

Am I good enough?

Shining a light on the impact of impostor feelings in 16-18 year old applicants



Introduction

Typically, when we talk about the world of work, we might automatically be referring to people with full-time jobs and who have experienced working life for at least some time, but this is not the whole picture. Sometimes it is easy to forget that we all have to start somewhere, and many young people are getting jobs and taking roles in the working world.

The impostor phenomenon (IP) is a psychological phenomenon which causes people to feel like they are undeserving of their successes and achievements. These people may experience feelings of doubt in their skills and might fear being exposed as a 'fraud' in what they do. This phenomenon has been highly focused on in women, but not fully assessed in adolescents; especially in terms of how this might affect their working lives.

As a company, Emotion at Work care deeply about a better world of work for everyone, making people feel confident, optimistic and safe and this starts when people are entering the workplace. The world of work is rife with emotions, and we bring them to life in the people, processes and places. Together they are the driving forces of human beliefs, behaviours and experiences and this research clearly demonstrates the importance of understanding impostor phenomenon for 16-18 year old applicants and those hoping to welcome them into the workplace.

I wanted to find out what kind of an impact (if any) the impostor phenomenon might have on younger people starting their journey in a workplace environment. For me, it was a topic I felt deserved to be explored in more depth, to support young people who are at a point in their life where they are making choices about what kind of work they may wish to pursue. We hope this research will shed light on factors which may cause issues in the workplace and offer insight for employers as a way of improving their young employee's experience.

In this report, we will offer some context on the impostor phenomenon, present our findings, and discuss how the findings relate to what more can be done for young people experiencing impostor feelings to help them better enjoy and get more out of their jobs.



Context

Impostor phenomenon was defined by Clance and Imes as ‘an internal experience of intellectual phoniness’. They conducted work to investigate impostor phenomenon and found it to be mostly prevalent in high-achieving women. From this, the Clance IP Scale was produced.

The **Clance IP Scale** is a survey that asks likert scaling questions, rating statements from **1** (not true at all) to **5** (very true) to describe themselves. Answers are then added up to give a score which gives a suggestion as to the extent of (if any) impostor characteristics they may display.

These scores are:

- **40 or less** = few impostor characteristics
- **41-60** = moderate impostor experiences
- **61-80** = frequent impostor feelings
- **80+** = often, intense impostor experiences



Early research was focused mainly around high-achieving women, but has since progressed to include impostor phenomenon and its links to perfectionism, increases in anxiety, influence on self-esteem and gender differences regarding impostor feelings (Pannhausen, Klug and Rohrmann, 2020; Rohrmann, Bechtoldt and Leonhardt, 2016; Cozzarelli and Major, 1990; Rackley et al., 2024). There has also been research into parenting styles and their links to the development of impostor phenomenon (Yaffe, 2021).

One area that has very little research is impostor phenomenon in young people. Though there are some studies, they tend to focus on the causes of impostor feelings, and not what affect these feelings have. We identified this gap, and have therefore chosen to focus our research on young people aged 16-18.

Similarly, there is some research related to impostor phenomenon in a work setting, such as the impact it has on managers and a link to job satisfaction and confidence, but very little has been done to look at the influence the impostor phenomenon has on the job application process. Interestingly, current literature suggests that there is a correlation between impostor phenomenon and a decline in job satisfaction. With this in mind, it is crucial that we are able to understand how impostor phenomenon affects young people, especially in the workplace, as this would allow us to tailor processes to them and their needs.

Methodology

Our study into impostor phenomenon and jobs was focused on the 16 to 18 year old demographic. This was because we believed this was around the age that young adults begin to find jobs and start their journey into working life. We aimed to gather our sample from sixth forms and colleges. For this particular study, the data collected was from a sixth form in a town outside of Bristol. We took a quantitative

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In total we had 173 students submit responses to take part, split across years 12 and 13.
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approach to the research, using a Google Form to gather responses. This form was open from 16th November 2022 until 30th November 2022, following an assembly presentation providing some context about impostor phenomenon and what would be expected when participating in the study. In total we had 173 students submit responses to take part, split across years 12 and 13. The results have then been collected and analysed to form this report.

