

# The Modern Slave

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*Abstract: The rise in the number of unpaid internships has put many students in a precarious situation. The idea of students spending their summers working and receiving no compensation has many people calling for reform. However, more important than the monetary aspect of intern- ing is the educational benefit one receives. If the student has a quality educational experience, and if the program transcends the typical parties involved and affects the greater community as a whole, the internship is well worth the time spent, despite being unpaid. This paper delves into the issues facing the unpaid intern, and seeks to find a solution to the problems today's students face.*

## **Introduction:**

In today's sluggish economy the competition among workers to find employment has never been higher. This fact coupled with the growing abundance of workers is adding to the growth of the contingent workforce. Recently, students and entry level workers alike have been classified as contingent due to their search for internships. The competi- tive nature of today's job market is forcing many students to spend their summers working unpaid internship positions in an attempt to gain recognition in their field and build their resume. Unfortunately, companies have not provided additional internship programs as the demand for such positions has risen significantly over the years. This leaves many stu- dents in a difficult situation. Often, young interns are so desperate to gain experience and recognition they are willing to be manipulated by their employers into working menial tasks which offer no educational value. The unpaid intern has striking similarities to Magdoff and Magdoff's "disposable worker," in which corporations keep profitability high by using workers only when they are needed, then casting them into the streets when they are not. In a way, the unpaid intern has devolved into the slave labor of the times. The internship position has become unethi-

cal and furthermore illegal, as profit-driven employers do not pay their interns a necessary wage. Similarly, John Gertner, author of “What is a Living Wage,” believes no one should work for a living and still find themselves impoverished. Similarly, interns should not be subjected to a summer filled with meaningless tasks and zero compensation. Is an internship experience a legitimate investment in one’s education that will not only benefit the individual and the company but society as a whole? Or are internships doing society a disservice due to the corporate exploitation of students they are meant to be instructing? Through the dehumanization of the college intern, numerous employment dreams have been shattered by redundant and tedious tasks. These students’ cries must be answered. Companies should grant them not only the ability to put this work on their resumes, but to also be compensated in a way similar to their full-time counterparts. Additionally, the entrance of interns into the “disposable workforce” as makeshift assets has devalued both the position and the experience of such an opportunity. It is crucial to assess the invaluable skills and knowledge a student can gain from an internship and weigh those skills against the injustices which have been directed towards the student. Overall, it is time to reconsider how the student, the employer, and the educational institution define an internship because cooperation among all three parties is the only way to ensure the student receives the proper experience necessary to be a valuable contributor in any workplace.

### **Historical Perspectives/The Devaluing of Internships:**

The value of an internship has diminished over the past couple of years. The combination of measly pay and performing menial tasks has taken much of the learning out of the previously experienced-filled position. Contrary to the experience-rich apprenticeships of the past, employers have not held up their end of the bargain when it comes to training the next generation of workers. As Debra Burke and Robert Carton explain in their article “The pedagogical, legal, and ethical imperatives of unpaid internships,” “Apprenticeships in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance were typically seven years in duration, in order to ensure

that the masters recouped their investment and that the apprentice was given sufficient time to become skilled and not simply exploited as cheap labor” (Burke, Carton 1). Companies today do not understand the basic principle behind an internship program. Internships are meant to be an educational experience, a time for students to become skilled in a particular trade, not a way of easily exploiting college students. In the past, the master was only concerned with instructing the apprentice in the technical know-how of an industry so the student could then be a valuable asset to the master. If businesses today used this approach in their internship program, they would essentially be cultivating the future generation of employees. These interns, given the proper training, can add new skills and talents to the organization, thus increasing value. It is not difficult to understand why critics consider the prospect of an internship without pay unethical and even illegal. Numerous workers have already filed suit against their employers for unfair pay. For example, in the *New York Times* article “Jobs Few, Grads Flock to Unpaid Internships,” Eric Glatt, a 40 year old entry-level intern for the film “Black Swan,” sued Fox Searchlight Pictures over minimum wage violations. “With an M.B.A. and a master’s in international management, Mr. Glatt wanted to get into film after a previous job overseeing training programs at the American International Group...I knew that this was going to be a normal job and I wasn’t going to be paid for it,” he said. “But it started kicking around in my mind how unjust this was. It’s just become part of this unregulated labor market” (Greenhouse 1). Even with his qualifications, Glatt was being treated unjustly by the administration of his internship, especially since he did not receive any pay for the work he did. Numerous other individuals have it far worse, working tasks that do not pertain to their area of study at all. John Gertner, author of “What is a Living Wage?” argues that a full time worker’s compensation should cover the costs of necessities needed to survive. According to Gertner, “...it was about the force of particular moral propositions: first, that work should be rewarded, and second, that no one that works full time should have to live in poverty” (Gertner 1). Here, Gertner believes one who works full time should be

