

SMU Cary M. Maguire Center for
Ethics & Public Responsibility

**2023-2024 Undergraduate Ethics Essay Prize
1st Prize**

**Fake It 'till You Make It: The Morality of Con Mans
Cooper Jennings Shapard
Electrical and Computer Engineering Major**

Fake It 'till You Make It: The Morality of Con Mans

From *Hamlet* to *The Music Man*, *The Odyssey* to *Harry Potter*, mass media from all generations focuses on a certain type of evil: the con man. These people abuse the ignorance of others for their own benefit. Whether that be through convincing employers of their not-quite-achieved achievements or selling an all-curing snake oil at a special discount just for you, con mans find a way to capitalize on what someone does not know. They go by many names—con men, con artists, confidence men, swindlers—but I will be referring to them as “con mans” for two reasons. First, to stress that a con man is a singular unit and applies regardless of gender, and second, to emphasize that these people are typically found in a corporate environment, not just pickpocketing on the street.

We are going to hear a lot about con mans for the remainder of this essay, so let's start by defining exactly what a con man is. I will be inferring that a con man is always:

- Intentional. There are many cases where someone accidentally engages in con man behavior. These cases are outside the scope of this paper.
- Deceptive. There may be a few fringe cases where a con man works without deception, but those should be considered outliers.
- For Personal Gain. This excludes a certain group of people who may use deception as a weapon for good, eliminating the difficult moral argument of "stealing bread to feed your family."

And that a con man is NOT always:

- Male. "Con man" is just a phrase and applies regardless of gender.

- A sufferer of the Dunning-Kruger Effect.^[1] Though misattributed confidence is an equally important problem, I will not be considering it as a sign of a con man.
- Malicious. Although some definitely have ill-will, I will consider anyone who intentionally deceives others, regardless of their intent, to be a con man. While all con men are for personal gain, not all of them intend to hurt others in the process.

Over the next few pages, I am going to take you on a journey through the life of a hypothetical man called Mr. Hoodwink who will represent the entirety of con men. He will help us answer some of the big ethical questions surrounding con men, like:

- Where can we find con men, and how do we handle them?
- How do hiring managers affect the number of con men in a company?
- Who actually gets hurt with a con men's 'victimless deception'?

They will also help us with some of the smaller (but nonetheless important) ethical questions, like:

- When is it moral to lie on your resume?
- What is the soft-skill to hard-skill ratio of an ideal employee?
- Why do we allow information imbalance to be used for personal gain?

In this essay, I break these six questions and more into many smaller, easier to answer pieces. Then, each piece will contain something called a "proposition," which is my way of declaring a moral argument. All propositions will be surrounded by evidence and critical reasoning that supports the argument. You may disagree with the proposition, and that's alright. I only seek to provide a logical conclusion to a series of evidence. In the end, only you can decide what you believe is moral. With that out of the way, let's begin.

Mr. Hoodwink needs a job. He is a charismatic man, not too passive and not too intense, but at that perfect middle ground where you can't help but smile when he parts his lips. He is always well dressed, adjusting a tie that may be a bit too loose, but a tie nonetheless. His hair may be just too unruly, but you can tell he put thought into just how unruly it should be and suspends it there with sheer will alone. And the way he walks: it's like he knows exactly where he's going and is not afraid to go there, and should anyone cross his path, he would walk straight through them and continue his wanderless march. This is exactly how he walks into his first interview.

Hired on the spot, Mr. Hoodwink takes his seat and begins work. He works slowly and turns in average work. Most of his time is spent at the water cooler chatting with other employees or kissing up to his boss. Despite working no harder than his peers and rarely doing his assigned job, his people skills and assertive attitude come in handy, and soon Mr. Hoodwink is promoted to manager. People love him. He may not be qualified for his position, but they love him nonetheless. And when the corporate official comes to check in on his branch, she sees his popularity and invites him to a management position at the company headquarters.

Mr. Hoodwink isn't a real person, but this is a real story that happens all the time in almost every field.^[2] People who have almost no relevant or honest qualifications climb their way to the top of the latter and reap the rewards of an authoritative position—pay, status, power. And once they reach that point, who would dare question their authority? Rarely anyone. And thus they stay there until they find a better opportunity or another company to leech from. It seems clear that Mr. Hoodwink and his associates are in the wrong. By most standards, it is unethical to lie and cheat your way to the top, especially when you take that chance away from someone who is both honest and qualified. But here is the interesting question: aren't the skills

that make a con man great—charisma, adaptability, communication, authoritative spirit, appearance of competence, and relentless drive to succeed—the exact same skills that make a strong leader? Does the con man deserve the position? Did Mr. Hoodwink earn his spot at the top?

