

Ethics and Interns

Dilemmas for social enterprises and charities

Introduction

Young people need work experience. Charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social enterprises need volunteers. But this symbiotic relationship has tended in recent years to morph into something that can be ethically and even legally dubious. Reasonable volunteer policy has drifted into questionable employment practice. So how can we reconcile the benefits of work experience and voluntary work with fair employment standards?

That was the key question explored in a 'public conversation' called Ethics and Interns organised by Public World, in partnership with the Hub Kings Cross. The workshop brought together more than 50 representatives of charities, NGOs and social enterprises, as well as young people with experience of being interns or aspiring to work or volunteer for NGOs, charities or social enterprises.

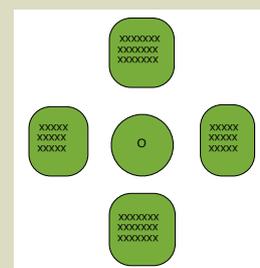
Did we produce a definitive answer to the question? Of course not, but the event itself and our preparations for it greatly enriched our understanding. Our preparation including interviews with a number of young people and charities, NGOs and social enterprises. Public World managing director Brendan Martin also wrote an article on the subject for The Guardian newspaper and website, which you can find [here](#).

Those activities, but especially the workshop itself, helped us to develop a better informed policy about our own practice. It also guided our plans for a consultancy offering to social enterprises, charities and NGOs interested in ensuring that their internship policies and practices comply with their general ethical commitments.

This report tries to capture some of the rich detail yielded by this project as well as the key issues we think emerged from them. It begins with a brief explanation about why we embarked on this exercise. That is followed in section 3 by a brief exploration of terminology and legal

The **Ethics and Interns** workshop was held on 24 November 2011 in partnership with the Hub Kings Cross, where Public World is based.

It was conducted in the round with seating arranged in four ranks in a diamond shape, so that each row faced inwards, with our excellent facilitator, Veena Vasista, in the middle.



Ten of the participants had been asked to prepare short contributions for input at various stages.

The idea was to make sure the workshop benefited from expertise and thoughtfully planned contributions but without the 'them and us' panel and audience format.

issues, and the relationship between them, because this draws out the ethical dilemmas involved.

Sections 4 - 7 are drawn from both the interviews we conducted and the discussion at the workshop. They express the voices in turn of social enterprises (Section 4), charities and NGOs (Section 5), interns and former interns (Section 6) and other organisations and individuals (Section 7). Section 8 then tries to draw out some of the dilemmas associated with the ethics of internships.

2. Why focus on charities, NGOs and social enterprises?

Public World is a social enterprise financed entirely from commissioned work and project funding. Sometimes we undertake small projects without any external funding on a pro bono basis if we believe our approach can add some value and we have a little capacity available to do it. Typically we do this by seeding a new project, from concept note up to the stage of seeking funding to take it forward.

We undertook this project on a pro bono basis because of our concerns about the vulnerability of young people to exploitation at a time of record youth unemployment. As a social enterprise committed both to improving working lives and supporting ethically robust approaches to productivity and performance improvements, we see the internship system as both an important issue in itself and an indicator of wider trends in employment practice in Britain. (Although our work is mostly international, some of our projects focus on Britain, where we are based.)

Clearly, whether or not interns are entitled to be paid, and whether or not they are paid, and how much, is one important aspect of the issue. It is obvious that in some sectors -- fashion and the media are the most notorious examples -- exploitation of interns has become scandalously systemic. It is equally obvious that unpaid internships have become crucial to the business models of many third sector organisations, which have evolved into something resembling a three-legged stool. Many organisations now rely on combining the contributions of volunteers, paid staff and unpaid interns, and the removal of any one of the three would quickly topple them.

While there are clearly some legal and ethical issues common to both the private and third sectors, there are also some important differences. Perhaps the most important arises from the legitimacy -- indeed, the desirability -- of volunteering. You do not need to be a 'Big Society' Conservative to believe that our economic, social and cultural fabric benefits from freely given effort, time and resources for the good of it. Moreover, the motivation behind such giving need not be entirely altruistic, but can and usually does include some benefits for the giver, if only in the form of a good feeling. Therefore, however problematic might be the treatment of interns by charities and other 'citizen sector' organisations, the solutions to those problems should not weaken and preferably should strengthen their voluntary ethos.

