

The Consequences of Self-Promotion at the Expense of Others



Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple.

Foreword

Every workplace in the United Kingdom (UK) relies on some self-advertisement. Colleagues describe their achievements at appraisal, bid teams highlight their track record to win contracts, and job applicants present their experience favourably. None of this is inherently improper. Yet a persistent minority of self-promotional behaviour crosses from legitimate advocacy into conduct that damages colleagues, distorts decision-making and, in serious cases, causes measurable financial and reputational harm to organisations across both sectors.

Self-promotion, defined precisely, is deliberate communication calculated to raise other people's awareness of one's own achievements, capabilities or contribution to a shared endeavour. That definition is neutral. It says nothing about whether the communication is honest, proportionate or fair to colleagues who contributed alongside the person doing the promoting. The ethical question only begins once accuracy and attribution enter the picture, which is precisely where most published commentary on the subject tends to lose precision.

Two working categories are therefore useful. Ethical self-promotion is accurate advocacy that preserves appropriate credit to others involved in the achievement being described. Unethical self-promotion relies on distortion, disproportionate attribution, concealment of others' contributions, or outright denigration of colleagues. The distinction matters because organisations that fail to draw it tend to treat all visibility-seeking behaviour with suspicion, discouraging the ordinary advocacy that healthy careers depend on.

The stakes are not abstract. Oxford Economics research commissioned by Unum estimated that replacing a single UK employee can cost an organisation more than £30,000 once recruitment, retraining, and lost productivity are factored in. When misattributed contribution contributes to disengagement, deteriorating morale, or eventual turnover, the consequences of unmanaged self-promotion can extend beyond interpersonal dissatisfaction into recruitment costs, retention pressures, and wider organisational performance.

The Ethical Spectrum

Organisational misconduct connected to self-promotion rarely announces itself as such. It sits along a continuum from entirely ethical self-advocacy, through excessive self-promotion and credit appropriation, to deception, before terminating in organisational misconduct or fraud. Treating every point on that continuum as equivalent is a category error. Exaggerating one's role in a successful project is not the same order of wrongdoing as falsifying financial statements, though both may originate in a similar underlying appetite for recognition.

At the continuum's first stage sits ordinary advocacy: an employee accurately describing what they did, in language proportionate to their actual contribution. Moving along it, excessive self-promotion begins to inflate that contribution relative to colleagues, without yet actively appropriating any specific credit belonging to someone else. At this stage, it remains a matter of tone and proportion rather than dishonesty, which is why managers so often tolerate or overlook it.

Credit appropriation follows where a person knowingly claims recognition for work substantially performed by someone else. Organisational research increasingly describes this behaviour as "knowledge theft", meaning the deliberate claiming of unjustified ownership over another person's work or ideas. Studies have linked such conduct to negative emotional and workplace outcomes, and experimental research has found that employees show reduced commitment to leaders who take credit for their work.

More recent research also suggests that knowledge theft can generate anger and a sense of loss among those whose contributions are appropriated, with implications for collaboration and willingness to exchange ideas. These findings support the broader concern that repeated credit appropriation can damage working relationships and discourage open contribution. However, the precise organisational consequences will vary according to context and how the behaviour is addressed.

Deception represents a further step, where factual claims about outcomes, capability or performance are knowingly false rather than merely favourably framed. At the continuum's far end lies organisational misconduct or fraud, where distorted self-presentation becomes embedded in systems of incentives, reporting and governance, causing harm that extends well beyond any individual colleague to shareholders, customers, taxpayers or, in regulated sectors, the public interest that regulation exists to protect.

Recognising this continuum has practical value for anyone designing appraisal systems, disciplinary policies or governance frameworks. A manager who treats mild overstatement with the same severity reserved for fabricated results will lose credibility and consistency with their team. Conversely, a governance framework that only intervenes once conduct has reached outright fraud will have missed every earlier opportunity to correct course, several of which are considerably cheaper and less reputationally damaging to address than the last.

