

Case 10

Doctoring the Résumé—Giving the Third Degree to the Director of Research at SCRC

Dr. Mary Parker, executive director of the State Children's Research Consortium (SCRC), was sitting in front of her computer screen when she made a shocking discovery. She was aimlessly surfing the Internet in her office between meetings, at this particular moment, seeing what new posts of interest were made on Facebook. She had another meeting in ten minutes, for which she had procrastinated preparing. No matter; she had confidence she could wing it adroitly.

This new development was certainly more important. If what she read on this one particular posting about her most valuable staff member was true, she would rather pack up her briefcase, go home, and hide under the covers for at least a week.

Normally, she would have felt a bit guilty about indulging herself in such an activity on work time. But yesterday, while she was spending a few minutes decompressing after a tense meeting on her organization's potential budget shortfall by clicking on some links her cousin Lisa had shared via email, she had come across news of a study conducted by researchers from the University of Melbourne on Internet surfing in the workplace.

According to the study, a large majority, 70% of the workers who were the study's sample population of 300, engaged in Workplace Leisure Internet Browsing (WLIB). WLIB was defined by the author of the study as browsing the Web for information and reviews of products, reading online news sites, playing online games, keeping current with friends' activities on social networking sites, watching videos on YouTube, and similar non-work related activities. What was surprising about this study was that the researchers determined that workers who engaged in WLIB were, overall, more productive than those workers who didn't spend work time on the Internet, at least when WLIB was limited to not more than 20% of work time. The researchers theorized that Internet surfing and other personal use of the Internet during work time afforded an unobtrusive break that helped workers' brains regain their concentration for work tasks.

With a chuckle to herself, she remembered one staff member she had had to let go for spending almost all of his time doing personal business while at work. She imagined that had he read the article, perhaps he might have decided to spend a few hours each day actually doing the work he was being paid to perform, as doing this might have made him think he would be able to focus better doing his personal business—at least so long as his time doing actual work for SCRC didn't exceed 20 percent of the time in the office.

Dr. Parker often accessed the Internet for personal purposes during work hours, but usually for only a brief time. Certainly nowhere near the 20-percent threshold. She was a busy member of the staff, dealing with five full-time researchers and a cadre of ten admin-

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istrative and other support staff, not including herself. She used to feel guilty stealing a few minutes of down time, reading the latest posts on the *American Idol* blog or looking for a bargain on a new smart phone at Amazon.com. Her guilt during these forays away from her official duties in her office was somewhat assuaged after having read about the study. Now, if she could only find something about a study with a similarly counterintuitive conclusion that those who eat at least one bar of chocolate each day were more successful in losing weight than those who didn't!

The Consortium's primary mission was to conduct research to improve the health outcomes of children. Although some of the studies the Consortium conducted required its researchers to collect their own data, the organization mostly analyzed existing data, such as that collected by the State's Health Care Cost Containment Council (HCCCC), a quasi-governmental organization that was a collaboration of the State Department of Health and the State Hospital Association, authorized by a statute enacted a decade earlier by the State Legislature. Many of the research studies conducted by SCRC were commissioned by the HCCCC. Funding for these studies came mostly from the HCCCC and from grants from some of the largest and most prestigious national foundations concerned about the health of children.

SCRC was incorporated as a federal, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization, with a board consisting of a balanced mix of health researchers, hospital administrators, elected officials, community advocates, academics, and representatives of think tanks in the state. Doing so provided many advantages compared to creating the organization simply as a research arm of the Department of Health. Generally, the board stayed out of Mary's way, and she had developed a close relationship with her funders.

Although Dr. Parker suspected others on her staff wasted working time playing computer games, arranging personal trips, or reading movie reviews, she wouldn't have considered cracking down on this practice. She never monitored how her staff used their time, provided they accomplished what needed to be done. She trusted their judgment in using their time. If they required an afternoon off to attend to some personal business, she routinely granted it, provided they did not have important deadlines that would be missed. She did not feel it was necessary to hold her staff hostage until 4:30 p.m. each work day.

