

Strategies for Assessing Exaggeration and Deception by Job Candidates

Summary. – Job candidates predictably distort the way they present their competencies and credentials out of concern for making a favorable impression and wanting to be liked by hiring professionals. These distortions, called social desirability biases, can be unconscious behaviors or they can reflect deliberate deceit. Behavioral clues to assess lying are too generalized to be effectively applied by most people. Rather, we outline a three-part strategy for due diligence on candidates that reduces bad hires resulting from erroneous information. Each component of the three-part strategy can be useful separately, but the components are especially powerful when used in tandem as a system of checks and balances.

It takes more work to tell a lie than it does to tell the truth. You have to not only make up something, but also watch me to make sure I'm believing you.

~Maureen O'Sullivan, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of San Francisco²⁸

Love or hate his more controversial ideas, but the illustrious psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud had a keen understanding of people and their motivations. One of his heuristics is hard to improve upon even today – *the principle that people gravitate towards what makes them feel good and move away from what makes them feel bad*. Experienced behavioral interviewers tend to know this principle well. Candidates typically, though often unwittingly, tell interviewers what is thought those interviewers want to hear. In the process, candidates can hype up characteristics that are thought to make a favorable impression and ignore or outright lie about characteristics that seemingly make an unfavorable one. Actually, we all do this to some degree; a classic principle in social psychology is that people behave in ways that they believe are socially acceptable and desirable when they know others are watching. This is generally known as “social desirability biases.”

According to Paulhus^{24,25}, individuals modify their behavior in two primary ways. First, people can give honest but inflated self-descriptions reflecting a lack of insight and an unconscious bias toward favorable self-portrayal (*self-deception*). This is a variation of social desirability bias. While it is important to have an accurate assessment of candidates' traits and abilities, professionals need to understand that virtually everyone exhibits social desirability biases to some extent. Candidates are simply acting naturally out of a healthy self-image and are expressing a need to be liked and accepted. The second and more serious form of social desirability is what Paulhus refers to as *impression management*. This term applies when people consciously use inflated self- descriptions, faking, or lying due to a hypersensitivity to situational self-presentation demands.

Self-deception and impression management behaviors lead to tainted candidate evaluations. This makes it crucial for hiring professionals to be prepared to address these confounds. This article aims to arm you with such knowledge.

Cues to Possibly Deliberate Deception

Innovative research by Richard Wiseman, University of Hertfordshire, and Maureen O’Sullivan, University of San Francisco, suggests that people are terrible at telling when someone is lying^{8,10,23,39}. For instance, do you think that liars avoid eye contact and fidget a lot? Many people do, but they would be wrong. Good liars maintain more eye contact and do not fidget. People naturally pick up on cues when trying to assess the sincerity of someone, but more often than not people focus on cues that indicate when someone is stressed, not necessarily when they are lying.

So what are some reliable signs that someone is trying to deceive you? Basically, the trick is to look for inconsistencies in the way people are talking. Experts like Wiseman and O’Sullivan note some examples from their research investigating lying in offline situations:

- **Latency in Speech** – there are long pauses between the questions you ask and the answers people give. When someone is lying they may have to think more about keeping details straight and slow their speech or become more hesitant.
- **Poor Fluency** – there is an increased use of short sentences and there may be frequent fluffs or errors in the person’s speech. Liars must work particularly hard to make lies flow smoothly and therefore they tend to speak more rapidly or become tongue-tied.
- **Irregularities in Articulation** – the increased use odd phrases.
- **Rigid Body Language** – lack of movement can also be a clue to untruthfulness.

The idea is that inconsistencies or the changes in delivery are clues that something peculiar or “out of sync” is going on. The clue to the deception is the mismatch between what is being said and what the person seems to be feeling. Of course, none of these signals absolutely guarantee that someone is lying. For instance, latency in speech can be accounted for in other ways, such as candidate nervousness. Furthermore, irregularities in speech and poor fluency may actually indicate that the person possesses heightened levels of creativity. Indeed, articulation and memory can become muddled from the mental interference caused by a creative mind “racing with new ideas¹⁵.” However, the four clues above – especially when they occur in tandem – can alert one to the distinct possibility of deception.

