

# **Do I Belong Here? Impostor Phenomenon, Well-Being and Purpose at Work: A Mediation Analysis**

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Impostor phenomenon is the experience of intellectual or occupational fraudulence despite evidence of success and represents an avoidant approach to goal setting. By contrast, purpose represents the motivation to pursue highly-valued life goals and is strongly associated with increased well-being. We hypothesised that impostor phenomenon would be negatively related to well-being; and that purpose at work would partially mediate this relationship. Participants (N=129; 62% female) completed a survey which included measures of purpose at work, impostor phenomenon, and well-being. As hypothesised, increased impostor phenomenon was negatively associated with well-being. Purpose at work partially mediated this relationship resulting in decreased impostor phenomenon and increased eudemonic but not hedonic well-being. We provide support for previous studies which link impostor phenomenon to an avoidant approach to goal setting by inhibiting the use of active coping strategies. We encourage future interventions which aim to reduce impostor phenomenon and foster more purpose among working professionals.

**Keywords:** impostor phenomenon; well-being; purpose; purpose at work; eudemonic, hedonic.

## **Introduction**

Do I belong here? Is a question that has plagued the minds of individuals spanning across a wide range of professional disciplines (e.g., Chakraverty, 2019; Henning et al., 1998; Vaughn et al., 2020) and minority groups (e.g., Bernard et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2018) to the extent that almost 50 years of research has been dedicated to the understanding of both its origin and ramifications. The question of belonging is characteristic of a concept first coined by Clance & Imes (1978) known as *Impostor Phenomenon*, the experience of intellectual or occupational fraudulence, in which a person experiences pervasive feelings of self-doubt, insecurity and incompetence despite existing evidence of ongoing success and achievement.

## ***Impostor Phenomenon***

Clance and Imes (1978) first identified the impostor phenomenon among high-achieving professional women who failed to internalise their successes and felt as though they had obtained their current position fraudulently through either excessive effort or luck. While the impostor phenomenon was first detected in women, further investigations have documented these feelings of inadequacy across all genders (Badawy et al., 2018) through a wide span of professional disciplines (e.g., Chakraverty, 2019; Hutchins, 2015; Shreffler et al., 2021). Current prevalence estimates of impostor phenomenon within the literature vary substantially across studies (9%-82%) which might be accounted for by methodological variations regarding sampling criteria and screening tools used (Bravata et al., 2020). When faced with a task sufferers of impostor phenomenon tend to set unrealistically high expectations (Dudău, 2014; Thomas & Bigatti, 2020). However, once an achievement or goal is reached, they attribute their success to external luck or effort (Clance & Imes, 1978). Initial explanations for the etiology of impostor phenomenon tend to focus on the family context and suggest that

impostors may have been exposed to maladaptive forms of achievement orientation in early life (Langford & Clance, 1993). Examples include exposure to parental overprotection (Sonnak & Towell, 2001), the prioritisation of intelligence over effort (King & Cooley, 1995), and a lack of parental praise for accomplishments (Langford & Clance, 1993). Research has also focused on the relationship between impostor phenomenon and a maladaptive response to goal attainment (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Impostor phenomenon has been linked to *Learned Helplessness* (Ibrahim et al., 2022) in which an individual displays a lack of control over task-related outcomes (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Learned helplessness within the context of impostor phenomenon tends to result in the avoidance of a task with individuals displaying low motivation when faced with challenging or complex goals (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Individuals with impostor phenomenon therefore display a fixed mindset to goals, whereby failure is not viewed as an opportunity for growth but instead as a confirmation of perceived fraudulence (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

