The Narrow Ground Between Self-Description and Self-Myth

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A cursor blinks in an empty professional profile. The platform wants a short introduction: a few lines that explain who this person is, what they are good at, what they have built, and why anyone should pay attention. The life behind the box is less cooperative. It contains years...

When a profile field asks for more than we can securely know

A cursor blinks in an empty professional profile. The platform wants a short introduction: a few lines that explain who this person is, what they are good at, what they have built, and why anyone should pay attention. The life behind the box is less cooperative. It contains years of work, several completed projects, several abandoned ones, long stretches of labour that left little visible trace, and a few encouraging judgements that matter but are difficult to place on an objective scale.

The field is impatient. It does not ask for conditions, counterexamples or confidence intervals. It asks for a label.



Illustration for The Narrow Ground Between Self-Description and Self-Myth

Terms such as "systems thinker", "rare profile", "multidisciplinary professional" and "visionary founder" can grow from genuine experience. One may reflect years spent tracing complex faults. Another may describe real translation between technical and organisational worlds. A third may point to a project that required unusual persistence and a long view.

Trouble begins when the label replaces the work. The profile no longer compresses experience; it builds an explanatory legend. Later events are fitted around the same identity. Success confirms exceptional ability. Failure proves that the environment was unprepared. Criticism reveals the limits of the critic. Uncertainty becomes a minor delay on a path whose meaning is already settled.

The alternative is not self-erasure. People who have built difficult things have both a right and a practical reason to make their value visible. The narrower question is how to do so without allowing the sentence to carry more weight than the results, the conditions and independent scrutiny can jointly support.

Six different claims can hide inside one sentence

"I am good at understanding complex systems" appears to be a single statement. It may contain at least

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six.

The first is biographical: the fields, roles and length of time involved. Projects, records and chronology can usually support it.

The second concerns performance: which concrete problem was solved, what changed as a result, and whether the result appeared again in a different setting. One success is evidence. It is not automatically a stable pattern of competence.

The third concerns the quality of the process. Did the person find defects in their own design, seek missing expertise, document decisions and reorganise work when conditions changed? For future collaboration, these features may matter more than the final outcome alone.

The fourth is external judgement. What did other people observe, and from what position did they speak? Detailed feedback from a colleague is not equivalent to a polite recommendation, a paid assessment, public enthusiasm or formal professional accreditation.

The fifth is comparative: "top few per cent", "an unusually rare combination", "exceptional ability". Such claims require a reference group, a method, an appropriate sample and a clear account of what is being compared.

The sixth is identity: "this is the kind of person I am". It is the strongest compression because it turns behaviour across different situations into one durable property. It may contain truth, but it can conceal how differently the same person performs under other pressures, with other colleagues or inside another institution.

None of these layers is forbidden. The distortion arises when they are presented as if one automatically establishes the next. Ten years of experience does not by itself place someone in the top one per cent. Repeated praise does not prove that the same competence transfers to every relevant setting. A powerful subjective experience does not become a measurement merely because it can be described precisely.

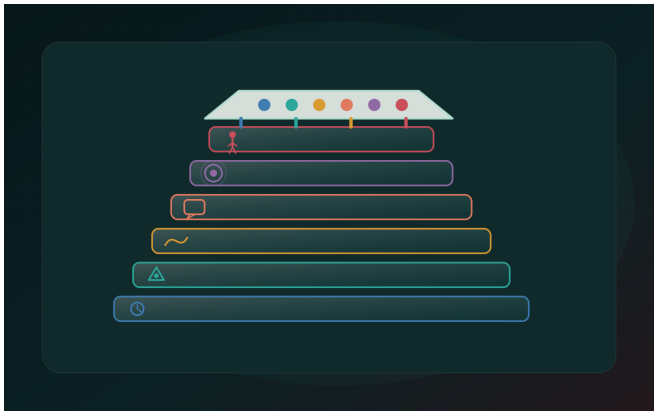


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Rarity always needs a denominator

Rarity claims are attractive because they provide identity and market position at the same time. Someone who sees several uncommon abilities meeting in one career can easily conclude that the complete combination must be extremely rare.

The hidden problem is the denominator.