The ethical issues become complicated, however, the more closely a volunteering position resembles a job and the more the giver is motivated by the aim of securing future payment. The extent to which unpaid internship has become part of a standard route into employment into the sector was underscored in a recent article by Shannon Maynard of the NGO Bankers without Borders, who wrote: "If you are a recent college graduate, an unpaid internship with a noteworthy nonprofit may be just the credential you need to help your resume shift to the top of the pile for that

“The business models of many third sector organisations now resemble a three-legged stool. They rest on paid staff, volunteers and unpaid interns, and if you take one of those away the thing will topple.”

*Brendan Martin,
Public World*

next paid gig.” She added: “It is an unspoken but known truth: Volunteering can often give you an inside track to a paid job at the organization for which you volunteer.”

If that is the motivation for many interns, it begs two questions: are the organisations that take advantage of young people willing to work for nothing in the hope of securing a job exploiting those young people? And is that practice unfairly excluding from the recruitment pool many young people who cannot afford to work without pay? This brings us to another two questions that express perhaps the main reason we decided to focus our attention on the third sector: at a time when the British government has begun making it a condition of paying Jobseekers’ Allowance that its beneficiaries consent to work for no pay, should organisations with ethical commitment to social justice be contributing through their practice to the normalisation of unpaid labour? If they will not draw a line in the sand, who will?

3. What do we mean by ‘intern’, and what does the law demand?

A brief check around NGO websites reveals that the terms ‘volunteer’ and ‘intern’ are both used inconsistently and even inter-changeably. But terminological usage is not necessarily random: in some cases it appears to reflect an organisation’s perception of employment law, or public relations considerations (now that unpaid internships are getting bad press). However, Paul Jennings, a solicitor with [Bates Wells and Braithwaite](#), suggested that any organisation hoping to avoid employment law simply by using the term ‘volunteer’ could be in for a surprise, and he warned that the term ‘intern’, which has no legal status, is also “being used inappropriately” by some charities and social enterprises. “People are attaching a label they think gives them impunity but it doesn’t,” he told the workshop. “This will become an increasingly litigious issue.”

(Disclaimer: nothing that follows constitutes legal advice from Paul or ourselves. The discussion that follows is for general interest only. Those requiring legal guidance should consult a solicitor.)

One of Paul’s key points was that employment law recognises only three relevant categories:

- Employees, who have a range of rights with robust protections;
- Workers, who work under contract (not necessarily written) involving mutual obligations with their employers, but have fewer rights and obligations than employees;
- Volunteers, who have no contractual obligations to the organisations they work for, and no employment rights.

The TUC [Rights for Interns](#) website also provides some useful information about the defining characteristics of those categories and the differences between them, as does the [British government website](#).

However, in addition to those legal categories, the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 introduced the term “voluntary worker”, who can be employed by charities, voluntary organisations and certain other types of organisations without being entitled to the national minimum wage. It also specified criteria for this definition, and these were broadened by the Employment Act 2008 to allow an organisation to reimburse a voluntary worker’s lunch costs and fares to the place of work without that payment conferring ‘worker’ status. There is a detailed exploration of that issue at the [Business Link website](#).

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*Paul Jennings,
Bates Wells & Braithwaite,
Solicitors*

Nevertheless, Paul Jennings told us, “charities are employers like anyone else -- their responsibilities are exactly the same.” He added that some charities have “fallen into the trap” of believing that they have more legal protection than they actually do have, and “that is leading them to practices that are unlawful”. Paul said that “when someone is genuinely volunteering, the court will be very reluctant [to say they have employment rights]”, but that “courts will be put off by exploitative arrangements”. In practice, rather than being clear cut, it is “always a case of degree and fact”.

The inference is that, depending on the facts of the case, a ‘volunteer’ could have employment rights, and the fact that he or she is described as a ‘volunteer’ would not determine the issue. Nor would any agreement made between the parties at the outset necessarily undermine a later claim that an ‘intern’ was legally a ‘worker’. For example, as Fiona O’Cleirigh of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) [Cashback for Interns](#) campaign reported at the workshop, the NUJ has supported backdated NMW claims for ‘interns’ that had originally agreed to work for no pay. Indeed, the NUJ has yet to lose a case it has brought (although, no doubt, its cases are carefully selected).

Another participant illustrated the impact of the legal complexity and uncertainty by saying their organisation is careful not to give their interns as many benefits as they would like to, or to pay them more than expenses, for fear that by doing so they would confer employment rights unintentionally. The effect was that they offered interns less than they would like to offer them because of their fear that this could lead to liability to give them more than they could afford.