At the start of our survey, we included a link to the Clance IP Scale. Participants were asked to fill this in and then record their score in the survey. Our Google Form also included likert scale questions surrounding factors we felt might have an impact on applying for a job, asking participants to rate them on the scale of 1 (no influence) to 5 (very strong influence). These factors were identified before starting our research. To identify the factors, we asked 8 individuals of the target demographic to name some factors they thought would influence their decision-making process if they were applying for a job and we focused on the most common of these. Finally, we identified 3 main characteristics of the impostor phenomenon (which we have named IP indicators) and asked people (using the same likert scaling system) to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these characteristics.

A few demographic questions were also included at the start of the form.



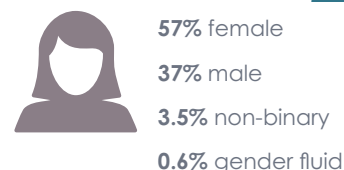
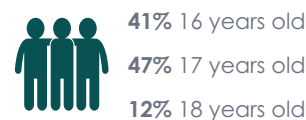
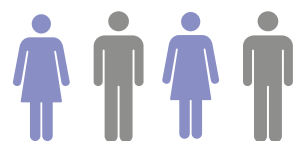
Am I Good Enough?

Shining a light on the impact of impostor feelings in 16-18 year old job applicants

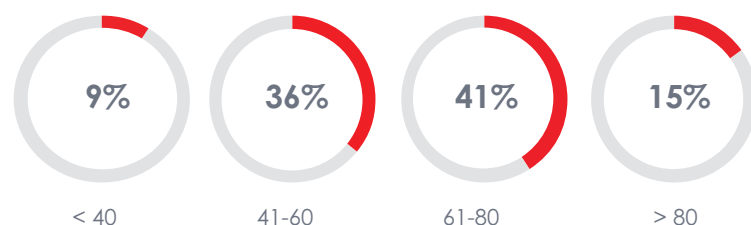


KEY DATA

Sample size
173 students



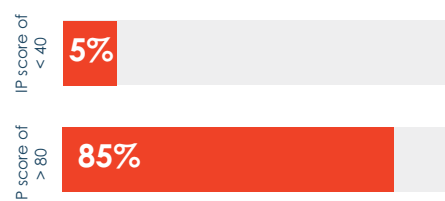
Clance IP Scale scores:



- < 40: few impostor characteristics
- 41-60: moderate impostor experiences
- 61-80: frequent impostor feelings
- > 80: often, intense impostor experiences

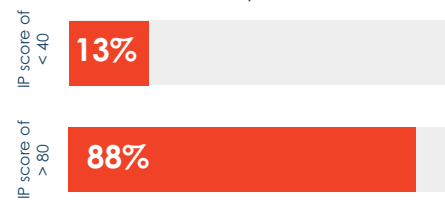
IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON SCORE AND IMPOSTOR INDICATOR STATEMENTS

Feeling like a fraud in your achievements



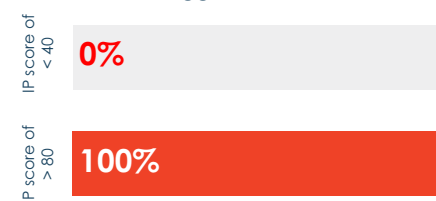
% who agree / strongly agree

Feeling like people will find out you're not as competent as they think you are



% who agree / strongly agree

Feeling like you're not successful in what you do despite evidence to suggest otherwise



% who agree / strongly agree

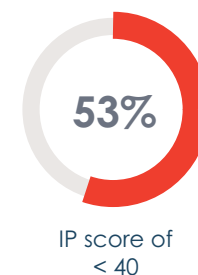


Analysis and insight

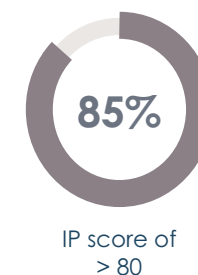
Young people who experience intense impostor feelings are more likely to under-estimate their achievements and feel unsuccessful at their job, hobbies or skills. The high correlation between an individual's impostor phenomenon score and the extent to which they agree/disagree with the impostor indicator statements gives confidence to the reliability and validity of the data gathered.

IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON SCORE AND FACTORS AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN APPLYING FOR JOBS

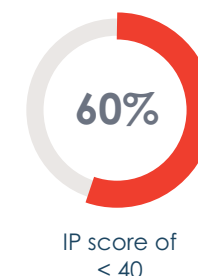
Ease of application



Effort required to learn new skills



Importance of sector/industry



% who agree / strongly agree that the factor is very important to them



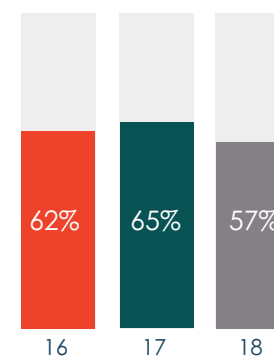
Analysis and insight

Individuals who experience high levels of impostor feelings may likely disregard job opportunities if there is a large focus on learning a new skill, even if they are fully capable of learning this. They also value the ease of application more than those with few impostor characteristics.

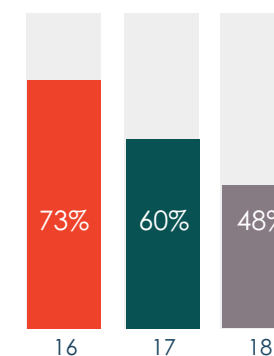


AGE AND FACTORS AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN APPLYING FOR JOBS

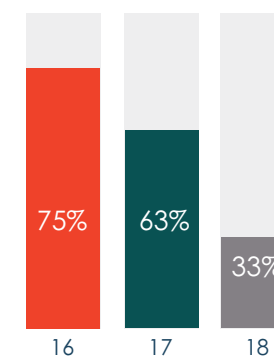
Pay



Flexibility of hours



Distance from home



% who agree / strongly agree that the factor is very important to them



Analysis and insight

Pay is a factor which is equally important across the age ranges. The data also suggests that, when compared to other factors, pay is more important to 18 year olds, equally important to 17 year olds and less important to 16 year olds.



Findings

We have mentioned that we included some likert scale questions surrounding the 3 main characteristics of impostor phenomenon we have identified (which we will be calling IP indicators). These indicators were identified as follows:

1.

Feeling like a fraud in your achievements

2.

Fearing people will find out you are not as competent as they think you are

3.

Feeling like you are not successful in what you do, despite there being evidence that shows otherwise

The factors that affect young people when applying for jobs we have identified are:

**PAY /
WAGES**

**EASE OF
APPLICATION**

**FLEXIBILITY
OF HOURS /
SHIFTS**

**LENGTH OF
CONTRACT**

**DISTANCE
FROM HOME /
TRAVEL TIME**

**EFFORT
NEEDED TO
LEARN (NEW)
SKILLS**

**SECTOR OR
INDUSTRY**

IP and demographic questions

Of our 173 respondents, 41% (71) were aged 16, 47% (81) were aged 17 and 12% (21) were aged 18. Over half of our respondents (57%) identified as female, 37% identified as male and the remaining participants identified as gender-fluid (2), non-binary (6) or preferred not to specify (3). Most importantly, we were able to identify the amounts of impostor feelings exhibited by respondents of our survey. Of those who responded, only 9% scored in the 40 or less bracket for impostor feelings, 36% scored 41-60, 41% scored 61-80 and 15% scored the highest level, 80+, suggesting that impostor feelings can be high in this age bracket.

This is important for both the young people in the age bracket identified, but also for hiring managers and HR professionals to understand, as this finding can be used to enhance both audiences' experience in the workplace.

Gender and IP Score

We can break down the different genders into how they scored on the Clance IP Scale. Females scored much higher for impostor feelings than men did, with 71% of females scoring in either the 61-80 or 80+ bracket, compared to only 28% of men scoring in the same categories. 100% of respondents who identified as gender-fluid scored in these top 2 brackets as well as 83% of respondents who are non-binary. Our findings suggest that females report more frequent or intense impostor feelings, and this supports the current research findings across the wider literature. Our findings also suggest a relationship between impostor phenomenon and gender identity, and this would be an interesting topic to be further researched.

