

Are unpaid internships threatening our industry?

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This article is a composite of several articles, see links at end.

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It is the young graphic designer's catch 22: to get a job you need experience, but to get experience you need a job. A commonly accepted way of breaking the cycle is to offer your services for free, either by getting a placement or doing free work in the hope of getting your name known. However I think we, as designers, have a responsibility to stand up to this misuse of talent which can result in those who are talented, but short of cash, being left out. Interestingly working for free seems to be common in the creative industries. Does this mean the realm of art is less valued than other industries? It is time to acknowledge that design is more than just playing in the sand pit—it adds real value to society. By compensating beginners to this world we are taking ourselves and our industry seriously.

The work of designers provides significant value to business. Unpaid internship positions can harm the worth a young designer might place on his or her skills, which will ultimately have far-reaching affects on salary expectations for members of an already underpaid industry.

Designers, along with most professions, have to accept starting at the bottom and working your way up. It is a system that few would argue with, as it trains people to build their skills gradually. Some jump the queue, if they are talented enough, but is it too much to ask for those at the very bottom rung of the

ladder to get paid something for their contribution? And isn't it illegal to pay workers less than the minimum wage?

That said, is it immoral for a young designer to accept an internship or offer of work that is unpaid? Or is that passing up an opportunity too good to miss? Last year *Vice* published an article complaining interns were "rising up off their swivel chairs, shaking their imaginary shackles and demanding what is not rightfully theirs". The article denounced their efforts to demand more from their work experience, and was largely slammed. Having said that (and you're probably not going to like me for saying this) beneath the deliberate provocation and the determination to cause controversy, some of the points in this piece do, in fact, carry some weight.

For one, internships are intended to give young, talented and ambitious people the experience required to help them cultivate a wide range of skills.

What is more problematic is that we are not talking about a level playing field. Some measure of experience is often a key factor under consideration during the hiring process, and internships are important résumé builders for students. Interns whose parents are able to support them financially gain an unfair advantage over those who work hard to maintain their financial independence. "Unpaid internships promote an oligarchic society," comments AIGA Philadelphia ethics co-chair Alex Zahradnik. This practice removes potential opportunities for those already at a disadvantage and excludes important voices representing all aspects of society.

The industry is doing itself a disservice by ensuring that only those who are wealthy enough can get a foot in the door. We are at risk of missing out on people who aren't lacking in talent, but lacking in funds. This is where *Vice* magazine's overarching statements fall short, and where employers can help by paying their interns.

For studios and agencies, interns can bring vitality to the workplace and fresh perspectives in creative problem solving. Internships offer studios and agencies opportunities to give back to the industry and the community. Interns themselves can also prove to be a high quality source of potential talent to draw upon once they complete their formal education.

An intern is not a volunteer. The U.S. Department of Labor's regulations define a volunteer as an individual who provides services to a nonprofit organization or public agency for civic, charitable or humanitarian reasons. An intern working at a for-profit company does not fit this definition. An intern is not a freelancer either. The nature of the work relationship does not meet Internal Revenue Service guidelines for independent contractor status.

Regardless of the internship duration and compensation schedule, the total paid for hours worked must at least meet the required minimum wage rate in the state where the employment occurs. Employers are encouraged to also offer students invaluable small perks such as travel reimbursement, tickets to lectures, or specialized training, and recommendation letters or introductions to other professionals

An internship also imposes responsibilities on the firm in terms of education and supervision, and laws are in place to protect workers from potential exploitation. While an internship can benefit both the firm and the intern, neither should consider it a form of uncompensated indenture.

The U.S. National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducted a survey of its members specifically on the subject of unpaid internships. A number of respondents commented on the counterproductive impact, citing the reasons: unpaid internships were essentially vehicles for corporations to exploit student labor; unpaid internships were discriminatory in that poor students could not afford to take on these internships; and unpaid internships were not taken as serious work experiences by either the student or the employer.

It is critical to consider how low compensation can affect the caliber of skill and intellect within an industry. Low wages are a consistent cause of "brain drain," whereby qualified and talented workers will shift their focus, either to another geographic area or another specialty. As Garret Hourihan, a senior creative designer for IBM, says, "If the intern cannot make it as an intern because of no pay, they may

very well move onto something which actually pays, just to survive.” Bright and motivated young people are not going to devote their energy to an industry that does not financially value their contribution.

So, what can be done? Clearly, this issue is complicated. It is moral, it is legal, and it needs attention. Unfortunately, those most immediately and directly affected by this issue, the students, are very unlikely to take action on their own for fear of damaging relationships with industry contacts. It is up to more-experienced professionals to decide that this issue deserves consideration. Steven Heller, co-chair of SVA’s MFA Designer as Author program, says, “If we don’t act fairly with our own progeny, how can we be respected in the business world?”

There is no doubt that interns lack experience, and businesses are looking for ways to cut costs. Difficult economic times are not an excuse for shortchanging the next generation of designers, and inability to pay does not provide exemption from ethical treatment of the workforce. As Joel Katz, AIGA Fellow and proprietor of Joel Katz Design Associates, a graphic and information design firm, states, “Interns receive valuable experience from us. They also perform tasks for us that earn us money—for that they deserve to be paid, although not at a professional level. My standard is to pay them better than they could earn at their work-study program at school. Anything less is exploitative and unethical.” Katz’s position reinforces the U.S. Department of Labor’s rule that “[deriving] an immediate advantage from the activities of an intern” precludes an unpaid internship from being acceptable.