This is definitely a loaded ethical question, and one that cannot be easily answered. However, the first step to answering any question is to place it in an abundance of context. We have already seen how con mans would work their way to the top, so now let's look at some historical data to see what role they play in a social ecosystem. We can start off by asking a simple question: what percentage of employees are con mans?

This is actually a very, very hard question to answer, not because of a lack of data or research, but because the average con man never gets caught. Con mans excel at convincing others of their authority, and since there is no way to accurately track the number of con mans with our current data, I suggest altering the question a little to answer it with something we do know. For example:

> What percentage of people lie on their resume?

Suddenly, we have an abundance of answers. But are these two questions the same? It seems clear that people who lie on their resume are con mans (they check off every box—intentional, deceptive, for-personal-gain), but not every con man lies on their resume. Thus, we can say that the percentage of people who lie on their resume is a **lower bound** for the number of employees who are con mans. So, what do the data tell us?

According to Management Science Researchers Christine Henle, Brian Dineen, and Michelle Duffy, over 55% of people lie on their resume.^[2]

Whether or not you think that lying on a resume is morally justifiable, that number is strikingly high. If that is the lower bound for con men, then the actual number must be higher than that. If you, the reader, have ever lied on your resume to get a job, then you are among the con man crowd as well. This may be uncomfortable, since being called a "con man" sounds like a negative trait. However, I intend to show that it is not always immoral and can actually be a beneficial trait in the long run. But back to lying on resumes.

Other interesting data from Employment Studies researcher Gianni Anelli shows that 45% of employees don't have the necessary skills for their job.^[3] If you've been paying attention, you may notice that the number of underqualified employees is lower than the number of people who lie on their resume. How can this be?

One conclusion is that people who lie on their resume don't get the job. However, that idea has already been disproven by Helene et al.. So, the only other option is that some liars, like Mr. Hoodwink, are actually fully prepared for their job. Now, I'll ask you, if a "con man" can fulfil every single aspect of their job, then do they deserve to be hired? Here is my reasoning:

Proposition One—A con man who can fulfil every part of the role they are assigned is moral.

Some readers might argue that a con man can still engage in immoral activity while fulfilling their role. This is true, and we will discuss that subset of con men later, but for now, let's look at the con man through a Utilitarian lens and assume their job is ethical. We can say that Proposition One is true for three reasons:

1. The goal of an employer is to find employees who can fulfil a certain role. Even if their qualifications are made up, if a con man can complete every task they are assigned, then they are doing their job correctly.
2. Con mans tend to have higher confidence levels and people skills (we will explore this later). When deciding between two candidates, both capable of fulfilling the job, hiring the one with the best communication is the natural choice.
3. Once the hiring process is over, the resumes no longer matter. Thus, the lies on a resume are a temporary immorality, but the long-term work of a con man can be, and often is, fully moral.

This proposition also plays into the reason people lie on their resumes. I use the term "lie" loosely, meaning any deviation from the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. For most con mans, they only lie because they want the job. An honest candidate and a con man both have the same motive, objective, and capability of fulfilling their role. This means that, though lying may be immoral in this context, the long-term morality is neutral.

We can follow this idea further using something I like to call a Truth Train (more commonly known as a syllogism). Assume all morality is based in the eyes of an employer, so even if the job itself is immoral, the employee is still moral if they complete their assigned job. We can only say this because the employer is the highest level of authority in the job environment (so what may be moral in the job environment may be immoral in a larger scope, like personal or American identity). Try and follow the two premises and see if the conclusion is logical.

> Premise One: All people who fill their role are moral.

- > Premise Two: Some people who fill their role have lied on their resume.
- > Conclusion: Some people who lie on their resume are moral.

It may take a second to find the caboose of the truth train, but it is in fact a valid one.

Therefore, in the scope of a corporate environment, I propose my second statement:

Proposition Two—Lying on a resume is moral if the liar can fulfil all the job requirements, and immoral if they cannot.