Hiring managers should therefore understand that females may be less likely to apply for a role, as they believe they are not suited to it or lack the ability to perform well. A study has indicated that women will only apply for jobs they are 100% qualified for, whereas men will apply when only 60% qualified (Mohr, 2014). With this in mind, hiring managers should be careful how they advertise a job position, and should try to encourage those who don't yet have the full skill set to still apply.

Young people aged 16-18 will probably have very little experience of work, so may be much less likely to apply for a job even though it interests them. Especially for women of this age, it is important that they refrain from only applying for jobs they are fully qualified for as many skills can be, and are, learned in practice.

Age and IP Score

Overall, 16-year-olds experience the least impostor feelings compared to the other age groups, which steadily increases as you increase age. 16-year-olds had the highest percentage in the 40 or less bracket (16 years = 11%, 17 years = 7% and 18 years = 5%), and the lowest percentage in the 80+ score bracket (16 years = 11%, 17 years = 17% and 18 years = 19%). Here, we can hypothesize as to why this may be the case. As 16-year-olds are less likely to currently be part of the workforce (via part-time work) and they are the furthest away (in our age bracket) from leaving school to work, they may not have had the experiences that older individuals have had to cause their impostor symptoms.

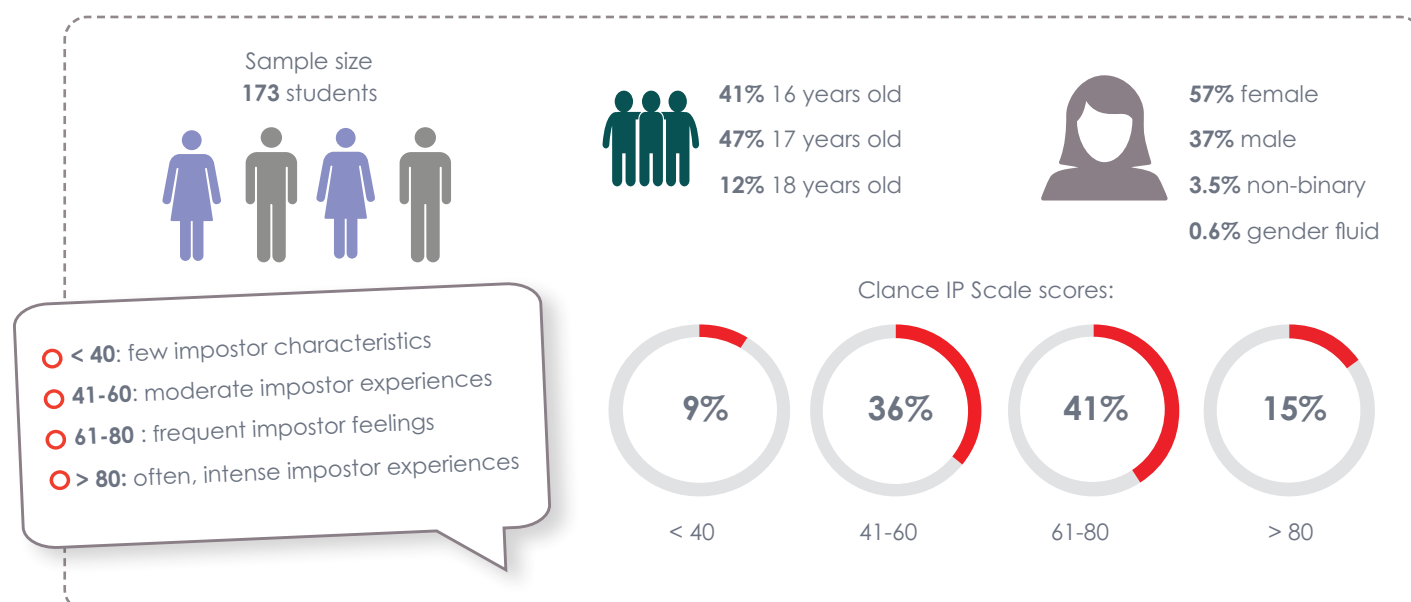
This may lead us to wonder whether there is a cause of imposter symptoms within the workplace, which progresses as you experience the workforce in greater detail. On the other

hand, there may not be any cause within the workplace, there may just be a rise in impostor phenomenon as age increases due to more experience and pressures of everyday life.