Add to all this the categories of ‘work experience’, ‘trainee’ and ‘apprenticeship’ -- the present government is planning to increase the incentives available to some employers to encourage expansion of apprenticeships -- and the whole picture becomes yet more convoluted. But what we can see is that the terminological confusion is closely related to legal uncertainty, and that the latter is complicating the ethical challenges associated with internships.

4. Voices from social enterprises

In this section, we hear from social enterprise leaders whose organisations currently have interns.

Solitaire Townsend of [Futerra Sustainability Communications](#) told us that her company has long had three types of work placement that could be called internships:

- Work placements, which are short-term arrangements to enable other businesses (or sometimes schools) to have one of their employees (or students) gain work experience at the company; Futerra does not pay them, but in the case of placements from other companies they are paid by their employers.
- University work experience schemes, such as the Masters on sustainability run by Forum for the Future, which requires periods of work experience with various types of employer, as part of the course. (In fact, Solitaire did that Masters degree herself, gained her work experience as a result and met the business partner with whom she set up Futerra when they were both interns of this type.)
- Futerra’s own internship scheme, under which a variety of people -- some just out of school, some post-graduate and some mid-career -- work at the company for various periods (three months is usually the minimum, and six months is not

unusual), either full-time or part-time, but typically three days a week, receiving an expenses stipend of £20 per day.

Two of Futerra's interns were also present at the workshop, where Solitaire said she liked having interns in part because they made the workplace more fun. She said the interns gain by being able to test out their career choices, get a reference, enhance their CV and see what are their best skills and aptitudes. "People want to work with us to build their sustainability knowledge," Solitaire went on, and even those who do not go on to paid work with Futerra often find that it improves their employment prospects elsewhere. It also strengthens the company's networks. "That is one of the most important things about it," said Solitaire, adding that an intern the company had ten years ago has recently given the company work.

"We increase our footprint through the people we have as interns and train," Solitaire said, but she stressed that interns do not work directly on deliverables to clients. They carry out tasks such as research and notetaking, which obviously contribute indirectly to client value, and Solitaire acknowledged that some would prefer to be more involved in client work. But she stressed that the company is not reliant on interns, unlike many NGOs and charities (and some social enterprises). "If someone says to us internships are illegal and we have to stop we would not have to go and recruit," Solitaire said. "Futerra is not dependent on interns for survival. In many charities they are working shoulder to shoulder with staff. If the interns go, the business will suffer. That is not our situation."

She also stressed that the company tries to make sure interns have a fulfilling experience. Every intern has a line manager, for example, and "we have interns who have travelled to be with us. That puts lots of pressure on line manager to make sure it is a positive experience. We have a pastoral responsibility to everyone who sits in our business."

Solitaire said she is confident that "the way we have done it has always been quite ethical", and that "one third of our staff (of 40) actually started as interns with the company." She added: "One was an intern eight years ago and is now one of our team heads. We recruit from our interns not because we do not do uncompetitive employment, but because knowing how the company works and so on is obviously an advantage."

However, Futerra is currently reviewing its internship scheme, for various reasons, including a view among some ex-interns that it should be changed. "I have no doubt that some of them have strong views," said Solitaire. One of the options being considered is to replace its own internship scheme with formal apprenticeships. One or two apprentices would be taken on for a year, and paid the London Living Wage, with no guarantee of employment at the end. However, the other two types of internship -- the work placement and experience programmes -- will remain, as the company feels it has a responsibility to continue to provide those opportunities.

Laura Walker Hudson is Director of Operations at [FrontlineSMS](#), which has a mission of "using mobile technology to promote positive social change", to quote its website. Laura said: "I feel strongly that being an intern is one of only two ways into development work. For many people, including myself, it was never an option, and I took the other route -- through administration -- but even in administration there is an increasing reliance on interns."

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*Solitaire Townsend,
Futerra Sustainability
Communications*

“I got a job as PA to a big international aid agency -- I was very lucky to have support to develop,” said Laura, who built her career in development from there. She believes that the way in which FrontlineSMS uses interns gives similar opportunities to others. “In this size of organisation there is lots to do, lots of people who want to help us and lots of people who want to get into development. So we would be crazy not to take advantage of that.”