In the end, Mr. Hoodwink has the same goal as any other employee—getting a sustainable job. And for con men to stand their ground in a competitive environment, bending the truth on their resume is almost a requirement.^[4] From the corporate perspective, con men who fulfil their role are exactly the same as any other worker, and thus they deserve the job just as much. It's easy to say that an honest applicant is more deserving of the role, but consider this: con men excel at communications and people skills.^[5] If both applicants, one honest one lying, apply for the same job with the same qualifications, wouldn't it be better for the company to give the job to the one with the best interpersonal skills? It seems obvious, but this is actually one of the main arguments against con men: "they are taking the jobs from the qualified people." This may be true, but what use is the smartest, most skillful person in the world if they can't communicate their ideas properly?

This is actually a rather interesting question, and to answer it, we can turn back to Anelli, the Employment Studies researcher at the University of Warwick. He found that, out of the top 10 skills demanded in the current job market, 7 had to do with communication or social responsibility.^[3] So when we ask if people-skills play an important part in the hiring process, the answer is an overwhelming yes. These data also suggest that, in a corporate setting,

communication skills are valued above hard skills at about a 3:2 ratio. This makes sense, because so long as an applicant has all the necessary hard skills, they can be considered for the job. Since most applicants have (or at least claim to have) these skills, it is their extraskillular traits that set them apart from the rest of the competition. Mr. Hoodwink may not be a brilliant scientist, but he has the interpersonal skills to maintain his job in almost any position. Knowing Excel or SAP may get a foot in the door, but clear communication is what lands the job.

Another reason that communication and social skills are important in the hiring process is because oftentimes the people who are doing the hiring for a company are different than the people an employee will work under. At first glance, this doesn't seem like a big issue. The company hires specific people to conduct interviews so the managers have more time to work in their designated area, and that means that everyone wins. Everyone but the job market. The hiring staff are looking for specific traits, and those traits don't always align with the job position. For example, let's say that an applicant said this line during an interview:

> "I worked on a project that used pandas to clean data in python environments."

To a computer scientist, this is an impressive statement that shows competency in many industry-specific skills. To a hiring manager who doesn't know coding, this sounds like an interesting story about a furry janitor in the Amazon Rainforest, but not anything related to the job. If the hiring staff are unfamiliar with the terms and standards of the relevant field, then they are more likely to give a job to someone who has clear communication than someone who is perfectly qualified but can't express it to someone in an unrelated field.

The opposite effect can happen as well, where unknowledgeable hiring staff give jobs to the people who *sound* skillful rather than those who actually are. Here is a quick test to check your own bias. Which of the two applicants is better suited to be a leader?

Chloe Minniway

- Clumsy
- Slouched Posture

Amanda Spindler

- Intelligent
- Maintains Eye Contact

Whether or not you resisted it, your first reaction was that Amanda would make a better leader. It seems obvious that an intelligent person who maintains eye contact would make a great leader, but what about those two traits actually prepare someone to lead? And isn't it fully possible that a clumsy person who slouches could be an excellent leader? As the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman phrases it, "real evidence of [leadership] is missing in the story, and the gap is filled by a guess that fits one's emotional response to [the candidates]".^[6] Basically, we subconsciously apply our first impressions of someone to their whole character, regardless of whether it actually holds true.

The bias you just experienced is the result of something called the Halo Effect, which is where a person assumes a broad application of someone's character based on very limited information. This effect, of course, increases the number of con men, who excel at the appearance of competency and use their confidence to mistakenly be considered qualified.

I actually had a relevant interaction at a recent Career Fair at Southern Methodist University. I met with a representative from a very well-known cellular provider company, and the woman I met with said they were looking for "Full Stack Developers and Software Engineers." Right up my alley. So, as she was looking over my resume, she pointed to a link and asked, "what's this link at the top go to? Is it your personal website or something?"

The website was my GitHub profile. (For the non-coder readers, GitHub is the worldwide industry standard for Software Development. It would be like asking "What's Excel? Some sort of tutoring class?")

Needless to say, when an interviewer or representative is not intimately familiar with the needs of the company, their company will be filled to the brim with yes mans and con mans. From an industry perspective, and one that encourages the hiring of qualified individuals, I propose my third argument:

Proposition Three—A company that separates its hiring staff from its working staff is immoral (unless the hiring staff is intimately familiar with the relevant field.)