Many employers of unpaid interns will argue that the experience and learning that occurs on the job is an equivalent exchange for free labor. I am an assistant professor of graphic design at Philadelphia University. I learn something new everyday—usually from my students. I still expect—and deserve—to get paid.

This mash-up article combines content from articles posted on the following websites: aiga.org, gdc.net, rgd.net, idsgn.org, itsnicethat.com, davidthedesigner.com. With extracts from articles by Shel Perkins (May 20, 2009) Alix Land (January 03, 2011) and Maribeth Kradel-Weitzel (March 29, 2011), Maisie Skidmore, Wednesday 17 July 2013

Optional quote:

“Offer anything, do anything. Work for nothing, make tea, carry bags, and learn, learn, learn.”
D&AD Chairman Dick Powell quoted on Dezeen

Optional sidebar copy:

Let’s start with some definitions.

Internship: an intern does not yet have the knowledge and experience necessary to be fully useful in the studio. Internships provide supervised hands-on work experience within a student’s field of interest.

The primary purpose of an internship is the education and training of the intern. Internships help emerging designers develop confidence and judgment as they gain practical experience. An internship is sponsored by the employer and must be paid.

Practicum: is a graduate (or undergraduate) level course, often in a specialized field of study, that is designed to give students supervised practical application of a the subject they have studied. A practicum provides academic credit for a structured work experience. A practicum is sponsored by the university. A contract must be signed between the university and the employer. The law does not require that students are paid during a practicum.

Co-op Placement: like an internship, it provides hands-on work experience within a student’s field of interest. It combines classroom-based education with practical work experience. A cooperative educational experience, commonly known as a “co-op”, provides academic credit for a structured work experience. A co-op placement is sponsored by the employer and must be paid.

Mentorship: is a personal developmental relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. However, true mentoring is more than just answering occasional questions or providing ad hoc help. It is about an ongoing relationship of learning, dialog, and challenge. The mentor will not ask the mentee to perform work for his/her client.

Strong sidebar option

http://www.core77.com/hack2work/2009/09/6_tips_for_working_with_your_i.asp
sidebar content?

Content links

http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/interns-dont-bother-uniting-you-have-no-chains-to-lose

<http://www.aiga.org/the-cost-of-free-labor/>

<http://www.aiga.org/be-smart-about-student-internships/>

Article by Shel Perkins May 20, 2009

<http://www.aiga.org/a-guide-to-internships/>

<https://www.rgd.ca/talent/internships.php>

<https://www.gdc.net/tools-resources/design-buyers/working-with-interns>

<https://www.gdc.net/node/946>

<http://idsgn.org/posts/opinion-the-case-for-unpaid-internships/>

<http://hyperallergic.com/141807/just-because-you-can-doesnt-mean-you-should-on-marina-abramovic-and-unpaid-work/>

<http://www.davidairey.com/unpaid-internships/>

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/unpaid-interns-rules-backlash-1.3441701>

<http://www.jacksonwynne.com/graphic-design-intern-what-to-expect/>

<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2016/04/how-to-land-a-first-rate-graphic-design-internship/>

<http://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/opinion-intern-row>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/black-swan-intern-ruling/314180/>

<http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6429439/viacom-settles-lawsuit-over-unpaid-internships>

[https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/06/
internships_educational_opportunity_or_opportunistic_scam.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/06/internships_educational_opportunity_or_opportunistic_scam.html)

https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/10/22/unpaid_interns_no_one_is_keeping_track.html

<http://www.naceweb.org/s10162013/paid-internship-full-time-employment.aspx>
[http://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/content/static-assets/downloads/executive-summary/2016-
internship-co-op-survey-executive-summary.pdf](http://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/content/static-assets/downloads/executive-summary/2016-internship-co-op-survey-executive-summary.pdf)

<https://wmich.edu/career/internpay>

<https://www.internsme.com/employers/blog/intern-salaries>

[http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/silicon-valley-tech-intern-salary-wage-
average-google-facebook-snapchat-a7002211.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/silicon-valley-tech-intern-salary-wage-average-google-facebook-snapchat-a7002211.html)

<http://www.businessinsider.com/25-companies-that-pay-interns-the-most-2014-2>

<http://www.idcanada.org/english/news/1077/NDS49-X5DSH-4Y3RQ/>

2016 Internship & Co-op Survey Report | National Association of Colleges and Employers
COMPENSATION

Overall, the average hourly wage to interns at the bachelor's degree level have remained virtually unchanged over the past seven years, and currently stands at \$17.69. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, current interns actually make less than their 2010 counterparts.

Michael Bierut could also be a sidebar, although I don't know if he pays his interns?! Here are some corresponding links:

[https://www.google.ca/search?q=michael
+bierut&espv=2&biw=1440&bih=722&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEWjontL13OnPA
hXlhFQKHANXAskQ_AUIBigB#q=michael+bierut&tbn=isch&tbs=isz:lt,isl:xga](https://www.google.ca/search?q=michael+bierut&espv=2&biw=1440&bih=722&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEWjontL13OnPAhXlhFQKHANXAskQ_AUIBigB#q=michael+bierut&tbn=isch&tbs=isz:lt,isl:xga)

<https://www.aiga.org/medalist-michaelbierut/>

<http://adamsmorioka.com/step-qa-michael-bierut/>

<https://thegreatdiscontent.com/interview/michael-bierut>

<http://www.rishisodha.com/about.html>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/yeahyeahang>

<http://waldendavis.com/>