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Ivet Popova

“It’s Not All About the Money...”

This article will discuss the issues surrounding the payment of internship opportunities in the PR industry. Despite the legal actions taken by the government after the active campaigning of PR professionals and PR organisations regarding unpaid internships, the question of whether paid work means good quality experience still stays. Drawing from existing opinion and literature on the topic as well as from personal experience I will present a different perspective on unpaid internships that will provide future interns with opportunities they might have not considered before.

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INTRODUCTION

PR internships have produced a lot of controversy surrounding the topic of payment. On one side are former interns, professionals and organisations who have united behind the idea of mandatory paid labour and, through relentless campaigning managed to get the support of the government. On the other side are people in the PR industry that acknowledge the unethical practices by companies regarding interns, but do not put money in the centre of the problem. They present unpaid internships as a challenge to the concept that paid means good quality of experience, or in other words the existing valuable opportunities for learning, personal and professional development offered by the company.

WHEN MONEY DOES MEAN (E) QUALITY

An internship by definition is an ‘on-the-job training’ through which a person can obtain qualifications for an actual job, or as the Guardian (2013) puts it a ‘stepping-stone to employment’. It is an opportunity to learn, experience, network and get familiar with the profession.

Ketchum’s CEO, Stephen Waddington writes in his blog about internships, saying they require ‘tenacity’, ‘ambition’ and this is how you are ‘getting ahead in PR’ (Waddington

2016). However, for an internship to be successful and productive there is an input required, not only from the company that offers it, but from the intern as well. So some may argue that when interns are dedicated and do their job they do deserve a reward. And what better reward than that much needed money.. Money means equality in the workplace. It shows that interns are treated with the same respect as the employees. It shows that their hard work is acknowledged, valued and encouraged.

It also shows that companies understand at what expense an intern has come to do the internship as usually an internship experience can be pricy, especially in big cities like London. Money can also translate into quality experience, in terms of promising good opportunities for career development as usually only companies with a large, steady budget can afford to offer paid internships. Such profitable companies are most likely market leaders and can provide interns with a lot of experience.

"It's important that internships are paid so that students can afford to do them regardless of background, and so that you're not giving away your time and skills for free" (Guardian 2013)

UNPAID INTERSHIPS AS 'SLAVE WORK'

When money is seen as a deserved reward that promotes equality it comes to no surprise that unpaid internships have been called "unfair" "exploitative" and "slave labour" (Harland 2016 cited in Waddington 2016). When it comes to PR the situation is the same, if not worse, because according to the Guardian (2013) internships are unpaid mainly in the media and communications sectors. A confirmation of that statement comes from the personal experiences of former PR interns.

"I was humiliated, harassed... Expected to do 12 hours a day often for nothing... I had no status at work" (Tanya de Grunwald 2013, cited in the Guardian 2013)

Other interns interviewed by the Guardian's Kieran Yates and Erica Buist (2013) shared more stories of disrespect such as being stuck in a basement the whole time and being publicly mocked by a manager. The issue hit its peak after big companies like Arcadia, decided to stop paying their interns and agencies started using interns' work for clients without crediting them. Thus, how the battle against unpaid internships began.

THE BATTLE AGAINST UNPAID INTERNSHIPS

Back in October 2011, PR Week and the PRCA, supported by the Deputy Prime Minister then, Nick Clegg, launched a campaign in an attempt to stop the unpaid-internship practice. Despite the fact a number of PR companies signing up to the campaign, confirming that they pay their interns at least the national minimum wage, a survey by the PRCA in 2012 revealed that most internships were still poorly paid. A summary of the results showed that just 28 per cent were paid at or above the minimum wage, with almost as many (23 per cent) receiving no payment at all (PRCA 2011).

However, because of the constant public pressure the battle concluded with the UK government issuing a law, in which it is stated that it is illegal to not pay interns, unless they are students on university programmes or their internship counts as voluntary work (GovUK 2015). This means that an intern's payment depends on the working arrangements they have with the organisation, not on what the title of the internship is.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Despite all the criticism that unpaid internships in PR have received, I believe that money is not the deal breaker here. As stated by Thompson in *The Atlantic* (2012):

"There has to be an appropriate middle ground that recognises the value that an employer provides to the intern through training without turning it into an exploitive situation as unpaid internships are not all, by definition, exploitive".

