

HR Compliance Law Bulletin

Practical and Effective HR Management Advice

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Spotlight

Online Degrees: Should You Trust Them?

by Nancy Hatch Woodward

While employers are more accepting of candidates with online degrees than they used to be, there is still a lot of skepticism about just how good those degrees are. A 2006 survey from career publisher Vault Inc. found that 28 percent of hiring managers believe an online bachelor's degree was as credible as an offline degree, while 58 percent said it was "not as credible, but acceptable," and 14 percent said it was not credible or acceptable. However, 43 percent of those surveyed believed that online graduate degrees were more acceptable than online bachelor's degrees.

Currently, there are about 2 million people who are enrolled in online degree programs, says Andrew Gansler, president of eLearners.com, which provides resources to online learners and connects them with online learning providers. He explains that online degrees are especially advantageous for working adults, because the flexibility and convenience makes it feasible. "In the old days—a couple of years ago—if you wanted to get a degree, you had to think about when the classes met and if there was a school near to where you worked that was close enough to attend."

Today, employees have a wide variety of choices. Many brick and mortar institutions have started offer-

ing courses or certificate programs. For example, Villanova, Tulane, and Lehigh University all have certificate program, says Gansler. There are also a number that offer full degrees online, from small liberal art colleges like Marist in Poughkeepsie, NY, to larger state schools such as Penn State.

"In the old days—a couple of years ago—if you wanted to get a degree, you had to think about when the classes met and if there was a school near to where you worked that was close enough to attend." Andrew Gansler, president of eLearners.com.

What about those diploma mills?

What scares most employers, however, are the newer for-profit universities. You have institutions that call themselves colleges when they really aren't, says Gansler, and there is no law against them doing so. So how do employers know if their candidates have a "real" degree? What hiring managers can do is to look at the accreditation of the institution to make sure it is recognized. But even then you need to be careful, Gansler warns. Some diploma mills have formed com-

Contributors

Nancy Hatch Woodward
Laura Starczewski, Esq.

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panies to accredit themselves. The school might say “accredited by the National Education Accreditation Association” but it would turn out that wasn’t a legitimate accreditation body.

Luckily, there are a number of ways employers can check out the legitimacy of the school. HireRight, an employment screening provider, keeps a database of over 90,000 educational institutions, including a database of known diploma mills. For those not working with a reputable screening partner, Joe Maris, director of operations of HireRight, suggests they use resources such as the Department of Education (www.ed.gov) or the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (<http://www.chea.org/default.asp>). “These sites can help you determine if you are dealing with a degree from a diploma mill or an unaccredited institution,” says Maris.

Employers also worry that it may be harder to check whether candidates actually have received the degrees they claim when they have “attended” a for-profit college. Not to worry, says Maris. While it is easy to say you have a degree when you don’t, a thorough background check can usually determine when a degree is not legitimate.

Actually, says Gansler, it is often easier and quicker to get this type of information from the for-profit colleges because they have better

streamlined services. “They realize they are competing with brand name schools that have been around for a long time, and so these for-profit schools want to do right by their students. They know they have to offer a level of service that surpasses what the traditional institutions do,” he explains. “If the school is accredited and the student provides authorization, hiring managers should be able to get this information easily.”

The candidate should be the focus

At the end of the day, says Gansler, when it comes to hiring a new person, it is going to be more about the person than the degree. Just as with any college experience, most students can get out of it what they want to get out of it. Some people will say that the online degree is inferior; others will tell you the opposite, he notes.

Considering that the Vault survey found that only 20 percent of employers had hired a job applicant with an online degree, many for-profit universities are starting to pull together studies on outcome-based analysis and review of academic success of online schools. That should help convince employers in the future of the advantage these schools can offer their employees.

You Be The Judge

Did employee’s complaints of harassment rise to level of constituting a protected activity?

The facts—A black man claims that his white supervisor yells and curses at him and that he disqualifies him from a new position. The worker also accuses the supervisor of being prejudiced against him because of his race, which the supervisor denies.