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## Cheque, please: Why millennials are rebelling against unpaid internships



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Guest writer

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Working for free has long been accepted as a near-unavoidable first step in a career in media, politics or the arts. But when you're working for months on end for little or no reward, when does paying your dues become exploitation? Sasha Borissenko reports.

***NB: the Spinoff has chosen not to name the participants speaking negatively about their experiences as interns in this story – even those who wanted to be named – so***

**as to protect their future employment prospects.**

Gemma\* is young, hard-working and passionate about her chosen career in art. For someone like her, the path looks clear: from tertiary education to a permanent position, with unpaid internships serving as a springboard from one to the other. But she has had enough of the internship system, and says she'll never undertake an unpaid internship again.

The final straw came after scoring a sought after position at an art consultancy firm, where she says she was led to believe she would be doing meaningful work. Instead she found herself walking the dog, doing the dishes, delivering coffees and “doing a lot of copying and pasting”. Despite working eight hours a week for six months, promises of paid full-time work never eventuated. There were two other interns at the firm; one worked elsewhere for 40 hours a week and another was supported by their family. Gemma supported herself with two part-time jobs.

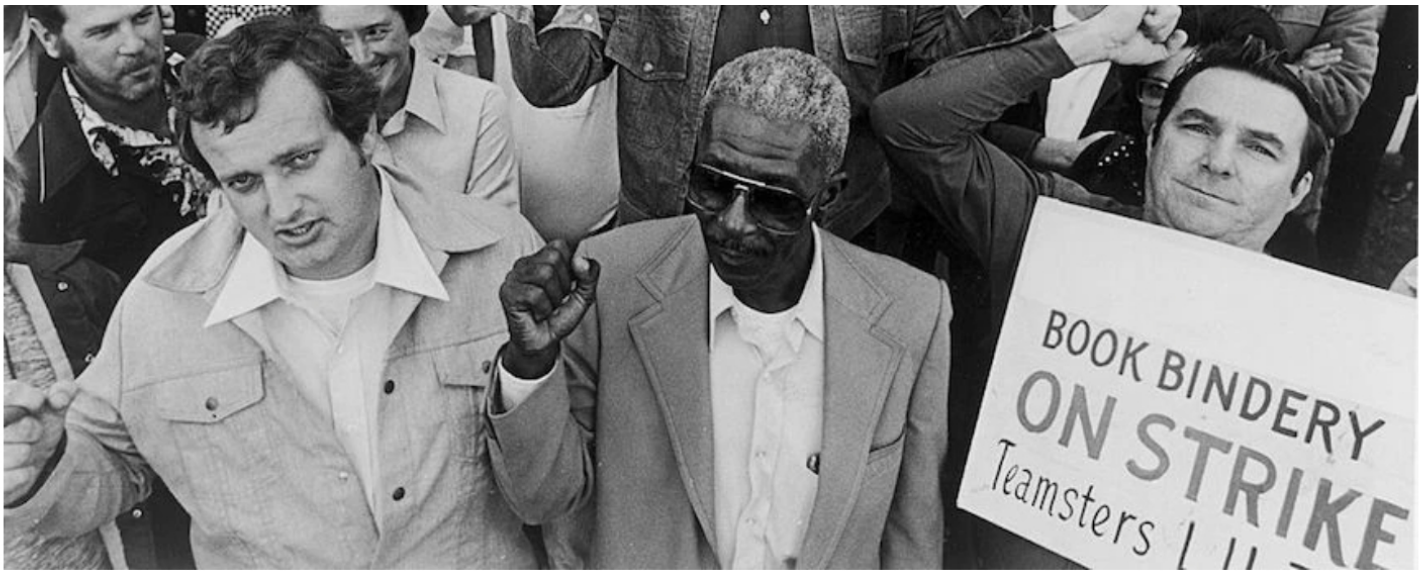
It was a toxic work environment, she says. The only woman staff member, a senior employee, was expected to complete assistant-like duties and subjected to “emotional bullying”. Gemma’s boss told her he preferred to buy only male artists’ work, because it would sell better. Another, asking about her ethnic background, told her he “thought you had something in you” and referred to her “exotic look”.

Gemma says the experience instilled in her “a complete distrust of white men in positions of power in the supposedly ‘liberal’ arts industry”.

“Everyone deserves to be paid for their time and labour. Just because someone is young and inexperienced doesn’t mean they deserve to be exploited.”







American country singer Johnny Paycheck, of "You Can Take This Job and Shove It" fame, with a group of striking bookbinders, 1977. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

**It's a familiar story. Want a career in the media, politics or the creative industries? You'd better be prepared to start with an internship, or two or three. Oh – and did we mention? – all those internships will most likely be unpaid. It's a foot in the door, they say. A rite of passage, an opportunity to make connections, to network. And sure, we all have to start somewhere. But even if (and it's a huge 'if') some interns manage to secure paid employment at the end of their internship odyssey, where does that leave those without the resources to work for free?**

Samantha\*, a fashion designer, completed four unpaid internships in the last year, donating a total of around 200 hours of free labour to various successful fashion brands. Living on student allowance and, later, the job seeker benefit, her duties consisted entirely of menial tasks like cleaning, tagging garments, completing deliveries, organising zips and taking pins out of mock-up garments.