### ***Impostor Phenomenon and Well-Being***

The strong achievement-orientation displayed by impostor phenomenon individuals when completing a task bring about fears of failure resulting in persistent states of emotional depletion that carry through to subsequent attempts of goal attainment (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). This concept has been referred to as a reoccurring *Impostor Cycle* (Clance, 1985). Substantial comorbidities have been observed between impostor phenomenon and various mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, somatic symptoms and social dysfunctions (Bravata et al., 2020). The direct assessment of the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being has been explored to a lesser extent with few studies examining well-being correlates which cover both hedonic well-being and eudemonic

well-being (Petee et al., 2015; September et al., 2001). *Hedonic Well-Being* can be conceptualised as the optimisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain (Diener et al., 1999) and is composed of both an affective and cognitive component (Diener et al., 2002). *Eudemonic Well-Being* represents human flourishing and the maximisation of potential extending beyond pleasure-driven happiness and towards true authenticity and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001). While previous studies indicate that eudemonia and hedonia are correlated at high levels (Baumeister et al., 2013; Huta & Waterman, 2014), eudemonic and hedonic well-being have been shown to differentially correlate to important life outcomes (Huta, 2016). Thus, highlighting the need for studies which separately assess these aspects of well-being with respect to the impostor phenomenon.

### ***Purpose at Work and Well-Being***

While individuals can derive their meaning and purpose from a wide range of sources, central to attaining well-being is meaningful work (Steger, 2016). *Meaningful Work* can be used to describe a person's subjective experience that their work or career path is one of purpose and significance (Steger, 2016). The cultivation of *Purpose at Work*, therefore acts as a facilitator in the pursuit of one's life purpose (Dik et al., 2011), as many people wish to align their work to their personal values and towards their contribution to the greater good (Dik et al., 2015). It has been said that human beings are "hardwired to seek meaning" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Martela & Pessi, 2018) so much so that a lack of meaning has previously been associated with poor mental health outcomes such as depression (Steger et al., 2009) and suicidality (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013). Conversely, the presence of meaning in life has been linked to increases in positive affect (King et al., 2006), general well-being (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009) and motivation (Haradkiewicz & Elliot, 1998) as well as a wide range of work-related outcomes such as employee commitment and engagement (Morrison et al., 2007),

career development (Dik et al., 2015), and organisational performance (Dik et al., 2013). Such increases can be attributed to the fact that purpose is a central life aim which directs, organises and stimulates goals and daily decisions by guiding the use of personal resources (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Thus, purpose can be referred to as the “supraordinate goal manager” which directs both higher-order and lower order goals on a daily basis (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). While individuals with high impostor phenomenon set their goals with the intention to outperform others, individuals with high purpose in life set personal goals which are defined in self referent terms (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Such goals have been attributed to increases in overall well-being (Oishi & Diener, 2001), leading to adaptive outcomes such as the motivation to try harder, increases in positive affect and a desire to learn (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006).

### ***Impostor Phenomenon and Purpose at Work as an Adaptability Resource***

Given the importance of purpose at work to both personal well-being and career-related outcomes (Martela & Pessi, 2018), an exploration of what might inhibit the cultivation of purpose at work is important. While impostor phenomenon represents an avoidance of goals, purpose at work acts as the motivator in the pursuit of highly-valued personal goals (Dik et al., 2013; Steger, 2016). In addition, increases in psychological demands at work (Rigó et al., 2021) as well as the saliency of work-stress present in the modern workplace (Hassard et al., 2018) have been referred to as a potential “breeding ground” for thoughts and feelings associated with impostor phenomenon (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Potential for increased incidence of impostor phenomenon is concerning given the strong observed associations between impostor phenomenon and poor career development (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016a, 2017), increased procrastination and burnout (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Rohrmann et al., 2016), and reduced motivation to lead among students and working professionals (Neureiter & Traut-

Mattausch, 2016a) which represent the complete opposite of the positive outcomes observed in individuals with high purpose at work (Dik et al., 2015; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