The professionals at 20|20 AssessSM and AETHOS Consulting Group also note other clues. For example, you should always be concerned if someone displays a sense of confusion about him or herself, as well as when a person becomes increasingly more secretive and defensive when discussing a particular topic. Also, a major red flag is when people are simply non-committal – they refuse to give direct answers, stall for time or are evasive in responding, or change their answers over time.

As many interviews these days, especially at the initial stages of candidate evaluation, take

place over the phone or Skype (or other VOIP) the interviewer must mostly rely on verbal clues. Of course this eliminates the possible confusion that interpreting body language can lead to, but at the same time it also puts more pressure on the interviewer to look for inconsistencies in response.

Limitations in Assessing Candidate Truthfulness

Remember that the cues and clues given above are not iron-clad. In fact, reliance on those guidelines alone is an unreliable approach to assessing candidate truthfulness. In contrast, we present below a three-part strategy for completing a best practice due diligence process on candidates. However, it is appropriate to discuss here the notion of whether people can learn to become better “lie detectors.” Many sources claim that they can teach how to detect deception reliably, but the evidence does not generally back up these claims. In the very few cases where training improves detection accuracy, the increase only reaches a few percentage points at most.

More importantly, the training effects obtained are limited to highly specific situations; situations where researchers knew exactly on which nonverbal cues were important to focus. When a researcher has a tape of five people being honest and five people being dishonest, it is possible to train people to spot liars better than they did prior to training (again, a small change at best). But, the training effect is limited to the specific tapes used.

Using different people, in a different context, with different types of lies, the training effects disappear. For the most part, the training effects found do not generalize or apply to different situations. Training does not help because the nonverbal cues associated with deception vary widely from situation-to-situation, person-to-person, the nature of the lie involved, and so on. Overall then, detecting deception is very difficult and with a few exceptions training does not seem to help

Interestingly, the latest research suggests that detectors are born rather than made. Testing thousands of people, only 31 out of 13,000 tested were able to detect deception much better than chance across a variety of situations⁹. These people – termed *wizards* – come from different walks of life and none of them were 100% accurate. Moreover, these wizards appeared to focus on different cues in different situations; they were simply able to read people well. Unfortunately, most of us do not have this gift. Most of us (99.8%) are not able to spot liars and training does enhance our abilities. Therefore, we strongly suggest that professionals do not invest time or money in websites, books, or training programs promising to teach you how to detect deception by evaluating nonverbal behaviors. Investment is better made in understanding and implementing a proven three-part strategy for due diligence on candidates.

A Three-Part Strategy for Due Diligence on Candidates

Although there are no fail-proof methods to determine whether candidates are being deliberately deceitful about themselves and accomplishments during the recruitment process, professionals can implement a process that vets candidate information with a system of checks and balances. We recommend this triangulated approach:



The process begins with an objective assessment such as a 20 | 20 Skills™ screening and selection assessment. This step uncovers important – but sometimes hidden – information about a candidate’s job competencies in the service-hospitality industry. This information can help inform and structure behavioral interviews with candidates. The outcomes and impressions professionals obtain from these interviews are subsequently verified by proper reference checking. We review the nuances of each component of this three-part strategy below.

Part 1: Standardized Assessment

Dating back to the formative efforts of Meehl and Hathaway’s L- and K-scales²¹ for the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Crowne and Marlowe’s Social Desirability scale⁷, and Eysenck and Eysenck L scale¹² through recent instruments like Hays and colleagues’¹³ SDRS-5 and the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding^{24,25}, social scientists have long used “Lie Scales” in an attempt to improve the validity of clinical and survey data. Lie Scales estimate the degree to which a candidate exhibits social desirability biases – the less harmful type that correspond to self-deception behaviors.

