

INTERNSHIPS AS OPPORTUNITY

HOW EMPLOYERS
SHOULD OFFER ACCESSIBLE,
HIGH-QUALITY PLACEMENTS

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POSITIVE IDEAS
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MAKING INTERNSHIPS WORK FOR THE MODERN LABOUR MARKET

Internships are on the rise in the UK's most competitive sectors, and are increasingly functioning as the first of several stages towards full-time work for young people, particularly graduates. Whereas previously internships allowed young people to gain an insight into a sector or profession, they have become an unstated requirement for many of the top jobs young people are now competing for.

However, it is difficult to access internships across sectors, and it is those with the connections, know-how and the financial means to support themselves who find it easiest to gain entry to this important career stage. Furthermore, those who do gain a coveted internship frequently find that rather than a genuine learning opportunity, internships involve menial work below their skill level and offer poor working conditions.

It is time to reconfigure the status of internships in the present-day labour market. Rather than employers regarding internships as a source of cheap and flexible labour, internships should be understood within the wider framework of young people's career paths. This requires recognising both the ways in which an organisation can best benefit from taking on interns and how those interns can, in turn, gain the most from an internship.

It is possible, however, to go even further than this. If employers make application systems far more accessible, successfully diversify intern intakes, and offer genuinely high-quality experiences, internships might do more than serve as a neutral element of the labour market. They could rather become a way to improve sector-wide diversity, kick start social mobility, and make sure employers are accessing and using the best talent available.

Benefits to employers of good internships

- ★ Employers that recruit interns and entry-level positions from a narrow set of backgrounds miss out on a wider talent pool and diverse points of view. As internships are increasingly used as a recruitment tool, diversifying intern intakes is a low-risk way to access the best talent.
 - ★ By making internships accessible, employers can contribute to ensuring a strong talent pipeline for their sector as a whole, as well as help improve social mobility across society.
 - ★ By providing challenging tasks appropriate to the skill level of the intern, employers can make the most of the interns' abilities for the benefit of their organisation.
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MAKING INTERNSHIPS ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

Access to internships is a critical issue. The number of sectors that now expect entry-level applicants to have some form of work experience – commonly in the form of an internship – has risen dramatically over the last decade. Nearly half of the top graduate employers now report that candidates without work experience will have little or no chance of receiving a job offer for their organisations graduate programmes', *regardless of academic qualifications.*

'I think, in terms of [being] a graduate, being an intern is a good way of applying for a company that you want to go in to but you don't yet have the right qualifications for. I mean, even for a junior role they expect you to have some sort of work experience.'

Focus Group participant

But access to internships is seriously curtailed for many people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, non-Londoners and minority groups. There are a range of barriers for these young people, including knowledge of how to access internships, confidence, and not having the money to undertake either unpaid or insecure work.

Employers are pivotal in helping to remove these barriers, and doing so is largely within their control. Recruitment and remuneration in particular have a large impact on who has access to the best opportunities.

So, what do accessible internships look like, and what can be done to get there?

1. PAY A FAIR WAGE; COMPLY WITH THE LAW

We advocate that interns are paid a living wage,¹ to reflect the costs of living in the area and ensure that it's not just those who are able to subsidise their wages that can access internships. This is particularly relevant to sectors concentrated in London, where the cost of living is higher, to ensure that young people without family and friends in the capital are able to take up an internship.

However, at the very least, employers must be aware of and comply with the law. Most interns are eligible to be paid the national minimum wage or national living wage if aged over 25. There are exceptions, such as when the intern is a volunteer, or is shadowing an employee. However, by failing to offer a wage or at least expenses, employers restrict these opportunities to those with the financial means to undertake them – even if they are acting within the law. If employers are unable to offer any compensation, the length of the internship should be limited. Alternatively, some universities offer small businesses financial support in return for paid internships for their students.

