how to be a "talentless hack" in public

Thoughts on how to better deal and co-exist with imposter syndrome

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Author's Note

This zine is adapted from a "tech talk" I did as part of my school's computer science society. I thought it was important to have a more soft-skills focused talk, because I find that discussions around interpersonal skills are glaringly missing in technically-inclined spaces. Discussions around the impact of technological advances on society are also missing, which I find even more concerning. (Ethics, anyone?) Tech people deal a lot with hardware and software and new technologies that the average person has absolutely never heard of, which is okay, because it's literally their job to know about, discuss, and work on or use them. However, as someone who has spent a lot of time looking at tech from the outskirts (I did some non-coding work at two tech startups) and has recently become a CS student, I think there exists a tendency to forget that we're also people, and that we work on devices or products or software that will be used or exploited by other people. Discussions around economics, human psychology, ethics, and interpersonal skills should be viewed as important in technical fields as well. This is the spirit in which I wrote most of this. And if you happen to work in tech, it's a PSA for you as well.

Disclaimer:

1. All of this is just my opinion.

2. Like any other advice, please take it with a grain of salt. Or several.

Unless I say otherwise, none of this is backed up by anything other than my personal experience, and I'm sharing this stuff because I learned it the hard way and I'm hoping I can give you something to think about. But just because something works for me doesn't mean it'll work for you, so... you know. Use your judgment.

"talentless hack":

1. a confused person in the awkward position of doing something they know nothing about

2. a person with crippling imposter syndrome

When you call yourself a "talentless hack" (which you probably don't, but you might if we share a similar sense of humour), it's likely for one of two reasons: either you're caught in a situation where you suddenly have to perform or get results or do something, and that, with zero experience or knowledge of what's going on (at which point feeling like "a hack" is somewhat legitimate), or you're doing it out of self-deprecation because you have imposter syndrome. What imposter syndrome does is it tries to convince you that you're a confused person with no qualifications, you shouldn't be here, and everyone is going to find out that you don't know what's going on. When it succeeds, your brain freaks out and you panic.

You may feel like it's acceptable to be concerned when you're clueless and stuck in a difficult situation. But imposter syndrome? We've all heard about it, but having it often feels embarrassing. Somehow I always feel like I'm the only one who's insecure.

Stuff you probably already knew about imposter syndrome

It's **normal,** and *most people* experience it, and a bunch of famous people, including **Einstein!!** and **Neil Gaiman!!**, have said they experienced it (how did they manage to function at such a high level??), and it's all in your head ***(so why is just ignoring it not working???)***

When we talk about imposter syndrome, there's a few widely accepted ideas we're mostly all aware of. For example, most people experience imposter syndrome. It's more common among women, it's more common among people of colour, and it's more common among other historically marginalized groups. This difference in frequency is because historically, those are groups of people that have been shut out of opportunities to achieve at the highest level, and have also been commonly told they shouldn't be doing certain things. As an example, there are very few women in tech, there are very few Black people in tech, and as a Black woman in tech, sometimes I look around and go, oh god, what am I doing here. Not only that, but a previous boss has made it an actual issue for me before. (We love casual racism.)

That being said, you don't have to be historically oppressed to have imposter syndrome. You're more likely to experience it when something is slightly out of your comfort zone, and no level of achievement will ever make it go away. It's just your brain trying to convince you of stuff that isn't true and the only thing you can really do about it is present your brain with evidence that you're competent and then ignore it and move on. Which, as we all know, is much, much easier said than done.

The argument I want to make today is that a different and more actionable way to deal with imposter syndrome is to deal with the symptom instead of the cause. The symptom here is the fear that you're incompetent (and everyone is going to find out). In my experience, there's huge overlap between the skills you use to figure out confusing situations where you're minimally qualified and the skills you use to deal with imposter syndrome. An added benefit is that if you're confident in your ability to deal with new situations, imposter syndrome won't be as bad, because you'll you're equipped to deal with the worst-case scenario where the things your brain are telling you are actually correct.

Remember:

The first "talentless hack" actually has no idea what's going on.

The second is just suffering from their brain telling them they're the first "talentless hack".