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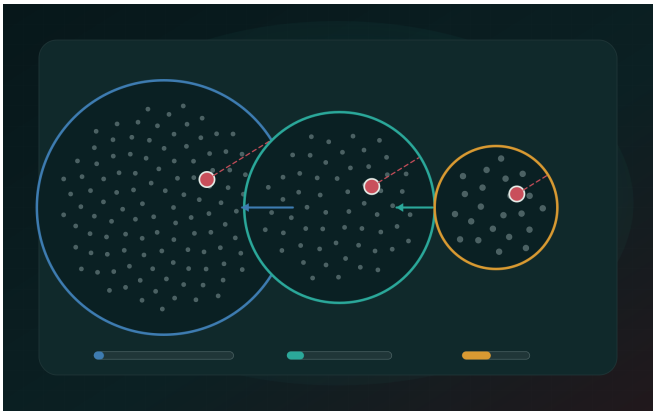


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Rare among whom? All adults, members of a profession, workers in one country, people with similar education, or those performing the same function at a genuinely advanced level? What depth qualifies as competence? Is interest and independent learning enough, or is sustained performance required? Are the abilities independent, or does one background factor make several labels likely at once?

Change the reference group and the same person can be both unusual and ordinary. In a general corporate environment, someone who moves comfortably between technical, communicative and organisational problems may indeed be uncommon. In a product-development team, that combination may be expected. In an international expert community, it may be widespread, though expressed at very different depths.

Percentile self-descriptions therefore demand unusual restraint. A precise-looking number without a measurement is often stage scenery. It need not be a deliberate lie. It may be an enthusiastic estimate, an impression assembled from feedback, or the overextension of a narrow test result. The public question remains the same: what can an outsider actually verify?

A less dramatic formulation may be more informative: "For two decades I have worked where technical defects, user processes and organisational consequences meet; in recent years I have connected this work with research and product-design questions." This does not announce how many similar people exist. It makes the combination, time span and practical material visible.

The statement is not smaller. It offers more handles.

Competence does not detach from its conditions

Professional profiles often treat ability as portable property, as if the same performance travelled unchanged into every organisation, team and problem. [3][4]

Real competence is conditional. A person may excel during long, independent analytical cycles and perform less well in coordination built from constant interruption. Someone may identify structural defects but struggle to make the repair politically acceptable. Another person may create direction and momentum while requiring a strong partner for detailed execution.

This does not cancel the competence. It defines its operating range.

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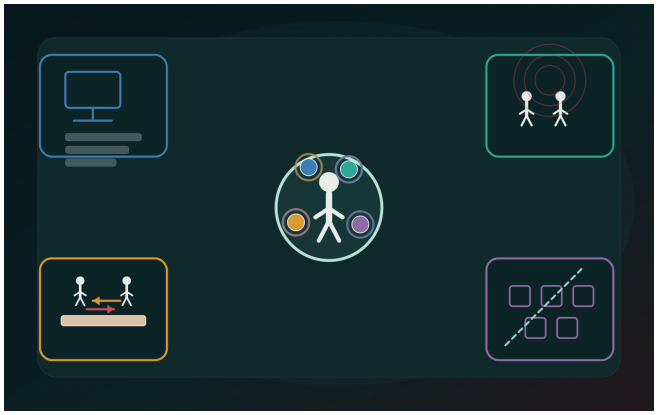


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A useful self-description therefore names conditions as well as strengths. In what task did the ability appear? Alone or in a team? During a short crisis or a multi-year build? Were authority, budget, data and leadership support available? Did the result survive when some of these conditions disappeared?

At first, such context can sound like an attempt to weaken an achievement. In fact, it helps separate personal contribution from team capability, institutional support, fortunate timing and luck.

Research on impression management has long examined how people try to shape the image others form of them [1]. Goffman's classic account describes social life as the management of roles and presentations, but it does not imply that every presentation is false [2]. A profile must select. The relevant question is how it selects: what disappears, and would the missing context materially change the reader's judgement?

A self-myth is usually not a conscious lie

The term self-myth can become a moral accusation, suggesting a person has deliberately invented a grand story and is now selling it. That occurs. The more common process is quieter. [5]

Memory organises narrative. It selects details that appear to belong together. In retrospect, a career acquires more purpose than it had while being lived. Abandoned paths become side routes, fortunate encounters become necessary stages, and early uncertainty is recast as farsighted exploration.