“Young people aged 16-18 will probably have very little experience of work, so may be much less likely to apply for a job even though it interests them.”

Link with IP score and indicators

When conducting this study, we hypothesised that there would be a strong link between the score from the Clance IP scale and the ratings given to the three impostor indicator statements. This is because the current literature suggests that impostor phenomenon is signposted by the IP indicators. Our findings did align with this hypothesis and suggest that this is not only true of adults, but that impostor feelings are also experienced by young people in these age brackets.



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For indicator one, feeling like a fraud in your achievements, of people whose IP score was 40 or less (low impostor feelings), 93% of them rated this indicator as a 1 or 2 (unlikely to feel like a fraud). Of those scoring 80+ (high impostor feelings), 85% rated the indicator a 4 or 5 (highly likely to feel like a fraud). This correlation strongly suggests that impostor feelings are linked to the indicators we have identified.

The other indicators follow the same positive correlational pattern. For indicator 2 (fearing people will find out you are not as competent as they think you are) 87% of those who scored 40 or less in IP rated the indicator as a 1 or 2, and 88% of those scoring 80+ rated it as a 4 or 5. This means that people who scored the indicator low, are not worried about people finding out they are not as competent as expected (probably because they believe themselves to be competent at what they do). Those who scored the indicator highly do not believe they are competent and therefore worry that suddenly people will see them as they see themselves (not competent at what they do).



The strongest link between IP score and IP indicators is found in indicator 3 (feeling like you are not successful in what you do, despite evidence otherwise). Here, we found that 100% of respondents who scored 40 or less in IP also rated the indicator as a 1 or 2, and 100% with an IP score of 80+ rated it as a 4 or 5. This shows a very strong positive correlation between this indicator and impostor phenomenon score. It is very likely then that people who have impostor symptoms will feel unsuccessful, even if they have lots of evidence showing their success, and those who do not display symptoms are able to correctly attribute their success.

These findings are massively insightful for hiring managers to understand who they might be hiring. Young people with impostor feelings are more likely to underestimate their achievements and feel unsuccessful at their job, hobbies or skills. This should be taken into consideration when we remember that over 50% of young people who took part in our survey experienced frequent to often and intense impostor feelings. Therefore, it is possible they will not include important achievements or skills on their CVs, and it may be beneficial to conduct interviews to gain greater insight into the individual and their abilities.

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As our research suggests that many young people experiencing impostor symptoms may underestimate their skills, we advise that it would be valuable for them to seek out someone else's opinion when constructing their CV or writing an application for a job. This way they are able to get help identifying their strengths and receive feedback on their skills and qualities.

Again, based on these findings, it is clear that many young people experience impostor feelings, and so when applying for jobs they should be sure to deeply evaluate their skills, successes and achievements, and look to find value in these, as employers will very likely view these highly, even if you as a young person do not.



Scores and factors

When analysing impostor scores against how participants rated ease of applications, we found that participants who scored in the 40 or less bracket, rated the ease of application the lowest (53% rated a 3, 4, or 5), and participants in the 80+ bracket scored the highest (85% rated a 3, 4 or 5). From this, we might assume that impostor feelings have an impact on how easy people find the application process, and more impostor feelings might cause individuals to doubt their ability when applying. Therefore, young people who may be experiencing impostor feelings should be aware that some applications may be more thorough than others and should try not to be put off by this. It is beneficial for them to remember that it is not a reflection of their ability or successes, but rather a way for hiring managers to establish good applicants. We also recommend that employers and hiring managers keep their recruitment process simple, such as avoiding having multiple stages, or making it clear how each stage helps the applicant show the best version of themselves.