Being good at dealing with confusing situations where you lack expertise will make it less likely for you to call yourself a "talentless hack" and will generally improve your confidence. As a bonus, it makes dealing with imposter syndrome much easier, at least in my experience.

When people meet me, they tend to assume I'm a reasonably competent person with some level of confidence. That isn't true, and their image of me is very flawed. Considering that I study a very technical field, I have basically no technical or concrete skills compared to the others in my degree. I'm somewhat mediocre at a lot of things. There's like 2 things I'm actually good at and both of them are not that useful in most professional environments. My main area of expertise is the history of type design. If you want to hire someone who already knows what they're doing, you really shouldn't hire me. So I deal with a lot of imposter-type feelings, because I'll run into really smart people and younger students who somehow already have a ton of relevant experience, I'll compare that to my resume and my life (which is kind of a mixed bag), and generally feel terrible.

That being said, I feel like I've gotten to do a lot of cool or at the very least interesting stuff in many different areas, despite my various levels of competence and various levels of success. And the way I do is by making a point of constantly throwing myself into new situations where actually I don't know what's happening. My default philosophy is, *this seems cool, let's do it*. Sometimes it doesn't work out very well, especially if it's low-stakes - for example, I did competitive programming in high school, and it went very poorly. But if I have enough time, and the stakes are high enough, I can pull off more that you'd expect. My first "real" co-op placement was at a med tech startup that hired me to do web development but informed me on the first day that I'd be doing mechanical design instead. At another placement, I was hired to do video marketing and then informed on my first day that I now also had to be a sound engineer. I came out of both jobs unscathed.

So over time, I've gotten really good at coping with being the clueless person in the room, not panicking, and occasionally even excelling. If you only have candidates with no experience or even minimal experience, I'm a great person to hire because I'm really good at learning on the job. I've gotten pretty good at not crumbling under pressure. This has translated to a lot less panic in general.

The importance of meta-skills

How do you become good at figuring stuff out? While I don't have many concrete skills, especially concrete technical skills, one thing that I do have is meta-skills. Remember how back in like, elementary school we would have a learning skills section on our report cards and the teachers made a super big deal out of it? I don't necessarily agree with how learning skills were evaluated in school, but the teachers were onto something, which is that those skills are really important.

I think talking about meta-skills is criminally underrated.

Learning Skills and Work Habits		E – Excellent G – Good S – Satisfactory N – Needs Improvement	
Responsibility		**Organization**	
• Fulfils responsibilities and commitments within the learning environment. • Completes and submits class work, homework, and assignments according to agreed-upon timelines. • Takes responsibility for and manages own behaviour.		• Devises and follows a plan and process for completing work and tasks. • Establishes priorities and manages time to complete tasks and achieve goals. • Identifies, gathers, evaluates, and uses information, technology, and resources to complete tasks.	
Independent Work		**Collaboration**	
• Independently monitors, assesses, and revises plans to complete tasks and meet goals. • Uses class time appropriately to complete tasks. • Follows instructions with minimal supervision.		• Accepts various roles and an equitable share of work in a group. • Responds positively to the ideas, opinions, values, and traditions of others. • Builds healthy peer-to-peer relationships through personal and media-assisted interactions. • Works with others to resolve conflicts and build consensus to achieve group goals. • Shares information, resources, and expertise, and promotes critical thinking to solve problems and make decisions.	
Initiative		**Self-Regulation**	
• Looks for and acts on new ideas and opportunities for learning. • Demonstrates the capacity for innovation and a willingness to take risks. • Demonstrates curiosity and interest in learning. • Approaches new tasks with a positive attitude. • Recognizes and advocates appropriately for the rights of self and others.		• Sets own individual goals and monitors progress towards achieving them. • Seeks clarification or assistance when needed. • Assesses and reflects critically on own strengths, needs, and interests. • Identifies learning opportunities, choices, and strategies to meet personal needs and achieve goals. • Perseveres and makes an effort when responding to challenges.	

Remember these?

Meta-skills are soft skills that help you develop concrete skills.