Mary often enjoyed using the Google search engine to take a break from the pressures of running the largest research organization in the state devoted to children's health. Periodically, she would Google the names of her employees and their families and visit the social networking profiles of those who had one. She took pleasure in learning about her coworkers' personal lives. Many of the professional staff had joined the organization when she had four years ago, and everyone was collegial and friendly. It was not unusual for staff members to invite the entire SCRC staff to their life-cycle events. There were staff outings to sports events, picnics, and occasional dinners. It would have been natural for the staff to be segregated culturally along the lines of educational achievement. It was important to her to make sure that those who had their Ph.D.s treated those who didn't as equal, valued members of the team.

Dr. Parker would have been the first to admit that her role was mostly administrative and political. She had been a researcher once herself, but her current role was to assure that the SCRC had the resources it needed to fulfill its mission and keep all of its stake-

holders happy. Perhaps her most important task for the organization was recruiting some of the best talent around to design and carry out the research that she knew would be used by state and local government, foundations, and practitioners in the field to improve the health outcomes of children, many of them disadvantaged. And, of course, doing what was necessary to retain these staff and keep them happy and motivated.

One of the best decisions she had made, she had thought, was hiring Harry Hauser as the Director of Research. Dr. Hauser was amazing, and his commitment to the mission of the Consortium was unquestionable. He was responsible for the five-member research department, all of whom had Ph.D.s. No study had ever been conducted by the organization since his arrival that did not have his creative signature visible somewhere on it, increasing its chances to avoid any threats to internal and external validity. In some cases, his research designs were a work of art, and several state laws were directly attributable to the data he collected and analyzed.

She was in the habit of cleansing her browser's history after each WLIB session, so as not to be embarrassed if anyone was snooping on her computer. This time, she bookmarked the Facebook page she had just accessed. She also printed out the page, as well, and placed it in a secured personnel file cabinet. More than likely, this particular post would be deleted as soon as Harry saw it.

Now, as she stared at the Facebook page on her computer screen for perhaps the tenth time, she could hardly believe what she was seeing, and wondered whether it might simply be a mistake. After all, there was no system in place that verified the accuracy or reliability of what one read on the Internet. Most of it was unfiltered, giving any single individual with a modem, some free open source software, and a Web hosting account the power to publish anything at any time. Social networking sites such as Facebook eliminated the need for even some of these minimal requirements.

What had shocked her was a comment on Harry Hauser's Facebook wall. Harry was one of Dr. Parker's 89 Facebook "friends." All of what she read on Harry's Facebook wall today was benign, other than one glaringly disturbing post. It was by all appearances from an Arkansas woman, a former colleague of Dr. Hauser's from a previous research job. She had been simply catching up with him, one of several new friends he had added this week. The post was written in a friendly manner and didn't appear to be malevolent in any way. But what Dr. Parker distilled from the posting was that Dr. Hauser had been dismissed from a similar research position in Arkansas four years earlier for exaggerating his academic credentials.

Dr. Hauser was, according to the post, Mr. Hauser. It raised the strong possibility that he had never received a Ph.D., although at the time of his dismissal from the Arkansas position, he was apparently quite proficient, if not gifted, in conducting research.

Dr. Parker had remembered building her staff and making a phone call to the executive director of that Arkansas organization that was Hauser's previous employer. Dr. Hauser's, or rather Mr. Hauser's, boss had praised his work, but had mentioned, somewhat cryptically, that he had left for personal reasons, and he had parted company on good terms. If the post was true, it wouldn't have been improbable that the terms of separation with

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that employer had been that his supervisor would have agreed not to disclose anything substantive about the reasons why Hauser had left the organization.