Another finding we found interesting and of value to both young people, and those working in hiring / managerial roles, was the difference in how people rated the importance of the effort needed to learn new skills. Those individuals who identified themselves as being in the 80+ IP score group (often and intense impostor feelings) rated the importance of needing to learn new skills much higher than all other IP score groups. 46% of the individuals in the 80+ group rated this factor as a 4 or 5 (very important to them) compared to only 13% (40 or less), 16% (41-60) and 21% (61-80).

One explanation for this high percentage in the high impostor feelings group might be that those with impostor feelings are more inclined to take job positions that they feel fully qualified for and comfortable with. This means that if a job role requires them to learn a new skill, they may feel out of place and worried about not being able to take on this job responsibility. Recruitment teams and managers should be aware of this when advertising for jobs. Individuals who experience high levels of impostor feelings may likely disregard job opportunities if there is a large focus on learning a new skill, even if they are fully capable of learning this. It may be beneficial for advertisements and managers to focus on developing skills as the individual progresses in the role, instead of 'throwing them in the deep end'.

A surprising finding was the link between IP score and the importance of the sector / industry individuals wish to apply for. Based on research and the context this provided for us, we hypothesised that as IP scores increased, so would the importance rating of the sector / industry. However, we found the opposite. As IP scores increased, the importance of this factor generally decreased. 60% of individuals in the 40 or less group rated the sector / industry as a 4 or 5. In comparison, 52% of 41-60, 44% of 61-80 and 46% of 80+ rated this factor as a 4 or 5. It may be interesting and useful to conduct some more research surrounding this topic to find out why this may be.

Age and factors



Pay / Wages

Overall, 63% of all respondents rated the influence of pay / wages as a 4-5 on our scale, meaning it was important to them. 88% rated this factor as a 3-5. 17-year-olds rated this the highest of the 3 age groups (65% rating a 4-5), compared to 62% of 16-year-olds and 57% of 18-year-olds. Although 17-year-olds have rated this more highly than the other ages, each age group responded in a similar way. Pay rates for jobs at this age do tend to be quite low (subject to the sector the work is in), so young people might apply for (or accept) jobs with the highest pay they can find. With this in mind, hiring managers should be aware that it is likely that young people of this age will apply for jobs with the best pay rate, meaning should they be interested in hiring someone of this demographic then it would be useful to offer a competitive rate. It may also be appropriate to create a structured development plan outlining development within the role, so that even if the wages are below average, it is clear to applicants how this will progress, and this may encourage more applications.



Ease of Application

When looking at the influence that ease of application for a job has on these age groups, the 18 years age group stands out. They tended to rate ease factor as of very low influence compared to the other ages. 48% of 18-year-olds rated ease of application as a 1 or 2 (meaning it had very little influence on their decision to apply for the role) compared to 30% of 16-year-olds and 35% of 17-year-olds.

This can suggest that at a younger age, individuals may disregard job applications which require more effort, opting for simpler processes. However, this might change as they get older and may begin to apply for roles they want and think they will be good at. This may also apply as they begin to look at full-time / permanent jobs as they begin to leave school, and therefore will be willing to go through a harder selection process to get the job they'd like. For hiring managers, this may be an important factor if you are looking to attract younger applicants. This means that in order to attract this cohort, it may be beneficial to opt for a simpler application process than you would use for a more senior role.



Flexibility of Hours

The importance of flexibility of hours in a job seems to be of most influence to 16-year-olds, and of least influence to 18-year-olds. 73% of 16-year-olds rated flexibility of hours as a 4 or 5, compared to 60% of 17-year-olds and 48% of 18-year-olds. This finding suggests younger applicants may be looking for more job flexibility to work around school or other commitments, and therefore hiring managers should be aware and accommodating if looking to recruit within this age range.

Contrastingly, applicants of around 18 years of age may be looking for more permanent positions or may have more time to work, so they value flexibility less. This doesn't mean that all 18-year-olds will be better suited to the position, but managers may have to provide a little more help to younger applicants in order to make their experience at work the best it can be.



Length of Contract

Generally, length of contract was rated of low influence across all age groups (80% of respondents rating it as 1-3 on our rating scale). This means that overall, 16-18-year-olds do not mind about the length of contract when applying for a job. There may be a number of factors influencing this. One reason for this may be that this age group is typically offered 'zero hour contracts' meaning employers do not have to give a minimum amount of hours work to the individual and the individual does not have to accept what is offered to them. Another reason may be that they are at an age where they are looking for a stable job to work throughout their time in education, which may last between 1 and 3 years.



