Imposter Syndrome

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Imposter syndrome, making people uncomfortable and insecure in their careers. Beginning a new career can be difficult enough, learning a new technology, meeting new people, these aspects of our lives can quickly take us out of our comfort zone. Once we have departed the comfort zone, feelings of self-doubt or feeling like a fraud can begin to creep in. These are a few of the ways that an individual can quickly become uncomfortable when making a career change, or accepting a new promotion, or in our day-to-day routine. Imposter syndrome in the Information Technology (IT) industry can easily be misunderstood or brushed off as just “being new”. In this paper, we will discuss the mental aspects of imposter syndrome. While a relatively new concept to the IT industry, imposter syndrome may have found its’ home. Many individuals in IT-related fields suffer from a form of self-doubt that goes far beyond that of being a little uncomfortable at work. Imposter syndrome has claimed many careers and caused quite a bit of emotional distress since its discovery. Research shows individuals in IT struggle with imposter syndrome because, imposter syndrome is different from self-doubt, imposter syndrome was originally thought to be experienced by women only, and how the steps taken to work through imposter syndrome are similar to those used while battling depression and anxiety.

Imposter syndrome is defined as, “when someone heavily doubts their talents and accomplishments and they think they are frauds and don’t belong.” (Jackson, D. (2021, March 3). This is perceived as our internal voice, our self-conscious. It is of note there is a difference between imposter syndrome and self-doubt; to be elaborated on later. The concept of imposter syndrome is not new, although it has taken many forms throughout its history. Ranging widely from inception, imposter syndrome has been thought to originate in aspects of mental health.

The difference between imposter syndrome and self-doubt. “There is nothing wrong with occasional self-doubt. The key, most experts agree, is frequency”. (Owens, A. (2021, May 7). Unpacking that statement further, how often one experiences the feeling of self-doubt may indeed indicate a larger issue with imposter syndrome, that constant nagging feeling of not being good enough. Author Alexandra Owens poses the question, “The important questions to ask yourself are: Is your self-doubt developmentally appropriate? Is it a persistent, nagging, ongoing experience? Or is it a temporary, situational experience?” (Owens, A. (2021, May 7). Owen’s questioning of self-doubt helps to identify the trigger method of imposter syndrome. By helping the person who is feeling imposter syndrome identify the triggers, it allows them to navigate the methods to mitigate it.

Some people are predisposed to feel imposter syndrome more than others. Individuals that experience anxiety, or suffer from depression are likely to be impacted by this syndrome. Similar to anxiety, those that experience imposter syndrome may realize they feel persistent fear, this underlying feeling that a person may be “found out”. This further relates to the feelings experienced during an anxiety attack or a flareup of depression. The illogical fear that something bad may happen, those feelings that everyone is talking about you when you walk into a room, to name a few.

Imposter syndrome symptoms. What makes this syndrome so difficult to identify, so difficult to contain? Looking at the symptoms of imposter syndrome on an individual level provides great insight into the “why’ of the question. Sufferers will combat feelings of inadequacies, “Impostor Syndrome expresses itself as an extreme lack of confidence. When you experience success, you may find yourself thinking, "I'm not worthy," or, "I don't deserve this." (The Mind Tools Content Team Imposter Syndrome - From Mindtools.com. mindtools.com.) Those impacted by imposter syndrome may feel this feeling early on in their careers, sometimes as early as their first job. Some will experience this feeling upon receiving their first promotion or starting school. Similar feelings can be related back to depression as well.

It is thought that those who display perfectionist tendencies, will experience imposter syndrome more frequently than those who don’t. Sometimes accepting the mediocre might not be a bad thing. Getting the job done, or completing a project isn’t always just enough. Hindsight will allow those that suffer from imposter syndrome to dwell on what they might have done better. Sometimes this will take form in the shape of an idea or thought, long after the original project was done, this thought will push the suffer to dig up old projects and rework them, instead of working on the task at hand.

On the other end of the spectrum, are those that suffer from imposter syndrome that has an incredibly difficult time completing a task they are responsible for. This is said to be due to the thought process attempting to curb the feelings of possible failure. This symptom can be one of the worst symptoms as it can become self-destructive behavior. The failure to complete tasks on time can have grave results, up to and including loss of career. This symptom can be exacerbated by anxiety.