The Case for Visibility

It would be a mistake to read the preceding continuum as an argument against self-promotion altogether. Under-promotion can also carry a cost, particularly where employees' contributions are not immediately visible to those making decisions about recognition, reward or advancement. In such settings, individuals who are less inclined to describe their achievements may be overlooked despite making consistent and valuable contributions.

Recognition does not always arise automatically from performance alone, especially where managers have limited direct visibility of an employee's work or where contributions are difficult to quantify. Some appropriate self-advocacy may therefore be necessary to ensure genuine achievements are understood. At the same time, organisations retain responsibility for creating systems that identify merit without relying too heavily on individual confidence or self-presentation.

Research by Christine Exley of Harvard Business School and Judd Kessler of the Wharton

School identified a persistent gender gap in self-promotion. Their experimental research found that women described their performance less favourably than equally performing men, including when assessments were presented to potential employers, suggesting that differences in self-evaluation can influence how otherwise comparable performance is communicated.

Separate 2026 UK research by HiBob found that around one-third of women surveyed identified visibility to senior leadership as one of the behaviours most rewarded in promotion decisions. The finding suggests that organisational visibility can materially influence perceptions of advancement. However, it should not be interpreted as establishing that visibility is universally rewarded more highly than measurable performance across UK workplaces.

Quiet contributors face a structural disadvantage that has little to do with the quality of their work. Remote and hybrid staff, whose output managers may never directly observe, are particularly exposed, as are employees in cultures where assertiveness is discouraged, whether because of temperament, upbringing, or workplace norms. Where achievements are difficult to quantify, such as mentoring, quiet troubleshooting or long-running relationship management, the burden of making that value visible falls disproportionately on the individual concerned.

This creates an uncomfortable asymmetry. Employees who are more willing to self-promote may gain greater visibility and access to sponsorship or advancement opportunities, particularly in environments where contribution is not assessed through consistently objective measures. Conversely, equally capable colleagues who under-promote may receive less recognition when their achievements are less visible to those making progression decisions.

Addressing only the excesses of self-promotion, without recognising this imbalance, risks reproducing the same underlying unfairness in a different form. The more sustainable objective is therefore to ensure that recognition and advancement reflect evidenced contribution, rather than either confidence in self-presentation or reluctance to engage in it.

Responsibility for correcting this imbalance cannot rest solely with individual employees, because encouraging everyone to self-promote more vigorously would escalate the arms race described in the preceding section. Management has an independent duty to proactively recognise contribution, rather than waiting for it to be advertised, through structured observation, deliberate solicitation of peer feedback, and appraisal processes that do not implicitly reward confidence over substance. The practical recommendations below examine that duty.

Cultural, gendered and structural explanations for under-promotion do not excuse organisations from building systems robust enough to surface genuine contribution, regardless of who is willing to shout about it loudest. A workplace that only recognises what is actively advertised has effectively delegated a core management function, namely the fair identification of merit, to whichever employees happen to be most comfortable with self-advertisement, which is rarely a sound basis for reward or advancement decisions in practice.

Cultural and Sectoral Variation

Attitudes towards self-promotion vary across sectors and settings, though such variation should be described carefully rather than treated as a fixed rule. Some evidence suggests that, within parts of the National Health Service (NHS), recognition practices lean towards multidisciplinary and team-based framing rather than individual credit. In contrast, in some corners of private-sector consultancy, individual profile-building can be more actively rewarded. Both the NHS and the consultancy sector are large and internally diverse.

The 2025 NHS Staff Survey found that just over half of respondents, 53.1 per cent, were satisfied with the recognition they received for good work, while 67.4 per cent said colleagues showed appreciation towards one another. These figures suggest a culture where peer-level

acknowledgement can coexist with more mixed satisfaction around formal recognition, a pattern consistent with, though not proof of, a collaborative ethos sitting uneasily alongside individually assertive self-promotion.