¹ In 2017 the living wage is £8.45 per hour or £9.75 per hour in London. The rate is set by the Living Wage Foundation based on the cost of living, and is higher than the government's National Living Wage, which is the legal minimum wage for workers aged 25 and above and is currently £7.20 per hour. See <http://www.livingwage.org.uk/>

2. ADVERTISE INTERNSHIPS OPENLY

Far too many internships are arranged on an ad hoc or non-transparent basis. While the government estimates 50,000–70,000 internships take place annually, only 11,000 are advertised online. To widen the pool of applicants, employers must take care to advertise openly and widely, rather than through a narrow set of universities or among employee's networks.

Employers should also make the application process as transparent as possible by explaining the different stages of the process and clearly outlining expectations in the job description.

'For my one there was a really good pack. They wrote every detail about it including what you'd be paid, how it would work, what you would be entitled to as a trainee – like you don't have to pay tax for certain things. It also detailed exactly what you'd be doing and the structure. So it really detailed everything. So that was amazing and gave you a lot of confidence to apply because you knew you'd be along the right lines.'

Focus Group participant

3. ENCOURAGE UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS TO APPLY, AND VIEW THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS IN CONTEXT

Under equalities law, employers are permitted to take efforts to direct recruitment towards certain identity groups if they are underrepresented. This can include connecting with relevant institutions,

representatives, interest groups, newsletters, and so on in order to advertise a position to particular persons. Sector-specific and economy-wide charities and programmes exist that can help employers reach underrepresented groups – such as the Social Mobility Foundation, upReach, and Creative Access. Universities are also actively seeking internship opportunities for disadvantaged young people.

Employers can go beyond monitoring diversity statistics and make active efforts to improve on them. This could include using a flagging system at the shortlisting stage, such as Rare Recruitment's, to make sure that applicants with particular disadvantages have their achievements recognised in the context of disadvantages they may have faced at home, school and in the workplace. This system flags sociodemographic indicators, educational background, and personal and family circumstances so that employers can pay close attention to candidates with multiple flags.

Most people are subject to unconscious biases that may lead them to not see the potential in an applicant. Unconscious bias training for staff involved in recruitment processes can help give members of marginalised demographics the fairest chance in application. Another method is to remove the name and address of the applicant when shortlisting, to reduce the possibility of racial or class-based unintended biases.

4. HAVE REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS OF APPLICANT EXPERIENCE

Many young people turn to internships as a source of experience when they feel they don't yet have what is required to gain a long-term position in a sector. However, many employers require prospective interns to already have prior experience before they can get an internship, or favour those who do. This experience is often only possible for those young people with significant financial support and professional networks, which are principally provided by privileged families, schools and universities. Requiring an internship applicant to have previous experience perpetuates cycles of inaccessibility and privilege within those sectors that do this.

'Some internships need you to have experience beforehand. Well you're not going to have it, are you?'

Focus Group participant

'In my second year of uni, during the summer, I said "OK I'm going to have to try really hard [to get an internship]". But loads of [employers] came back and were looking for someone more experienced and obviously I thought, "this is ridiculous". But then eventually I ended up working for a really good [employer] and that helped me get the next gallery internship, and from that it has built it up. You have just got to get lucky with one that will take you with no sort of relevant experience. But it is one of those things where you go around in circles.'

Focus Group participant

PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES

Internships can provide benefits for both employers and interns. Employers can gain a new perspective from an energetic and committed worker, a temporarily increased capacity within their workforce, and a potential recruitment stream. Interns can gain experience, connections, familiarity with the workplace and sector, skills, references and possible job opportunities.

However, for this to happen, employers must design an internship that provides a sufficient supporting structure and learning opportunities.

What to do...

- ✓ Have a flexible **structure** for the intern's time at the organisation.
- ✓ Provide a thorough **induction** to the organisation, workplace, team and expected responsibilities of the intern.
- ✓ Provide a trained **manager** for the intern, who can supervise them closely, particularly to begin with, and will communicate with them regularly.
- ✓ Be clear as to whether there are future **employment opportunities** available in the organisation from the beginning of the internship.