Tying back into anxiety is the next symptom. Some that suffer from imposter syndrome experience the fear of being judged or discovered. A common symptom experienced by those that suffer from anxiety. The fear of being discovered or being judged seems to be one of the more prevalent symptoms. An article by The Mind Reader states;

“Impostor Syndrome is often characterized by a constant fear of "discovery." Not only are you haunted by the fear that you aren't good enough, but also that your co-workers and managers will find out you're a phony – if they haven't done so already.” (The Mind Tools Content Team Imposter Syndrome - From Mindtools.com. mindtools.com.)

This constant fear has a multifaceted impact on the life of the sufferer.

The downplay of our own success. Humans are interesting in the fact that under normal circumstances they will celebrate their success, no matter how big or small. Imposter syndrome turns those feelings of happiness and joy, quickly into a shyness of sorts. Those that experience imposter syndrome will quickly dispute celebration, in turn downplaying their successes, not only in careers but in life in general. This feeling is quickly seen in the Information Technology field as “being humble”, however, those that are aware of imposter syndrome know "the truth. Someone who has just been promoted will be on “high alert”, they may believe they weren’t the correct choice for a promotion, or that some sort of trick is being played on them. They could very well experience this feeling until they are up for the next promotion, or when they move into a new corporation. The same can be said for feedback or when receiving praise for a job well done. This can sometimes be misconstrued as mocking when in reality this feedback is meant to help build the recipient up. When in reality the sufferer has indeed performed well or done something above and beyond to earn recognition.

It is thought, imposter syndrome was first seen in mental institutions. Further research originally theorized that imposter syndrome was initially suffered only by women. In early years, imposter syndrome was referred to as, “the imposter phenomenon”. “The Impostor Phenomenon was identified from clinical observations during therapeutic sessions with high achieving women by Dr. Pauline Clance. (Sakulku, J., & Alexander, J. (2011). The Imposter Phenomenon. *International Journal of Behavioral Science, Volume 6*(No. 1, 75-97), 75-97.) Dr. Pauline Clance’s research was targeted toward high achieving women, that displayed evidence of successful careers. Despite objective evidence of success, these women had a pervasive psychological experience believing that they were intellectual frauds and feared being recognized as impostors. They suffered from anxiety, fear of failure, and dissatisfaction with life. (Sakulku, J., & Alexander, J. (2011). The Imposter Phenomenon. *International Journal of Behavioral Science, Volume 6*(No. 1, 75-97), 75-97.) This was later disproven as we now know a wide range of people the effects of imposter syndrome.

The Information Technology industry is just now beginning to realize that imposter syndrome is real and that it has long plagued the industry. Many newcomers to the Information Technology fields are completely unaware of imposter syndrome when they begin their journey. Those that have more experience in the industry can quickly identify when someone new is experiencing the syndrome. Some going as far as quickly pulling the newcomer’s attention to the feeling and walking them through it.

Some veterans in the industry take to blogs online in an attempt to bring the issue to light. Many writing their own experiences, sharing what they have done to fight it. Author Dominique West writes;

“How do I describe that despite having almost 7 years of experience in Technology, with 4 of those years specifically in Information Security, I still question my success and my place in the community? How do I accurately convey a message of doubt without seeming overzealous? I’m not sure, but I decided to write it anyway. In part to the fact that I know this isn’t a journey that only I am experiencing. (West, D. (2019, February 23).

A quick Google search will yield hundreds of personal accounts, blogs, self-help videos, all regarding imposter syndrome.

Where the Information Technology industry is still in its infancy, many newcomers are unaware of imposter syndrome. This is further exacerbated by the culture within IT. With Information Technology being a fast-paced and increasingly competitive, the levels of self-doubt and imposter syndrome are easy to experience. Ego is another huge issue in the cyber security world. The very nature of the attack-defense culture drives this ego hierarchy where everyone is constantly competing and comparing. With this constant uncertainty and fear of judgment, professionals can end up operating in this constant cycle of self-doubt. (Is Imposter Syndrome Paralyzing Cyber Security Professionals. (2020, March 5).

