Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 86-6

Engineer Misstating Professional Achievements on Resume

Facts:
Engineer A is seeking employment with Employer Y. As an employee for Employer X, Engineer A was a staff engineer along with five other staff engineers of equal rank. This team of six was responsible for the design of certain products. While working for Employer X, Engineer A along with five other engineers in his team participated in and was credited with the design of a series of patented products.

Engineer A submits his resume to Employer Y and on it implies that he personally was responsible for the design of products which were actually designed through a joint effort of the members of the team.

Question:
Was it ethical for Engineer A to imply on his resume that he was personally responsible for the design of the products which were actually designed through the joint efforts of the members of the design team?

References:
Code of Ethics - Section II.5.a. - "Engineers shall not falsify or permit misrepresentation of their, or their associates', academic or professional qualifications. They shall not misrepresent or exaggerate their degree of responsibility in or for the subject matter or prior assignments. Brochures or other presentations incident to the solicitation of employment shall not misrepresent pertinent facts concerning employers, employees, associates, joint venturers or past accomplishments with the intent and purpose of enhancing their qualifications and their work."

Section III.10.a. - "Engineers shall, whenever possible, name the person or persons who may be individually responsible for designs, inventions, writings, or other accomplishments."

Discussion:
In essence, the issue before the Board is to what extent, if any, may an individual engineer engage in less than total candor in the development of his professional resume. Although this issue may appear to be simple and easily resolved, a closer examination of the question reveals a number of difficult issues.

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An employment resume is in many senses a written description of the professional achievements and qualifications of the individual whose name appears at its heading. In the world of professional employment, it is the method by which prospective employees communicate their credentials, qualifications, experience, etc. to prospective employers. The resume is generally the first impression that a prospective employer gains of an individual. In fact, in the highly competitive employment environment that currently exists, the employment resume is the means through which the prospective employer "screens out" the less desirous, less qualified applicants. The importance of the employment resume cannot be overstated.

It should therefore not be surprising that the contents of a resume can have an enormous impact upon the success of an employment applicant being considered for a position. Today there is great pressure on the job applicant to stress those qualities and qualifications which will have the greatest impact and make the best impression upon those in a position of responsibility in the hiring process. Job seekers take great pains to stress those aspects of their educational and employment history which demonstrate their suitability for the particular employment position in question.

Over the years, the Board has faced fact situations which bear some resemblance to the facts in this case. In Case 72-11, John Doe, who had been employed as a design engineer in an aerospace company for twelve years, during which he had been assigned to the performance of highly technical and complex engineering design work, was laid off when contracts with his company were terminated and new work was not forthcoming. After many months of seeking a new job in his specialized field with no success, Doe was advised by an employment counselor that his only opportunity lay in finding a position involving management and administration of engineering work. Doe had had some managerial and administrative experience of a minor nature in connection with his former employment but felt he could perform satisfactorily at a higher level in that related field of technical activity if given the opportunity. After being turned down repeatedly for technical, managerial or administrative positions because his resume showed a lack of such experience, Doe devised a new resume which played down his technical design experience and expertise and emphasized his minor managerial and administrative function in his former employment as an important responsibility. As a result, Doe was able to obtain a new job which involved responsibilities in his general field of technical expertise.

In concluding that Doe was not in violation of the Code for rewriting his employment resume in this manner, we were inclined to the more charitable view that Doe's action can be condoned as something less than an "exaggeration" in that it more nearly might be considered a degree of emphasis. We noted that this is an established and accepted form of sales technique in which the seller proclaims all of the virtues of his product and conveniently ignores its less desirable features.

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We emphasized that what we said in Case 72-11 was a matter of degree. The purpose of then Section 3(c) was to protect a prospective employer from being deceived as to the competence of an engineer-applicant in order that the employer not be tricked into entrusting important engineering decisions to one not qualified to make them. In Case 72-11, we found that Doe could truthfully show some degree of competence in the managerial and administrative technical areas of the employment even though Doe strongly emphasized its extent and level.

In contrast, Case 79-5 involved an engineer who received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1940 from a recognized engineering curriculum and was subsequently registered as a professional engineer in two states. Later he was awarded an earned "Professional Degree" from the same institution. In 1960 he received a Ph.D. degree from an organization which awarded degrees on the basis of correspondence without requiring any form of personal attendance or study at the institution and was regarded by state authorities as a "diploma mill." The engineer listed his Ph.D. degree among his academic qualifications in brochures, correspondence, and otherwise without indicating its nature.

In concluding that the engineer was unethical in citing his Ph.D. as an academic qualification under these circumstances, we noted that the earlier Case 72-11 had been decided under old Code provision 3(e) which had since been expanded to embrace "misleading, deceptive or false statements regarding professional qualifications" rather than merely "exaggerated statements of qualifications." We therefore held that the newer and broader Code language should be interpreted to prohibit the engineer from citing his Ph.D. degree as an academic credential.

Since our decision in Case 79-5, the NSPE Code of Ethics has again been modified. The Code language appears to restrict even further the representations which engineers may make in resumes, brochures, correspondence, etc. New Section II.5.a. specifically addresses the issue of professional qualification misrepresentation. In the context of the present case, we interpret Section II.5.a. to prohibit Engineer A to imply on his resume that he was personally responsible for the design of products which were actually designed through the joint efforts of the members of the design team. While we acknowledge that Engineer A did not in fact state that he was personally responsible for the work in question, we interpret the term "misrepresentation" in Section II.5.a. to include implications which are intended to obscure truth to a client, members of the public, or prospective employers for that matter. We stress however, that we do not mean to suggest that unintentionally false or inaccurate statements would be unethical per se. Instead, we are referring to statements such as those made by Engineer A which are intentionally designed to mislead a potential employer by obscuring the truth.

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Finally, we note that by his conduct, Engineer A appears to have been in violation of Section III.10.a. by failing to provide due credit to those five other staff engineers who worked with Engineer A in designing certain products. While we certainly are not suggesting that Engineer A indicate the names of the five other engineers on his employment resume, we do believe that Engineer A has an obligation to express the fact that the design work was performed as a result of a team effort as opposed to an individual effort. By noting such, we believe that in the context of the fact in this case, Engineer A would be in compliance with the spirit and intent of Section III.10.a.

Conclusion:
It was unethical for Engineer A to imply on his resume that he was personally responsible for the design of the products which were actually designed through the joint efforts of the members of the design team.

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