Imposter Syndrome: Flawed Self-perception Limits Career Success

70% of all people feel like fakes at some time or another\(^1\)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When will they find out I don’t know what I’m doing?

Imposter syndrome is real. Despite a mountain of evidence that demonstrates we are skilled and capable—positive work reviews, promotions, awards, pats on the back—imposter syndrome leads us to doubt our abilities, attribute our successes to luck or chance, and make us feel it’s only a matter of time before we’re discovered as frauds.

Imposter syndrome is common. Early research on this topic estimated that 70 percent of people feel like fakes at some point. First observed as a phenomenon in high-achieving women, imposter syndrome has since been identified in both women and men. Subsequent research has revealed higher incidence (or at least more admissions about feeling this way) in younger workers, minorities, individuals working in fields where they have previously been excluded, and some medical professionals.

Imposter syndrome is not the same as a lack of self-confidence. This psychological pattern has become a popular topic recently leading to confusion on its meaning. It is not synonymous with the lack of confidence or self-doubt caused by genuine limitations. Instead, it’s an incorrect assessment of one’s abilities compared to peers.

Imposter syndrome holds some people back. Many people who fall prey to imposter syndrome are successful at work, despite their self-perceived fraudulence, but they are unable to fully enjoy their success. For some, constantly feeling like intellectual frauds can hamper job performance, job and career satisfaction, and career progress. It can cause workaholism and perfectionism, and it ultimately leads to job burnout. Still others react with avoidance tactics by sparingly highlighting their accomplishments, and ducking salary negotiations, new assignments or promotional opportunities, which keeps them from achieving to their potential.

How can we confront imposter syndrome? While many people achieve success despite authenticity doubts, knowing how to overcome these feelings could help them internalize accomplishments and feel more satisfaction and less stress at work. Organizations can and should help employees by being aware of the signs of imposter syndrome and the current business trends that are thought to exacerbate it. Interventions can help employees achieve fair pay and promotions, develop greater job satisfaction and commitment, helping them to be strong performers long term.
Clarifying Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a psychological pattern that occurs when an individual has an inaccurate self-perception. It is not a clinical diagnosis or mental illness, but rather a temporary form of intellectual self-doubt that is not based on objective assessments. These individuals also make inaccurate comparisons between themselves and their peers, often overestimating their peers’ competence.

A recent rise in popularity of the term has made it a business world buzz word, and it has mistakenly become a synonym for a lack of confidence. Reducing it to a confidence issue, makes it a personal deficiency and places the burden of fixing it wholly on the person suffering from it, rather than considering the work environments (external factors) that can foster it.

It is also important to separate imposter syndrome from feelings of self-doubt based on real knowledge limitations. This type of doubt leads to objective self-reflection, helping a person accurately identify gaps in his or her expertise and develop a plan for self-improvement.

Prevalence of imposter syndrome in high achievers and situational minorities

Many talented, accomplished people have been affected by imposter syndrome—actors, well-known business leaders, even Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

“It’s experienced by people who always set high standards for themselves but evaluate themselves very harshly,” said Ilene Wasserman, PhD, head executive coach for Wharton’s Advanced Management Program.

Clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes first used the term 40 years ago, and the phenomenon continues to attract interest. In 2011, writing about this psychological pattern in the International Journal of Behavioral Science, researchers Jaruwan Sukulku and James Alexander found that 70 percent of executives report experiencing it at least once in their careers, and it was more pronounced among high-achieving women. Further research revealed that anyone can have imposter syndrome. The original findings of higher pervasive self-doubt in women may simply illustrate that more women than men are willing to admit to and share these feelings.

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Research continues to attempt to identify causal factors and types of people more prone to imposter syndrome. Here a few:

1. **Employees in a workplace where they are the minority**

   Ethnic minorities, women or any individual working in a climate where they’ve historically been excluded are more likely to question their own abilities. Examples include research labs, STEM careers, corporate boardrooms and elected government positions. Individuals in these situations tend to be questioned about their competence and judgment at a much higher rate, which contributes to their self-doubt. They are also more likely to feel they received their job based on affirmative action quotas, personality or character, rather than skills or experience. Today’s organizations are also increasingly international, with more and more C-suite leaders having been raised in other cultures. Adjusting their style to fit in can contribute to their feelings of fraudulence.

