

# Little White Lies

By Chere B. Estrin

*“Of course I have a perfectly good reason why I’m late. I was in the shower and the drain clogged up. I couldn’t open the door until the water went down.”*

Face it. We’ve all told them. And any-one who denies it is probably lying. If you’re squirming in your seat, then you know what I’m talking about. ‘Most little white lies and helpful exaggerations that somehow, in a moment of weakness, come tumbling out of your mouth. When it happens, you’re astonished. Looking first to the left and then to the right, you quickly check yourself over to make certain the words did, indeed, emanate from your voice mechanism. But you’re a little trepidatious. “Could that have been me???” you ask yourself. “Me, the straight-shooter, honest to a fault, cherry-tree cutting George Washington clone?” Let me be the first to calm you down: how and why the falsehood originated is anyone’s guess. Least of all, the teller.

In most parts of the country, folks still stretch the truth to gain an edge. Particularly when it comes to getting a job or keeping one. In some instances, people may feel that the truth just wouldn’t seem credible. And so, a tale is told.

The job market according to Charles “Chip” McCreary, president of the Dallas-based search firm Austin McGregor International has five primary categories in which fibs most likely emerge. For the job seeker, those embellishments target vulnerable areas employees are most likely to scrutinize. However, most of these key areas have little or nothing to do with skill level. In fact, some of those areas the employee actually has little or no control. It’s fear of how you may look to the next person that’s of ultimate importance. Particularly if your livelihood is on the line. Tiny little woven webs of deceit promising to haunt you throughout your career start in the job seeking stage.

*“I can’t come to work today. Jerry Garcia died.”*

**1. Compensation:** According to McCreary, compensation is the Number One embellishment. Some people can exaggerate over 100%. However, salary is the one area that is easily checked, either through the former employer, credit reports (in some states pulling a credit report on an applicant is legal), or asking the candidate to produce a pay stub. Huge discrepancies in reported earnings can knock a job seeker right out of the game. They may never know why they didn’t get the job.

*There’s a very good reason why I can’t do your assignment. You’re a paralegal - I’m a trained attorney assistant.”*

**2. Tenure:** On average, paralegals spend between two and three years with the same employer. The tall tale trend now is for those who have spent more than 10 years with one firm to indicate they’ve spent less time with the firm. These job seekers rationalize that an overly long stay reveals a lack of initiative and drive. Others may exaggerate the time they’ve spent with a firm in order to emphasize their staying power.

*“I can’t come to work today. My cousin got kidnapped and I have to go find her “*

**3. Reasons for leaving:** Leaving a firm today is no disgrace. Particularly in this era of downsizing, rightsizing, and simplifying. But lying about why one left might be. Obviously, if you leave your job, the underlying implication is something wasn’t working. Personality conflicts, salary disputes, location, lay-offs, acquisitions, lack of advancement, all rank high on the list for reasons to leave a job. And while the great capsizing of Corporate America has yet to finish, some very capable paralegals refuse to admit to being laid off. Some of the rationale

may lie in the misconception that only the weakest links are laid off. Factors such as lack of work in the department, rising overhead, underutilized associates and severe budget cuts fail to equal the weak link stereotype in the minds of many employees and employers.

*“Dear Employer: I am enclosing my resume for your review. I’m a certified paralegal with Bachelors degree. “*

**4. Age:** The Los Angeles Paralegal Association reports the average age of paralegals is 38. Even with this middle-age statistic supporting them, some paralegals still feel a need to mask their age or deny that they have crossed the line into their fifth or sixth decade. Although it’s illegal to discriminate against employees or job applicants based on age, many employees feel employers draw unfair conclusions about a candidate’s age through logical deduction: looking at the year the candidate graduated college. Some candidates either add a few year’s to graduation to appear younger or leave dates off entirely. While the year you graduated college does not have to appear on the resume, leaving it off is a pretty safe indicator you’re probably over the age of 40. Just how much over 40, of course, is anyone’s guess.