She stressed that “we comply with employment law”, but her list of the terms on which interns are engaged by her organisation -- and particularly the minimum time commitment and job descriptions -- could contribute to a claim for worker status. Laura said:

- interns can work full time if they want but the minimum is 2-3 days a week;
- they are paid the cost of a travelcard plus lunch;
- they set their own work schedule;
- they have job descriptions;
- “we make efforts to make it interesting”;
- they have development and exit interviews;
- all interns are thanked on the website and receive references.

Until recently, the organisation had only had volunteers, people who found the organisation (rather than vice versa) and contributed in various ways without any job description or particular time commitment. For example, there is a “lady who is a graphic designer -- we send her work and she does it at weekends”. But FrontlineSMS found itself needing someone with a particular skill set and, “this was the first time we did a quick call-out to see if there was someone out there; within 25 minutes we had the person we needed.”

There are now two unpaid interns working alongside three full-time and two part-time staff, and they work in community support and communications. “At any one time, we have between none and seven volunteers/interns”.

James Sutton of [Bloomtrigger](#), a social enterprise start-up aiming to protect forests, spoke of how he derives no income yet from his venture, and has taken on an intern, Juan, who is Spanish but living in London, and who wants to learn about and work in the kind of business James is developing at the same time as improving his English. Juan makes an important contribution to the development of the business, in various ways, James said, but also obtains training and experience. “He does a range of jobs for me: every day administration, going into schools, etc.”

Juan works Monday to Friday, 9 till 1, and then does an English class. “He sometimes works from home for me after that too,” James said. “He has been a great help to me. I am teaching him quite a lot of skills -- e.g. marketing, Photoshop, Wordpress blog management, how to make videos. Each week he writes a blog and I help to correct his English. From my point of view as a very small start-up I don't pay myself a wage and I cannot afford to pay him -- it really is a big help to me. But I have friends who do internships for big companies, or even for charities. They work very long hours for no pay -- that is pushing it too far I think.”

“I pay interns the London Living Wage. I aim to make money out of the business so I should pay for help in developing it.”

*Tanya de Grunwald,
Graduate Fog*

At the workshop, *Hermione Taylor*, founding director [DoNation](#), echoed James's point that, as a start-up unable yet to pay herself, she could not be expected to pay an intern. "Start-ups don't have any money," she said. But this was contested by another participant, *Tanya de Grunwald*, of [Graduate Fog](#), who said: "I pay interns the London Living Wage -- I aim to make money out of the business so I should pay for help in developing it."

5. Voices from charities and NGOs

Unpaid internships have become normal in charities and NGOs, but there are important exceptions, and the issue is an increasingly sensitive one. For example, the World Development Movement ([WDM](#)) -- which campaigns for "a world without poverty and injustice" -- has gone to the trouble of putting up a [special page](#) on its website outlining its reasons for not paying the half dozen or so interns working for the organisation at any one time, alongside around 25 staff.

WDM acknowledges the difference between interns and the many volunteers supporting WDM: the interns, it explains, tend to be people who are "not only passionate about international development but who also wish to develop their future career in this sector". The internships offer a way in, WDM says, and a recent ad on its website for two campaigns and policy internships included a glowing testimonial from a former intern quoted as saying:

"My time at WDM was a massive education. I was welcomed in to help in all the different facets of campaigns and policy. Within a couple of months I was editing reports and organising campaign stunts. WDM is a passionate organisation and doesn't hide its radical agenda. Today I work at Greenpeace, a huge and different beast, but WDM stood me in excellent stead to get the job."

WDM's explanation for not paying interns concludes: "We recognise this is not ideal. But if we had to pay wages to interns, it would be unlikely that we could offer an internship programme at all, which would then remove the opportunity for people to gain the valuable work experience they need to get the jobs they want. The current system is tried and tested and it works well for both WDM and our interns and volunteers."

However, a problem with that reasoning is precisely that the system benefits some young people who want to work in the sector and who can afford to spend three days a week working for no pay, at the expense of others who cannot afford that. That is one of the reasons that another well established NGO in the same space, [People and Planet](#) takes a different approach. People and Planet has run a highly successful internship programme for 14 years, and has always paid its interns, who work full-time.

Rich Lott, now the organisation's IT manager, started as "one of the first interns we ever had." Rich said that People and Planet "has a very good reputation for its internships -- many high profile people in the sector (such as the 38Degrees founder David Betts) started as interns with us." He added: "Our internships have always been paid. Not everyone who cares about what we do can afford a year without pay. It's about the skills we need but also helping to produce people for the rest of the sector as well -- that has inherent value for us."