2. **Younger workers and millennials**

   Many workers in their 20s and 30s have grown up with the pressures of social comparison and overprotective parenting—factors that can contribute to anxiety, fear or insecurity about work or school performance. Raised in an age of “everyone gets a trophy,” many have little experience with failure. A recent study in the United Kingdom found that one-third of millennial workers reported feeling the effects of imposter syndrome. A study of university librarians showed that those in the first three years of their careers reported higher imposter syndrome scores than their more experienced colleagues.

3. **Helping professions including clinical nurse practitioners and physicians**

   Constantly addressing patient care issues that arise outside one’s immediate bank of knowledge is thought to lead to higher incidences in this profession. Additionally, the medical profession neither prepares physicians to grapple with mistakes nor adequately supports them to share their insecurities.

One in three millennial workers report feeling the effects of imposter syndrome.

Source: Wharton Executive Education, 2018
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Current business trends may exacerbate imposter syndrome

No one’s entirely sure what causes imposter syndrome. Some evidence links its origins to childhood experiences. But several external (situational) factors are thought to contribute. Today’s business environments and cultures top the list.

Workplace volatility—Today’s workplaces continually change, and imposter syndrome is shown to reduce an individual’s adaptability. Talent is agile. There’s little job security. Employees change bosses frequently. Tech-oriented workers—engineers, programmers or other specialists—are often promoted into management roles, which require an entirely different set of skills. This volatility can spell trouble for those struggling with imposter syndrome.

Workforce diversity and inclusion—Workplaces are increasingly diverse, but inclusion doesn’t necessarily keep pace. Hidden barriers, biases and stereotypes hinder multicultural professionals, women and various generations of workers. To illustrate, more women than men are graduating with bachelor’s degrees, but women are questioned about competence and judgment at a higher rate than men, triggering feelings of imposter syndrome. Research in academia shows that competent students of color or other underrepresented identities sometimes question the role of affirmative action in their admission, contributing to self-doubt.

International nature of large organizations—Increasingly, today’s corporations are international, and employees may have been raised in cultures that emphasize modesty or restraint, rather than the brasher American business style.

Work cultures that reward overconfidence—Venerating confidence over competence has serious risks and can lead a team, project or even company astray. One study found that the odds of making a bad acquisition were 65 percent higher for overconfident CEOs.

Social media usage—“Surrounding influences fuel imposter syndrome,” says Sam Parr, founder and CEO of The Hustle. We can easily compare ourselves to others, and when we see someone getting awards or living the dream on social media, we assume these things are legitimate when they perhaps don’t tell the whole picture.

Imposter Syndrome Intervention

Not all self-doubt in the workplace is bad. And it isn’t necessarily imposter syndrome. Fleeting self-doubt can work to our advantage, motivating and driving us forward to meet a new challenge. A new employee, an employee thrown into a new situation or someone promoted into management without proper training would naturally have doubts. Alleviating self-doubt in these cases might be as simple as finding a way to help the person become more competent.

Self-doubt can also stem from skewed views of how well peers are doing. This distortion may be based on those individuals’ overconfidence or skewed social media evidence.

It’s important to consider actual competence before mistakenly attributing self-doubt to imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is when a competent, high achiever incorrectly assesses his or her abilities.
Ways to combat imposter syndrome

1. **Acknowledge what you’re feeling.** Learning to recognize these feelings, rather than engaging in them, is the first step in learning to let go of self-doubt, suggests psychologist Audrey Ervin.17

2. **Spot evidence of your success.** Meeting goals and doing a good job are objective signs of your ability. Save the evidence—the emails and messages telling you how great you did—to use as positive reinforcement when you need them. “It’s easy to look at each small success in isolation and discount it for various reasons. It’s much more difficult to discount it when you acknowledge what your strengths are and how many successes you’ve had over time.”8

3. **Own your successes.** Even if you had outside help or a little luck, acknowledge and celebrate your wins. When someone compliments your work, don’t brush it off as being in the right place at the right time or as a lucky break. Instead, thank them. Force yourself to linger on your accomplishments, so you have a more balanced perspective.

4. **You’re not alone in feeling this way.** Research done in the 1980s estimated that 70 percent of all people feel like fakes at some time or another. Talking to or hearing from others (such as a mentor or trusted friend) who have felt this way can help.

5. **Fake it ‘til you make it.** Act with confidence, even if you don’t feel it.

6. **Tell your inner critic to be still.** Stay conscious of what you say to yourself. And, avoid comparing yourself to others. (This may mean avoiding the one-sided perspectives of social media.)

