Windows XP

Task failed successfully.

OK

How to Fail Successfully

Fear of failure as a software engineering intern

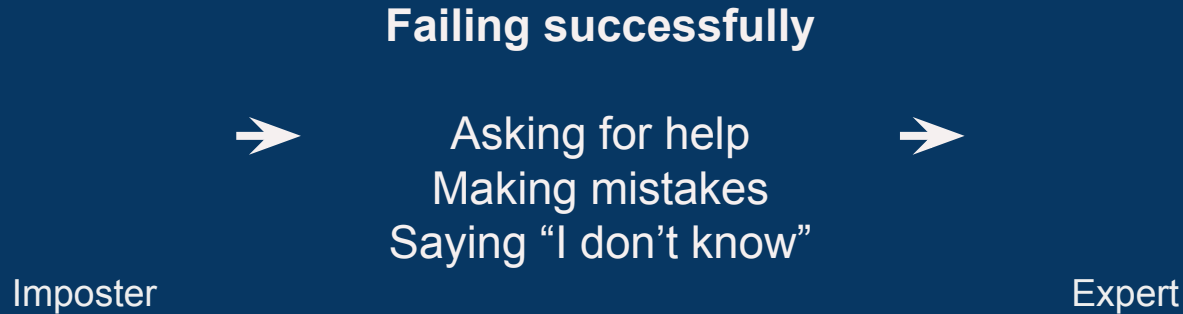JSConf Korea 2022 • Eleanor Rumsey • @EllieRumsey

Hi, I'm Ellie!

Fullstack software engineer at **FELLOW**

Former tech intern

Imposter syndrome - Fear of being "found out"

You are pretending to be much more qualified than you actually are

Failing successfully

→ Asking for help
Making mistakes
Saying "I don't know" →

Imposter   Expert

Being an intern

What's it like being an intern?

- Work hard in school, study hard for interviews → I know a lot 🤠
- Job uses technologies I'm unfamiliar with → I know nothing 😔
  - Very few opportunities to prove the knowledge I do have
- Imposter syndrome 😈

Meaningful internship projects

- People work the way they are expected to
- The "intern project"
  - Meaningless tasks enforce the idea that you aren't qualified
  - Isolation → Can't learn from others

As management:

✅ Assign interns low urgency, high importance projects

How can I fail successfully?

Ask for help

It's okay to not know everything

Asking for help

- The sooner you realise you're stuck, the sooner you can get help + move on
  - Less time spent feeling unqualified
- 💁 **Story**: Basic tickets on my first week at Fellow

As an intern:

✅ Present questions in context of what you do know

✅ No one in software knows everything about everything

As a team:

✅ Encourage collaboration and socialising

✅ Provide guidance, not just solutions

Make mistakes

It is scary, it will happen, you will be okay

Make the most of mistakes

- 💁 **Story:** Sugar in my coffee
- It is going to happen → the best you can do is learn from it

As management:

✅ Don't encourage a culture of blame
✅ Be open about times you've made mistakes
✅ Ensure processes exist to avoid the worst mistakes

Say "I don't know"

Be confident in what you do know, be transparent about what you don't

Know what you know and what you don't know

- Counterintuitive
  - Feels like you're admitting that you are unqualified or unintelligent
- Figure out the limits of your knowledge → **Define what you do know**
- Once you establish what you do know:
  - **Be transparent** when discussing your code
  - Imposter syndrome can't say you're pretending to be someone you're not

Responding to questions, feedback, and criticism

- Remember **why you think you're right**
- Discuss your thought process from a position of curiosity and collaboration

As an intern:

✅ Practice saying:
- "Can you clarify what you mean?"
- "That's a really good point, I hadn't thought about it like that"
- "I don't know"

✅ Don't assume other people are always right

Confusing code might just be wrong

- Don't assume that it's your fault for not understanding
- 💁 **Story:** Why aren't we caching?

Engineers love to have strong opinions

- Is their approach better or are they just saying it louder?
- Take these into consideration, but also **remember everything you do know**

Underrepresented groups

- Fear of confirming stereotypes
- Diverse representation in management

Following my own advice

- Seeking opportunities to leave my comfort zone
  - For instance, flying from Canada to Korea to talk about being a software intern
- Being transparent about what I do and don't know when responding to questions
- Asking for help and clarification rather than being embarrassed that I don't understand

Takeaways

✅

Ask for help

It's not a weakness

The role of an intern is to absorb information

✅

Make mistakes

It's a natural part of learning

Learn from them, move on

✅

Say "I don't know"

Remember what you do and don't know

No one knows everything

😊
Thank you!