

# The precarious life of kids these days: the unpaid internship industry

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“Able to handle multiple tasks under strict deadlines”, “devotion to work late hours when needed”: these were some of the criteria for a three to four month internship in Brussels, completely unpaid, that I applied for directly after receiving my Bachelor’s degree. I wanted to kill some time before starting my Master’s degree in Leuven, and I thought an internship would be a good opportunity to gain valuable work experience, in addition to developing connections and meeting new people. The work for the internship included “assisting in the organisation of events”, “writing summaries and comprehensive report” (sic), “data management”, “office management”, and so on.

It sounded promising, albeit demanding, and was the only one of six internships that I applied for that even invited me for an interview. Directly after the interview, I was “hired”, so to speak. Four months later, after leaving the job early with a profound sense of unfulfillment, I grew increasingly critical about the internship industry as a whole. To refer to it as an industry sounds silly, but in the post-crisis era we are increasingly faced with organizations that hire interns as replacements for paid entry-level employees, inexorably demanding desperate students and graduates to invest all their time and energy to do tasks that provide little in terms of valuable work experience.

More recently, having gained a stronger sense of what I want for myself and what I’m willing to accept from others, I declined an unpaid internship that demanded my presence for at least four days a week for six months and required that I work in the cafeteria at least once a week. The fact that a company that earns millions a year has the gall to demand unpaid interns to do work that really would best be done by paid cafeteria staff is astounding to me, but maybe this is becoming the new normal as employers are increasingly undermining the potential of educated youth in a race to the bottom. The harsh reality is also that there will always be someone who is willing to do the unpaid work that others would decline.

In this article, I don’t want to give you tips about how to land an internship or how to write a good cover letter. Instead, I want to illuminate the growing phenomenon of unpaid internships that might look seductive as a line in one’s CV but ultimately offer little by way of a learning experience and exacerbate competitiveness and inequality in an already precarious job market.

The organization that I interned for set up conferences in Brussels on a variety of topics, one of which concerned the issues facing the European job market and unemployment. The conference was held in the affluent four-star Silken Berlaymont Hotel, and my job that day was to welcome delegates and speakers and take notes. At this stage I was a few weeks into my internship, and I was already growing cynical and exasperated with the amount of work I was doing for no pay, or at least no sense of personal benefit to me.

I remember sitting in a corner that day during the conference, taking notes as I was asked to do,

while one of the hired speakers, Professor Mike Campbell, was describing the growing phenomenon of unpaid internships in Europe, in the context of the fact that many youth have trouble finding employment. During the discussion session, I fantasized about raising my hand and announcing – like one would do in a dramatic scene of a badly scripted film – that I was myself an unpaid intern for the organization that was hosting this very conference about employment issues. Instead, I kept quiet, and stood politely by the door when the session ended in time for a stiff “networking lunch” break.

My internship experience was a disillusioning one. I have learned about the prevalence of internship positions that seem to exist primarily as a means for organizations to cut costs and hire free labor. Unpaid internships are becoming more common, especially in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Many employers require their interns to do real work, in the sense that they are indispensable to the functioning of these organizations. Of course, one learns by doing, but there is only so much energy that one can invest in an organization (especially those that receive generous funding and/or financial profit) for free before it becomes exploitative. This counts not only for the amount of effort that one puts into their work, but also the quality of the work that interns are asked to do; it is doubtful that making two hundred badges for conference attendees, or working in a cafeteria, will teach me much about working in a non-profit organization. Ultimately, too many interns receive no rewards in return for the work they do, whether in terms of financial compensation or as a fulfilling learning experience.

Given the competitiveness of the job market, many youths are already happy to have a line in their CV and a letter of recommendation for the months of valuable work that they do. But young people are getting the short end of the stick: while organizations continue to benefit from the labor that youth are willing to offer for little to no reward, finding a stable, paid job is becoming increasingly difficult. We young people are the boomerang generation: vacillating between living independently, and depending on our parents for support because of the precarity of the job market. This only counts for those who have the privilege to be able to rely on their parents financially in the first place.

