

In the job hunt, people do lie, but honesty pays off, study finds

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Honesty pays off, according to a new study of job seekers. When job applicants were warned that a pre-employment test could detect fake responses, they gave more honest answers -- a result that could improve their chances of being hired. Results were published in the human resources journal *Applied HRM Research*.

"People may be tempted to make themselves look as attractive as possible to employers, but honesty is always the best policy, since many pre-employment tests have ways to spot fakers," said Chris Wright, associate professor of psychology at San Francisco State University. "We found that applicants who were warned against faking achieved significantly lower test scores, suggesting that they gave more honest answers and hadn't exaggerated their responses in order to inflate their test results."

The study also found that job applicants who were warned against faking were more likely to be rated as "honest" by the test's [lie detection](#) feature. The findings suggest that a simple warning may curb dishonest responses.

The study focused on tests that collect biographical data about applicants' education, employment experience, skills and attitudes. Employers are increasingly using such pre-employment assessment tools as part of the hiring process, particularly for retail jobs and service sector positions.

Many tests have built-in faking scales that rely on specially-designed questions to detect faking. For example, applicants might be asked to rate their agreement with unrealistic statements, such as "I have never lied," or may be asked the same question in different ways to check the consistency of their answers.

Conducted in a real recruitment setting, the study included 200 participants who were applying for bus operator jobs with a municipal transit agency. Applicants completed a test assessing their attitudes and behaviors related to attendance, safety and customer service. Before the test, half of the applicants received verbal and written warnings, explaining that misrepresenting themselves would be detected by the test and that information about their [honesty](#) would be used in hiring decisions. The remaining candidates took the test without being warned.

"Our findings suggest that some people do embellish their answers on pre-employment tests," Wright said. "However, we also found that warning applicants can be a simple and cost-effective way for employers to influence people to provide honest responses, which will ultimately provide more accurate test results to inform hiring decisions."

More information: "The effect of warning against faking on noncognitive test outcomes: a field study of bus operator applicants" was published in the Winter 2010 issue of the human resources journal *Applied HRM Research*. The paper is available online at: www.xavier.edu/appliedhrmresearch/2010-Winter.html

Provided by San Francisco State University

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