Regional and organisational communication styles across the UK can also differ in ways relevant to self-promotion. In some settings, particularly parts of the public sector and certain professional services traditions, understated communication has historically been valued over overt self-advertisement. However, treat this as a tendency rather than a rule, since counterexamples exist in every region and sector, and generational change is visibly reshaping expectations in many workplaces.

The practical implication is not that any one sectoral or cultural style is objectively superior, but that organisations operating across multiple settings, such as public bodies engaging private-sector contractors, should watch for the risk of misreading understated communication as low contribution, or assertive self-promotion as necessarily higher performance. Recognition systems built around a single cultural assumption will systematically misjudge employees who do not share it.

Two Case Studies in Organisational Self-Promotion

Two documented episodes illustrate, with unusual clarity, how self-promotional pressure can escalate into serious organisational harm once it becomes embedded in incentive structures, rather than remaining a matter of individual conduct. Both involved leadership choosing, over an extended period, to project an image of success that diverged sharply from underlying reality, and both produced consequences reaching well beyond the organisations directly responsible for the original distortion of the record.

Wells Fargo's fake-accounts scandal is among the most thoroughly documented examples internationally. Between 2002 and 2016, employees, under pressure to meet aggressive cross-selling targets, opened millions of unauthorised deposit and credit-card accounts in customers' names, a practice the bank later admitted in a 2020 settlement. Internal metrics presenting cross-selling as a runaway success were, in substance, a self-promotional narrative sustained by fabricated activity rather than genuine customer demand.

The financial consequences were severe. Wells Fargo paid \$185 million to US regulators in 2016, then a further \$3 billion to the Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission in 2020, including a \$500 million civil penalty earmarked for defrauded investors. Chief executive John Stumpf ultimately forfeited around \$69 million in compensation and was later barred for life from the banking industry, while roughly 5,300 employees were dismissed over the underlying conduct.

The Post Office Horizon scandal offers a UK-specific parallel, although its self-promotional dimension operated differently. Post Office Ltd and Fujitsu maintained public and institutional confidence in the Horizon accounting system for years after internal evidence suggested it could generate false shortfalls, contributing to the prosecution of postmasters based on data the organisations continued to present as reliable. More than 900 people were prosecuted, and more than 100 convictions had already been overturned in court before Parliament subsequently legislated to quash qualifying Horizon-related convictions more broadly.

Parliament's response has been substantial. By July 2026, the Ministry of Justice had identified 2,228 convictions as quashed by the Act among Post Office/CPS and self-identified cases in England and Wales, alongside 21 additional Royal Mail Group convictions. Separately, eligible claimants under the Horizon Convictions Redress Scheme may choose a fixed total payment of £600,000 or pursue a detailed assessment of their losses.

Financial redress has expanded considerably across the various Horizon schemes. By 28 August 2026, approximately £1.697 billion had been paid to more than 13,500 claimants, including payments under the Horizon Shortfall, Group Litigation Order and Horizon Convictions Redress schemes. The scale and continuing administration of these programmes

illustrate how difficult and resource-intensive it can be to remedy institutional harm once it has become deeply established.

Both episodes share a structural feature worth isolating analytically. In each case, an organisation's public and internal narrative of operational success outpaced, and diverged sharply from, the underlying reality, and the gap was sustained not by a single dishonest statement but by an accumulated pattern of confident presentation that discouraged internal challenge. That pattern, more than any single act of individual self-promotion, converted a communication failure into a matter of lasting institutional and legal consequence.

Governance Failures and the Limits of the Self-Promotion Frame

Carillion's 2018 collapse is frequently cited alongside these examples, and rightly belongs in any discussion of organisational overstatement, but it demands more careful handling than the other two. The joint parliamentary inquiry into its failure found a board that presented a picture of financial resilience through a record £79 million dividend in 2016, even as liabilities of nearly £7 billion accumulated against just £29 million in cash by the time of liquidation in January 2018.