These scales are often used in surveys and assessments that gather important self-report data obtained in applied settings, such as medical screening and diagnostics and personnel selection. You will remember that people often unwittingly give overly positive responses to survey and assessment questions out of a healthy self-image and a need to be liked. Furthermore, many survey and assessment respondents believe that their responses given to survey items will not be kept confidential, resulting in possible negative consequences¹ data obtained in applied settings, such as medical screening and diagnostics and personnel selection. You will remember that people often unwittingly give overly positive responses to survey and assessment questions out of a healthy self-image and a need to be liked. Furthermore, many survey and assessment respondents believe that their responses given to survey items will not be kept confidential, resulting in possible negative consequences¹².

Despite the multitude of available Lie scales, research on the concept of social desirability continues to be debated fiercely by social scientists. This is due in part to the fact that measures of social desirability are not static instruments. Synthesizing the conclusions from

the vast literature on “faking” behavior, Hays and colleagues¹³ noted that “individuals vary in their tendency to give socially desirable responses and questions differ in their susceptibility to elicit social desirable responses” (p. 630). Snell and colleagues’ review³⁴ of the social desirability construct also agrees with the theoretical implication that socially desirable responding is partly a *respondent*- and partly a *test item*- characteristic. In other words, Lie Scales are dynamic measures that must take into account the audience responding to the questions that measure social desirability, as well as the content of those questions to the purpose of personnel selection. Too often, these variables are not considered.

This situation has led to the criticism that Lie Scales do not score reliably across subgroups of respondents. For example, one of the better-established findings in social psychology is that women (but not men) show elevated rates of social desirability responding in later life^{26,27}. Another criticism concerns the specificity of test questions on measures of social desirability. It has been argued that Job Desirability is a better predictor of faking than social desirability measures because it captures more aspects of faking²². For example, an item on a social desirability scale might be “I always declare everything at customs.” If people answered “True,” the inference would be that they are trying to present an overly favorable impression. In contrast, an item from Miller’s Job Desirability Scale is “I have read the Ohio State Constitution Article concerning physical ability standards for police officers.” The implication would be that someone who answered “True” to this item is lying, as no such Article of the Ohio State Constitution exists. A measure of job desirability appears *prima facie* to be an improvement, but this approach also has major problems with reliability and widespread applicability of its content.

For these reasons, some assessments develop their own Lie Scales. Likewise, 20 | 20 Skills assessment includes a proprietary Lie Scale that was designed to be relevant for candidates worldwide in the service-hospitality industry. Accordingly, this measure functions well regardless of the test-taker’s age, gender, employment level and country of origin. The 20 | 20 Skills measure of social desirability only aims to evaluate the degree to which a candidate is unwittingly trying to make an overly favorable impression (self-deception). It is not a measure of deliberate deceit per se (impression management).

When 20 | 20 Skills reports are delivered to hiring professionals, candidates’ scores on industry-specific competencies are mathematically adjusted to reflect the candidates’ attempts to artificially inflate the scores. This statistical re-adjustment approach is only possible with state-of-the-art “Item Response Theory (IRT)” statistics. These are the same gold standard statistics used in such well known tests as the GRE, LSAT, and MCAT. As a result, hiring professionals should not expect to find this feature in most organizational assessments, which are traditionally constructed and validated with outdated Classical Test Theory methods.

What are People Likely to “Lie” About on Assessments?

Likelihood of “Lying”	Content of the “Lies”
High <i>“what everyone fudges about”</i>	Courteous behavior and private reactions to stress
Medium <i>“what fewer people fudge about, i.e., moderate scorers on Lie Scales”</i>	Self-esteem and personal competence
Low <i>“what high scorers on Lie Scales fudge about”</i>	Morals and motivation levels

Explaining too much about the content of the 20 | 20 Skills proprietary Lie Scale would undermine its validity, but many professionals are fascinated by the generalities we can share. We learned something new about social desirability when we developed our Lie Scale – namely, individuals seem to focus on certain themes the higher they score on the scale. For example, the illustration above shows that likelihood of an individual “lying” about “their courteous behavior and private reactions to stress” is very high, because nearly everyone positively inflates their responses on these issues.