It is impossible to know everything about cyber security or Information Technology. Many people attempt to specialize in a more granular manner, often picking one or two topics to focus on. This allows the individual to focus more of their learning efforts on a more finite scale. Even then, becoming a “specialist” or “expert” in a certain field doesn’t come easily, or without experiencing a level of self-doubt or imposter syndrome. This is caused by how quickly the technologies change. With the ever-changing landscape and constant evolutions of vulnerabilities, what you know one day might be completely irrelevant the next day. A further look into imposter syndrome in cyber security says, “If imposter syndrome continues to plague the cyber security industry, the risk of burnout is intensified. In a time when companies are scrambling to find talent, the risk of losing their current cyber security employees to burnout is particularly worrying. (Social Engineer (2020, June 15).

Imposter syndrome is not openly discussed in the Information Security industry. This is thought to be caused by the negative connotations related to being seen as weak. As previously mentioned, the Information Security industry is highly competitive. In such an industry having your peers see you vulnerable can lead to them attempting to bypass your authority or chain of command. Being seen as weak or vulnerable can also be taken as a lack of confidence. Given how quickly the industry changes, that level of perceived confidence is thought to be incredibly important. If you take two candidates with the same skill set, the one who displays the confidence will be the one to receive the job or the promotion. Knowing the aforementioned allows us to look further at the writings from Katherine M. Caflisch. Her writings in the American Society for Microbiology indicate, “imposterism is not merely an isolated attitude or opinion’ it can drastically affect job performance and has also been associated with anxiety and depression.” (Caflisch, K. M. (2020, August 14). If an employee is experiencing imposterism during a project any negative feedback received can be detrimental to the entire project or this individual’s career. The Information Technology industry has a relatively high turnover rate or “churn”. Career IT personnel who experience this “imposterism” tend to change companies every two to three years. These frequent career changes can add to the levels of imposter syndrome one may experience. To add to the chaos imposed by this syndrome, it has yet to be established as an official diagnosis in the DSM-5, psychologists have however, acknowledged imposter syndrome as a specific form and very real version of self-doubt.

Living with imposter syndrome, attempting to navigate a career, there has to be some help, a way to mitigate the impact of this “imposterism”. Thankfully for everyone, the internet provides the answer or at least some helpful guidance. Those that suffer from imposter syndrome and battle the feelings of fear and uncertainty have managed to provide an abundant amount of information to assist those that enter the industry or those veterans of the industry. Some provide examples of what they have done personally to improve or to quickly identify when they are experience symptoms of this syndrome. CISO David Stapleton provides his steps for mitigating or cutting off the feelings experienced with imposter syndrome. David says, “Be vigilant for the physical and mental signs that often accompany imposter syndrome” and “Take a breath and remind yourself of the facts”. (Stapleton, D. (2021, March 16). These steps are similar to the steps provided to assist in dealing with both anxiety and depression. To further elaborate on the methods used to counter imposter syndrome we look to the security experts. Cyber security is an incredibly fast-paced learning environment, along with high stress due to the nature of what is being protected. One small mistake can lead to a company spilling all their corporate data across the internet, or even worse, having it sold to the highest bidder on the dark web.

Relating to those that display behaviors of perfectionism, it is recommended to “not spend forever planning or waiting for circumstances to be perfect”. (Social Engineer (2020, June 15). This effectively removes the power from the feelings of imposter syndrome, again, a similar step is advised when dealing with depression. In speaking about the syndrome, we remove the power it has over us. Once the sufferer can come to terms with the fact that, they may not be able to perform perfectly every time, they can contribute something to their projects. Changing their mindset from failure to something positive allows them to diminish their feelings of self-doubt.

With all this self-doubt and constant fear of being discovered it is a wonder anyone would want to work in the IT industry. Given that imposter syndrome is not self-doubt but more specifically an extreme variation of self-doubt, more awareness is needed within organizations. IT professionals are working against not only external threats, but internal as well. There are many shapes and forms that imposter syndrome can appear, similar to anxiety and depression. In conclusion, imposter syndrome is not self-doubt, while it did originally begin with woman everyone can suffer from it, and there are many steps that can be taken to mitigate the feelings.

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