



Unpaid work experience or internships

Principles

Work experience is when a person works for an organisation purely to gain experience in a particular occupation or industry. Internships or vocational placements are similar, providing opportunities to develop relevant experience and skills.

These arrangements can be a valuable way for people to make the transition from study to work, or to explore a new career path. They may last for just a few weeks or several months, and can sometimes lead to ongoing employment.

It's lawful for work experience or internship arrangements to be unpaid as long as:

- a) the main benefit of the arrangement is for the person doing the placement
- b) the person is not doing 'productive' work
- c) it is a meaningful opportunity to learn and develop skills

Examples

Scenario 1

A council is running an internship programme for students interested in local government. The internships are advertised as unpaid positions and students are allowed to choose the hours they spend at the council offices over a two-week period.

The council is careful to ensure that the role is mainly observational and that the students are not expected to do productive work.

The students are clearly the main beneficiaries and no employment relationship has been created, so the internships are lawfully unpaid.



Scenario 2

A publishing company is running an internship programme for recent Communications and Journalism graduates.

The advertisement calls for applicants who are passionate about a career in publishing and looking for experience as a gateway to future employment opportunities. The company will select candidates based on academic transcripts, previous work experience and references.

The three-month full-time internships are unpaid, but the advertisement says successful candidates will benefit from perks and networking opportunities. It also says there is a possibility of employment at the end of the internship, depending on performance.

The duties listed include general administration, event planning and proofreading, with possible opportunities for writing.

The company is asking the interns to perform significant productive work. So despite the promise of work experience, perks and networking opportunities, it's likely that the company will get more from the arrangement than the interns. This means that it qualifies as an employment relationship, so the interns should be paid.