Meta-skills are a subset of soft skills, and they specifically focus on helping you develop concrete skills. We often don't really think of soft skills as something to work on, right? We just assume we'll pick them up by virtue of existing as a human. But I've worked with a lot of different people in a lot of different contexts, and in my experience, that doesn't always happen. This is especially true for people who are in school and only do school and don't take initiative to be involved in other things. Sometimes it's hard don't realize that you're missing some important soft skills because it's doing things with other people that you pick up skills (or become aware of a certain lack-thereof) by osmosis. But unless you're actually a genius, soft skills are what will make or break you as a co-worker. Even if you're working on your own, you will come into contact with or rely on other people eventually. And soft skills are always useful in general.

5 helpful meta-skills/ character traits for a confused person/ "talentless hack"

1. Knowing how to learn
2. Curiosity & perseverance
3. Communication
4. How to take/give feedback
5. Self-awareness

I. Knowing how to learn

Knowing how to learn is arguably the most important skill because there's always going to be a situation where you don't know something that you need to know. Also, it makes you pretty unstoppable because if you know that you're good at learning, it gives you a ton of confidence that if something unexpected comes up, you'll be able to figure out how to deal with it or at the very least figure who can.

Why school fails at teaching how to learn (in my opinion)

In my opinion, formal education (aka, the school system) has two jobs: the first is to teach people how to learn, communicate, and find information, and the second job is to teach people concrete skills. I think school is pretty terrible at teaching people concrete skills, because curriculums go out of date, evaluation requirements are kinda weird, and because it's very possible to get through a course without actually retaining any knowledge whatsoever. But I also think school is bad at teaching people how to learn things themselves, because at school, a lot of the legwork is done for you. All of the information is curated and ready for you to consume, you have a structure you're required to follow, and since class assignments and projects tends to exist in a bubble where the real world doesn't matter, if the information taught is outdated or even wrong you probably won't notice, as least not immediately. Also, most people forget what they learned in a class pretty quickly.

Now, some of these things are features, not bugs. It would suck if I paid 45 thousand dollars for an education where I have to dig out material and organize it myself. In a lot of cases, I learn things in school that I would have no idea to even think about looking up otherwise. But still, school curriculums are sometimes outdated, convoluted, missing critical information. Most classes aren't great at getting you to engage with content in a meaningful context. And if you're planning to practice applying your knowledge, it's good to have a meaningful context in which to do so.

Learning something on your own means that you have to put in a ton more work yourself. You need to figure out what you to know, when, and how much. You need to figure out where and how you're going to find that information. Ideally, you want to record and organize that information somehow so that you can access it more easily later. And then you need to figure out how to get that information in your system so that you can remember it, and actually use it. Different people are going to do different parts of this of this differently, because we all learn in different ways. How you do this is going to depend on how you best absorb information. But it's kind of important that you figure out what works for you, so that whenever something new comes up, you have a mental map of how you're going to attack it. I can't tell you what kind of structure will work for you. I know that personally, I like to learn through a mix of trying stuff out, watching demos, taking notes, and reading. But what I can talk about is some different options for finding information.

Learning on your own means:

creating your own structure/timeline for learning

knowing where + how to find information

figuring out how to record information so you can access it more easily later

figuring out how to get the knowledge in your system so you can actually use it

Places and ways to find information

Look things up online

Look at / read books (the index is great!)

Ask people for information/advice/demos

Go to a workshop / find a recording of a workshop

Get your hands dirty and try stuff yourself

Take a class

The internet is really good for two things: it's good for getting an overview of a topic, and it's also really good for finding answer to really obscure and specific knowledge on like some internet forum. However, contrary to popular belief, you can't actually learn everything online, especially if you're looking into a niche topic or discipline, so you'll have to broaden your search eventually if you want to do in depth. (Sorry to burst your bubble. If it makes you feel better, I do feel like a boomer now that I've said this. Oops.)

Books are also great, because they typically contain a lot more in-depth background knowledge and more details. There are books that go very in-depth on a subject of very narrow scope, which is a lot less common for online articles. A book is like a set of niche, interconnected Wikipedia articles, but much more detailed. In my opinion, books are very underrated for research.

There's are two main ways to use books. You can read them cover to cover if you're just trying to use them to improve your background knowledge, or if you're looking for specific information, the index is your best friend. The chapter list is also your best friend. Each section will typically have notes and sources that you can also check out for further information. It's a good idea to look through the index, table of contents, and notes to see if the book has what you're looking for. You do not have to read books from cover to cover. You just can.

