

Interns: a case study

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John Cain Foundation inaugural conference

March 21 2015, Melbourne University

Internships have increasingly become a core focus for industrial activists, labour lawyers and the media in recent years.

These unpaid internships are widely considered to be unfair and unjust, and yet so desirable to young people and businesses alike.

It's a familiar story, a young, ambitious student or recent graduate wants to get their foot in the door. Immediately, they'll turn to an internship – commonly unpaid and for periods of three to six months or longer.

The growing popularity of internships in the last 20 years has come to socialise a culture of free labour, especially within white collar industries like media, the arts and legal and finance professions.

There are a few significant problems with the modern internship structure.

Firstly, constant demand for internships perpetuates industry standards of unpaid work and significant working hours.

Secondly, this structure benefits the rich. Those who can afford to work full time for significant periods of time are almost always rich, networked and privileged. They're the young people who have a family structure to rely on, and are located in our major cities with access to employment networks and universities.

Susan Greenberg recently summed it up well in an article in the New York Times:

“Internships are the new Harvard: prestigious, costly, insanely competitive and the presumed key to all future successes.”¹

Thirdly and more broadly, the loss of permanence in the workforce highlights our rapidly changing job market. Career pathways are no longer one track, the eight hour day has disappeared in all but its name and through our online connectivity, the workplace is increasingly intruding on our home lives.

¹ <http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/parenting/2015/02/25/the-internship-that-looks-good-vs-the-job-that-pays/?referrer>

While we can't empirically say how many times one will change careers in a lifetime, we do know that frequent job changes are commonplace in the early years of employment. In the USA, of workers aged 20 to 24 around half have been with their employer less than a year.

Over the past 30 years entry level job opportunities have dramatically decreased. In conjunction with this, youth unemployment rates have remained significantly higher than the last decade's average unemployment rate of 5%.

So, why has our workforce evolved into one that openly and shamelessly asks our youth to work for free? And more troubling, why has this become an accepted culture in the workforce?

When we say it out loud – work for free or don't work at all – it sounds a bit ridiculous – and completely illegal, but it's actually a part of a deeper problem with the changing workforce and youth unemployment.

More young people than ever are finishing high school and more than ever are going to university. This is giving them the knowledge to enter the work force, but not the skills.

Over time, specific industries have been incapable of training the growing number of recent graduates and students for the workplace.

With this change in the market, and some many young graduates keen to do whatever they can to gain some experience, internships have appeared to fill this gap. It's a way for companies to leverage eager young un-skilled professionals to get maximum value.

the rise in internships can be seen as a symptom of an education system that does not effectively match the number of graduates it produces to the number of jobs available in fields related to a given degree. For example, one academic determined that less than 20% of Journalism graduates could expect to get a job, given the size of the industry.

And a more sinister culture is also emerging. Many industries are quasi requiring unpaid internships before gaining paid work. It's unfair to the poor, disadvantaged and less privileged who can't afford to work for free.

The culture of working for free as an 'intern' has been socialised and it is an unregulated norm. Again, the quote I mentioned above from Susan Greenberg highlights this absurdity excellent.

Unregulated is the key word here – and I haven't touched on it yet, but it is probably the crux of the problem both here and across Western economies.

A national survey conducted by Interns Australia in 2014 showed that 61 per cent of university graduates surveyed had completed two or more unpaid placements. Many of

these were for more than two months. Many of those were without contracts and without protections.

We only have to look to the United States to see the negative effect of a rapid expansion of the use of internships and an increase in inequality for young people entering the workforce. It's a problem they've identified and are trying to fix – we're still waiting for that same protection here.

Furthermore, as more and more young people undertake internships we are trapping cohorts of graduates in a cycle of underemployment and excluding them from economic participation.

Interns Australia has been working towards bringing businesses, unions, industry groups and researchers together to create an accreditation scheme that rewards best practice internships.

We believe that all interns who are working significant hours with professional assigned duties should be entitled to minimum wage for their work. We don't believe that young people should ever be doing the work of a paid position – a common narrative we hear.

We need significant cultural change as well as a legislation change. Ross Perlin sums up the situation succinctly in Intern Nation:

“This is a generational rite of passage. We now have a massive culture of unpaid work that may have started decades ago with good intentions but has really gone off the rails. The vast amount of what goes on at for-profit employers is illegal and unethical and erodes the ethic of a fair wage for a day's work.”