Distance from Home

Job distance from home is another factor that is greatly influenced by age. 75% of 16-year-olds rate distance from home as a 4 or 5, compared to 63% of 17-year-olds and 33% of 18-year-olds. This steady decrease as age increases may be down to the ease of travel increasing as we get older, due to factors such as learning to drive or being able to access more modes of public transportation. From this finding, we can infer that young people will apply for jobs that they will be able to get to easily, and opt for venues closer to home. This also means that they may not apply for jobs that they really want, even if they would be suitable, as they are too difficult to get to.

Alternatively, the young person may be successful in applying for a job further away, so it would be beneficial for both the young individual and manager to work together so that travel can be made most effective to and from work. What this might look like could include: scheduling longer but fewer shifts or working around the needs of the young person so they can find a way to get into work without feeling stress which may add to their possible impostor feelings.



Effort Needed to Learn New Skills

Our findings suggest that 18-year-olds are least influenced by how much effort would be needed to learn new skills for their job. This means that 16-17-year-olds are more likely to account for the possibility of needing to learn new skills for the job role, and may be put off by these kinds of roles. These age groups do typically experience fewer and less intense impostor feelings, but this is not to say that this plays no part.

We could hypothesise that 16-17-year-olds are simply looking for easy jobs to earn some money, which would explain why they are less inclined to learn new skills. Alternatively, it might be linked to impostor feelings, but to know for sure, more research would need to be carried out. On the other hand, 18-year-olds are more willing to learn new skills. This might be because they are looking to work in an industry they are aspiring to make a career out of, or if they are looking for a permanent job then they are willing to put in the effort to make themselves knowledgeable.



Sector / Industry

Interestingly, we found that the desired sector / industry that young people will apply to jobs in had the most influence on 18-year-olds. 71% of 18-year-olds rated it as having a 4 or 5 influence, compared to 46% of 16-year-olds and 44% of 17-year-olds. We can assume that by the age of 18, young people may be looking for more permanent jobs or have had previous experience and have learned what their likes and dislikes are within the workplace. It is important to remember that almost 20% of 18-year-olds we surveyed experience often, intense impostor feelings, meaning that they may not feel confident in interviews or at work, even though they are (or would like to) be working in a sector they are passionate about. For interviewers and hiring managers, this means that you should be careful to ask questions that will allow young people to talk about their achievements in a way that makes them feel comfortable.

Conclusion

Our research project set out to explore the kind of impact (if any) impostor phenomenon might have on young people starting their journey in a workplace environment. Through our research, we have delved into the link between impostor phenomenon and age, gender and factors that impact someone to apply for a job. By doing this, we have been able to provide clarity and suggestions for both young people of our demographic and people who are involved in the process of advertising and hiring for open positions.

Importantly, our research has identified that impostor feelings in young people increase with age and that there is a link between gender identity and impostor feelings. Some other stand out findings include:

- The importance of a simple application process for those with often and intense impostor feelings.
- The importance of flexibility in hours and shifts for young workers (especially 16- year- olds).
- The lack of importance to apply for specific sectors / industries in those who have often and intense impostor feelings.
- The positive correlation between impostor phenomenon scores and impostor phenomenon indicators.

There are several aspects to consider here to make the transition into the workplace as easy and comfortable as possible for young people, but our findings and suggestions provide a varied and detailed base of knowledge which can be incorporated into practice.