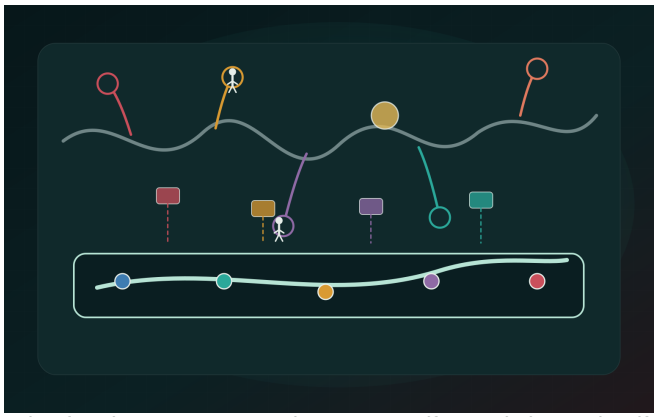


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Professional and social platforms reinforce this process. They reward continuity. A life is easier to read when early interests lead in a straight line to the current project. Actual careers contain interruption, necessity, borrowed ideas, errors corrected by other people, and periods that only later acquire meaning.

The self-myth becomes dangerous when it stops presenting the past and begins protecting current

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claims from examination. If a project fails, the market was not ready. If criticism arrives, the critic lacks the full picture. If an assessment is weak, the assessment is too narrow. Any one of these explanations may be right in a particular case. If every result can be absorbed into the same identity story, the story no longer takes a risk. No evidence remains capable of changing it.

This matters especially around new theories, ventures and creative projects. Long work necessarily creates emotional and identity investment. Without it, many difficult projects would never survive. The same investment can blur the difference between the project's value, its current level of completion and the role it plays in the creator's self-conception.

A project is a verifiable state, not a professional rank

Entrepreneurial language can raise status around an open process with remarkable speed. An idea becomes a "startup", a prototype becomes a "platform", several conversations become "market validation", and an interested contact becomes a "partnership". The words may not be entirely false. They cover different stages with the same label.

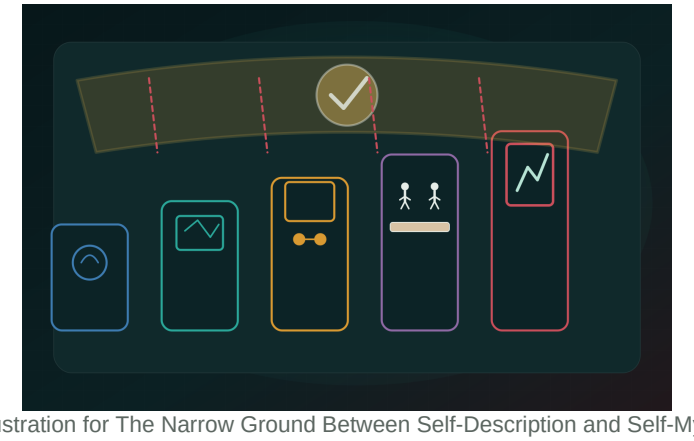


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A clearer description separates the state:

- what has actually been completed;
- what works in demonstration;
- what has been used by an external participant;
- which result can be repeated;
- what cost and labour are required to sustain it;
- which claims remain hypotheses;
- what the next independent test would be.

A product can be compelling while still being a research prototype. A conceptual framework can be productive without a completed formal system. An article can matter without founding a new discipline. Precise status language does not remove potential. It prevents potential from being booked as finished achievement.

Inflated self-description may buy attention in the short term, but it borrows expensive credibility from the future. Every later demonstration, partnership and result must repay the first sentence. A more exact description offers less immediate shine and more room for learning and correction.

Understatement distorts as well

Criticism of inflated profiles can produce the opposite mistake: the idea that a responsible person should report only dry facts and avoid any stronger interpretation.

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A task list often hides the value of work. "Tested software" says little about someone who repeatedly found defects crossing several organisational layers, pursued them through conflict and improved the team's reasoning in the process. "Wrote articles" does not show a writer who integrated many sources, imposed demanding linguistic and logical constraints, and repeatedly reduced the size of their own claims.

Conclusions can therefore be drawn from evidence. The bridge should remain visible.