It would be inaccurate to state that Parliament's inquiry concluded Carillion's leadership engaged in "self-promotion"; that specific term belongs to this analysis rather than to the inquiry's own findings, which instead described recklessness, hubris and an unsustainable dividend policy. A more defensible formulation is that the inquiry's evidence illustrates circumstances that can be interpreted, through an analytical lens, as institutional self-promotion, without presenting that framing as the inquiry's own conclusion.

That distinction is not pedantic. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) separately fined KPMG a record £21 million in 2023 for audit failures across three years of Carillion's accounts, finding an unusually large number of breaches of auditing standards. Auditors, regulators and elected committees each reached conclusions using their own vocabulary and evidentiary standards, and collapsing those distinct findings into a single narrative of self-promotion would overstate what any one of them established on the record.

Theoretical Foundations

Three established frameworks from organisational psychology help explain why unethical self-promotion can cause harm disproportionate to any single act. Individually, each is well evidenced; the more useful step, largely absent from earlier treatments of the subject, is connecting them into a single explanatory sequence that traces how one instance of distorted self-presentation can travel through an organisation to affect behaviour far removed from the original act.

Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger, holds that people evaluate their own worth and performance largely by comparing themselves with others around them. When a colleague's self-promotion inflates their apparent contribution, everyone else's comparative standing is affected even though their own performance has not changed, producing a sense of injustice that is not imagined but a predictable consequence of how self-evaluation actually works in practice.

Organisational Justice Theory, associated with Jerald Greenberg, distinguishes distributive fairness in outcomes from procedural fairness in how those outcomes are decided upon. Misattributed credit damages both simultaneously: the outcome, such as a promotion or bonus, goes to the wrong person, and the process that allowed inflated self-presentation to determine that outcome is itself perceived, correctly, as flawed and manipulable by anyone willing to promote themselves sufficiently aggressively, regardless of underlying merit or actual contribution.

Social Identity Theory, from Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains how team and organisational cohesion depends heavily on members perceiving fair treatment within the group. Once colleagues believe recognition is captured disproportionately by self-promoters,

identification with the team weakens, and defensive, self-protective behaviour, including reduced knowledge-sharing and diminished willingness to collaborate openly and consistently, becomes a rational individual response to a genuinely unfair collective environment.

Sequenced together, these theories describe a causal chain: a self-promotional act produces perceived unfairness in attribution, which triggers unfavourable social comparison, which in turn undermines organisational justice and erodes trust; the resulting defensiveness reduces knowledge-sharing and open collaboration, and that reduction carries a real, lasting organisational cost in innovation, retention and performance, extending the damage from one individual's conduct into the wider system surrounding them.

The Legal Position in the United Kingdom

*UK employment law does not use the language of self-promotion, but several established doctrines apply directly once excessive self-promotion damages colleagues or misleads an employer. The House of Lords' decision in *Malik v Bank of Credit and Commerce International SA* established that every contract of employment carries an implied term of mutual trust and confidence, breached where an employer, or conduct it knowingly tolerates, seriously damages that relationship without reasonable and proper cause.*

Where self-promotion shades into deception, such as falsified performance claims or misappropriated credit that misleads an employer about an individual's suitability or entitlement to reward, disciplinary action may be available under misconduct principles. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures sets out the minimum fair process, requiring investigation, a statement of allegations, a hearing, and a right of appeal before dismissal, helping the employer demonstrate procedural fairness should the dismissal subsequently be challenged before an employment tribunal.

Whistleblowing protection is directly relevant wherever a colleague raises concerns about another person's self-promotional misrepresentation. Protected disclosures under Part IVA of the Employment Rights Act 1996, as inserted by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) and subsequently amended, protect workers from dismissal or detriment where they reasonably believe that the information disclosed tends to show specified wrongdoing, such as a breach of a legal obligation, a miscarriage of justice or danger to health and safety, and reasonably believe that the disclosure is made in the public interest. The applicable statutory requirements concerning how and to whom the disclosure is made must also be satisfied for protection to apply.