compensated in such a way that they have the ability to care and provide for themselves and their families. This not only makes sense morally, but logically as well. For example, why would a person take a low paying job when it is not enough to support both them and their family? It would be more logical from a financial standpoint and certainly more convenient for this individual to remain unemployed and collect welfare checks. The issue presented by both Gernter and Greenhouse delves into the question of the use of slave labor in the workplace. The fact that an already proven, 40 year old AIG manager with an MBA was coerced into receiving no compensation for his hope of entering a new profession is inexcusable. Obviously, a seasoned employee such as Mr. Glatt should not be completing the same tasks as a typical entry level worker or college intern. The difference between the two individuals is simple; Eric Glatt is a 40 year old professional learning the “tricks of the trade.” He is not a student and therefore cannot receive college credit. However, a college intern can receive compensation in the form of academic credit but, in order for the experience to be fruitful and worth his or her time, meaningful work must be done.

#### **Ethical/Legal Implications:**

U.S. companies lack of moral and ethical regard when compensating interns have become inexcusable. In many ways a parallel can be drawn between the unpaid intern of the present and slave labor of the past. One would think that as a society we have evolved into a morally conscious culture, yet companies across the country hire thousands of interns every year and refuse to pay them a cent. The primary legal basis used to refute the legality of unpaid internships is the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) established basic worker rights including the standard work day and minimum wage laws. In addition the act partially exempts interns or “trainees” from the aforementioned worker rights because it is voluntary and learning based. Conversely, FLSA defines “employ” as “to suffer or permit to work, and if that condition occurs, an employment relationship exists regardless of the parties’ intentions” (Burke Carton 108). The FLSA has become out-

dated and hypocritical. There is little doubt that much of the work interns are subjected to falls under the description mentioned above. Interns are by definition legally employed and should be treated and compensated as such. It is irrelevant if they are trainees or full time workers, they still deserve a reward for their work. The Department of Labor has six conditions which must be met for unpaid internships at for-profit companies to be legal. According to Jean Chatzky and Maggie McGrath in “The Great American Internship Swindle”, “The internship has to benefit the intern (not the company), for one thing. The intern can’t displace a regular employee, for another. The biggie, however, is that the internship must be “similar to training ... given in an educational environment” (Chatzky, McGrath 22). Many businesses find a loophole in this system by granting students college credits and subjecting them to the same or similar work as those employees earning a paycheck. Earning college credit alone is not enough compensation to subject oneself to a summer of meaningless work. Nonetheless, if the employer actually provides the intern with essential knowledge in the field, then the internship would be well worth the time submitted. When a business simply provides an intern with college credit, and refuses to instruct or compensate them in the necessary manner they are not benefiting the student, but rather abusing the internship system.

#### **Low Income Issues:**

Another issue involving the use of unpaid internships is the segregation caused by lower income student’s inability to work unpaid positions for months at a time. Unpaid internships in effect are separating those students who can afford to spend their summers earning nothing and those less fortunate students who rely on summer incomes for school expenses. Debra Burke and Donna Carton present the argument that students of higher socio-economic status can intern without pay, offering an advantage over lower income competitors. In fact, the practical necessity of having experience in order to secure employment: “raises a troubling class divide between entry-level jobseekers who can afford the luxury of unpaid experience and those who cannot” (Burke Carton 123).