The People and Planet internships last for a year, and there are between four and ten of them each year. Each is paid the Oxford Living Wage (currently £8.01 per hour). The year starts with a highly structured period of training, which goes from the general to the

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*Rich Lott,
People and Planet*

particular demands of a specialism. “It is often people’s first job after university,” Rich Lott told us. “All have job descriptions and the person specs have some common elements and some particular elements. They have a contract of employment for 11 months and they are entitled to the same holidays and pensions and other entitlements as the rest of the staff.”

People and Planet also has volunteers but “by no means” necessarily recruits interns from them, nor its staff necessarily from interns. Rich said: “We advertise widely in the network and it is unusual if no applications come from within the People and Planet networks. But interns go into the pool and are not treated favourably. Over the years we have found the calibre of the people coming to our internships has gone through the roof – I often think I would not get in now. We get people who have done a lot with their lives. You have got to have something to give.”

John Hilary of [War on Want](#) explained that his organisation used to have paid interns, but that it no longer ran an internship programme. War on Want had originally paid its interns at a relatively low rate, but after internal discussion decided to pay interns at a level equivalent to the London Living Wage. The organisation then decided it would be fairer to pay an entry level salary, and the intern post was turned into a permanent position.

War on Want does, on the other hand, still welcome volunteers. John said the difference between a volunteer and an intern is that a volunteer is there on their terms, while an intern is effectively a full time staff person. (However, as mentioned in Brendan Martin’s Guardian article, in November 2011 War on Want advertised for a ‘volunteer’ to take on a detailed job description and person specification, and expectations of minimum attendance times.) War on Want volunteers, said John, were “people of all ages, including retired people, and often former trade union officials”.

The charity does still have volunteers “who come to us with ideas or research they want to develop”. John gave an example of one such piece of work, where the volunteer had done a “fantastic piece of work, and she got the credit – hers is the only name on the cover”. He added: “When I started as a volunteer with Amnesty International 20 years ago it was usual for volunteers to be just stuffing envelopes. We have tried to get away from that. We provide as much flexibility as possible.”

John recalled that when he was first a volunteer it was possible to ‘sign on’ for state benefit, but now the welfare system made that more difficult. He said that it was one thing NGOs and charities not paying interns, but for private companies to do so is “a lot more sinister” because “people are working for nothing to help others accumulate capital. But at War on Want no-one is accumulating capital.”

[WWF-UK](#) updated its policy on interns last year “to ensure that all placements at WWF are time limited, appropriate, fair and properly structured”, *Benjamin Ward* of WWF-UK explained. “We take on relatively few interns at WWF-UK, but when we do, we find they are a great way for people to gain valuable experience whilst supporting specific projects that are vital to our work. Placements are unpaid (we do cover expenses) and are never longer than 13 weeks; long enough to achieve results and to learn about us and what we do. We also ensure placements are well structured and properly managed.

“Feedback from past interns is overwhelmingly positive and we have seen many people use their placement as a springboard into employment - with us or elsewhere. We recognise that unpaid internships are an issue worthy of ongoing debate and discussion.

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”

*Benjamin Ward,
WWF-UK*

As such, we're engaging with other charities to look at best practice and make sure our policies are sound."

[Forum for the Future](#) has around 40 interns -- between 10 and 12 full-time equivalents -- at any one time, among around 60 staff. *Ros Parker* (deputy director of finance and resources) and *Helen Saunders* (human resources officer) said they are careful to avoid the term 'employ' in relation to interns, as they are told from the start that there is no guarantee of a job. "However, when there are vacancies, we encourage them to apply. We induct all interns as we would a member of staff. They have access to senior managers and team meetings."

Interns are given access to training events, and are welcome to attend team meetings. They also get help with CV writing and interview technique. "We tell interns to make as much use of the opportunity as possible." Interns are encouraged to join in activities such as brown bag lunches and they gain access to training in, for example, the kind of computer software they would need in any job. "Many interns have never worked before," Ros said. The organisation tries to give each intern an exit interview. "We ask where they are going next. A year ago it was mainly into paid work, but the jobs are not there now."