Discrimination and victimisation claims can also arise indirectly. Where recognition systems systematically reward self-promotion in ways that disadvantage a group sharing a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, for example, if promotion criteria implicitly favour a communication style correlated with gender, an indirect discrimination claim becomes arguable, while an employee penalised for raising such a concern may separately claim victimisation under the same statute.

The financial exposure attached to getting this wrong is not trivial. From 6 April 2026, the maximum compensatory award for unfair dismissal rose to £123,543, or 52 weeks' gross pay if lower, alongside a maximum basic award of £22,530, under the Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order 2026; the Employment Rights Act 2025 is expected to remove that compensatory cap entirely from January 2027, materially raising the stakes for employers who mishandle these disputes.

None of this amounts to a developed body of "self-promotion law", and it would misdescribe the position to suggest otherwise. What exists instead is a set of established employment law doctrines, developed for other purposes, that intersect with self-promotion whenever it produces misrepresentation, unfair detriment or a breakdown in workplace trust, meaning organisations addressing the issue are working within familiar legal territory rather than an unregulated gap requiring novel legal analysis.

Practical Measures for Organisations

General exhortations to be transparent or to foster fairness are unlikely, on their own, to change entrenched behaviour inside most organisations. What organisations actually need are specific, implementable mechanisms that make accurate attribution the default outcome of ordinary processes, rather than something achieved only when a manager notices and corrects a misleading claim well after the event has passed and the damage is done.

Documented contribution records, maintained contemporaneously rather than reconstructed at appraisal time, give managers an evidential basis for assessing claims about individual input to a project. When teams keep even lightweight records of who did what, disputes about attribution become questions of fact rather than competing narratives, considerably reducing the scope for confident self-promotion to substitute for demonstrable contribution when a manager eventually assesses performance formally.

A 360-degree appraisal, incorporating structured feedback from peers and subordinates rather than a single manager's impression alone, directly counteracts the tendency for confident self-presentation to dominate one evaluator's judgement. Combined with team-based objectives rewarding collective outcomes rather than purely individual metrics, it reduces the incentive to inflate personal contribution at a colleague's expense, since shared success depends less on any single person's account of events.

Structured project retrospectives, held at the close of significant pieces of work, create a natural, low-stakes opportunity to record who contributed what before memories fade and competing accounts harden. Named-authorship protocols, requiring specific attribution on reports, bids and publications rather than a single collective byline, achieve a similar effect for written output, making misattribution considerably harder to sustain once contributions are formally recorded at the point of original creation.

Evidence requirements within promotion and reward applications, which require claimed achievements to be supported by named colleagues, documented outcomes, or other verifiable records, shift attention away from persuasive self-description and toward demonstrable contribution. This helps reduce the extent to which confident presentation alone can influence decisions concerning advancement, recognition or reward.

Manager calibration sessions can provide an additional safeguard by allowing several line managers to compare candidates before confirming final decisions. This wider review can identify cases where one evaluator may have been disproportionately influenced by a particularly confident or assertive style of self-presentation, helping ensure that decisions remain grounded in evidence rather than presentation style alone.

Peer recognition schemes, properly designed, distribute the power to acknowledge contribution more widely than a single line manager, reducing the extent to which recognition depends on one person's assessment of one person's self-description. A visible, accessible mechanism for disputing misattribution, whether through human resources, a nominated ombudsperson or an established grievance route, gives affected colleagues a route to correction that does not depend on informal, uncomfortable confrontation with a colleague.

Finally, behavioural indicators built carefully into management training help line managers better recognise when self-promotional confidence is being mistaken for underlying substance, and equally when a quieter colleague's genuine contribution risks being overlooked entirely. Taken together, these measures shift an organisation's culture away from rewarding whoever presents most persuasively and towards rewarding what can be evidenced, verified, and fairly attributed to the people responsible.

