

Bosses reveal job interview horror stories

Naked photos, “porn star” emails and threats of broken legs are just some of the bizarre things Aussie companies have to deal with when trying to hire staff.

After Melbourne recruiter Graham Wynn was left red-faced by a female candidate’s very indecent proposal last week, we asked five local bosses and HR experts for their job interview and resume horror stories.

“One that always comes to mind is this guy who said on his resume he can do a Rubik’s cube in under five minutes,” said Judy Sahay, founder of digital marketing agency Crowd Media Group.

“I happened to have a Rubik’s cube on my table so I asked him to do it. He couldn’t. After 10 minutes I stopped him because he was wasting my time. He was embarrassed. He knew he’d stuffed up at that point.”

Ms Sahay said it wasn’t about whether he could solve the Cube. “We were testing integrity,” she said. “I just wanted to know if he was someone who would lie.”

In another case, a candidate claimed on her resume she could speak German. “I speak German, but when I started speaking in German she had no idea what I was saying,” she said.

“But the worst one, this girl literally said in her resume that she had worked for my company for two-and-a-half years. The ad didn’t say who we were, she didn’t realise.”

When they contacted the woman, “she started crying”. “She knew she was in trouble,” she Ms Sahay said. “We didn’t take it too far. It was sad.”

Muffin Break general manager Natalie Brennan said she was once sent a resume with a profanity-laden email accidentally attached.

“They had tagged on another email where they were basically having quite a profane discussion about a woman,” she said.

“Clearly it was a conversation between some friends. I emailed him back and said, ‘You know, here are some hints ...’ I would always laugh because inevitably all of these people would write ‘attention to detail’ as their skill.”

Ms Brennan had her own embarrassing moment, however, when interviewing a young woman who “looked like she had a black eye of some sort”.

“I thought she had banged her head. To try break the ice I said, ‘Did you have a knock on the head playing sport?’ and she said, ‘No, that’s my birthmark.’ So I learnt pretty quickly you don’t make comments on personal attributes.”

Kearin Lowry, founder of Toowoomba-based HR firm Workforce Positive, said she had once been sent a naked photo attached to a candidate’s resume instead of a headshot.

“She was quite a young woman, when I read through her experience she was a model as well, so I thought maybe she had just mixed up her photos,” she said.

The woman was “still a good candidate”, so Ms Lowry simply removed the photo before forwarding the resume onto the employer. “I just saw it as an error,” she said.

Ms Lowry said one of the most common interview mistakes was not listening to the questions or talking over the interviewer.

“I had an interview recently where I didn’t ask any questions,” she said.

“They started telling me about all the things they’d done, they talked for about 45 minutes and never really drew a breath. They were a really lovely person but just the social norms of an interview weren’t really noticed.”

Her favourite moment, however, was hiring for a marketing role when she noticed a candidate’s email address was “pornstar69@hotmail.com”.

“There was definitely some positioning going on there,” she said. “It was back in like 2002, you know when you sign up for your first Hotmail account. I guess it never occurred to them to get a different email for job applications.”

Joshua Lewis, founder of Brisbane-based IT company Dorks Delivered, gets anywhere from 200 to 300 resumes per job listing. He’s seen resumes written in comic sans, 16-page novels, and in one case even a “doppelganger”.

“Two resumes came through that were identical except for the name at the top,” he said.

To help filter them out, he devised a simple test. Since most jobs require attention to detail, when he posts a job on Seek he writes a message halfway through the description.

“I say specifically, ‘If you click on the apply button on Seek you will not get the job,’ he said. “Instead send your applications with your resume and cover letter to this email address.”

If he receives 200 applications, Mr Lewis says only around 60 to 70 will have followed the instructions. “A huge number of people still click that button,” he said.

Mr Lewis says his most memorable interview was in the early days of his business when he was still operating out of his home.

“He came to the house, we were talking to him, he seemed fantastic,” he said. “After he left we said, he looks good, we just couldn’t figure out one thing — why was he crying? Maybe he’s passionate, maybe he’s scared. But his resume was amazing.”

When they sent him a job offer a few days later, the man declined. “He said he’s got very bad cat allergies,” Mr Lewis said.

Hiring from overseas can also be hit-and-miss. “One person from Pakistan asked if they could work for me for \$1 an hour to get a visa into the country,” he said. “That’s probably something I wouldn’t suggest. Don’t marry on the first date.”

Simon Bennett, director of Glide Outplacement and Career Coaching, says one that stands out in his memory was “a girl who turned up for an interview in hotpants”. “She didn’t need to say anything, I think the interview lasted less than two minutes,” he said.

“I said, ‘This is an interview and I don’t think you’ve dressed appropriately and I don’t think you’ve taken the interview very seriously.’ She said she didn’t realise. I think some people might have let it go and interviewed her anyway.”

He said a common error candidates made was not asking any questions at the end because they were nervous and just “want to get out of here as quick as I can”.

Equally, though, Mr Bennett says he has received some highly inappropriate questions — like, “Do you do drug or alcohol testing?”, “Does the team go out for drinks on Friday nights?” and “Do you monitor email use and web browsing at work?”

But Mr Bennett said the most memorable incident occurred early in his career. “I was interviewing an accountant, he was okay but a little bit rough around the edges,” he said.

“One of the questions I asked him was, ‘What would your referees, your previous boss say about you if I asked them?’”

The man responded, “Don’t worry about that, they’ll give a really good reference. I know they will, because I told them if they don’t I’ll break their legs. And I know somebody else that will do it for 50 quid if I asked them.”

According to Mr Bennett, the man was “dead set serious”. “I concluded the interview relatively quickly after that.”