With these associations in mind, it is important to reinstate the involvement of purpose in the motivation to pursue highly-valued personal goals (Steger & Dik, 2009), which contrast the avoidance of goals due to failure as evidenced in the impostor phenomenon (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). It is therefore possible that impostor phenomenon may serve as a barrier to the fulfilment of one's purpose at work due to the tendency towards this avoidant approach. In addition, research on goal pursuit suggests that the production of negative affect can be a crucial step in ceasing the operation of a goal (Aarts et al., 2007) which may be brought about by pervasive feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt in high impostor phenomenon individuals. The formulation of this hypothesis is based on the *Conservation of Resources theory* (COR), a motivational theory of evolution which suggests that individuals strive to obtain, retain and protect highly-valued resources for survival (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This theory suggests that impostor phenomenon serves as a maladaptive coping mechanism which uses up our essential mental resources resulting in a state of emotional depletion (Haar & de Jong, 2022; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016b). Impostor phenomenon and the resulting emotional instability interfere with goal pursuit (Oertig et al., 2013) thus, serving as an obstacle to the pursuit of purpose at work.

### ***The Present Study***

In order to address this question, the current study aims to understand how impostor phenomenon might reduce felt purpose at work, in turn explaining previously observed negative effects of impostor phenomenon on well-being. We estimate that increased impostor phenomenon will lead to decreases in participant well-being (H1)

Furthermore, we predict that the impact of impostor phenomenon on well-being will be partially mediated by purpose at work (H2). This study could improve our understanding of the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being and could provide a rationale for the utilisation of intervention methods which craft an individual's purpose in order to form the basis of an adaptive coping mechanism for experiences of impostor phenomenon salient in the modern workplace.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Design***

This research features a cross-sectional design with imposter phenomenon as the independent variable (IV), hedonic well-being as the first dependent variable (DV1), eudemonic well-being as the second dependent variable (DV2) and purpose at work as the mediating variable (MedV).

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited by way of convenience sampling through a combination of both advertisements sent out on social media platforms as well as via email. Recruitment posters specified that participants must be in full-time employment in order to take part in the study. A priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power software version 3.1.9.7 to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypotheses. Results indicated that the required sample size to achieve a lower power bound of 0.8 for detecting a medium effect, at a significance of  $\alpha=.05$  was  $N=126$  for a simple mediation analysis. Thus, the obtained sample size of  $N=129$  was deemed adequate to test the study hypotheses. Three participants (3.78% of the total) started the questionnaire but did not finish it. These participants were removed from the dataset as not enough information was available to include their data. Our sample



largely identified as female (62%; N=76) and the rest identified as male (37%; N=46) or did not specify their gender (N=1) with an average age of 39.51 years (SD= 12.81).

### ***Procedure***

Recruitment posters sent out via a combination of emails and social media advertisement informed participants that the study was looking to assess the relationship between interesting work and well-being. Participants were given access to an online survey via Qualtrics XM and were presented with both a plain language statement and consent form in order to continue to the survey (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Participants were then asked to indicate their gender and age in numbers. Following that, participants were assessed across each variable using psychologically validated measures of purpose at work, impostor phenomenon, hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being (see Appendices D-I). Such measures were presented in a random order to eliminate the possibility of order bias (Perreault, 1975). Following survey completion participants were debriefed regarding the nature of the study and were provided with additional contact information should they wish to avail of external support services (see Appendix J).

## ***Measures***

### *Socio-Demographic Information*

Participants were asked to state their gender in an open-ended text box in accordance with inclusivity standards of the American Psychological Association (2020) and to specify their age in numbers.

### *Hedonic Well-Being*

*Subjective Happiness.* The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is a four-item scale which measures global happiness on a Likert-scale from 1-7. The item anchors are relative to the items, the first pair of items are anchored at 1 (*Less happy*) and 7 (*More happy*), the second pair of items are anchored at 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*A great deal*). An example item is “Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”

*Satisfaction With Life.* The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) is a five-item scale which assesses an individual’s global judgement of their life satisfaction, which comprise a cognitive judgment of a person’s quality of life. Participants responded on a Likert-scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). An example item is “I am satisfied with my current life.”