Forum for the Future feeds the information from the exit interviews into the senior management team, and it has an Internal Values Working Group, which meets quarterly, and considers ethical issues in relation to interns. The organisation "simply cannot afford" to pay interns, but does "everything else we can", although there are some "structural problems" -- such as the legal implications of any particular kind of support to an intern -- that prevent the organisation doing as much as it would like to increase the benefits to interns. "We are diligent about the work they are given, and we give them work that will help them. We wouldn't put them on our chargeable work." Interns "don't work on restricted funds projects", but "if it's a large scale project in which we are getting core funding too", they might do work such as research and note taking.

A February 2012 website ad for interns on its magazine *Green Futures* gives an idea of the kind of work the Forum does expect interns to do. It states: "The interns would ideally work four days a week over a period of three months. The internships are unpaid, but travel and lunch expenses will be covered. Tasks include:

- Production support (proofreading, picture chasing)
- Updating the *Green Futures* website
- Administration
- Research on specific forthcoming feature articles
- Researching and writing short briefings
- Support to expand *Green Futures*' readership"

The [Young Foundation](#) has between 15 and 20 interns, among about 60 staff, its intern co-ordinator, *Gemma Callandar*, told us. It recently advertised internships in no fewer than 15 of its project areas. Although its ad states that "interns are volunteers", it also states: "Interns must be available for at least three days a week and for a minimum of 12 weeks. The working day for interns is 10am to 5pm." *Gemma Callandar* told us: "If we had to pay interns there would be a lot less of them." But *Carl Roper* of the TUC told the workshop that this encapsulated the systemic damage done by the system,

“We are diligent about the work they are given. We give them work that will help them and we wouldn't put them on chargeable work.”

*Helen Saunders,
Forum for the Future*

because a parallel argument has always been used to justify low labour standards as the price for employment opportunities.

6. Voices of interns

Hilary Aked recently completed an unpaid internship with [Open Democracy](#), an online discussion forum. “I am doing it to learn new skills, gain experience in online publishing, make contacts, and develop my CV,” she told us. “I do some online publishing editorial work, some commissioning. I was doing a wiki project and working on the archive.” Yet Hilary is an Oxford graduate in English with a Masters in development studies from The London School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS) and spent a year working as the paid editor of *London Student* magazine. Since then she has interned at WDM and Amnesty International, and she has also volunteered at the Campaign Against the Arms Trade. “I’m lucky enough to be able to (do this for nothing),” she told us. “I am quite lucky to be getting this experience. You can look at it as an exploitative relationship or a win-win.”

A former intern who worked with Futerra for a month during her ‘gap year’ before university, and then had two months of paid work with the company, told us: “It was just what I needed at that stage.” But she has concerns about the systemic effect of internships: “The main thing is you need somewhere to live for free. This mainly favours Londoners or rich people whose parents can afford to pay for accommodation there.” She grew up in the north of England and during her London internship she lived for one week each with four friends of her family. “I didn’t need to move around but didn’t want to impose too much, and I got to see different parts of London a bit,” she recalls.

Later she began a six month internship with Green Alliance, “but I left early because I was offered a job elsewhere.” Describing the internship system as a “really tricky” issue, she went on: “I think it is a broader issue of lack of funding in the third sector. If social enterprises rely on interns there is something wrong with their business model, and if the charity sector relies on interns there is something wrong with their fundraising. Young people are bearing the brunt of these deficiencies.

“The problem with it becoming normalised is that if you are applying for an actual job you are expected to have experience. It puts better off people at an advantage. But another way of talking about it is to see it basically as part of my education. Paying for a few months more living costs after university -- especially when you have £9k fees per year. You get new networks, new skills, and find out from the inside which organisations are fun to work at and which aren’t.”

Her list of what a good internship should look like highlights the difficult intersection of unpaid internships with employment law. She says that in addition to consistent line management, being able to set your own objectives, a “structured experience” and a free lunch (“that always makes you feel better!”), interns should be “integrated into the structure of the organisation and made to feel they are an important cog in the machine”, and “invited to staff meetings, because networking opportunities are quite key for an intern”. But the latter two practices could breach the definition of ‘voluntary worker’ under the National Minimum Wage law.

Rachel Karasik graduated in 2011 from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, where she took a degree in Criticism, Communication and Curation, and is now a community organiser with the social enterprise [FutureGov](#). “I got linked up with Futuregov through a friend,” she told us. “I started three weeks after graduating --

“If a social enterprise relies on interns there is something wrong with its business model, and if the charity sector relies on interns there is something wrong with its fundraising.”