Dr. Parker considered how to deal with this upsetting situation. If the Facebook post was accurate, Dr. Hauser had won the keen competition for his well-paid position based on false pretenses. He certainly demonstrated that he had the expertise and qualifications to continue in the position if she decided to simply ignore what she had found. On the other hand, ignoring this information, she judged, made her complicit to his alleged fraud, and it wasn't fair to keep someone on her staff who was dishonest, even if this meant losing a valued employee.

She considered seeking advice from a friend (a real friend, not a Facebook friend), or sharing what she learned with the current board chair, an older philanthropist who usually told her to do whatever she needed to do, provided it was ethical and consistent with the organization's mission. However, she decided that once she shared this information with anyone, it would be only a matter of time before others learned of this. And even if she decided to keep it to herself, others could learn about Hauser's fraudulent credentials in the same manner as she had.

On one hand, she knew that silence was complicity, and it just wasn't right to ignore this information. And on the other hand, she knew that Hauser's research, using the substantial resources provided by the Consortium with funding from both public funds and prestigious foundations, was so valuable that thousands of lives of children at risk could very well be improved if she simply kept mum about what she had discovered.

This was shaping up to be a classic ethical dilemma.

Dr. Parker's ethics training in graduate school had prepared her to deal with ethical dilemmas, or so she thought. She recalled the two primary approaches to ethics—*teleological*, based primarily on the outcomes of a decision, and *deontological*, based primarily on principles. In this case, a teleological approach militated for keeping her mouth shut as long as possible, knowing that the greater good would be served. And a deontological approach suggested her taking action on the principle that Hauser should be held accountable for his dishonesty—assuming the Internet post was accurate. And she truly hoped it wasn't.

She considered estimating the costs and benefits to each of the stakeholders of the organization, including herself, of various responses. She made an attempt to be a rational decision-maker, using her graduate degree nonprofit management training. The basic model she remembered was a seven-step process called RESPECT. In short, it called for:

- Recognizing the moral aspects of the dilemma,
- Enumerating the guiding principles,
- Specifying the stakeholders and their principles,
- Plotting the various options to resolve the problem, and evaluating these alternatives,
- Consulting with others, including the stakeholders, where appropriate, and
- Telling the stakeholders what your decision will be.

This model sounded reasonable in the crucible of a class, but in a real situation, she found it to be hopeless. There were too many variables, the issues were too complex, and the reaction of any single stakeholder to the news of Harry's deception, or rather alleged deception, in the calculation was unpredictable.

It was time for her next meeting, and she was so preoccupied with this new problem that she was unable to focus on the topic, which was whether to change the Consortium's health benefit plan and other fringe benefits to accommodate same-sex partners. Her distraction was noticed by other staff members around the table, but they plodded on until there was agreement to end the Consortium's current discrimination against gays and lesbians in committed relationships and propose this policy change for board approval.

When she returned to her office, she decided that her course of action would be to go with what her gut told her was the right thing to do, rather than weighing the costs and benefits through some calculation. Maybe the Facebook posting was a practical joke, she thought, thinking that this was unlikely. Almost every Ph.D. she knew who received a degree in the social sciences was more than willing to volunteer, unasked, the horror stories of his or her matriculation experience, the hazing, the senseless rewrites of dissertation chapters, and the months of delay until a dissertation chair set aside the time to read anything. Harry had never mentioned much about his doctoral experience at Princeton, which she found to be unusual. He had been reticent in response to her sharing her own story as an ABD student ("all but dissertation"), which had been the two worst years of her life.

Anxiety was mounting for her about how to deal with this, or whether to deal with it at all. The safest course was to simply sleep on it for at least a day. But she suspected that she would be unable to sleep soundly, knowing that this 800-pound gorilla in the room would make it difficult for her to have the interaction with Harry during working hours that she needed to do her job.

If only he wasn't such an important part of the success of this organization, she thought. The decision would be easy. But, she lamented, by all measures, Harry Hauser was a crack-jack researcher, regardless of whether he was Dr. Hauser or Mr. Hauser. His research designs were elegant. Although others performing research in the social sciences were content to distribute a survey to a sample population with a perfunctory Likert scale and simply publish the results, Harry found ingenious experimental designs that provided much more confidence that the answers to the research question posed were reliable and valid.

