The Emotional Toll For Some Unpaid Internships



The topic of unpaid interns in the workplace has garnered a lot of media attention this past year. As the economy lost jobs many organizations brought on board more unpaid employees, often students or new graduates, under the theory that they were offering these interns an opportunity to build a career. Many times these interns were brought on at the expense of brining on board a new paid staff. Unpaid internships often become a rotating door of cheap, unpaid work.

There are estimates that across Canada as many as 300,000 people are working for free in some of the country's major corporations, corporations that are often turning a great profit and paying their executives bonuses for keeping costs to a minimum. Often students and new grads jump at the opportunity to break into a major corporation and take these internships hoping for benefits that are not always materializing.

As a result of the recent attention there has been both an official crackdown on unpaid internships in many industries. There are those, including both interns themselves and organizations, who feel this crackdown is unfair. This ongoing attention has lead many to question just what is fair when it comes to offering unpaid career opportunities when it appears many are not leading to stable employment

Discrimination and Opportunity In Unpaid Internships

The grind of the unpaid intern has appeared as entertainment in many television shows featuring stories of medical, legal, journalist, and even government interns toiling away for no money trying to get ahead in their respective fields.

If you talk to an unpaid intern many will tell you they are grateful for the opportunity. Those who feel taken advantage of are reluctant to speak up for fear of losing the opportunity.

Some reports inform us of an interesting side to the unpaid internship debate. Among unpaid interns there are many who are able to work as unpaid interns because they have the socio-economic status to enable this. The opportunity for them to work as an unpaid intern allows them to show their skills and offer up their best side to a potential employer. These interns are often able to work extra hours and still have the energy to make a positive impression. This provides an advantage to those who can really afford to work without being paid.

However, there are others who are working 30 to 50 unpaid hours a week struggling to pay their bills while working part-time minimum wage jobs. These unpaid interns are feeling the stress and not seeing much light at the end of their unpaid tunnels. Often these interns are not able to perform at the level of others because they are either not available or simply over worked.

When they speak candidly many unpaid interns talk about the financial, physical and emotional cost of the internship. Many report experiencing heightened stress and even hopelessness as they work hard but see no real hope for a return on their investment of time.

Should You Hire An Unpaid Intern?

Internships have long been an important component of many education and training programs. Many successful people have talked about the value they gained as a result of the experiences and connections they made as interns. Some organizations offer wonderful experiences and opportunities for training and skills development for their interns and could not if there was the requirement to pay those interns a fair wage.

The question of should you hire an unpaid intern is not a straightforward one. Some organizations and individuals believe that by paying their dues in unpaid internships individuals learn the value of hard work and working from the bottom up. However the reality for many is that the unpaid internships may be taking a heavy toll.

Ideally organizations who bring in individuals to work should pay those individuals for their work. This is an idea situation that can lead to benefit for both parties. If you can pay your interns at least the minimum wage you should. However, if you cannot pay them consider well the pressures and expectations you are placing on them. If you are requiring unpaid interns to work long hours and attend after work or weekend events, plus incur costs of transportation, buy clothing, contributing to workplace fundraising, buying gifts and more step back and ask yourself what is fair. Understand the reality for your unpaid intern and respond accordingly.

HR Insider Resources

Beware the Costs Of Unpaid Interns

Beware the Unpaid Intern – He/She May Be Eligible For Pay

Ontario Explains When It is OK Not To Pay Interns