Former intern

initially as an intern on the London Living Wage, and now I have been given a small rise and had my contract extended.” As a fully paid member of staff, she says, “I do a lot more than I did before. I have more a leadership role now. The internship was like a trial period. I’ve really lucked out with who I am working for.”

Her earlier experience of internships was less benign. Like many people who did the same courses as she did, she worked for a gallery in university vacations, and found that the employer had got rid of all its paid invigilation staff and replaced them with interns. “I also did two other internships. Some internships you only get offered the bottom of the barrel work -- no-one trusts you with anything major. For me, if you are going to work for free I want to get something out of it. Developing skills was what I wanted.”

Rachel added: “We are at the point now where you need to have done internships to get an internship. For many it is heart-rending to have been through school for all those years and paid all that money -- but the feeling is, what can you do? This is a hot topic among my friends, and the feeling among everyone is that doing internships is par for the course. If you don’t it makes it much harder to get a job. People rack them up -- five or six internships.”

7. Other voices

Carl Roper, of the [Trades Union Congress](#), stressed that unions are “in favour of good quality work experience”, and that both work experience and entry level employment should be accessible. The problem with internships was that they benefit “only a very small group of rather fortunate young people”. More and more employers were exhibiting what he called “internship creep”, and replacing established paid workers with unpaid ‘interns’. “This is not a sustainable business model,” Carl said.

Gus Baker, [Intern Aware](#), echoed Carl’s point about access to opportunities. “Internships can be a fantastic experience and a fantastic introduction to the world of work,” he said, but “my friend has had to give up his idea of being a journalist because he cannot afford to do an unpaid internship”. The system was “leading to two-tier workforces” and was not in the interests even of the social enterprises and charities that used unpaid interns, “because if you don’t have to pay someone you do not invest properly in their development”.

Fiona O’Cleirigh, NUJ [Cashback for Interns](#) campaign, mentioned she was also chair of the London Freelance Branch of her union, and said “freelances hate interns” because their availability was undermining pay rates.

Marcus Mason, [New Deal of the Mind](#), talked about their work to help unemployed people into the creative industries. It is a project designed to widen entry-level opportunities beyond those who can afford to take on unpaid internships, because the systematic use of the latter has narrowed the social composition of recruits.

The BBC television producer and crossbench peer *Lord Charles Colville* said that unpaid internships, by excluding many of the most able from the recruitment pool, was already undermining creative industries and could have the same effect on charities and social enterprises.

Sandra Bruce, a Masters student with multiple language skills, spoke of how she has contacted many NGOs to seek a position as a volunteer, offering to do whatever they

“We are in favour of good quality work experience but unpaid internships benefit only a very small group of rather fortunate young people.”

Carl Roper, TUC

need, but only for one day a week, unpaid. But she has found that they invariably want more time than that and require applicants to fit into highly specified task descriptions. In other words, Sandra has found that the organisations she has approached -- mainly in the human rights and development fields -- no longer want the kind of volunteering she offers because they only want unpaid interns who can give more time.

Another participant with recent experience of volunteering full-time for a human rights legal charity, without any intention or wish to apply for paid employment there, said that one of her tasks was to process applications for volunteer positions. It was evident that securing unpaid voluntary positions had become an essential part of career progression for lawyers wishing to specialise in human rights work, and this meant that the charity was not only receiving far more applications for voluntary positions than it could accept, but also that the level of qualifications of successful applicants had steadily increased. The change had been so fast over a period of less than two years that "by the time I left I would not have been accepted as a volunteer because the bar had been raised so high; the minimum was a law degree and you usually needed a language too." Yet this participant had a degree from Cambridge University and a PhD from Birkbeck.

Evidently, what was occurring in that charity, as in many others, was job substitution -- not necessarily the replacement of existing jobs with unpaid positions but certainly a trend towards meeting organisational needs for which there was no staff budget through a deliberately designed unpaid position. "Hey, let's get another intern," was how one of our workshop participant's described a frequent response of managers in a charity where she had been an intern to any challenge requiring additional capacity.

Among the other comments from participants were:

- "Entry level jobs don't exist any more."
- "People change the term 'volunteer' to 'intern' on their CVs because it looks better."
- "We have created a career model where volunteering is expected."

8. Ethics and interns: some dilemmas

It is clear from the work we have done that, while there are some very clear ethical issues involved, there are also some questions and dilemmas that are less easily answered or resolved.

