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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES



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### Educated Woman, Postdoc Edition, Chapter 13: Fake It Until You Make It?

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United States  
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I want to be able to proudly say to someone that I am a "fill in the blank" and not cringe afterward.

You know, with [all of this decision-making](#) about leaving the bench and possibly the scientific enterprise altogether, I've been giddy. This newly discovered clarity (minus the massive quantities of guilt) puts a smile on my face. Just the thought that in another 6 months *something* will be different is enough to make me cheerful during meetings and phone calls that a few months ago would have made me want to vomit. Has it motivated me to work any harder on finishing a paper or two? Not quite, but, hey, this is a work in progress.

However, a new, admittedly irrational thought has consumed my brain: As I try to transition to something new, someone's going to figure out that for the past few years, I feel like I've been faking it all--my confidence, my scientific abilities, and my enthusiasm.

I wrote a few months ago about how [I was going to take off the mask and stop faking it](#). But that was about not trying to be the person I thought others wanted me to be. Now, it's the realization that my

confidence is shaky, I'm not sure how I'll fit in to a new job, and my newfound but kind-of-fake enthusiasm isn't enough. Who the hell am I to think that someone would want to hire a scientist who has just cut bait and run screaming from the lab?

Here's a question I'm not looking forward to answering in job interviews: "Why do you want to come here?" I'm quite sure that the answer they're looking for is not: "Because I want to get the hell away from the lab." But it's the truth. Possibly a more diplomatic, "I'm looking forward to developing a new skill set that encompasses all of my talents" might work. And it's still the truth, but the likelihood that I'll be that diplomatic on the fly is nil, so I'll have to think of these answers ahead of time and, well, that's a bit like faking, isn't it?

Fortunately, I know [I'm not alone in feeling like I've been faking it](#). Fake it until you make it, right? After all, everyone just feels their way along in the dark of a new job, graduate program, whatever, until they can finally see daylight. But what is *it* really? What am I faking? Should I pretend I belong until I really do? What if I never do, just like I've never felt like I belonged at the bench? Have I cheated myself out of a life that would have been better for me? Who, ultimately, was I fooling?

#### Comments?

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In my former life (before graduate school), I was pretty confident. I saw a problem, intellectual or otherwise; I worked hard; I solved the problem. But, as we all know, this is not how things work in graduate school. I left my Ph.D. program with a distorted, fun-house-mirror image of myself and my abilities rather than a realistic reflection.

I realized how warped my confidence had become when I talked to an undergraduate I trained. He learned quickly in the lab but never registered as overwhelmingly interested in his studies. He later got a job at a company, working in their lab. When I talked to him about the job, he said he loved what he was doing and was excited about the prospect of going back to school, possibly for a master's and maybe even for a Ph.D. I trained and taught him, and here he was, 2 years later, exuding confidence that I'm green and envious of! My, how broken we can become.

My veneer at my current job is starting to crack. I'm getting pressure from all sides to make myself fit so that I can stay, when that's the last thing I want. Keeping up the two-faced fakery required to search for a new job while still in the old job is starting to grate on my damn nerves. ("Oh, I'm honored you want me to stay; let me think about it." Versus "You people are crazy; get me the hell outta here!")

Now that I'm ready to go, I'm a little scared that I'm going to have to repeat the exercise. The prospect that I might never "make it" to somewhere that I'm satisfied and secure looms irrationally in my mind.

All this time, I was trying to realign what I valued with the values of my environment. My fake enthusiasm didn't allow me to enjoy my postdoc. I want to be able to proudly say to someone that I am a "fill in the blank" and not cringe afterward.

So, intellectually I know now that faking it is not going to work this time. Maybe I need a different mantra to cure my particular strain of impostor syndrome. My yoga teacher says at the end of class, "Practice makes confidence." This is different from fake it until you make it. Faking it means you never feel like you know what you're doing. Practice implies that you acknowledge your mistakes, learn from them, and in time make fewer mistakes. Yeah, I'd say that faking it has been a mistake.

My hang-ups are slightly less severe than they used to be--but it's hard to take the distortion out of the fun-house mirror. Writing essays and cover letters forces me to say positive things about myself, which helps me escape the negative feedback loop I've been in for a while. I'm trying to cut down on the fakery so that the "me" I see in the mirror is a close approximation of someone I actually like and can enjoy living with. My big hope is to have interviews for jobs I *actually* want to do, because I can't bear the thought of lying through my teeth *again* about how much I enjoy doing this or that.

I have interviews coming up quickly; for this, I'm grateful. However, I am slightly (I lie--extremely) terrified. I hope I can iron out some of the fun-house wrinkles in time.

Speaking of impostors, Micella Phoenix DeWhyse is a pseudonym.

Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback [to our editor](#).

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