

New study on the impostor phenomenon in the workplace shows how it affects career prospects and productivity

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Have you ever felt that you are not good enough and that someday soon someone will see through your façade of competence and expose you a fraud in your job? If so, you are not alone.

This sensation of being a fake in the workplace, somehow in a position beyond one's true capabilities is known as "the impostor phenomenon". Some estimate that about 70% of people from all walks of life feel like impostors for at least some part of their careers. The sensation is far from pleasant, but a new study from the University of Salzburg, Austria that was published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, suggests that it might not only be detrimental to your self-esteem but to your career prospects and business as well.

Dr. Mirjam Neureiter and Dr. Eva Traut-Mattausch studied the responses to an anonymous online survey of 238 university alumni, now working across a variety of sectors and professions. They were interested in how the impostor phenomenon would affect a sufferer's attitude to their career development, the ability to adapt to new working conditions and their knowledge of the job market.

They found that this suite of career self-management factors was negatively affected by the phenomenon, demonstrating that those who feel like fakes, though high-achieving, tend not to fulfil their full potential. By undervaluing their talent, workers could be ruining their

careers and companies.

But they did find one positive effect of the phenomenon. "It seems to encourage people to offer their best performance ... to prevent being uncovered as frauds," explains Dr. Neureiter.

Previous studies have demonstrated that people who are confident in their abilities feel - and are - more able to learn from and adapt to changes in the work place, to a much greater degree than those who doubt themselves. Furthermore, a knowledge of the general [job market](#) helps workers know their worth and feel more encouraged by this knowledge. Still other studies have shown that career optimism not only makes the individual happier, but enhances their prospects of promotion and has a beneficial impact on work productivity as a whole.

Optimistic people seem to experience more work satisfaction than their less positive colleagues.

Those who believe themselves impostors, by contrast, report various negative thoughts and emotions and are more disposed to feelings of depression. On top of this, even if self-doubters are successful sometimes, they remain fearful of failing the next time and of being discovered as fakes. This establishes a cycle that prevents them from developing an optimistic perspective in the future.

"As the impostor phenomenon contains the fear of being exposed, it might be expedient to provide networking programs or supervision groups where sufferers have the chance to share their experiences and feelings without any blaming," says Dr. Neureiter. "Incorporating the impostor topic in support measures might enhance the reduction of impostor feelings as well as their negative effects."

Perhaps, as Dr Neureiter thinks, the first step to overcoming the

impostor phenomenon and its negative consequences is for "suffering individuals to be encouraged to talk about their feelings."

More information: Mirjam Neureiter et al, Inspecting the Dangers of Feeling like a Fake: An Empirical Investigation of the Impostor Phenomenon in the World of Work, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016).
[DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01445](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01445)

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