By now, we have a solid understanding of where to find con mans and how they infiltrate into a company. However, we have yet to discuss what happens to all the people who don't get the job. Logically, it makes sense to say that every time a con man gets a job, an honest applicant is rejected. Although, with over half of applicants being some sort of con man, this is not always the case. Examine the theoretical table below.

Applicants	Con Man	Qualified Worker
------------	---------	------------------

Con Man	Either Wins: Fair fight	Con Man wins: Undeserving Victory
Qualified Worker	Worker wins: Deserving Victory	Either Wins: Fair fight

Luckily, we can say that from a moral standpoint, we only have to examine the top right box. In the other three examples, it's either an equal opportunity fight or the qualified worker comes out on top. So, let's zoom in on the morally questionable top right box. As always, we need to start with a question. I will assume, as before, that both candidates can fully fulfil the role, but that the con man is lying about their qualifications (whether that be university attendance, previous work, false references, etc.). So, is Mr. Hoodwink immoral for "taking" the spot of a fully qualified individual?

Another loaded ethical question. We can try and use some of the previously mentioned evidence, but those were under the assumption that the con man was the only candidate. Does the answer change when we introduce a new variable?

Before answering this question, I want to present some evidence about a recent trend in the job market published by The Burning Glass Institute, part of Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work. In the highly competitive modern job market, employers are now starting to care less about the education and certifications of potential employees and more about their previous projects and demonstrated competency.^[7] This is because the employers are starting to realize what we have been discussing this entire essay:

people can have the necessary skills for a job even if they don't have the official qualifications to prove it.

There is hardly a visible difference between a Computer Science student who spent four years and half a million dollars to get a degree and a freelance coder who spent those four years developing industry specific skills. In this case, the qualifications are not a prerequisite to the skills, but that is not always true. Take doctors, for example. It's going to be very hard to find a doctor who has all the skills required to perform surgery but lacks the degree to prove it. So in some fields, qualifications DO indicate competency, and it is harder to apply the con man argument. The more specialized a field is, the harder it is to get away with faking qualifications, because it becomes nearly impossible to gain the necessary skills without them. Thus, the more specialized a field is, the less con mans we can expect to see. Specialization seems to be a natural filter that weeds out the con mans and only leaves the people with honest qualifications and thorough competency.

Following this logic, we can also see why some con man scandals are more important than others. It's the reason why headlines like "Florida Man Falsely Poses as Doctor"^[8] is a much more worrisome headline than something like "Local Company's Best Accountant Lies about College Degree" even though the accountant has magnitudes of more influence on the average person. Thus, with the knowledge that qualifications are not the only way to prove that someone can fulfill their role in a company, I make my fourth proposition:

Proposition Four—A con man who "takes" the job of a fully qualified individual is moral on the premise that both can fulfil the demands of the job.

It's easy to say that Mr. Hoodwink can only win by stepping on the qualified applicants, but it's hard to realize that qualified applicants also only win by standing on top of everyone else. 'Victimless deception' may not actually be victimless, but there is always a victim in competition. The con man's deception does not victimize another applicant any more than an honest applicant victimizes other applicants. If both can fulfill the position, then both are at equal standing.

By now, we have collected a lot of evidence on why being a con man is both moral and beneficial in a corporate setting. As a quick recap, here are the beneficial traits of a con man:

- They are people-oriented and value clear communication.
- They are trusted by their peers and are naturally seen as leaders.
- They often boost group morale with their storytelling and flattery.
- They can compete with qualified employees because their skills are just as developed.

Bending the truth may move them through the company, but a solid foundation in their skills is how they stay.

However, we should use another Truth Train to check if *all* con mans are moral. Consider the premises and try to determine if the conclusion is valid.

- > Premise One: All con mans use deception.
- > Premise Two: Some deception is moral.
- > Conclusion: All con mans are moral.

This Truth Caboose is in fact NOT valid, because some con mans can use deception that is immoral. The most well-known con mans are usually the ones who are corrupt from start to

finish—Charles Ponzi,^[9] Victor Lustig,^[10] Bernie Madoff.^[11] But what makes these con men immoral while people like Mr. Hoodwink are just as moral as the rest?