*“For Christmas I gave the senior partners wife two books and a video: “Liar’s Club, ““First Wives Club” and “An Affair to Remember “ And get this - she had me fired!”*

**5. Hierarchy:** Perception is everything and sometimes, whether we want to admit it, perception supersedes truth. Some professionals believe a slight exaggeration of their importance on the organizational chart tips the odds in their favor. Misbelief emerges a “I completed projects for partners” rather than “worked directly with associates.” Sure, it probably makes them sound a little more important, but in fact, they may have completed only a few projects, directly for the partner. Out-and-out exaggeration is the rationale that all projects are completed for the partners. Therefore ... well, you get the picture.

*“Why didn’t I summarize the deposition exhibits? Uh, because they weren’t important?”*

Fibbing on the job renders far more serious consequences than job seekers’ fibs and you would hope, is less likely. Further, employees run a much higher risk of discovery. Relationships in firms are built upon trust which in turn results from seeing colleagues each and every day. Job seekers. On the other hand, practice the art of self deceit believing a little white lie is OK because it’s just to get the job. Besides the rationale goes, if an offer is not forthcoming, they will never see the interviewer again, anyway. Telling a little white lie on the job weakens your position, leads to mistrust, and creates the suspicion that you’re not quite as capable as you were once thought. Even so, I’ll bet you that you and I can probably fill a Martindale Hubbel with the job-related whoppers we have heard over the years.

*“Motion to Compel???? I thought you said, “Get some lotion for Me!”*

There are four key, areas forming the basis for most employee white lies: salary increase rationale; tardiness; absences, and poor performance/on-the-job screw-up. The most commonly known employee white lie for excused absence is told by practically everyone at one time or another’ Unless the fact that you are leaving is well known throughout the firm, who could possibly tell the truth about having a job interview? And, leaving work in the middle of the day when not on firm business is pretty hard to imagine. Standing there dressed in your Sunday best telling your boss you have a root canal scheduled for the entire afternoon takes guts - and lots of them. This of course, accounts for otherwise well-behaved employees changing into their go-to-meetin’ suits in strange bathrooms; front seats of cars, and empty offices. Finally, you haven’t lived until you’ve tried putting on a new pair of panty-hose while squashed in the driver’s seat of a Miata.

*“You mean when he says, “Make sure this gets filed, “ he doesn’t mean in a drawer????”*

Reasons for tardiness seem to hold the record for the most imaginative stories. Telling your employer that you’re just running late offers no

real acceptable excuse and causes you to appear somewhat irresponsible. Running late because a tire fell off your car while in the fast lane of rush-hour traffic, now that might get you somewhere. It provides an interesting story coupled with empathy (simply everyone has a similar story) and might even illicit genuine concern. It's a beauty.

Telling little white lies and helpful exaggerations is one of those skills no one wants to admit they have. I know of no one who willingly steps up to the issue. Even though there really is an art to it. Be very clear that we're not talking about out-and-out lies, harmful and shameful untruths. Nor is it this author's intent to either support a white lie nor admonish you for telling one. White lies we generally told without malice and generally in an effort to protect. Remember as a child when you walked in on your parents while they were arguing and asked, "What's wrong," to be met with "Nothing"? That's a white lie.

But no one wants to fib, exaggerate, or even lie by omission. Even when your parents probably told you that from time to time it's okay to tell a little white lie. And to be truthful 100% of the time is an admirable goal but one that in all likelihood is unachievable. It's a tough scene to be caught in this dilemma which is all about slightly tarnished morality. So while little white lies and helpful exaggerations will probably always permeate our working environment, perhaps the only thing to do may be to choose wisely the white lie that is told or the exaggeration explored. But it is this author's opinion that the best and wisest thing to do is to stick to the truth no matter what.

"I read an interesting article yesterday about a female baby whale rescued by marine biologists. The recovering whale, it was reported was doing well and gaining about a half-pound every three hours. I knew exactly how she felt. "

Well, okay, maybe.

\*\*All examples used in this article are taken from real stories.

*Chere B. Estrin is the President of The Estrin Organization, a Los Angeles and Orange County based legal staffing company. She has written five books on paralegal careers and is a columnist for Legal Assistant Today magazine. Her latest books, Paralegal Career Guide Third Edition and The Complete Guide to Landing the Perfect Paralegal Position (PESI) are due in bookstores in April, 1999. She can be reached at [estrin@estrin.com](mailto:estrin@estrin.com) ©C.B. Estrin.*