### *Eudemonic Well-Being*

*Meaning in Life Questionnaire.* The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) is a ten-item scale which assesses the presence of meaning and search for meaning on a six-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*Absolutely untrue*) to 6 (*Absolutely true*). An example item is “I understand my life’s meaning.”

*Flourishing.* The Flourishing Scale is an eight-item measure assessing individuals self-perceived success as well as self-esteem, purpose, and optimism (Diener, Wirtz, et al., 2010) across a seven-point Likert-scale from 1 (*Strongly*

*disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). An example item is “I am a good person and live a good life.”

### *Impostor Phenomenon*

Impostor phenomenon was assessed using The Impostor Profile (IPP30, Ibrahim et al., 2022) which contains 30 items and forms 6 scales (Competence Doubt, Working Style, Alienation, Other-Self Divergence, Frugality, and Need for Sympathy). The response scale is a visual analogous scale ranging from 1 (*Does not agree in any aspect*) to 100 (*Completely agree*). Example items are: “Despite former successes, I have a strong fear of failure” and “Mostly, I am dissatisfied with the quality of my work.”

### *Purpose at Work*

The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI, Steger et al., 2012) was used to measure the level of purpose at work of participants and is a ten-item scale measured on a 5-point Likert-scale across three components described by the authors as Psychological Meaningfulness- the extent to which a person perceives their work to be meaningful, Meaning Making- the extent to which a person crafts meaning through their work, and Greater Good- a person’s desire to make a positive impact on others. This scale ranges from 1 (*Absolutely untrue*) to 5 (*Absolutely true*). Example items are: “I know my work makes a positive difference in the world” and “The work I do serves a greater purpose.”

All measures (Table 1) showed good reliability with a minimum Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .777 for the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

### *Data Analysis*

Data collected from participants was analysed in R 4.2.1 using RStudio version 4.2.1. Data was recoded in R as some measures included both positively valenced and negatively valenced statements. A correlation analysis was performed on the data in

order to assess whether the preconditions for mediation, as set out by Baron & Kenny, (1986) were met. This correlation also formed the basis of the first hypothesis which assessed the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being. A mediation analysis was then performed on the data in order to test for the second hypothesis, that levels of purpose at work can partially explain the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being. To allow for robust inferences, all decisions about statistical significance were based on two-tailed tests of significance at  $\alpha < .05$ .

## Results

### *Hypothesis 1 Imposter Phenomenon will be Negatively Related to Well-Being*

We ran a Pearson correlation between each of the measures in order to assess the relations between variables (see Table 2). Two-tailed tests of significance were used in order to investigate the potential positive and negative relationships between variables. There was a significant negative correlation between imposter phenomenon and purpose at work,  $r(111) = -.34, p < .001$ , this means that as imposter phenomenon increased, purpose at work decreased. In addition, there was a significant negative correlation between imposter phenomenon and eudemonic well-being,  $r(110) = -.42, p < .001$ , as well as a significant negative correlation between imposter phenomenon and hedonic well-being  $r(110) = -.50, p < .001$ . Therefore, as imposter phenomenon increased both eudemonic and hedonic well-being decreased. These results confirm our first hypothesis that imposter phenomenon is negatively related to well-being.