However, relatively fewer people “lie” about issues related to self-esteem and personal competence. This might be due in part to the fact that these issues are less private and more observable by others. Therefore, the test-taker may have a “gut feeling” that others already know the answer to such questions. However, when test-takers “lie” about these issues, it reflects a higher propensity to exhibit social desirability biases. The least likely issues about which test-takers seem to “lie” concern their “morals and motivation levels.” Yet again, chances are you are dealing with someone exhibiting extreme social desirability biases when positive distortions are observed for these topics.

Beyond Lie Scales, objective assessment provides hiring professionals with detailed information about a candidate’s strengths and weakness across job-related traits and competencies. Assessment can also reveal insights into whether a particular person is likely to be a good “fit” with the company’s culture. IRT statistics can accomplish these evaluations better than other approaches, because IRT yields over all scores as well as highly specific feedback on whether candidates scored in mathematically unusual ways on individual test questions¹⁴.

This level of specificity uncovers hidden strengths and weaknesses that overall test scores

characteristically miss, and this hidden information can be invaluable for helping to inform and structure behavioral interviews with candidates and conversations with the candidate's professional references. Furthermore, IRT-based mathematics yields unbiased scores, so test feedback satisfies legal requirements¹⁴.

Part 2: Structured Interview Process

Decades of research have demonstrated that employment interviews alone have limited validity in predicting job performance^{2,18}, although more recent analyses suggest that the effectiveness for both structured and unstructured interviews may be better than traditionally assumed^{17,20,31}. In accordance with their suspicion of outside information, employers do not trust applicants and give little consideration to the information they provide, because they believe that applicants lie and inflate their attributes.

As we have seen, this is a legitimate concern. However, employers unfortunately rely on superficial physical characteristics in assessing candidates. They refer to their reliance on subtle cues as relying on their "instincts" or "trusting my gut." Other researchers have noted the strong tendency for interviewers to make decisions based on superficial observations. For example, one simulation found interviewers rated applicants more highly if they showed greater amounts of eye contact, head movement and smiling, as well as other non-verbal behavior. Such physical clues accounted for eighty percent of the variance between candidate ratings². Tessler and Sushelsky³⁷ similarly found statistically significant effects for eye contact and social status.

Yet given the litany of potential inaccuracies, one might wonder whether all candidate interviews are subjective and error-prone exercises. Clearly they are not, and we do not imply that all job analyses are rife with inaccuracy. To be sure, most applicants believe the interview is an essential component of the selection process³⁰. Perhaps because almost all organizations use at least one interview in their selection process¹⁶, candidates may assume that assessments made during the interview are related to performance on the job. Social scientists note the pitfalls associated with *unstructured* interviews, but meta-analytic reviews of validity studies unanimously support the superiority of structured interviews⁵.

There is no universal process or definition for structured interviews, but the minimum characteristic of a structured interview involves asking candidates standard questions organized around a set of job requirements. When a structured approach is used, some findings suggest that the outcomes can be as powerful as such proven techniques as ability tests and assessment centers. It is therefore not surprising that some research suggests that candidates view the employment interview as the most suitable measure of relevant abilities³². Smither and colleagues³³ also found that applicants perceived interviews as more job related than other procedures. Similarly, Rynes and Connerley²⁹ found that the interview was perceived to possess high job-relatedness. Schuler³² suggested that selection methods which are perceived as controllable by the candidate, obvious in purpose, providing task relevant information, and offering a means of feedback are considered the most socially-valid or acceptable.

The structured behavioral interview offers all of these components, giving the appearance of job-relatedness. Thus, applicants perceive structured interviews as a mutual exchange of relevant information predictive of future performance and therefore job-related. The most

useful objective assessments provide feedback about candidates that help facilitate this exchange of job-related information¹⁴. So, while objective assessment and behavioral interviewing can be effective when used separately; they are even more powerful when used in conjunction.

Part 3: Reference Checking

Nearly all employers request candidates to provide references, but few employers actually check those references. Professional reference checking firms indicate that roughly half of employers perform some form of reference checking as a routine part of the hiring process^{1,3}. Out of those that check references, many do so simply to confirm their already firm decision to hire a given candidate.