'I think my company had someone that was on the same internship before me. He now works as a permanent member of staff so it gives me an incentive at the end to possibly stay with the company.'

Focus Group participant

- ✓ Ensure the intern is **included** in office activities and social events (see 'What no to do...').
- ✓ Provide the intern with productive **challenges** during their time at the organisation.
- ✓ Give the intern chances to engage in relevant **training**.
- ✓ Where possible, give the intern a chance to engage in professional **networking**.
- ✓ Be **flexible** with the intern if, for instance, they want to attend interviews at other organisations, have caring responsibilities or need to work elsewhere to support themselves. Paying your intern, whether legally required or not, will allow them to give more to your organisation.

'I worked 6–7 days a week: 3 at an internship, 3 at a paid job (due to unpaid nature [of the former]). Sometimes [I] worked 12–14 days straight.'

Focus Group participant

'One of [my employers] sacked me for doing paid freelancing work. It was meant to be a three-month internship, four days a week, and I used to work freelance as a photographer's assistant. They weren't paying me any money and I had the audacity to ask for a day off to go and earn money and they basically sacked me because of that.'

Focus Group participant

- ✓ Offer **career support** to the intern even if there are no progression opportunities within the organisation.
- ✓ **Conclude** the internship when expected or mutually decided and do not expect interns to stay on beyond the agreed time, or about six months, without improved pay and conditions.

'When I applied it was for a four- or five-month contract and they kept extending it and saying there will be a job at the end for you. So I ended up working there for nine months but it was paid hourly. ... It was fine for four months but they kept extending it and I couldn't take leave for nine months.'

Focus Group participant

- ✓ Conduct a **final review meeting** and **exit interview** at the end of the internship to find out how to improve your internships.
- ✓ Give the intern a personalised **reference** when requested.

Further detail can be found in, for instance, the CIPD's employers' guide for internships.

What not to do...

Don't exclude interns from social events

Treat interns like another, less experienced employee. Include them in activities in and around the office. Recognise that they are not only being trained in work skills but, also, how to act in a professional environment. Not all interns will be used to being in a professional environment, and

may need more support to feel included and comfortable.

'I was sat – it sounds a bit silly – I was sat on a separate part of the desk. So two women were sat there and rather than putting me next to them, which they could [have done] because there were computers all along it, they put me four seats away from them. Then also I wasn't invited to the Christmas party. I was never sent any details and the only reason I was invited was because they saw me overhear them talking about it.'

Focus Group participant

Don't treat interns as a source of cheap labour

Give them work befitting their skillset, rather than landing them with disproportionate amounts of menial or mundane work.

'I started my internship in a not very busy environment and felt like I would just end up answering the door/phone and make cups of tea. Once we started getting busier, I was able to show my skills and now I'm a trusted member of the team (even [trusted] to look after important stuff when people are on holiday).'

Focus Group participant

INTERNSHIPS AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY

Internships are a vital piece of the puzzle to ensure equal access to the best opportunities for young people, regardless of background and geography. We need to reorientate the labour market so that internships become a route into competitive sectors for those who otherwise cannot build-up the required experience. By enshrining values of **accessibility, inclusion** and **quality** from **recruitment**, through the **placement** and onto any ensuing **career support** and referencing, employers can use internships to facilitate change for the better across their sectors.

This guide was co-written by Carys Roberts, research fellow, and Olivia Ouwehand, research intern, at IPPR. The content is based on our research, other guides to high-quality internships, and focus groups with current and prospective interns.

RESOURCES

- Roberts C (2017) *The inbetweeners: The new role of internships in the graduate labour market*, IPPR. <http://www.ippr.org/publications/the-inbetweeners>
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD's) detailed guide to high-quality internships: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/routes-work/internships-guide>
- Common best-practice code for high-quality internships: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/providing-quality-internships-code-and-guidance-for-employers>
- The Social Mobility Foundation: <http://www.socialmobility.org.uk/>
- Creative Access: <https://creativeaccess.org.uk/>
- upReach: <http://upreach.org.uk/>

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