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Areas for further exploration

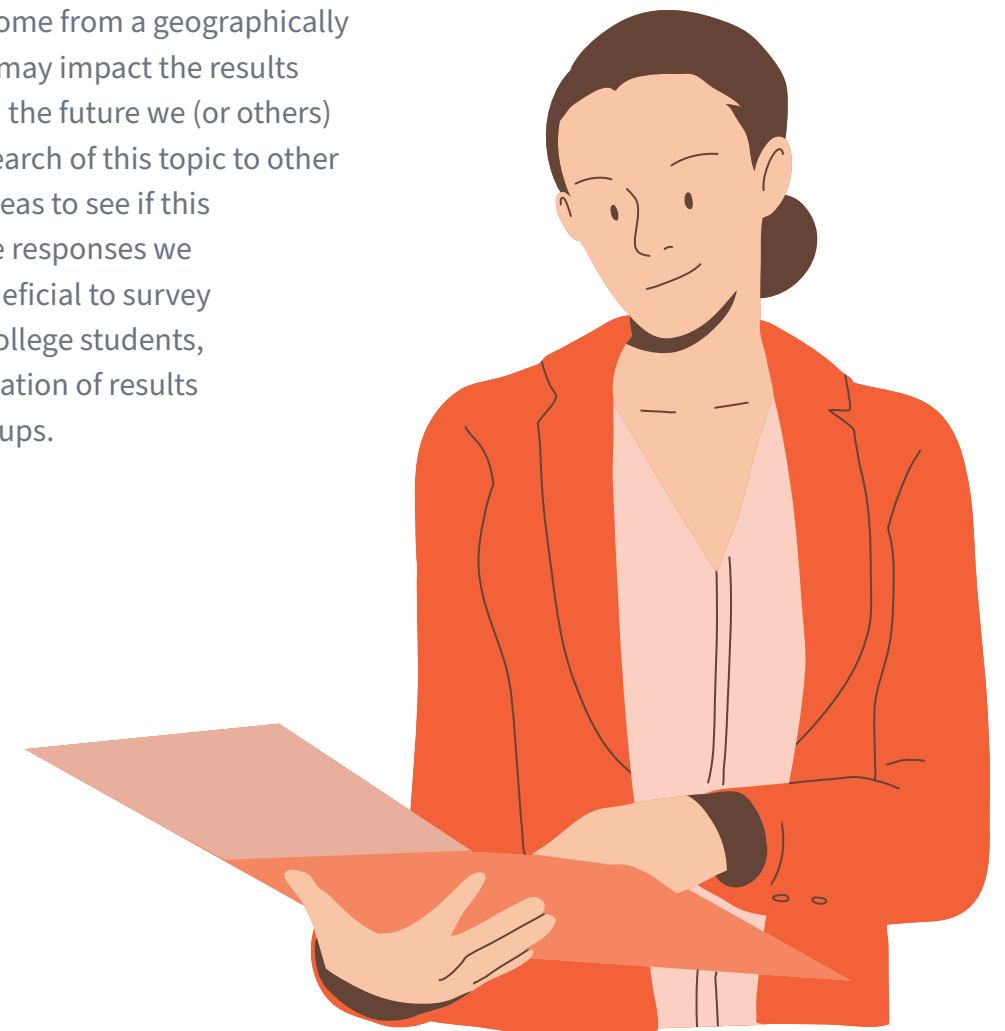
While we try to get the most accurate data possible all the time, some things can still be improved.

Our research was completed quantitatively, meaning we were only able to gather objective data in the form of numbers and means. In the future, we or other researchers may look to gather qualitative data, which would allow for a deeper understanding as to what may cause someone to feel impostor symptoms, or how this makes people feel.

The respondents of this survey all attend the same school and so come from a geographically similar location. This may impact the results gathered, therefore in the future we (or others) could expand the research of this topic to other schools in different areas to see if this has any impact on the responses we receive. It may be beneficial to survey both sixth form and college students, as there might be variation of results within these 2 subgroups.

Similarly, because we only sampled from one sixth form we had a relatively small sample size, so conducting further research will improve the reliability and validity of our findings.

Lastly, our user experience could have been streamlined, as in our survey the participants had to complete two different surveys. If this could be incorporated into one single survey, this may make the process easier to complete.



Next steps

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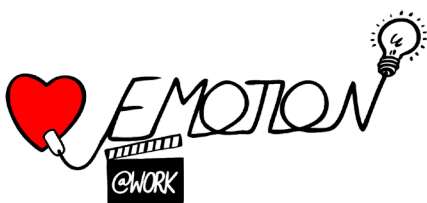
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