For example, few would argue against every worker receiving the minimum wage, but it is less easy to distinguish between a 'volunteer' and a 'worker'. And surely it is a good thing if someone can graduate from volunteer to worker -- why shouldn't a voluntary organisation favour those who have given their time and effort when appointing to paid positions, particularly since the voluntary workers involved will already know much of what a new recruit would have to learn?

On the other hand, it is surely a problem that we are now dealing with systematic use of unpaid internships as a central and consistent element of the selection and recruitment process of many an organisation. This is highly problematic ethically, because it is contributing to the normalisation of unpaid labour. It is also restricting the recruitment pool to those who can afford to work for no pay (and often it takes several unpaid internships to gather the experience and contacts required to be considered for a paid position), with obvious consequences in terms of class and perhaps racial privilege. It is also leading to voluntary organisations keeping the carrot dangling to attract a steady

“If you don't have to pay someone you don't invest properly in their development.”

Gus Baker, Intern Aware

supply of well educated young people to work for nothing, which we believe is eroding the integrity of the employing organisations themselves.

Some organisations acknowledge some of those problems but believe the ethical balance nevertheless comes down in favour of unpaid internships, particularly if the positions are part-time and therefore compatible with part-time paid work the rest of the time. That is part of the WDM rationale for not paying its interns, even though it admits that it derives value from them. Yet People and Planet offer their interns considerably more than is offered by organisations that do not pay their interns, and in part that is because they have them full-time and for longer.

In many ways the WDM comment that “the current system is tried and tested and it works well for both WDM and our interns and volunteers” goes to the heart of the ethical problem, although perhaps not in the way WDM intends. The rationale offered is made in terms of the benefits to insiders, whereas the costs are borne by outsiders -- those who can never afford to join the recruitment process on that basis, or who do join it and never quite make it to a paid position.

Moreover, these problems are hidden from the insiders -- the disadvantages of the restricted recruitment pool might well be affecting the employing organisations too, in ways that they cannot detect. For example, funders might be increasingly evaluating budget proposals on the assumption that unpaid interns will be used, which locks the practice into the system even more, producing a vicious circle. If that is the case, then funders must take primary responsibility for reversing the trend, by reviewing their own policies and assumptions and making sure they ask the right ethical questions. If there is to be a level and fair playing field among organisations relying on charitable funding, such questions must be asked.

But what are those questions? That is a bit harder! Each organisation’s circumstances are different, and ethical dilemmas, like organisational challenges of any kind, can only be resolved internally, although external facilitation can help. Public World’s own commitment to ethical decision-making in this area is not only to try to get it right ourselves but also to offer to facilitate deliberations within other organisations, and to encourage debate on this issue throughout the sector.

So, to conclude, here are five issues that seem to us to have come out of our work, with some of our thoughts about questions to ask about them:

a) “It is wrong for profit-seeking organisations to use unpaid interns, but surely it is different for a non-profits?”

Of course non-profits are different, but:

- are you sure you are distributing sacrifices fairly between staff and interns?
- are your own values being compromised by taking advantage of job scarcity?
- has your volunteer policy morphed into an unfair employment practice?

b) “We provide valuable work experience and enable young people to get a foot on the ladder.”

“Hey, we have more work than we can do -- let’s get another intern!”

Anon

That is an important contribution to make, but:

- are you sure you have the right balance of your needs and theirs?
- do you have the staff capacity to deliver on your commitments to them?
- if you didn't have the intern would you need a paid worker to do their work?

c) “We would love to pay our interns the local living wage, but we just don't have enough money.”

These are indeed very hard times, but:

- do your interns instead gain benefits that are not available to paid staff?
- do you need to review your business model or fundraising strategy?
- is the availability of unpaid interns distorting your volunteer policy?

d) “I am not even paying myself -- how can I pay an intern?”

This is a real issue for start-ups and even established organisations, but:

- are there fairer ways of collaborating that could share rewards as well as risks?
- are you sure your business model is robust and sustainable?
- have you discussed the ethical issues and practical solutions with your intern?

e) “Our intern policy isn't ideal, but fulfilling our mission is more important.”

No doubt your mission will make the world a better place, but:

- is it really either/or, or could there be ways of having a better mix of both?
- what impact is it having on the social and ethnic composition of your workforce?
- are you sure your workplace practices aren't undermining your ethical standards?

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