Employers who do not check references give a variety of reasons. Checking references may seem too time-intensive when long-term benefits are ignored. Employers may trust the referrals from friends or current employees, while ignoring risks of perceived favoritism. Some employers want to avoid redundant assessments, and mistakenly believe that reference checks are always duplicative of other assessments. And some employers just do not want to risk uncovering disconfirming evidence about a job applicant to whom they have become emotionally committed.

Reference checking raises legal concerns as well. It is legal to request information about an applicant's past job performance. Reference checkers in general have a qualified immunity against charges of invasion of privacy so long as they restrict their inquiries to job-related issues. Many organizations require applicants to sign a formal waiver that gives reference checkers permission to discuss on-the-job behavior with former employers.

When reference checking is conducted, The Society for Human Resource Management has consistently found that the task is delegated to human resources personnel^{35,36}.

Unfortunately, survey research conducted with human resources specialists who check references has found that many of these individuals do not believe references provide credible information^{6,19}. This perception of limited usefulness may result in reference checking being given a low priority. When reference checking is a low priority, it may not be done, or may be done in a perfunctory and ineffective manner. Unstructured, inconsistent, and unreflective reference checks may not produce useful information. To practitioners who are unfamiliar with best practices, this poor return may seem intrinsic to reference checking as a method.

Clearly then, proper reference checking is *not* a universal hiring practice. This is unfortunate, since proper reference checking has a number of advantages. Direct benefits include making better and more informed hiring decisions, improving job-person match, improving on self-report assessments of training and experience, demonstrating fairness and equal treatment of all job applicants, and sending a message about the high expectations of the employer. Longer term benefits include avoiding the costs of a bad hire and maintaining employee morale by making quality hires.

One of the benefits of using a qualified executive search firm is the ability to tap into their experience and knowledge of many peoples' reputations in their industry. This information is

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often unavailable anywhere else and can be a valuable complement to formal reference checking. A search professional may not know the details of a candidate's work behaviors, but they can often provide valuable input on the cultural fit between a candidate and a hiring company.

To be sure, reference checking experts clarify that a properly conducted reference check is not an informal, gossipy exchange of unsubstantiated opinions about a job applicant. For example, Barada³ stated that "A reference check is an objective evaluation of a candidate's past job performance, based on conversations with people who have actually worked with the candidate within the last five to seven years" (p. 2). Similarly, Andler¹ noted that "The reference check is usually carried out by the hiring manager or employment staff and determines actual competency on the job. This type of check involves an in-depth conversation with someone who knows or has worked with the candidate" (p. 156).

Practically speaking, it is unusual for a candidate to provide professional references with whom they do not have good relations. This is understandable, but it makes it difficult to identify a candidate's "flat-sides" or developmental needs from their references, as people are frequently reluctant to share information that puts a candidate in a negative light. We all have areas of improvement, and this is valuable information for a hiring organization. Again this is where utilizing a qualified and professional search firm can add value to the due diligence process. Effective recruiters have relationships in their industry that allow them to find more balanced references beyond those provided by the candidate themselves.

Rather than reflect poorly on candidates, obtaining balanced references from other sources can actually help candidates. For example, researchers at Cleveland State University made a startling discovery about perceived credibility during the recruiting process. The researchers created two fictitious job candidates, Dave and John, with two identical resumes and two nearly identical letters of reference. The only difference: John's reference letter included the sentence: "Sometimes, John can be difficult to get along with." They sent the letters and resumes out to two different groups of personnel directors. Guess which candidate personnel directors most wanted to interview? It was "difficult-to-get-along-with" John. The researchers concluded that the open and voluntary criticism of John made the praise in the reference letter more believable. As a result, the personnel directors perceived John to be a much stronger candidate. In other words, revealing a less-flattering side to John actually helped sell John.