***Hypothesis 2 The Effect of Impostor Phenomenon on Well-Being will be Mediated by Purpose at Work***

We performed a simple mediation in order to investigate whether the effect of impostor phenomenon on well-being is partially mediated by purpose at work. To allow for robust estimation of model coefficients, we bootstrapped the model 5,000 times and report all estimates with 95% confidence intervals (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

We found a significant negative relationship between impostor phenomenon and hedonic well-being ( $\beta = -.410$ , CI  $[-.584, -.237]$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the percentage variance of hedonic well-being explained by its relation to both impostor phenomenon and purpose at work was 18.3%. We also found a significant negative relationship between impostor phenomenon and eudemonic well-being ( $\beta = -.391$ , CI  $[-.542, -.240]$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the percentage variance of eudemonic well-being explained by its relation to impostor phenomenon and purpose at work was 34.3%. This means that increased impostor phenomenon was related to decreases in both hedonic and eudemonic well-being. We found a significant negative relationship between impostor phenomenon and the mediating variable, purpose at work ( $\beta = -.337$ , CI  $[-.502, -.172]$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the percentage variance of purpose at work explained by its relation to impostor phenomenon was 11.4%. This means that increased impostor phenomenon was related to decreased purpose at work. We observed a significant positive relationship between hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being ( $\beta = .599$ , CI  $[.442, .757]$ ,  $p < .001$ ), such that increases in hedonic well-being were related to increases in eudemonic well-being. We found a significant positive relationship between purpose at work and eudemonic well-being ( $\beta = .323$ , CI  $[.137, .510]$ ,  $p = .001$ ). However, the relationship between purpose at work and hedonic well-being was not significant ( $\beta = .044$ , CI  $[-.168, .257]$ ,  $p = .684$ ). This means that increases in purpose at work were related to increases in eudemonic well-being but not hedonic well-being.

Finally, we found a significant indirect effect of impostor phenomenon on well-being via purpose at work for eudemonic ( $\beta = -.109$ , CI  $[-.199, -.019]$ ,  $p = .017$ ) but not hedonic well-being ( $\beta = -.015$ , CI  $[-.087, .057]$ ,  $p = .686$ ). Additionally, 21.8% of the total effect could be explained by the indirect effect with respect to eudemonic well-being while only 3.5% of the total effect was accounted for by the indirect effect on hedonic well-being. Thus, the results of the mediation analysis partially confirm H2, that the effect impostor phenomenon on well-being is mediated by purpose at work with respect to eudemonic well-being but not hedonic well-being.

## **Discussion**

Based on our initial research hypotheses, we set out to examine the impact of impostor phenomenon by investigating its relation to both purpose at work and well-being in a sample of working professionals. More specifically, it was proposed that purpose at work would mediate the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being such that any change in reported impostor phenomenon and well-being could be partially explained by purpose at work. In addition, well-being was assessed across two core dimensions hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being. As predicted, we found impostor phenomenon to be negatively-related to both hedonic and eudemonic well-being (H1) which aligns with reported findings in previous research (Peteet et al., 2015; September et al., 2001). Regarding the mediation analysis (H2), purpose at work emerged as a significant mediator in the negative relationship between impostor phenomenon and eudemonic well-being but not hedonic well-being. Our results therefore show that reduced levels of purpose at work partially account for increases in impostor phenomenon which subsequently reduce eudemonic well-being. Therefore, our second hypothesis was partially supported.

Regarding our first hypothesis, we found that impostor phenomenon negatively related to well-being such that increases in impostor phenomenon were related to decreases in both hedonic and eudemonic well-being. With respect to hedonic well-being, our findings suggest that individuals with impostor phenomenon experience less satisfaction in life, a facet of well-being that has previously been attributed to greater academic success (Antaramian, 2017; Diener, Emmons, et al., 2010). In addition, our results indicate that individuals experiencing impostor phenomenon are more likely to experience less happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) which may be attributed to the production of negative affect as a result of perceived fraudulence, self-doubt and insecurity (Clance, 1985). The link between increased impostor phenomenon and decreased eudemonic well-being evident in our study implies that impostor's experience less meaning in life, and thus encounter less personal growth and more psychological distress (Steger et al., 2006) meaning that impostor's are less likely to cope well with adversity (Ryff & Singer, 2008). This can be seen through the impostor's avoidance of failure and the tendency towards procrastination resulting in self-handicapping behaviours that ultimately prevent the maximisation of one's potential (Want & Kleitman, 2006). Our findings in relation to both hedonia and eudemonia coincide with the small number of studies concerned with the direct influence of impostor phenomenon on well-being (Peteet et al., 2015; September et al., 2001). Furthermore, our finding that individuals with impostor phenomenon might experience increased psychological distress aligns to previously observed comorbidities between impostor phenomenon and anxiety (Rohrmann et al., 2016) and depression (Bernard et al., 2020), as well as an increased incidence of low self-esteem and social dysfunctions (Bravata et al., 2020). Despite the expansive literature that links impostor phenomenon to a wide range of well-being outcomes, this study is one of the few to assess the direct



relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being thus, confirming many of the negative well-being outcomes described by Clance and Imes (1978). Our findings suggest that more research is needed in order to investigate the nature of the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being in order to facilitate targeted and effective impostor phenomenon interventions.

Regarding the mediation analysis, the results of this study confirm that impostor phenomenon reduces felt purpose at work which in turn might serve to explain previously observed negative relations between impostor phenomenon and eudemonic but not hedonic well-being. The non-significant association between purpose at work and hedonic well-being suggests that although individuals may cultivate a high level of purpose and meaning from their career, individuals might also experience negative well-being outcomes such as reduced happiness and global ratings of life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, et al., 2010). This finding contradicts previous theories which suggest that positive emotions may provide a foundation for individuals to experience meaning at work (Dik et al., 2015). Additionally, our results suggest that hedonic-well-being outcomes evident in the impostor phenomenon, such as the production of negative affect do not occur as a direct result of reduced felt purpose at work but may occur instead as a result of fears of failure or exposure as suggested by Clance and Imes (1978).

Our hypothesis was supported with respect to eudemonic well-being thus, suggesting that increased impostor phenomenon subsequently leads to reduced purpose at work which could partially explain decreases in eudemonic well-being. Reductions in purpose at work evident in high impostor phenomenon individuals might be due to an achievement orientation to goal setting which interferes with the role of purpose as a central life aim that motivates our personal goals (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006;

McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). While individuals with high impostor phenomenon set their goals with the intention to outperform others, individuals with high purpose in life set personal goals which are defined in self referent terms (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Such goals have been attributed to increases in overall well-being (Oishi & Diener, 2001), leading to adaptive outcomes such as the motivation to try harder, increases in positive affect and a desire to learn (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). On the other hand, achievement goals of individuals with impostor phenomenon are characterised by the avoidance of challenge and complexity (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). This subsequently brings about feelings of failure which can result in negative emotional states (Jaremka et al., 2020; Leonhardt et al., 2017). In this case, failure is not seen as a source of growth or development but as a reflection on an individual's lack of ability and intelligence (Clance & Imes, 1978). As this is in opposition to a growth mindset, the belief that capabilities are not fixed but develop over time (Dweck & Yeager, 2019), impostor phenomenon individuals express lower levels of *Grit* (Ibrahim et al., 2022), the perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Therefore, impostor phenomenon can be referred to as a “Maladaptability resource” which can hinder the utilisation of purpose at work as a source of increased eudemonic well-being. As the conservation of resources theory suggests the consuming thoughts of self-doubt and fraudulence associated with impostor phenomenon drain individuals of their mental resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018, 2018). This persistent level of emotional instability interferes with goal pursuit (Oertig et al., 2013) thus, serving as an obstacle to the pursuit of purpose at work.

Our findings could mean that creating purpose at work in individuals with high impostor phenomenon might facilitate the use of adaptive coping strategies. This study provides promising findings for the use of applications designed to foster purpose at

work as a way to boost employee well-being as put forward by Dik et al., (2015). One example of this is the crafting of *Flow States* at work, in which a person is completely focused on a goal-directed activity that they are highly skilled at but also find challenging (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Moreover, the universal factors of flow represent the complete antithesis of the impostor phenomenon such as the experience of a sense of control, challenge and a set of clear goals (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow states align nicely to the pursuit of purpose-related goals and have previously been associated with eudemonia due to the promotion of growth (Bonaiuto et al., 2016). Therefore, flow could aid in the creation of purpose at work which could in turn, act as an adaptive coping strategy for thoughts and feelings associated with impostor phenomenon thereby boosting employee well-being as a result.