This not only does a disservice to students, but many companies are losing hardworking individuals who otherwise could have contributed to their organization. Additionally, many universities are requiring students to complete an internship for graduation and often those students are not only working for free, but paying for their college credits as well. As Jean Chatzky and Maggie McGrath explain, “According to research firm InternBridge.com, 60 percent of students say internships are now mandatory for graduation at their schools... But to get those credits, in more than 70 percent of cases, according to InternBridge, you’ll generally have to pay your university for them—often substantially.” (Chatzky McGrath 2). Also, even if one could afford a summer of paying for college credits while working for free, another study suggests that unpaid interns are often given more clerical duties, opposed to the professional opportunities offered to paid interns. The hire rate for interns by their employers is nearly double for paid interns compared to those receiving no pay. This can all be related to Jon Gertner’s “What is a Living Wage?” in which he argues that a fundamental component of our principles must be to provide all workers with some sort of “livable wage”. He writes, “In simplest terms, most economists accepted that when government forces businesses to pay higher wages, businesses, in turn, hire fewer employees” (Gertner 4). Drawing a parallel between wages and internships one can see that unpaid internships are completely nonbinding, or voluntary. Unpaid internships do not follow the law of supply and demand. There is basically an unlimited supply of unpaid internship positions available. What company would not want to have unpaid students doing their dirty work? However, when colleges and universities begin requiring internships as needed to graduate, it has then crossed into the realm of involuntary, unfair for those students who may not be able to afford them.

### **The Reserve Army of Interns:**

The growth of the contingent or “disposable workforce” in the past few decades is directly related to the increased economic flexibility among businesses which have the authority to hire and release workers on impulse. This means the strength of the workforce is slowly dimin-

ishing. With a record number of unemployed laborers many of them are willing to work longer hours for less pay. In the businesses efforts to keep profits high and costs down, a vicious cycle is created resulting in high unemployment and low worker compensation. Fred and Harry Magdoff explain in their article “Disposable Workers”, how a central feature of capitalism is to constantly have a reserve supply of labor. They further explain, “What Capital is doing, and will continue to try to do, is apparent—whatever it possibly can to enhance investment profitability. This will continue to exert downward pressure on wages, working conditions, and benefits for workers” (Magdoff, Magdoff 51). Internships fit perfectly into this business plan. By paying students practically nothing, while they are often working 40 hour weeks, without any guarantee of full-time job after graduation, a company’s internship program has turned into a great way to acquire cheap labor with no future obligations. Most interns would not dare ask for compensation from their superiors as they feel grateful and even honored to stand in the presence of such “professionals”. But, interns must understand that their time is valuable and that internships were not designed to be a simple “networking opportunity”. As Madeleine Schwartz author of “Opportunity Costs: The True Price of Internships” states, “Work is not, as the internship setting would suggest, an exchange of gifts. Work is an exchange of time for money...” [internships] “Devalue the fundamental dignity of work” and how “unpaid internships produce a culture of self-denigration in the workforce” (Schwartz 45). Schwartz mentions how the internship positions of today are similar to the position women found themselves in years ago working as housemaids. There was a general belief at the time that housework was not work but rather a natural part of a women’s daily activities. Schwartz writes, “Although interns have entered en masse into workplaces in the past few decades, their complacency isn’t new. We have only to look at the parallel case—women and their household work” (Schwartz 41). Schwartz believes that by comparing this issue to the feminist movement, we can solve the problems associated with unpaid internships. The feminist movement proved that housework is indeed “work worthy.”

Schwartz argues that proving internships are equally “work worthy” unpaid students can receive the compensation they deserve.

### **Redefining the Intern:**

Possibly the most important aspect of an internship is how it must be a mutual agreement between three parties; the individual, the school, and the employer. These members need a clear definition and description of what the position entails. Unfortunately, there is much confusion between employers and schools as to what an internship should involve. Scott Swanson and Chuck Tomkovick agree with this assumption in their article, “Marketing Internships: How Values and Search Strategies Differ across the Student- Employer Dyad.” They explain, “The degree of congruence between student, employer, and faculty advisor expectations is one of the most critical factors in the success of a student internship (Swanson Tomkovick 253). The whole point of an internship program from a colleges perspective is to reinforce ideas and skills which otherwise cannot be taught in a textbook or classroom. It is a time of “hands-on learning”. However if an internship does not offer an educational upside then it is no longer intended to benefit the scholar. The business has violated its part of the agreement to mentor the student, and the intern deserves to be compensated for his or her time. In the article “Internships Have Value, Whether or Not Students Are Paid,” the authors Charles Westerberg and Carol Wickersham argue that unpaid internships still possess real value to students and the prospect of only earning college credit is not something a college student should frown upon. “Internships are negotiated partnerships, so it is helpful to consider the cost-benefit analysis from multiple perspectives” (Westerberg, Wickersham 23). Westerberg and Wickersham present the idea that the benefits to the student does not stop at college credit. Students gain considerable opportunities for social and professional networking, increased self-awareness, increased civic engagement, and potentially most important resume building. Additionally the benefits can be felt across the greater community and the business itself. Internships even unpaid, serve as a great recruitment opportunity for businesses. Also, internship