Building on the above issues, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board prepared a report that listed seven characteristics that set reference checking apart from casual conversation and make it a valid and useful component of the hiring process³⁸. As stated in the report, properly conducted reference checks are:

- **Job-related.** The focus of a reference checking discussion is on an applicant's ability to perform the job.
- **Based on observation of work.** The information provided by a reference must be based on experience observing or working with a job applicant.
- **Focused on specifics.** The discussion must be focused on particular job-related information common to all job applicants to ensure fairness. Skillful probing and

comparing of information ensures that the process produces more than a superficial evaluation.

- **Feasible and efficient.** Because reference checking is focused, it can be conducted quickly. It provides a reasonable return for the small amount of time needed to do it well.
- **Assessments of the applicant.** The information obtained from reference checking may be used to determine whether an applicant will be offered a job. Reference checking procedures therefore are assessments subject to employment regulations, such as the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, and they must conform to accepted professional measurement practice^{14,36}.
- **Legally defensible.** It is necessary for reference checks to meet high professional standards, and reference checkers can meet these standards within the constraints of the law.
- **Part of the hiring process.** The purpose of the reference check is to inform a decision about hiring. The results need to complement other assessments used in that process.

As you can see, proper reference checking is used both to verify information obtained from job applicants, such as facts about previous employment, and to cross-check the candidate's skills and abilities relevant to the position to be filled. There is marked variation in the degree to which employers structure and standardize reference checking. Training in effective reference checking is often not available to those who must conduct it. Increasing attention to structuring reference checking according to best practices and shifting responsibility from human resource personnel to hiring supervisors has the potential to raise the perceived and actual value of reference checking.

Although reference providers are generally willing to disclose factual information about an applicant's employment history, they may need to be persuaded through skillful questioning to discuss sensitive topics or make evaluative judgments. Many reference providers have misconceptions about potential liability associated with providing information about former employees. However, providing reference information need not be avoided—it can be done within the bounds of legality.

Given the state-of-the-art practice and potential of reference checking as an assessment, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board report³⁸ further recommends compliance with five steps:

1. Organizations should require applicants to provide appropriate professional references and make applicants responsible for ensuring that they can be contacted.
2. Organizations should develop and follow a thoughtful reference checking strategy that is an integral part of the hiring process.
3. Organizations should use a consistent reference checking process that treats all applicants fairly, obtains valid and useful information, and follows legal guidelines.
4. Organizations should increase standardization of and training in effective reference checking techniques.

5. Organizations should conduct proper reference checks for each hiring decision.

20|20 Assess and AETHOS Consulting Group have assisted many organizations worldwide with designing and implementing both structured behavioral interviews and structured reference checks, because companies know the critical importance of understanding the psychological and legal nuances of these processes. Two critical take-aways here are (1). Be careful when using a candidate's social media profile(s) or other content (e.g., LinkedIn endorsements or social network size) as part of the due diligence process, as such information is not an effective substitute for a proper reference check; and (2). An easy, useful question in a reference check is to ask a candidate's former supervisor or employer whether the candidate would be *enthusiastically* rehired. This latter question gets at a person's reputation and effectiveness, and is therefore distinct from merely asking whether someone is *eligible* for rehire.

There is no Truth Serum; Only Best Practice Due Diligence

We have taken some time to review the issue surrounding conscious and unconscious candidate deception, but we have taken even more time discussing a three-part strategy aimed to achieve greater due diligence on candidates. This proposed best practice is likely to assess the degree to which a candidate is unwittingly inflating his or her personal characteristics and accomplishments or is even attempting to deliberately deceive hiring professionals.

Each component of the three-part strategy works together: Quality assessments first reveal hidden strengths and weakness related to job performance and "fit" with the company culture, and this information is then explored and clarified with candidates in structured behavioral interviews. The information gleaned from these vetting processes is subsequently cross-checked by proper reference checking. Proper reference checking then provides rich context for further interpreting the information received from objective assessment and structured behavioral interviews.

This complete system of checks and balances can greatly reduce the prospect of making bad hires resulting from erroneous information given by candidates. It is a system that yields tremendous results across 20|20 Assess and AETHOS Consulting Group, and it can also work for you with the proper design, guidance and implementation.

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