Although the results are as expected, it is important to bear in mind that this study is a cross-sectional study, having assessed impostor phenomenon with respect to well-being and purpose at work at one time point therefore common method variance cannot be ruled out (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). In addition, given the nature of a mediation analysis is to assess the relations between variables, we cannot infer causality between study variables (Constantine, 2012). The mediating effect of purpose at work on the relationship between impostor phenomenon and well-being occurred only partially. To claim a full mediation, the researchers would have to confidently measure all possible mediating variables, a task which is practically impossible due to the nature of psychological research (Memon et al., 2018; Rucker et al., 2011). Therefore, the strong relationships observed between study variables could stem from many causes, including variables not included in the study. In addition, our study was limited by sample size as although our initial sample met the requirements for mediation, some participant responses were only partially completed meaning our usable sample size was

lower than the threshold estimated by g-power. It is important to note however, that the data collection phase of the research was limited due to time constraints. Furthermore, this research included specific sample inclusion criteria as only individuals in full-time employment were deemed eligible to take part. Finally, our data is based on measures of self-report which is important to consider given that the study measures impostor phenomenon, a concept which often results in a tendency for underestimation and hence potential underreporting of effects (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016a, 2017; Vergauwe et al., 2015). In light of these limitations, the examination of the relation between impostor phenomenon, well-being and purpose at work on a longitudinal basis by way of the experience sampling method (ESM, e.g., Canning et al., 2020) would be welcomed in future research. In addition, coaching interventions which examine the impact of purpose at work on impostor phenomenon, eudemonic well-being and hedonic well-being would be welcomed in order to assess the practical implications of our findings.

### ***Conclusions***

In sum, our data suggests that the negative effects of impostor phenomenon on well-being can be partially explained through levels of purpose at work. The negative relationship between impostor phenomenon and purpose at work is supported through the impact of impostor phenomenon on the pursuit of long-term goals (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). The very nature of impostor phenomenon can help to explain our findings including its association with learned helplessness (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2021), the belief that outcomes are out of one's control (Maier & Seligman, 1976). This subsequently leads to the avoidance and lack of passion for long-term goals, a fixed mindset whereby failure is seen as a lack of intelligence rather than an opportunity for growth (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Kumar &

Jagacinski, 2006). Therefore, impostor phenomenon can be referred to as a “maladaptability resource” present in high impostor phenomenon individuals, who lack the resources to meet work demands and thus, experience a persistent state of emotional depletion (Haar & de Jong, 2022; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016a). While impostor phenomenon acts as a maladaptive response to goals, our findings suggest that purpose at work might facilitate the use of adaptive coping strategies due to its association with the motivation to pursue highly valued, overarching life goals (Steger et al., 2006). Our results clearly support the theoretical assumption that purpose at work matters in the context of both impostor phenomenon and eudemonic well-being. The strong negative effects observed between impostor phenomenon and purpose at work contrasted with the strong positive effect of purpose at work on eudemonic well-being should encourage future researchers to examine this relationship further, and put forward potential interventions which aim to reduce impostor phenomenon and foster more purpose at work among working professionals.

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## **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

## **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Open Science Framework at [<https://osf.io/2w5a3/>].

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**Tables**

Table 1. Reliability Statistics.