That is why I want to present a different perspective which, hopefully, will inform future interns to not judge a book by its cover, or in other words to look beyond the money as an issue and focus on the experience offered. Why? Well first of all, being paid doesn't mean you get a good experience or you are considered as equal to everyone else. Intern can receive payment and still be harassed by senior management, their work exploited. A former PR intern at Microsoft, Hayley Stevens (2016) shared that her paid experience was far from rewarding as she was stuck in a room by herself for a year doing nothing as she was a one-person department that no one wanted to deal with.

With the money also come greater expectations from the intern to do their best, even if the task is rather bizarre. For example, a PR intern was expected to search through London for a special handkerchief, just to prove their commitment to the job and to prove they deserve their pay. This goes to show that paid internships can also exploit, if not more than unpaid ones. Finally, there are these companies that can provide you with good opportunities, but cannot afford to pay you, like the start-ups. When looking for an internship, an intern has to know when to take chances. I did with a start-up company and it really paid off in the long run. I had a lot of responsibilities, because the agency was starting from scratch. The work was challenging as it put to the test all my PR skills. There was a huge amount of respect amongst everyone in the team, because interns were part of the team, part of the foundation of that agency. Plus, I felt fulfilled as I participated in the creation of something new, which wouldn't have been the case in an already well-established agency.

UNPAID INTERNSHIPS CAN BE A PRICELESS EXPERIENCE

Working at a start-up company is definitely a priceless experience. As Erica Ivarsson (2014) says about her PR internship at a start-up agency that it wasn't about the money, but the experience, because experiencing the reality of a start-up instead of looking at success stories in the media is priceless. Sometimes unpaid internships can be referred to as voluntary work. As defined by the NCVO (2016):

"Volunteering is someone spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone who they're not closely related to."

There is also the concept of pro-bono work, or sharing PR skills and knowledge for free, which is another form of voluntary work. The CIPR has a special scheme encouraging pro-bono activities as they help the development of skills and knowledge (CIPR 2016). A lot of companies have recognised the benefits of volunteering and people who have done voluntary work are usually preferred candidates for a position. As an intern I have volunteered to help at a sales company, providing my time and PR skills for free. It was a rewarding experience, because I felt that my help was appreciated by the people in the company and because of the thought of doing something for the greater good.

Finally, there was this unpaid internship that some may consider lucky, but was a priceless experience. It was at a big, rich company, but still I was given a fair share of responsibility, was treated as part of a team and as equal to everyone else. I got all I was promised in terms of learning opportunities and value of experience. Everything discussed so far goes to show that the issue with quality and equality when it comes to internships is not payment, but rather depends on the ethics and values of the company.

TIPS FOR GETTING A GOOD INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

As stated in the Guardian (2013) the problem is that many companies purposely offer roles that are unclear. That is why before deciding on an internship, whether paid or unpaid future interns are advised to:

- Make sure they understand what is expected of them and what they can expect in return from the employer;
 - Decide whether the internship is of value – there is an insight into the industry, there are opportunities for networking and of future employment;
- (TargetJobs 2016)

And some personal advice:

- Check if the company corresponds to your values, morals and interests;
- Find someone with previous experience at the company;
- Know your rights so do not be afraid to demand what you are owed/ promised;

In order for companies to provide good quality internships the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has produced the '*Internships That Work*' guide. There future interns can read more about the obligations of a company when offering an internship.

THE FUTURE OF THE UNPAID INTERNSHIP

Whilst, I agree that money do motivate, give confidence and make people's work feel more valued on a subconscious level, I think that people's understand of what a good value experience is is changing. At the end of the day it is not about the money, it is about the morals of the employers and the choices that interns make. And I believe that when those choices are well-informed ones unpaid internships can turn into priceless

experiences, even in the PR industry. PR professionals are influencers, persuaders, so I hope that with this article I managed to encourage future PR interns to make informed choices and take chances as they may discover new exciting opportunities they did not consider possible before. I also hope unpaid PR internships are given the benefit of the doubt and their value re-evaluated.

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