programs strengthen the relationships companies possess with communities, creating greater community involvement. Lastly, educational institutions can rest assured that interns (in the right setting and program) are learning meaningful information through presentations and data analyses outside the classroom, further abiding by the schools mission statements. Authors Shoho, Barnett, and Martinez in the article “Enhancing “OJT” Internships with Interactive Training” contrast the use of coaches as a source of guidance in an internship program instead of the typical employee, employer relationship. “Most definitions of coaching do not view this as a supervisory or evaluative process; rather, effective coaches promote change by establishing their credibility and developing meaningful relationships with their coachees” (Barnett, Martinez, Shoho 165). These authors present the notion that management should foster a healthy relationship with interns, instead of relying on power and dogmatic practices for supervising. Adding to the idea of mutuality between parties in an internship program, Debra Burke and Robert Carton authors of “The Pedagogical, Legal, and Ethical Implications of Unpaid Internships”, argue in favor of the idea justified above but presented in another way. “The internship must produce a rich learning experience for the unpaid student, to whom the primary benefit of the relationship must inure. The relationship between the institution, the student, and the employer should be symbiotic. To ensure that the primary purpose of the internship will be educational and that interns will not perform menial tasks...” (Burke, Carton 127). The overall and original goal of an internship is for the student to gain new knowledge from the experience. But, lately focus has been shifted away from the students and towards the business or institution. Burke and Carton argue that first an interns obligations must be met, the student must benefit, because the program is originally meant for them. Only then, can businesses and institutions benefit from the program as well.

### **Unpaid Backlash:**

As more and more companies become reliant on unpaid interns to foster into full time employees many firms must consider if this cost

cutting has unexpected consequences. For example, Dave Devries, a Public Relations manager at Sprint, writes in *Public Relations Tactics*, “Consequently, most organizations enjoy a large candidate pool when choosing the next PR intern. However, unpaid internships severely limit the field of potential candidates” (Devries 1). Devries describes here the first repercussion of a company deciding to undergo an unpaid internship program. The lack of incentives—substantial income—facing perspective students reduces the talent pool available for recruitment by the company. Furthermore, Devries considers the lost revenues students sustain by working for no pay and its particular hardships on those of lower socioeconomic classes. This issue he also believes severely limits the potential pool of candidates based merely on one’s socioeconomic background. David Thompson author of “Internship Training Programs,” believes that if correctly administered, an internship program should significantly reduce the difficulty of recruiting new employees. “The employer is able to observe the intern at work during the training period and makes permanent job offers only to trainees who have demonstrated their worth and indicated their potentialities... the possibility of poor choices on either side is lessened materially” (Thompson 396). Thompson explains that an internship program offers a unique perspective on potential full time workers by providing managers with the ability to assess and critique their workers before they are hired full time. Essentially, it is the most in-depth interview process available to companies. Also, it is a way to remove the interns that the company believes are no longer needed and keep the student who exemplified great work ethic and drive. As Thompson stated above the possibility of making a “poor choice” during hiring is minimized.

