of ResumeDoctor.com. "The things candidates are lying most about are the things you can easily check up on."

Worthington himself has a close friend who, about 15 years ago, in his early twenties, got a job that required a degree. Being young and naive, the friend claimed to have one, though he hadn't finished college. Now this friend is up for a huge promotion after years of rising in the ranks. To get the new job, he has to present his resume to the board. (Worthington's advice: Just leave it off the resume.)

Others feel personally stung when a co-worker or employee is found to have lied. But they sometimes learn they have to let it slide.

Several years ago, Bill Perry was director of public relations for a dot-com start-up. He worked side by side with his employee, a young woman he coached from her first day at the company. The firm was a "pressure cooker," but he felt she would be comfortable enough to tell him about any problems.

One day, she called in sick. When he called her to ask a question, he realized there was little chance she was truly out sick. "You get that sixth sense that someone's just not coming clean," he said. So he asked her about it and she became defensive. "I felt like I was having a conversation with my sister. It turned into a confrontation much more quickly than it should have," he said.

The next day, Perry pulled her into a conference room and confronted her again, realizing she was probably interviewing somewhere else. She opened up, saying she just couldn't handle the frenetic pace.

"Through it all, I just thought it would have been so much better at the outset if she said frankly . . . 'I just wonder whether I can keep going,' " he said. "The lying thing, to me, just kind of doubly hurt. I thought we had the camaraderie. Second, I was just, kind of, if we didn't have that, why didn't she just tell me it wasn't working?"

Still, Perry helped her find a new job. Why? Because even though she lied, he respected her work. And he also acknowledged that he, just that week, had lied to a family member so he could

get out of planning a party. After all this, Perry's guilt got to him, he called the family member, confessed, and helped plan the party.
"We all do this at one time or another."

Office lies

According to a recent survey, 19 percent of workers admit they lie at the office at least once a week. Among the reasons:

- To appease a customer: 26%
- To cover up a failed project, mistake or missed deadline: 13%
- To explain an unexcused absence or late arrival: 8%
- To protect another employee: 8%
- To get another employee in trouble: 5%