Summary – Recognition Without Distortion

The material examined here supports one central proposition more strongly than any other: the ethical problem is not visibility itself. Individuals are entitled, and in most careers required, to make their contribution known to others. It is the acquisition of visibility through the distortion

of contribution, rather than the pursuit of visibility as such, that produces the harm documented throughout the preceding sections, from damaged colleagues to entire collapsed organisations.

Wells Fargo and the Post Office Horizon scandal demonstrate what happens when that distortion becomes embedded in institutional incentives rather than remaining an individual failing; Carillion illustrates why careful, evidence-respecting language matters when describing such failures. Between these extremes sit millions of ordinary workplace interactions where the same underlying dynamic, credit sought without being fully earned, operates on a smaller but still consequential and cumulatively costly scale.

Organisations that build recognition systems that surface genuine contribution, regardless of who is willing to advertise it most confidently, address both ends of the problem at once. They reduce the reward available to unethical self-promotion while ensuring that quieter, equally valuable contributors are no longer structurally disadvantaged, which is a considerably more achievable and durable goal than attempting to eliminate self-promotion from organisational life altogether.

Additional articles are available at [Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple](#). This site covers procurement and supply chain management issues to help organisations and people improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of their product and service supply to customers' delight. © Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple. All rights reserved.

Further Reading

- *Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Work and Pensions Committees, Carillion (House of Commons, Second Joint Report of Session 2017–19, HC 769, 2018)*
- *House of Commons Library, The Collapse of Carillion, Research Briefing CBP-8206 (2018)*
- *Financial Reporting Council, Final Settlement Decision Notices: KPMG LLP, KPMG Audit LLC and Carillion plc (12 October 2023)*
- *US Department of Justice and US Securities and Exchange Commission, press releases and administrative orders on the Wells Fargo & Co. settlement (21 and 24 February 2020)*
- *Congressional Research Service, Wells Fargo: A Timeline of Recent Consumer Protection and Corporate Governance Scandals, IF11129 (2020)*
- *Business and Trade Committee, Post Office Horizon Scandal Redress: Unfinished Business (House of Commons, Fourth Report of Session 2024–25)*
- *Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Act 2024 and accompanying Explanatory Notes (legislation.gov.uk)*
- *Department for Business and Trade/Post Office Ltd, Post Office Horizon financial redress data (GOV.UK, various releases, 2023–2026)*
- *Malik and Mahmud v Bank of Credit and Commerce International SA [1997] UKHL 23*
- *Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures*
- *Employment Rights Act 1996, as amended by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, and the Equality Act 2010*
- *Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order 2026; Employment Rights Act 2025*
- *NHS England, 2025 NHS Staff Survey National Results*

- *Oxford Economics and Unum, The Cost of Brain Drain: Understanding the Financial Impact of Staff Turnover (2014)*
- *Exley, C. L. and Kessler, J. B., "The Gender Gap in Self-Promotion", The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 137(3) (2022), pp. 1345–1381*
- *HiBob, UK Women in the Workplace 2026: The Visibility Penalty*
- *Festinger, L., "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes", Human Relations, 7(2) (1954)*
- *Greenberg, J., "A Taxonomy of Organisational Justice Theories", Academy of Management Review, 12(1) (1987)*
- *Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C., "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict", in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations (1979)*
- *Rodgers, M. S., Sauer, S. J. and Proell, C. A., "The Lion's Share: The Impact of Credit Expectations and Credit Allocations on Commitment to Leaders", The Leadership Quarterly, 24(1) (2013), pp. 80–93*
- *Zweig, D., Scott, K. A., Damp, A. and Paquin, T., "Mitigating the Toxic Experience of Knowledge Theft: An Exploration of Interventions", Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology, 99(1) (2026), e70093*