
Ethics and the Job Search



**Office of
Career Development**
Vassar College

As a job seeker, you may feel as if you are waging a “me against the world” battle in which you are pitted against recruiters, interviewers, and other job hunters in a fight for the ultimate prize: a job. The danger of this attitude is that it tends to promote unethical behavior, both intentional and not. The job seeker may find it extremely difficult to distinguish between ethical and unethical conduct or to see the real consequences of unethical actions. Ethical decisions will result, in general, in a positive long-term situation. The job hunter who makes decisions based on ethical concerns retains integrity, benefits others, and is more likely to make informed decisions. This guide is designed to provide a basic look at some of the major ethical dilemmas faced by job hunters and to discuss appropriate options to resolve these situations.

In following the guidelines discussed here, you should recognize that (a) your actions have potentially far-reaching consequences and may have serious effects on other people; (b) unethical behavior tends to come back to haunt you; and (c) you have many alternative courses of action. Don't be afraid to take enough time to weigh all the options in order to make an informed, ethical decision.

Ethical Dilemma #1: What is lying? Is it okay to “exaggerate” on my resume or during an interview?

Attitudes on creative resume writing and interviewing vary widely. Obviously, the point of a resume or a response to a direct question is to highlight valuable experience and to show a potential employer that you have the skills sought. Many students find themselves trying to dress up a series of lifeguard jobs with descriptions like “aquatic recreation management supervisor,” or citing supervisory experience that boils down to a lengthy babysitting career. Is this okay? Where do you draw the line between explaining relevant skills from unlikely jobs, and downright misrepresentation?

First of all, lying is never okay, ever. Lying is what you do when you put a GPA on our resume that is not the GPA you have earned, making up jobs you didn't hold, or falsifying recommendation letters. In case the ethical unacceptability of these actions does not seem obvious, think of it this way: Your resume does not get you a job, it gets you an interview. If you get an interview based on a fictional job experience, you will eventually be caught in the lie in an interviewing question. If you do, in fact, manage to bluff your way through the

interview and are hired, you will eventually run into a situation where your employer will expect you to have substantive experience in a field you know little about. It doesn't pay. Sooner or later, you will be caught in the lie. At the very least, you will lose your credibility, if not your job.

What do you do if your work history looks more like Mel's Diner than Executive Dining Room? You don't have to resort to lying to create a winning resume. Consult resume-writing guides or visit with a Career Counselor or Career Assistant for suggestions on ways to highlight unlikely or unusual experiences. Volunteer work, fieldwork, significant extra-curricular activities, and even coursework can be included in a section called “relevant experience” to reveal a sustained interest or commitment which makes up for a dearth of paid employment.

There are also many ways of bringing out the strong points in a less-than-flawless academic record. For example, a resume might include “GPA in major,” a description of relevant coursework, (particularly if your major is not directly related to the field in which you are job hunting) or a brief description of a thesis or project. *(over)*

In the interviewing book *Sweaty Palms*, author Anthony Medley states that honesty rests on three things: truth, consistency, and candor. Honesty as an interviewee is important for several reasons. Getting “caught” lying is an obvious danger, but ethical behavior goes beyond the threat of reprisal. Your interviewer is trying to determine whether you fit his or her needs as an employee in terms of skills, interests, background, temperament, etc. If you misrepresent yourself on any of these counts, you may wind up with a job that you are incapable of performing. Moreover, even exaggeration can be risky, since subsequent interviews, reference checks, or deeper inquiry can reveal the breach of truth.

This does not mean that you cannot prove to a potential employer that you would be a great financial analyst despite the fact that you haven’t taken math since high school, or that you are ideally suited to publishing regardless of your lack of experience. As in resume writing, interviewing successfully depends on being able to extract relevant material from your background and to bring skills, experiences, etc., to the interviewer’s attention. For example, questions like “Do you have supervisory experience?” can give you a chance to describe jobs in which you learned a lot from your own supervisor and thus gained insight into the qualities of a successful manager.

You can smoothly bypass any background questions in which you feel your answers are

inadequate by assuring the interviewer of your ability to learn and adapt, perhaps citing unrelated past work experiences where you have excelled. It is okay to try to convince the interviewer that you have what they are looking for, but you shouldn’t lie in the process.

A final word on lying: if you have a past experience about which you are uncomfortable, a GPA which embarrasses you, or anything else you would rather not discuss, don’t try to turn it into a resume enhancer or distort it during an interview. Leave it out—this is your prerogative.

Ethical Dilemma #2: Is it acceptable to interview “just for experience?”

What do you do when you are not interested in working for agency X but think that interviewing with a “real” interviewer will be valuable practice as you prepare for meeting with agency Y next week?

First, you must examine the potential consequences of interviewing for a position “just for experience.” At the very least, you are wasting the interviewer’s time and the money involved in the interview visit. More seriously, you are taking an interview slot that might be filled by a student with a strong interest in working for agency X. There are times, of course, when you know little about the position or the firm and think that an interview with low stakes might be good practice. Many such interviews result in a student’s introduction to a new

field or a company in which s/he becomes interested. The key in evaluating whether or not you should sign up for an “experience” interview is to ask yourself (a) Would I ever consider working for this company or taking the position in question? (b) Am I taking a contested spot in a full interview schedule? (c) What are my other options for gaining interview experience?

If the answer to (a) is no, you should not interview for that position. If the answer to (b) is yes, you should only interview if you have some interest in the position. In response to question (c), you can read interview books, arrange informational interviews to speak with alumnae/i and others who work in your field of interest, and sign up for a mock interview with a Career Development Office staff member.

A related question arises when you have been interviewing with a given company and have decided you are no longer interested in the position. What do you do when they offer to pay your way for another round of interviews?