#### **University Benefits:**

Although the massive benefits to both the students and corporations have been discussed, a lesser talked about beneficiary are the educational institutions themselves. Colleges and universities have manipulated the internship system to not only make their particular institutions stand out, but to also bring financial rewards. For example, by a univer-

sity offering its students a strong internship program, it in effect attracts more students which increases revenues. Additionally, universities are reaping the monetary benefits of the academic credits they offer through internships without paying professors, using their classrooms, or facilities. Burke and Carton mention in their article, “Collecting tuition from the student in exchange for the privilege of working without remuneration might be justifiable if the college plays a central role in securing the internship and ensuring a substantive academic experience in a quality work environment” (Burke Carton 123). However, if a college makes no such attempts to provide internship opportunities for students charging tuition is hard to justify. From a colleges perspective there is literally no downside of offering academic credit for internships. The programs cost the institution nothing and provide them with plenty of revenues. As Rick Weible, author of “Are Universities Reaping the Available Benefits Internship Programs Offer?” unveils the recruitment benefits a strong internship program presents. “Student recruiting efforts are positively affected by internship opportunities... Of the respondents, 81.6% reported that most of the time students are more likely to enroll at institutions with internship programs” (Weible 5). Clearly, in today’s increasingly competitive job market students are not only looking for an institution renowned for its education, but also for its internship program, and job placement abilities. Many articles and authors have pinned corporations as the sole conspirer in the devaluing of the modern intern. But, when examined closely one can see that academic institutions have an equal share in the exploitation of the student.

#### **A Model Internship Program:**

Numerous components are at play when an organization is designing the ideal college internship program. As mentioned earlier, it is not only the employer’s responsibility but also the academic institutions to forge a general definition and mission as to what the program will achieve. Will the internship experience benefit exclusively the individual or the company? Or will the results yield a greater benefit to both the community and advancement of society as a whole? These are all ques-

tions one must consider when formulating the ideal internship experience. The "International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction" by Mark Buckingham, speaks of the transcending nature of internships, which helps the student among other individuals. "Internship programs provide in-service training, supervision, and mentoring... provide the opportunity to work as a responsible professional whilst being supervised. Internship programs act as a "gate keeper" between educational development and professional employment" (Buckingham 3). Buckingham explores the concept of turning students into professionals through the proper internship setting. It is important to narrow a model program from the viewpoints of the student, the employer, and the school.

From a student's perspective an internship should consist of the reinforcement of ideas expressed in school but also a unique experience one cannot attain in a classroom setting. David Thompson of "Internship Training Programs," believes a major component of an internship includes the student's opportunity to test a possible career path. "One objective of internship programs is to help the student bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application ... With this knowledge, he can better decide if he wishes to enter the field, and, if so, what type of work" (Thompson 395). Peter Fernald and Gary Goldstein present the idea of an internship being both a "capping" and "bridging" experience for students. It gives the student the opportunity to "cap" their educational careers and "bridge" themselves into the world beyond college. "With the instructor seldom present at the weekly seminars, advanced interns take greater responsibility for their learning and the conduct of the seminar ... taking greater responsibility involves seeking assistance and support not from the "boss," the instructor, but from "coworkers," their seminar peers" (Fernald Goldstein 9). The "capping" and "bridging" process offers additional independence and growth for the interns.

The employer's viewpoint on internships extends beyond its benefit as a recruitment tool for future workers. A lesser talked about corporate benefit from interns is the added experience given to management to organize and oversee their interns. Thompson believes this review, "Leads

to improvements in procedures and systems and serves as a fresher course for the supervisors" (Thompson 396). This point is severely overlooked by companies. Often, the best way for new managers to gain experience is to oversee young interns. It not only benefits the company by recruiting new interns, but also helps train novice managers.

Lastly, from the schools perspective it seeks to develop students who not only adhere to the institutions mission statement but who also become a viable member of the workforce. Thompson describes, "Internship programs are a proving ground for a schools product, providing a laboratory for testing the performance of its students on the job" (Thompson 396). A universities contact with business organizations is a valuable source of constructive criticism which helps the university advance its program and credentials. It is clear a model internship program is based on a mutual respect between the parties. No one member should benefit any more than another member.

#### **Conclusion:**

The dehumanization of the college intern has undoubtedly ruined the experience for countless individuals. The combination of inadequate pay, decreased administrative learning, and increased demand from schools and employers have put handfuls of students in a precarious situation which is often tough to escape. However, if all three parties including the schools, students, and employers jointly tackle this issue, there is no doubt a resolution can be reached. A joint resolution can restore college internships to their previous greatness, offering students the unique ability to effectively explore the corporate world while continuing their college education. More importantly the intern will be treated as a human again, an equal, and not a pawn used for corporations selfish desires.

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