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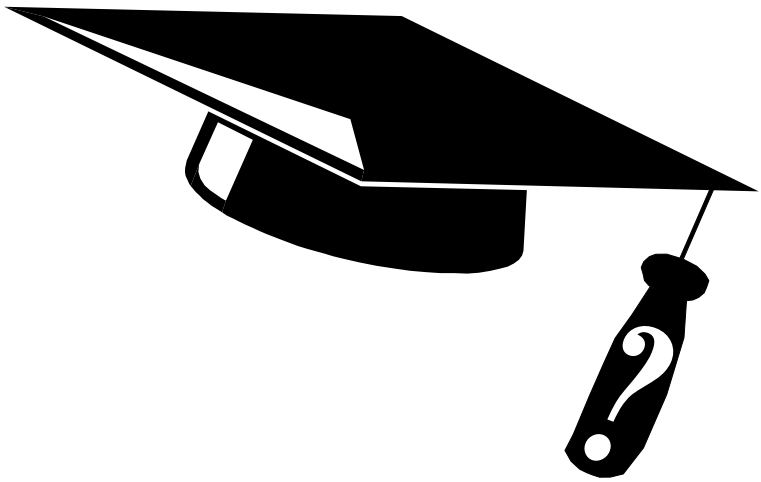
FTC FACTS for Business

Avoid Fake-Degree Burns By Researching Academic Credentials



If you're a hiring manager or human resources professional, chances are you review applications and resumes from people who want to work for your organization or who want to be promoted. Some applicants may list credentials — like a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree, or a professional certification — that sound credible, but in fact, were not earned through a legitimate course of study at an accredited institution.

Federal officials caution that some people are buying phony credentials from "diploma mills" — companies that sell "degrees" or certificates on the Internet without requiring the buyer to do anything more than pay a fee. Most diploma mills charge a flat fee, require little course work, if any, and award a degree based solely on "work or life experience."

According to officials from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Department of Education, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) bogus credentials can compromise your credibility — and your organization's. You could place an unqualified person in a position of responsibility, leaving your organization liable if the employee's actions harm someone. You could hire a person who is dishonest in other ways, exposing your organization and colleagues to potential damage. And if the bogus degrees are brought to light, you risk embarrassment.

The agencies have teamed up, putting new tools in place to help you weed out bogus academic credentials and insure the integrity of your hiring process.

AUTHENTICATED U.S. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION GPO

Tell-tale Signs of a Bogus Degree

Although it's not always easy to tell if academic credentials are from an accredited institution, the federal officials say there are clues to help you spot questionable credentials on a resume or application. Look for:

Out of Sequence Degrees. When you review education claims, you expect to see degrees earned in a traditional progression — high school, followed by bachelor's, master's, and doctoral or other advanced degrees. If an applicant claims a master's or doctoral degree, but no bachelor's degree — or if the applicant claims a college degree, but no high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) diploma, consider it a red flag, and a likely sign of a diploma mill.

Quickie Degrees. It generally takes time to earn a college or advanced degree — three to four years for an undergraduate degree, one or two years for a master's degree, and even longer to earn a doctorate. A degree earned in a very short time, or several degrees listed for the same year, are warning signs for the hiring official or the person doing the preliminary screening.

Degrees From Schools in Locations Different From the Applicant's Job or Home. If the applicant worked full-time while attending school, check the locations of the job and the educational institution. If the applicant didn't live where he went to school, check to see if the degree is from an accredited distance learning institution, using the steps described under 'Checking Out Academic Credentials.' If the degree is not from a legitimate, accredited distance learning institution, it may be from a diploma mill.

Sound-Alike Names. Some diploma mills use names that sound or look like those of well-known colleges or universities. If the institution has a name similar to a well-known school, but is located in a different state, check on it. Should you come across a degree from an institution with a prestigious-sounding foreign name, that calls for some homework, too. Researching the legitimacy of foreign schools can be a challenge, but consider it a warning sign if an applicant claims a degree from a country where she never lived.

Checking Out Academic Credentials

Federal officials recommend that you always check academic credentials, even when the school they're from is well-known. Some applicants may falsify information about their academic backgrounds rather than about their work history, possibly because employers are less likely to check with schools for verification or to require academic transcripts.

Here's how to verify academic credentials:

1. **Contact the school.** Most college registrars will confirm dates of attendance and graduation, as well as degrees awarded and majors, upon request. If the applicant gives permission, they may provide a certified academic transcript. If you aren't familiar with the school, don't stop your research just because someone answers your questions on the phone or responds with a letter. Some diploma mills offer a "verification service" that will send a phony transcript to a prospective employer who calls.

2. **Research the school on the Internet.** Check to see if the school is accredited by a recognized agency. Colleges and universities accredited by legitimate agencies generally undergo a rigorous review of the quality of their educational programs. If a school has been accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, it's probably legitimate. Many diploma mills claim to be "accredited," but the accreditation is from a bogus, but official-sounding, agency they invented.

You can use the Internet to check if a school is accredited by a legitimate organization at a new database of accredited academic institutions, posted by the U.S. Department of Education at www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation. (There are a few legitimate institutions that have not pursued accreditation.)

To find out if an accrediting agency is legitimate, check the list of recognized national and regional accrediting agencies maintained by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation at www.chea.org.

Look at the school's website. Although it is prudent to check out the school on the Internet, it's not always easy to pick out a diploma mill based on a quick scan of its site. Some diploma mills have slick websites, and a "dot-edu" Web address doesn't guarantee legitimacy. Nevertheless, the website can be a source of information. Indeed, federal officials say it's probably a diploma mill if:

- tuition is charged on a per-degree basis, rather than per credit, course, or semester
- there are few or unspecified degree requirements, or none at all
- the emphasis is on degrees for work or life experience, and
- the school is relatively new, or has recently changed its name.

Check other resources. There is no comprehensive list of diploma mills on the Web because new phony credentialing sources arise all the time. However, the Oregon Student Assistance Commission's Office of Degree Authorization maintains a list of organizations it has identified as diploma mills at www.osac.state.or.us/oda. Another way to check up on a school is to call the registrar of a local college or university and ask if it would accept transfer credits from the school you are researching.

3. **Ask the applicant for proof of the degree and the school's accreditation.** If you don't get satisfactory answers from the school itself and the accreditation sites on the Web, ask the applicant for proof of the degree, including a certified transcipt, and the school's accreditation. Ultimately, it's up to the applicant to show that he earned his credentials from a legitimate institution.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

OPM oversees the federal work force and provides the American public with up-to-date employment information. OPM also supports U.S. agencies with personnel services and policy leadership including staffing tools, guidance on labor-management relations and programs to improve work force performance.

The U.S. Department of Education establishes federal policy and administers and coordinates most federal assistance to education. It assists the president in executing his education policies for the nation and in implementing laws enacted by Congress. The Department's mission is to serve America's students—to ensure that all have equal access to education and to promote excellence in our nation's schools.

The National Small Business Ombudsman and 10 Regional Fairness Boards collect comments from small businesses about federal compliance and enforcement activities. Each year, the Ombudsman evaluates the conduct of these activities and rates each agency's responsiveness to small businesses. Small businesses can comment to the Ombudsman without fear of reprisal. To comment, call toll-free 1-888-REGFAIR (1-888-734-3247) or go to www.sba.gov/ombudsman.

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