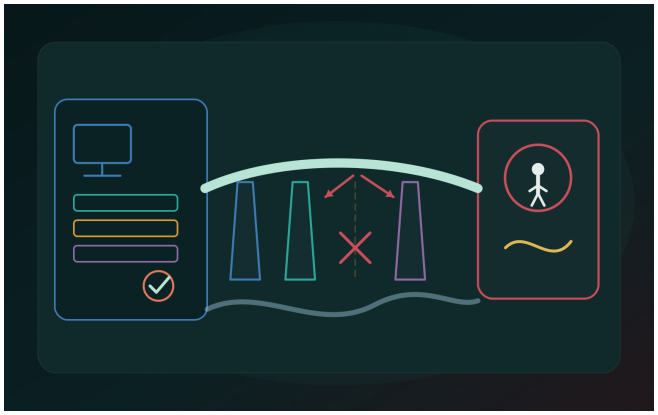


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For example: "Work across several domains of fault analysis and system organisation suggests that one of my strengths is identifying shared structure among scattered problems. I am currently testing this ability in research prototypes and publication projects." This is an interpretation. It does not announce a permanent rank. It names its basis, current application and unfinished test.

Precision here is information discipline rather than a performance of modesty. A profile does not need to make the work smaller. It needs to keep the size of the claim proportionate to the material beneath it.

A workable architecture for self-description

A good profile does not have to become an academic paper with footnotes. Several distinctions still improve it.

First, separate fact from interpretation. "I have worked in software quality assurance for fifteen years" is largely factual. "My strength is identifying organisational patterns behind system defects" is an interpretation. They become more credible when they are connected without being merged.

Second, show at least one result or artefact: a product, publication, documented process improvement, open-source contribution, research note, case study or measurable organisational change. Some projects must remain private; even then, a verifiable trace can usually be constructed.

Third, name the operating range. In which tasks does the person perform strongly, and where is another competence required? A boundary is not a confession of weakness. It reduces bad role matching.

Fourth, treat external validation separately. An award, test, invitation or partner outcome may be reported, but the conclusion should match what it actually measures.

Fifth, leave room for an open state. "I am working on this", "I am trying to formalise this", "I am seeking technical criticism here" and "I want to test this prototype in a real environment" are not weak sentences. For the right collaborator, they provide a more precise interface than a closed self-ranking.

Keep the self-description editable

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Every introduction reduces. A few lines cannot contain every failure, collaborator, condition, restart and doubt. The aim is not complete autobiographical truth. It is compression that does not reverse the proportions.

A self-myth is rigid. Each new fact is arranged around an identity that has already been completed. A self-description remains editable. It can become more precise after a new result, smaller after a counterexample, broader after performance repeats in another domain, or simply differently weighted when the work changes direction.

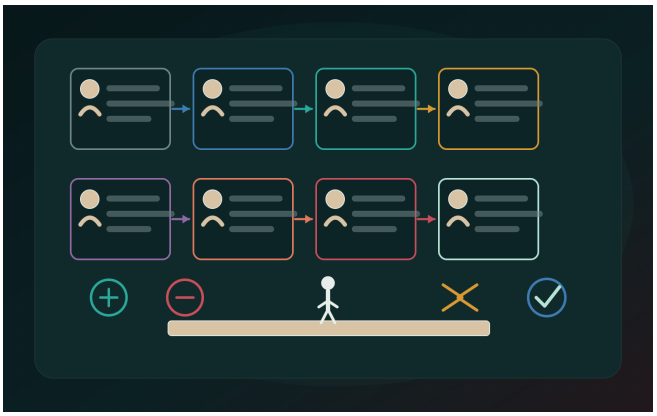


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The cursor is still blinking in the field. Something has to be written. The best sentence will probably not settle, once and for all, how exceptional the person behind it is. It will show what they have done, how they work, which results support the interpretation, and what remains to be established.

The profile then stops being the pedestal of a finished statue. It becomes a clearly marked workspace.

References

[1] Leary, Mark R. - Kowalski, Robin M. (1990): Impression Management: A Literature Review and Two-Component Model. Psychological Bulletin, 107(1), 34-47.

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[5] Swann, William B. Jr. (1983): Self-Verification: Bringing Social Reality into Harmony with the Self. In: Suls, Jerry - Greenwald, Anthony G. (eds.): Psychological Perspectives on the Self, Vol. 2. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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