Formally speaking, according to *Eurofound*, an EU agency devoted to the improvement of working conditions, an internship is legally required to meet the following criteria: it should not involve tasks that would otherwise be done by a full-time employee, it should revolve around training, it should be no more than six months long, and interns are required to receive a bonus payment if the duration of the internship is longer than two months. However, it is easy for employers to bypass these regulations. For example, I remember in the agreement that I signed for my internship, it explicitly states that I am “not an employee”. For another internship that I did after graduating from secondary school, I signed a “volunteer contract”. It goes without saying that a *contract* for a volunteer is absurd; volunteers, by the simple fact of being volunteers, have no obligations towards the organization they are working for. Yet a growing number of organizations are officially hiring interns as volunteers. By doing so, organizations can further avoid the responsibility that involves having employees; “volunteers” are not legally required to be paid, or even have their worker’s rights respected. After all, they’re volunteering, aren’t they?

The activist organization, *Intern Aware*, which protests the exclusionary nature of unpaid internships, makes a clear distinction between internships and volunteering. Volunteering, they state, involves a person working on their own terms; they volunteer their time when it works best for them and are not required to undertake certain tasks or meet certain standards of performance. Interns, like employees, are monitored by their bosses and are given a set of tasks to complete within a certain time frame and a certain set of standards. For this reason, *Intern Aware* argues, interns should be paid like regular employees.

The blurring of the boundaries between volunteers and interns is dangerous and allows organizations to avoid meeting the legal standards for working conditions. Interns can thus work for several months at a time with no pay, undertaking mundane administrative tasks, and receive no legal protection as workers. I would argue that at the very least, interns should be left with a sense of having learned something fulfilling from their experience, and should feel as though they have made a valuable contribution to the organization. Ideally, they should be treated as potential employees, in which as a reward for their commitment, the organization also commits to them.

I continued my unpaid internship for four months, being fully aware of the competitiveness of the job market and how it might benefit me in the long run. Not only is the paid job market incredibly competitive, but internships themselves are becoming increasingly difficult to land. The purpose of internships, as I explained above, is to provide training and experience to fresh graduates just entering the job market. However, as I've noticed in my own endeavors to get an internship, many internships require some prior work experience. The internship position that I was "fortunate" enough to be hired for, which was unpaid and emphasized the long working hours involved in the job, already had approximately thirty applicants. Less demanding internships that provide even the slightest compensation are even more competitive. It should be noted that this was in Brussels, a place where many graduates aspire to work after their studies. However, it's telling that we even have to compete for work that shouldn't require experience, but should rather *provide* experience. Evidently, the fact that the standards for internship positions are so high shows that many internships exist for the benefit of the organization, even though internships should benefit the intern before anyone else.

One might argue that if people are willing to work for free, then it shouldn't be seen as a problem. This is something they "signed up for", and you can always make the choice to leave if you are not happy with your internship experience. Yet in the present job market, in which several extracurricular activities and at least one or two internships are required to meet the minimum standards of several entry-level jobs, what does it really mean to make that "choice" to work for free? Sure, we could make the choice to not compete altogether and accept our fate as low-paid workers. Many people are happy with doing more basic, less-ambitious work. But as students in higher education, should we really accept this as our only alternative?

We also can't ignore the wider impact that unpaid internships have for society as a whole. To quote the slogan for *Intern Aware*, "unpaid internships exclude those who cannot work for free." In other words, there is nothing meritocratic about a system that only works to the advantage of those who can live on savings or support from their parents for several months at a time. One might also wonder what it means for society if potentially great minds have difficulty competing in the job market because of the necessity to have done unpaid work in order to compete for a paid job. The bottom line is, unpaid internships contribute to the growing gap between the rich and poor.

If the growing phenomenon of unpaid internships is harmful to society and provides few benefits for the interns themselves, while also being an almost necessary component to one's CV, what can we do about this problem? The issue of exploitative unpaid internships is widespread and can hardly be tackled on an individual level. But I would suggest, first of all, that you should know your rights. There is only a certain amount of time that you can legally work for an organization for no pay. Agencies like *Eurofound* provide information on worker's rights as well as the legal boundaries of internships in Europe, and there are several activist organizations that address the problem of unpaid internships and can also provide information. Secondly, assert your own standards, and don't accept work that you know offers you no benefit. Although the job market may seem disheartening, there are always better options. However, there is only so much you can do as one person, and I can offer you no optimistic pep talk in the closing of this article. All I can say is, good luck.