

On becoming an intern

I've been encouraging my clients to get unpaid work experience, now called Internships, as a means of developing their skills and gaining relevant work experience to increase their chance of success with job applications.

My view of unpaid work experience, is as something you would do for a few weeks, where you would do supervised work and actually learn and develop. Possibly not even full time, as 2 days a week unpaid work over 3 months could be a brilliant addition to a CV and can also help to test drive if a career is something that you should really give your all to try and move into, better to find now that the reality doesn't match your thoughts.

For years I've been hearing from clients that certain careers demand a year or more of unpaid work experience, from George who wanted to work as a lobbyist to Rachael trying to get work in TV, others seeking work in fashion and PR, George and Rachael were unable to work for nothing and had to adjust their plans. George was also interested in advertising and is doing really well. Rachael has a job in another industry, not exactly what she wanted to do but she could segue into a job within a TV company with a bit of creative thinking and an upturn in the economic climate.

There are quite a few stories from interns such as this [one](#) from Sarah Geraghty.

The media today refer to Alan Milburn's idea to offer all young people the sort of internship that the well off can offer their offspring, but I can't see this happening. Even if some form of payment was available, you still need to find these opportunities, and there's a lot of competition for even unpaid work.

Paid internships are available - see [Graduate Talent Pool](#) and [Wexo](#) but the opportunities listed include many that are unpaid, or just with expenses covered.

Many people think you have to go to London to take up these Internships, and for some careers this will be true, but you could still look to create your own opportunity local to where you live.

Here's what I suggest to my clients:

1. Decide what it is you would like to explore
2. Make a list of local companies who operate in this area if for example you want to be a graphic designer, or larger companies who will have e.g. a marketing department.
3. Think about anyone you know who works for this company, so you have a warm contact who can make the introduction. As this company will be local to where you live perhaps a neighbour or friend of your parents can help. Ask around and get a name an introduction
4. Failing this you need to make contact direct, use your interpersonal skills to get a name from reception.
5. Send a letter or email but don't be vague make it relevant to the company.
6. Follow up with a phone call, and arrange to meet for a 20 minute initial chat

Not everyone will talk with you, so you can't rely on just a few companies, but this approach works for so many people.

If you don't get much success you need to review your approach.

Need more help - my book [How to get a job in a recession](#) has helpful chapters on fact finding interviews and more.

I am now firmly of the opinion that if the work on offer is an actual job that a wage should be paid, as otherwise this is exploitation. [A recent report](#) from the [Institute for Public Policy Research](#) states that employers who offer graduates unpaid internships are breaking the law.

Under, the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 anyone doing work for an organisation must be paid at least the minimum wage. This is regardless of how a job was advertised, what the job title is or whether there is a contract in place. Charities, voluntary organisations and statutory bodies are able to employ unpaid voluntary workers but private companies are not.

In November 2009 Reading Employment Tribunals ruled, in the case of Nicola Vetta and London Dream Motion Pictures Ltd, that someone employed on an expenses-only basis is still entitled to the minimum wage if they can show they are a worker.

[Tanya de Grunwald](#), author of *Dude, Where's my Career?* Has some really [interesting posts](#) on her Graduate fog website, including correspondence about an unpaid internship with James Caan. James Elliot writes in The Guardian about [unpaid internships in the fashion industry](#)

Want more reasons why we shouldn't work for free, watch the [video](#) here. It's in a slightly different context but is a great confirmation of why you deserve to be paid for what you do.

Young people are now torn with the dilemma that now unpaid work experience is the norm and without it their chance of the job they want is remote. But without the back up of money from parents what can they do?

I still think that a short period of work experience, more akin to observation can help give a much greater insight into a job and increase job prospects, but certainly not doing an actual job.

I strongly believe that if someone is doing an actual job, they should be paid.

Tanya is doing a great job on this and has listed 7 companies who may face legal action including Superdrug, Weight Watchers, Morrisons, Tesco, Sainsbury's - see her post [here](#). She is also after advice and comments on what she should do next, so do get over to her [site](#) and comment [there](#).

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