Harry had contempt for surveys, which he was unable to disguise even when doing so would have been appropriate. Surveys provided an opportunity for people to either lie, exaggerate, or self-delude themselves in order to please the researcher or be deceptive about personal issues. He was fond of illustrating this assertion by relaying the story of the Milgram experiments conducted in the 1960s. She remembered this as if it were yesterday, although it had in fact been several years ago.

Using newspaper ads and direct mail, Milgram recruited male individuals to participate in an experiment lasting an hour, for which they would be paid \$4.50, paid whether or not the subjects completed the task. Subjects were told that they would be involved in an experiment that would test the effect of punishment inflicted by a teacher

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on learning, and would play the role of the teacher or learner. Unknown to the subjects, they always were picked to play the role of teacher, and a paid actor in cahoots with the experimenter was trained to play the role of learner. The learner, who made sure he informed the “teacher” that he had a heart condition, would pretend to receive a shock administered by teachers, and occasionally scream in mock pain and beg for mercy. The subjects were subjected to a 45-volt electric shock, as an example of the punishment the learner would receive with a wrong answer. They were then told to administer a shock to the learner when the learner gave a wrong answer to a question. Not knowing that the learner was not really a participant like themselves, they “administered” severe electric shocks when asked to by the experimenters. Most of the teachers were willing to administer electric shocks to the learners, who pretended to writhe in extreme pain and discomfort, and more than half (26 of the 40 subjects) administered “shocks” of 450 volts with either little or no encouragement from the experimenter before the experiment was halted.

Today, the methodology of this experiment is considered unethical. And it is. But if the methodology were carried out by traditional surveys, the result would be closer to the results obtained by Milgram when he asked his Yale senior psychology class what percentage of teachers they would predict would be willing to administer the severe shocks—which was less than 2%.

What point had Harry been making with this? He had continued with the punch line of the story.

Imagine the Milgram data had been collected relying on surveys administered to participants, as is the typical data collection tool for most social science research—

Question #1: If you were asked by an authority figure to administer a 450-volt, potentially fatal shock to a heart patient, would you do so?

Question 2: If “no,” what would be the highest voltage you would administer?

Using this philosophy, Harry’s research often made the local news and occasionally made the national news, and certainly his research designs were legendary. The organization had exploited Harry’s reputation for finding ingenious ways to answer sensitive questions by applying for a series of grants from the Hughspott Foundation. These grants not only funded all of Harry’s salary, but also covered a good share of the general overhead of the organization. These grants not only had financial benefit, but there was a certain level of prestige that accrued whenever the Hughspott Foundation approved another grant.

Harry’s contributions to the organization went beyond his research talents and his ability to attract outside funding from grantors. He was a model employee. Mary considered him to be a personal friend.

After the meeting on same-sex benefits, Mary returned to her office and tried to work. Instead, she began looking at movie reviews on the Web. Her thoughts returned to her dilemma, and she couldn’t focus on the reviews.

She decided to confront Harry directly, to simply press his intercom button and ask that he come to her office. If anything, she might find some swift resolution. He could vehemently deny the truthfulness of the Facebook post, which would require her to investigate further. Or he might admit his subterfuge and beg to remain on staff. Or he might simply resign. Each of the three posed serious risks for the organization. This would likely be a distasteful confrontation, regardless of how sensitively she handled it, but she admitted to herself that as executive director, this was part of her job to do. Her instincts were to pose a simple question and to listen as much as possible.

She paged him to her office, and his head popped in.

“Sit down, Harry.”

“Everything okay?”

“No. I just learned that you may not really have a Ph.D. from Princeton. If this is true, I haven’t given much thought to what should be done about this, but I wanted to hear directly from you whether this was true or not.”

She saw his face redden.

