

Applicant Faking Is Not the Same As Lying

Most applicant faking does not involve making statements that are objectively untrue (for example, saying you have a college degree when you did not complete college). Instead, it is associated with applicants expressing subjective opinions about themselves in a way they feel will make them look better to the hiring organization (for example, a candidate saying, “I work harder than most people” even though she knows that others might describe her as being somewhat lazy). These sorts of efforts to make oneself look good are not the same as lying or outright dishonesty.¹³ To some degree they reflect socially intelligent behavior in terms of trying to present oneself in the best possible light—sort of like rolling down one’s sleeves to hide tattoos before a job interview.

Many Applicants Do Not Fake

Although it is difficult to estimate a precise number, the majority of applicants do not appear to radically distort their response to assessments just to make themselves look good.¹⁴ There are at least three reasons why applicants do not fake more often:

1. Applicants may feel that intentionally faking is ethically wrong. These applicants feel morally obliged to respond in an open and candid manner.
2. Applicants may believe that they will be caught if they try to fake. Research indicates that applicants are less likely to intentionally change their answers if they are warned that an assessment is designed to detect faking.¹⁵
3. Applicants may prefer to describe themselves in a candid manner. They do not feel a need to purposefully fake their responses in order to be hired. These candidates would prefer not to be hired if it means working in a job that does not fit their personal styles, motives, or skills.

Most Applicants Who Fake Are Not Very Good at It

To effectively fake an assessment, candidates have to know how to respond to make themselves look good. Yet the questions on many assessments do not have a clearly correct response. Applicants may not know what behaviors are associated with effective performance in the jobs they are applying for or how these behaviors relate to assessment questions. As a result, applicants do not know how to fake their responses. For example, the correct answer to the question “Do you like to take

risks” depends on the degree to which the job requires risk-taking behavior. Figuring out the right amount of risk taking for a job is probably not something most candidates are able to accurately estimate.

Efforts to fake also fail due to the fact that many people think their personal views and beliefs are similar to those of most other people. Even someone who holds very extreme beliefs may not think of himself as extreme.¹⁶ As a result, when people fake they may not do so to the point of it actually being effective. For example, applicants who use illegal drugs can provide surprisingly revealing responses to questions like “How many times have you used illegal drugs in the past year?”¹⁷ One reason why some applicants openly admit to drug use may be because they believe that almost everyone uses drugs to some degree. They assume that saying that they never used drugs would be perceived as unrealistic. The same is true when you ask candidates about whether it is okay to steal from their employer. Some candidates appear to assume that almost everyone steals, so they do not see anything wrong with admitting that they steal as well.

Some Faking Is Not Faking But a Lack of Self-Awareness

There are several reasons why applicants may provide inaccurate responses to assessment questions. On one hand, they may truly be faking in an attempt to pass the assessment. On the other hand, they may simply be unaware of their true skills, interests, and capabilities. For example, a candidate once answered “yes” to the pre-screening question “Are you an expert at Excel?” even though all she had ever done was enter data into Excel for several years. She did not know Excel had other functions or features beyond simple data entry, so from her perspective she truly believed she was an expert.¹⁸ Lack of self-awareness can also influence the results of personality measures for candidates who do not have realistic perceptions of themselves (for example, applicants describing themselves as being highly creative, even though others might describe them as lacking creativity).

Faking Can Significantly Affect the Scores of Some Assessments

Some assessment questions are easier to fake answers for than others. For example, most applicants could guess the correct answer to questions like “Do you have strong people skills?” or “Are you an expert typist?” Assessments that contain questions

for which the correct answer is fairly obvious are called “transparent.” Transparent assessment questions can be very susceptible to problems of faking, particularly when they are used to rank order candidates based on their assessment scores.¹⁹ In such cases, applicants who fake may receive much higher scores than better-qualified applicants. The result is an assessment that rewards candidates who fake over candidates who provide candid and accurate self-appraisals of their skills, interests, and capabilities.

Applicant faking may significantly influence the results of any assessment that asks candidates to provide information about their skills, interests, experiences, and capabilities. Virtually all self-report assessments fall into this category, regardless of whether they are designed to measure personality, past experiences, qualifications, or interests. Through careful design and analysis, it is possible to build and score these sorts of assessments in a way that helps control the effects of faking, but the influence of faking can never be completely removed.²⁰

It is worth noting that the effects of faking are not limited to self-report assessments. Faking can and does affect other aspects of the hiring process. For example, it has been estimated that more than 10 percent of resumes contain outright fabrications.²¹ Interviews are also susceptible to applicant faking, particularly when the interviews are not well structured. The results of highly objective assessments such as background investigations can and are faked by applicants using false or stolen legal documents. A small industry even exists to provide applicants with prosthetic devices and drug-free urine samples to fake the results of drug screens that utilize urinalysis. In sum, applicant faking is an important issue that must be taken into account when designing any staffing processes, not just processes that use self-report measures such as personality tests and pre-screening questionnaires.

In sum, the question is not whether applicants will fake. Research clearly indicates that some, but not all of them, will. Better questions to ask include how prevalent applicant faking is, how much it affects the assessment results, and whether it affects the results enough to render the assessment useless. These questions should be considered when designing and evaluating any proposed process for evaluating candidates. This includes processes that use highly structured assessments such as personality measures and pre-screening questionnaires. But it also includes processes that use less systematic techniques for evaluating candidates such as reading resumes and conducting interviews.