Obviously, if you have already accepted a different offer, you should thank them but decline politely and hope that the company will retain a favorable impression of your candidacy for the future. Likewise, if you have determined that this is a position for which you have absolutely no desire, the ethical route is to withdraw your

candidacy, allowing the firm to use its resources to interview someone truly interested in the position.

In some cases, however, this may be an opportunity for you to see for yourself if the position is right for you. An on-site interview is probably the best way for you, as a job-shopper, to determine whether or not you would enjoy the work, the atmosphere, and the people in a given job. It is also a chance for you to check out the location, a deciding factor in many job hunts. Thus, if you are wavering in your employment decisions, a paid on-site interview is an excellent opportunity.

In the long run, to make an ethical decision about interviewing, you must weigh your priorities and your interests and take into account how your decisions affect others.

Ethical Dilemma #3: Is it okay to accept a job offer and then retract it later if something “better” comes along?

The answer to this question is quite straightforward: No. Retracting an accepted employment offer is perhaps the cardinal sin of job-hunting. Consequences are many: not only is a retraction a major breach of integrity, but the organization involved will hold a permanent black mark against the candidate. Firms share information, and you never know “who knows who.” When an accepted candidate retracts an offer, the firm faces the uncomfortable and potentially costly prospect

of finding someone else to fill a position.

What do you do, then, if your job offers don’t happen to arrive in the order you hope, leaving you with a tough choice to make between a real-life offer and the possibility of a “better” offer that might come at a later date? Let’s say you have rated and ranked a number of jobs and are offered a less-than-first-choice job. You are faced with a dilemma between wanting to remain available and not wanting to remain unemployed. You might take some of the following steps:

1. Don’t accept the job offer on the spot. Ask the company when they need your answer and request a week to consider. The company should appreciate that you are not accepting impulsively. It is rare that a firm will demand an immediate answer. As a corollary to this point, never act simply on intuition. Take the time to weigh out the pros and cons of each offer and to assess the likelihood that the “better” offer will come through.

2. Ask for a written confirmation of the offer. This, too, will help buy some time.

3. If possible, attempt to modify the offer received to make it more attractive. Believe it or not, an organization that has made you an offer wants you. They have chosen you from a number of candidates and would prefer for you to accept than to hire a second-choice candidate. “Negotiating” can be quite simple: You’re hoping for a job that starts in

September but this begins in June? Ask for the summer off. They have mentioned a salary range? Indicate that the upper end of that range makes the job considerably more attractive to you. You live some distance away from the firm’s city? Ask for help with moving costs and locating housing. These are only examples of some avenues that can turn a decent offer into a dream offer.

4. Ask to speak with the person who would be your direct supervisor. This will give you a chance to ask some candid questions about the job itself, scrutinize the firm more closely to see if it is a “fit,” and buy a little extra time.

5. Don’t burn your bridges. If you decided to turn down an offer, try to do so in such a way that the company retains a favorable impression of you and remains interested in you. You may explain that you feel you need additional experience before you can truly contribute to the firm, that you are unable to relocate (or have made plans to move to a different city), or whatever the case may be. Remember, they wanted to hire you. If you walk away leaving them with an amicable feeling of regret, they may become a valuable resource in the future.

6. This is a good time to contact other organizations from which you have not yet received an offer. You can let them know you have received an offer elsewhere and can request that they expedite the decision-making process on your candidacy. Sometimes you become a more desirable

(over)

candidate when an organization knows they must compete to hire you.

Ethical Dilemma #4: Should you interview for or accept a job with a long-term commitment when you have short-range future plans?

This is one of the most common problems facing college job seekers. Many students are looking for a job to take time off before graduate school or professional training. Yet many jobs list expected commitments of two years or more, or seek career-track candidates. So what should you do if you are interested in a job that posts a time commitment that exceeds your employment plans?

First, you must evaluate the flexibility of your future plans. For example, your outlook will be different if you have already been accepted to graduate school and are deferring for a year than if you are planning to take a year off and apply to graduate programs in the interim.

The next step is to evaluate the importance placed by the organization on a specific time commitment. A two-year management-training program, for example, will be less flexible than an entry-level position with a firm that prefers its new hires to stay for at least two years. Similarly, if the firm invests a great deal of time and money in its new employees in order to prepare them for movement up the corporate structure, the desired time commitment may be taken very seriously.

Once you have figured out if either you, the organization, or both are flexible in terms of future plans, you can decide whether it is appropriate to interview for the position or to accept an offer. In the event that you do receive an offer and there is a conflict between your plans and the firm's expectations, you have a few options. On the one hand, you can explain the situation to your interviewer. They may be willing to hire you for the available time period, perhaps with the possibility of future employment as well. Many large firms actually help finance employees' graduate study and provide leave-time for grad school.

On the other hand, if your plans are fairly flexible, you might consider accepting the job with the attitude that you will remain if the job works out. This is, of course, the approach many people take to the job hunt even when they have no future commitments. In fact, the average person changes jobs every two years; no career track job is an inescapable prison.

In the long run, resolving this dilemma ethically requires that you be straightforward both with yourself and with your potential employers. Evaluate your future plans before you begin applying and interviewing, and keep your long-term goals in perspective when weighing offers.

Summary: Ethical decisions in the job-hunt

In the course of your search for a job, you may encounter any or all of these ethical dilemmas. Research has shown that college students tend to be unaware of their ethical options and to act egocentrically without understanding the implications of their behavior. It is essential that you take time to sort through alternative behavior, to list and rate as many options as possible, and to evaluate the consequences of your actions. Remember, your behavior not only reflects on you but also can positively or negatively affect recruiters, interviewers, employers, college personnel, and other students as well. Ultimately, making ethical choices enables you to retain your integrity and to make job decisions that benefit you, your future employer, and others.