Measure	<i>n</i>	<i>α</i>
Work and Meaning Inventory	10 <sup>a</sup>	.905[.880, .930] <sup>b</sup>
Impostor-Profile	30	.853[.814, .892]
Meaning in Life Questionnaire_ Presence	5	.867[.830, .904]
Meaning in Life Questionnaire_ Search	5	.923[.901, .946]
Satisfaction With Life Scale	5	.821[.773, .869]
Flourishing Scale	8	.867[.830, .903]
Subjective Happiness Scale	4	.777[.717, .837]

*Note.* This table demonstrates the reliability of measures used to assess study variables.

<sup>a</sup> Number of items that make up each scale.

<sup>b</sup> The associated Cronbach’s alpha of each scale.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Imposter Phenomenon	46.9	12.65	—		
2. Purpose at Work	3.6	0.81	-.34***	—	
3. Eudemonic Well-Being	5.38	0.84	-.42***	.46***	—
4. Hedonic Well-Being	4.85	0.98	-.50***	0.18	.66***

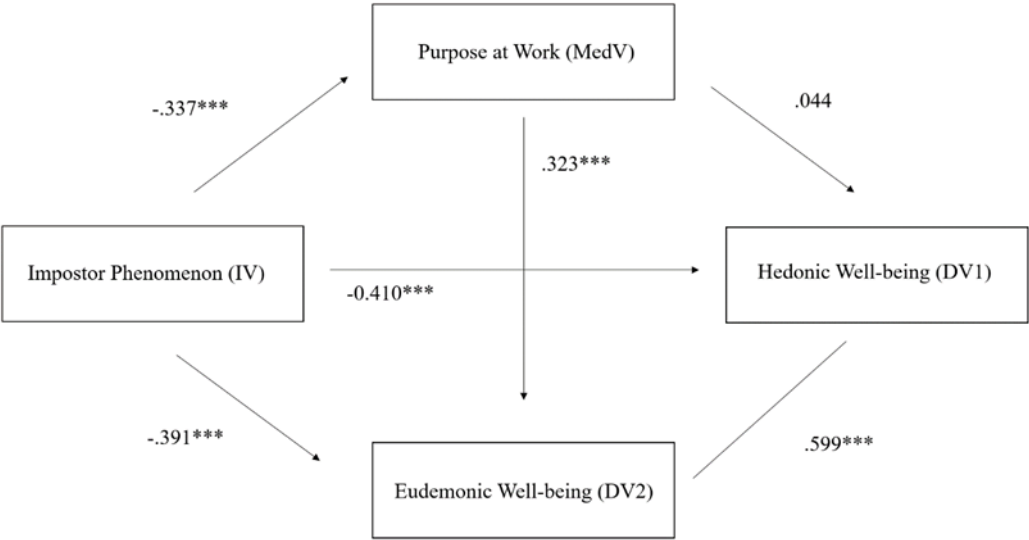
*Note.* \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Paired complete n ranging from 112 to 113

Table 3. Mediation Analysis: Effect of Purpose at Work on Impostor Phenomenon and Well-Being.

Effects	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>p</i>
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Direct Effects					
Eudemonic Well-Being~ Purpose at Work	.323	.095	.137	.510	.001
Eudemonic Well-Being~ Impostor Phenomenon	-.391	.077	-.542	-.240	<.001
Hedonic Well-Being~ Purpose at Work	.044	.108	-.168	.257	.684
Hedonic Well-Being~ Impostor Phenomenon	-.410	.088	-.584	-.237	<.001
Purpose at Work~ Impostor Phenomenon	-.337	.084	-.502	-.172	<.001
Hedonic Well-Being~ Eudemonic Well-being	.599	.080	.442	.757	<.001
Indirect Effects					
Impostor Phenomenon~ Eudemonic Well-Being	-.109	.046	-.199	-.019	.017
Impostor Phenomenon~ Hedonic Well-Being	-.015	.037	-.087	.057	.686

*Note.* CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit. NS = Not significant

Figures



Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure Captions

- Figure 1. Mediation Analysis: Standardised Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Purpose at Work on Impostor Phenomenon and Well-Being.