“It’s true,” he admitted. “I don’t have a Ph.D. from Princeton. I was ABD at Princeton, but never got the chance to defend my dissertation. I kept running into roadblocks. The closer I thought I got, the farther away I seemed to be. And then my wife got pregnant, we had our first child, and you already know this, our kid had health problems. Eventually, he was diagnosed with autism. That has been one of my motivations for working with the Consortium, helping to identify treatment protocols to deal with problems such as what my son is experiencing. As a result of all of the stress of the Ph.D. program, needing to earn a living, and being a caregiver for my kid, I had to abandon Princeton when I was this close to finishing,” he said, his fingers in the air indicating that he was really close.

“The truth is, I was as close to getting my Ph.D. from Princeton as one can get, and it certainly wasn’t my fault that I didn’t get through the last hoop they put in front of me. Obviously, my work here is good and respected nationwide, and the fact that I didn’t get my Ph.D. diploma from Princeton didn’t affect the quality of my research. My Ph.D. is really from Coolidger University. I could tell you more about this, but it is not something I am proud of. The short answer is that Coolidger is a diploma mill. It was the only way I was going to be Dr. Hauser.

“I lied on my application to work here. I admit that. I am sorry. If you want to fire me, I will understand. However, you might consider the option of disciplining me for lying on my job application in some way we can mutually agree, and keeping me on staff here. I need the job. I like working here. My research is first rate. No one has ever complained. Obviously, the mission of the Consortium is important to me, and I think everyone is served by letting me continue to do the job you hired me for, for which I am qualified.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” Mary shared. “I don’t know how to respond, but there are issues here that I have to think through, such as who should be aware of this, and what

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authority I have to make the decision. So, give me the rest of the week to sort through this, and I'll meet with you to decide how we will address this."

"Again, I'm sorry. I always expected someone would find out eventually. Believe it or not, I am actually relieved that you now know about this." He got up and left her office.

Dr. Parker considered the option of simply keeping the information to herself and telling Harry to terminate his Facebook account, or at least remove the offending post and remove that former colleague as a Facebook friend. After all, it wasn't the same as if Dr. Hauser was claiming to be a medical doctor and performing surgery. Unlike in medicine, those without being formally trained in research can be quite capable of doing research. There is no requirement that researchers be licensed or even have any particular educational training. The proof was in the pudding that Dr. Hauser, or rather Mr. Hauser, knew what he was doing when it came to performing social science research, and his work was respected.

Clearly, he would not have been considered for the position with only a Master's degree, regardless of his abilities. The recruiting notice explicitly required an earned doctorate for applicants to be considered.

Epilogue: Five years later, Dr. Parker, still the executive director of the SCRC, comes across a news item about a research study, in which Dr. Harry Hauser is the senior project manager. It mentions that Dr. Hauser received his Ph.D. from Princeton University.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the advantages the SCRC enjoyed by having incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization compared to being an office within the State's Department of Health?
2. What boundaries should there be between the personal and professional lives of staff members of a nonprofit organization? Should an executive director encourage or discourage staff to share time away from the office?
3. Should Hauser be fired simply because he misrepresented his credentials when he was hired, or are there other ways to discipline him while keeping him in the organization?
4. How might this development affect the credibility of the research he has already completed for the foundations and government agencies that commissioned his research?
5. Should Dr. Parker inform the funders of Dr. Hauser's past research that he lied about his credentials?
6. If Dr. Parker does fire him, does she have an obligation to tell funders who are expecting Hauser to be the senior project director for several major current grants?
7. If she does choose to fire him, what obligation does she have to disclose to future employees that he had misrepresented his credentials?

8. How much time is “permissible” for workers to do personal things such as surfing the Internet during work hours without being disciplined?
9. Was Dr. Parker’s strategy for dealing with her initial confrontation with Hauser a good one? How else could she have approached this?

Note: This case originally appeared in *The Nonprofit Management Casebook: Scenes From the Frontlines*.