Librarians are also very underrated. Talk to librarians. They actually have master's degree in how to find and organize information. If you don't know where to find something, a librarian will generally know. Depending on where you live, you may have access to your public library, university libraries, college libraries, the city archives, and/or museum libraries. They're there for you, and meant to be used.

You can ask people about what you're studying, whether that's seeing if you know anyone who might have answers or know someone who has answers. If you're at work, try to find out if someone in your organization can help and set up a meeting with them.

You can go to workshops. You can try stuff yourself. You can also take a class, but classes might not be tailored to exactly what you're looking for. That being said, there's really good at exposing to areas you would not know exist otherwise.

Some general advice:

Try to get a good mix of background/ general information and specific/ in-depth knowledge

Do not waste an expert's time by not doing your research beforehand – you want to ask them questions only they can answer, not things you can easily Google or find elsewhere

II. Curiosity and Perseverance (valuable sources of motivation)

Curiosity and perseverance go hand in hand. Learning a new skill is not easy. It takes a lot of work, a lot of discipline, and you have to be willing to not give up when you inevitably run into problems. The reason I briefly bring up curiosity is that while you don't have to be interested in something to learn about it, it helps a lot, and it makes you less likely to give up if you have intrinsic motivation. Otherwise, you have to rely on discipline. (And I am really bad at discipline.)

III. Communication

We all know communication is important, but it takes on a whole new level of importance when you're new to something and other people are involved.

Some quick tips for these situations: be honest with the people you're working with about where you're at skill-wise. You should find out what their expectations are, let them know how much you think you can handle, and negotiate with them if necessary. Sometimes, you might have to tell someone that they're asking you to do something you're not capable of yet. It's good to feel confident telling someone you're working with when you might need more time, or when you might need a different task entirely. Definitely ask for help if you need it and give updates on what's going on well and what you're still having trouble with. That shows maturity, keeps everyone on the same page, and prevents you and your colleagues from having nasty misunderstandings. If you don't know or understand something, ask.

It's also really cool when you can document what you learn, because it's useful for future you but it cn be useful to others as well. During the job where I had to teach myself sound engineering and recording fundamentals, I kept a record of what I learned for the person who replaced me to use. I think my employer and my replacement found it really useful. (I also got paid to train the new person, which was pretty cool.)

IV. Taking/Giving Feedback

Feedback goes both ways. If you're working with people, it's good to find out how you're doing, and if you're not already getting feedback, it helps to ask for it. Don't take it personally, obviously, but it helps to know where you're at and that can help direct what you choose to focus on improving at. You can also give feedback related to the expectations and how much you're actually able to do and if you're working with reasonable people you should be able to come to some kind of agreement.

V. Self-awareness

Self-awareness is two things: it's being aware of how other people see you, but it's also being aware of what your strengths and weaknesses are. The best ways to improve self-awareness are through being observant, asking for feedback, monitoring your own behaviour and so on. There's actually research that shows that people who are more self-aware are also confident. But even just experientially, knowing what you are and aren't capable of and being willing to communicate that makes you carry yourself with a certain amount of confidence that other people will definitely notice.

While I'm still here, here's my most important imposter syndrome geared advice: it helps to go out and do stuff. You don't have to be as aggressive about doing new and uncomfortable things as I am, but working on projects, either by yourself or with other people, goes a long way toward building skills and convincing yourself that you are a capable person. The more you put yourself out there, the easier it gets. It's never going to be painless, but you will at the very least have more and more reason to brush away the voices in your head that say you can't do anything.

Imposter syndrome, or even just fear of inexperience, is a terrible reason not to do something. Don't self-select out of things. If you think it would be cool to do something or apply somewhere, do it! You never know what'll come of it, and the worst thing that can happen is you fail. Even if you do fail, failure teaches you a lot more that not doing anything does. Get outside your comfort zone. It's cliché, but true. You might surprise yourself. Even if you don't, you'll still have a cool story.

Also, talent is overrated anyway.

You'll make it work. I believe in you.

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