7. **Push yourself to act before you’re ready.** If you struggle with procrastination caused by self-doubt or the need to “have all the facts,” give yourself time limits. Flawless isn’t usually necessary, and there will never be a perfect time.

8. **Don’t take constructive criticism personally.** There are always ways to improve what we do. When you receive feedback, try to reframe it as a way for you to meet a goal of lifelong learning.

9. **Ask for help.** Not knowing how to do something isn’t a sign of weakness.

10. **Mentor someone else.** It will boost your feelings about how much you really do know.
How organizations can lessen the effects of imposter syndrome

Companies also have an opportunity to help mitigate imposter syndrome in their organizations, which can lead to improvement in productivity and employee confidence levels. For example, through learning and development, managers are trained to be able to identify who among their team has developed imposter syndrome. These employees put off a “never good enough vibe” that is typical of this behavioral pattern. These individuals also shrug off achievements and stop short of applying for promotions or special projects. They may also struggle with perfectionism or workaholism.

SIGNS OF EMPLOYEE IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Procrastination caused by a perfectionist fear of failure causing them to struggle to start
- Workaholism motivated by the belief that they are not skilled enough so must work harder than others to measure up
- Perfectionism causing them to set unrealistically high standards for themselves and others
- Not accepting help from others because they feel that going it alone helps them prove their worth
- Turning down promotions or new assignments with the excuse that they’re “not ready yet”
THEORETICAL MODEL OF LEADERSHIP IMPOSTER PHENOMENON

The corporate culture also must be set up to be a trusting workplace, and leaders should have relationships with their employees that signal it’s OK to talk about self-doubt. There are several opportunities to encourage these practices.

Workplace affinity groups—Expect that individuals placed in positions and situations where they are a minority may be prone to self-doubt. Groups with shared interests and experiences enable workers to surround themselves with people who can relate.

Mentorship programs—Mentors can serve as a professional anchor for those struggling with imposter syndrome. By sharing experiences and advice, mentors can help protégés work through feelings of self-doubt and understand they’re not alone.

Trained managers—When employees have a trusting relationship with their manager, they feel more comfortable sharing self-doubt. Managers can then provide frequent positive feedback. They can also engage with the self-doubt, letting employees know that fears and uncertainty are normal.
Organizations can also help employees build knowledge and understand the value of their jobs. “The more knowledgeable workers become, the less likely they are to have invisible holes in their confidence.” Knowledge of the job market can help employees feel more marketable, enabling them to feel satisfied and committed to their organizations long term.

When employees are high achievers but hesitant about their career path, a little encouragement can go a long way. Keep an eye on workers’ trajectories. If your high-performing employees aren’t asking for raises or promotions, don’t assume they are satisfied. Use real metrics of job performance to assess employees when determining salaries and opportunities for promotions.

However, managers must be cautious in venerating confidence over competence. If your workplace values creativity and innovation, it must also value uncertainty and not knowing. Overconfidence has downsides which can lead a team, project or even company astray. Instead of blindly urging for more confidence, make room for people to voice, acknowledge and heed doubt.

“The more knowledgeable workers become, the less likely they are to have invisible holes in their confidence.”

When high-achieving individuals feel intense intellectual or professional fraudulence, they are experiencing imposter syndrome. These feelings can become a barrier to career development, affecting productivity, job satisfaction and self-confidence. They can also have an economic impact for the individual, keeping them from negotiating salaries or striving for promotions.

Personal and organizational interventions, as well as learning and development and mentoring programs, can help employees feel more satisfied and committed—leading to better performance long term.
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About the Author

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Michele is recognized as a thought leader in the areas of entrepreneurship and talent development. She has authored several articles and columns on these topics. In addition, she delivers presentations and training on learning and development, change management, strategic planning, process improvement/redesign and leadership.

About SkillPath

A leader in learning and development since 1989, SkillPath provides professionals worldwide with strategic and innovative training solutions.

Our mission is to provide the highest-quality training for companies and businesspeople around the world, so they can benefit personally and professionally from the experience.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, our revenue funds scholarships for students at Graceland University. We have a long history of partnering with programs that develop individuals’ leadership and innovation skills, and our mission aligns with companies that share a goal to invest in mentoring and scholarship opportunities for students and young professionals.

To learn more about this topic or other workplace challenges, download additional free resources at skillpath.com/resources.
References