The answer lies not in the con man behavior, but in the nature of the con man's job. Moral con men, like Mr. Hoodwink, are just regular employees. They may have deceived a hiring manager to get the position or sucked up to the boss to get a raise, but for the most part, their day to day lives are honest and diligent. On the other hand, immoral con men do not engage in ethical behavior during their job. These are the Ponzi Schemes, the Snake Oil Sales, the Telescammers, and other jobs that rely on deception. The con men at these jobs are immoral because they rely on deception to make a profit instead of using it as a tool for mobility. In light of this, I make my fifth proposition:

Proposition Five—A con man who continues to deceive others after their initial employment is immoral.

The distinction between a moral and an immoral con man is that moral con men deceive others in order to *change location*, while immoral con men deceive people to *stay where they are*. Media usually only portrays the immoral con men, which is why there is such a negative stigma surrounding the term. In the end, con men just use an information imbalance as a method of mobility. In a world overflowing with information and data, it's hard to find a job that is not reliant on some sort of information inequality. We trust doctors because we are under the impression that they know more about medicine than us. We trust Investment Managers because we know they have more information on market trends. We trust Real Estate Agents because they control the availability of housing information.^[12] In the end, con men are simply doing what almost every worker does: shifting the balance of information for a profit. It would be

fallacious to call out con men for being immoral without also calling out the doctors and lawyers and engineers who use the same information asymmetry to survive in the job market.

Now, if we go all the way back to the original question of Mr. Hoodwink's morality, does the answer change in light of all of this evidence? Is he immoral for using his people-skills to traverse through a company? Is he immoral for bending the truth on his application so he could actually have a fighting chance amongst his peers? Does his initial deception really make him a bad boss? Is it not his confidence, charisma, communication skills, adaptability, and drive to succeed that makes him a great leader? Does Mr. Hoodwink deserve his spot at the top?

That's for you, the reader, to decide. I presented you with the evidence and moral propositions, but in the end, only you can decide what you believe.

If you are a fully qualified individual and still despise con men, then great! The more con men that are in the world, the more we need qualified people to have specialized knowledge. You will still be fighting for your spot among con men, but standing by your qualifications will set you apart from the rest.

However, if you are worried that you aren't able to stand your ground in the ruthlessness of the modern job market, if you value people and relationships above all else, if you are hopeless about moving through a company or are scared that you can't succeed, if you are charismatic and charming and want to use those traits to bring joy to others, if you know your skills can compete with the rest of the crowd, or if you are willing to take your own path and control your own fate no matter what anyone tells you, then I have a proposition for you:

Proposition Zero—Become a moral con man. All you need to do is Fake it 'till you Make it!

References

1. Kruger, Justin, and David Dunning. “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 77, no. 6, 1999, pp. 1121–34. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121>.
2. Henle, Christine A., et al. “Assessing Intentional Resume Deception: Development and Nomological Network of a Resume Fraud Measure.” *Journal of Business and Psychology*, vol. 34, no. 1, Feb. 2019, pp. 87–106. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-017-9527-4>.
3. Anelli, Gianni. “But Which Skills?: Natural Language Processing Tools and the Identification of High-Demand Skills in Online Job Advertisements.” *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2023. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.13169/workorglaboglob.17.2.0091>.
4. Winter, Bill. “Lying on Résumés: Shortcut to Success?” *American Bar Association Journal*, vol. 67, no. 8, 1981, pp. 978–79. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20748903>. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.
5. Wood, Jennifer L., et al. “Lying on Job Applications: The Effects of Job Relevance, Commission, and Human Resource Management Experience.” *Journal of Business and Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 1, Aug. 2007, pp. 1–9. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-007-9048-7>.
6. Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Penguin, 2012.

7. Fuller, Joseph. "The Emerging Degree Reset." *The Burning Glass Institute*, Feb. 2009, https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/emerging_degree_reset_020922.pdf.
8. Anonymous. "Florida Fake Teen Doctor, Now 25, Sentenced to Prison for New Scam ." *NBCMiami*, 3 Jan. 2023.
9. Williams, Terry, and Trevor B. Milton. "Wall Street Cons." *The Con Men: Hustling in New York City*, Columbia University Press, 2015, pp. 219–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/will17082.15>. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.
10. Hand, David J. "Intentional Dark Data: Fraud and Deception." *Dark Data: Why What You Don't Know Matters*, Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 140–66. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmd85db.9>. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.
11. Heydenburg, Michael R. "The Ponzi Scheme as a Deception Operation: The Bernie Madoff Case Study." *American Intelligence Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2015, pp. 27–34. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26202133>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2024.
12. Levitt, Steven D., et al. *Freakonomics*. Denoël, 2014.