"In the fashion industry it's so hard to get that entry level job," she says. "You have to work for free just to get the experience. It is a hard and competitive industry, and it is sad this is the only way to get in."

She says she continually felt taken advantage of, knowing there was little likelihood the internship would ever become paid employment.

"I think it's become part of how their business is structured. There are always interns willing to work for free."

While nothing came of Samantha's internships, she's still intent on pursuing fashion

design. In meantime she's living on the unemployment benefit while constantly applying for jobs. She hopes to secure a business grant to become entirely self-employed.

**Michelle\* completed two internships for reputable media outlets in the early days of her journalism career. The first demanded that she complete low-level work to fill pages of the newspaper, while spending the little money she had getting to and from interviews, and taking time off much-needed paid work.**

"I was fortunate that I had a fairly flexible job and didn't get sick during the course of my studies, she says now. "But I also spent almost a year working practically every moment and being stressed about falling behind every moment... it was utterly exhausting."

The other was a wholly positive experience, the editor taking the time to help improve her writing and shape her stories. She says that second internship helped her become the journalist she is today.

"Having had a not so great experience prior, that really showed me the difference between an environment that offered guidance, and wanted to grow talent, versus one that just saw their interns as there to [complete low-level work]."

Auckland University of Technology head of communications Alison Sykora agrees that not all internships are created equal. She says those arranged by AUT and other similar tertiary providers are specifically designed to offer students 'real world' experience as part of their study, giving them a competitive advantage when they enter the workforce.

While the placements AUT arranges are generally unpaid, Sykora says the university believes they're a net positive for students. Interns get industry experience, work traditional hours, and meet people who could be potential employers, while employers benefit from adding fresh thinking, enthusiasm and additional resource to their teams.

Auckland Museum associate curator Jane Groufsky is one for whom the tertiary internship system worked. Her first job came about as a direct result of her university-led unpaid internship at Te Papa. With a part time job and some support from her family, and a student loan to cover the rest, she was able to work 200 hours for the museum over several months. By the end of her extended internship she'd become an invaluable part of the team.

"But not everyone's that lucky, and an unfortunate consequence is that people can get

locked out of the sector.”



“So that’s a grande iced no-sugar vanilla latte with soy milk and an extra shot, got it?”

**Two years after completing a graphic design degree, Cameron\* moved to London in search of greater opportunity. He landed on his feet, scoring an ideal internship at a web development agency doing design branding for an app.**

“I worked my very hardest, and tried my best to prove my worth. Naively I must admit my job hunt during the internship somewhat slowed down as I began to believe that there was a role for me at the end of it.” Turns out, that wasn’t the case.

Out of money, he was reduced to calling his parents for rent money. It was the last straw; he ditched the life of an intern – and a long-held dream of a career in design – in favour of a corporate job.

These days he works as a marketing manager, and says he’s seen first hand how firms exploit the internship system. “I have been in the room with managers who have openly and unashamedly suggested them as a way to get free labour.

“I can hear the baby boomers saying to me ‘go out and get a summer job to fund [your



internship]’. But the fact is, in today’s competitive world, it’s not that easy. Heck, even the girl who serves my coffee is completing a barista internship.”

Cameron says people should only consider completing an internship with companies that are experienced in their desired field and who have a good internal employment relations reputation. He says it’s also important to evaluate the prospects of full time employment at the end of the placement, and whether the work is actually valuable in terms of one’s CV.

**So it seems the onus is on the prospective intern – someone in an exceedingly poor bargaining position – to find, or negotiate for, a worthwhile internship. And even if you’re one of the lucky ones to secure a highly sought after gig, how much should you celebrate a system in which ‘desirable’ industries are increasingly dominated by economically privileged folk?**

It’s a question with which Matthew Harnett, an editor at culture website [The Pantograph Punch](#), has struggled. He says unpaid internships are great for those with families or other support networks that can provide for them while they’re not earning, but most people aren’t that fortunate. “Privilege in this country looks predominantly white, urban and educated. We lose a lot not hearing from voices outside that mainstream – voices who’ve got to work double shifts to make rent, or to look after family, or eat.”

He says organisations who employ interns need to decide whether they value someone for the work they do – even if it is a token amount.

“[Failing to pay interns] has to be placed in a wider context too: whether the work they’re doing means someone else is profiting elsewhere. Put it this way: would sparky or plumbing apprentices tolerate not getting paid a living wage while they learned the trade? In the creative professions, unpaid internships are regrettably often – though not always – tantamount to exploitation.”

Over the summer, the Pantograph Punch piloted an ethical internship scheme. For six hours a week over a three-month period, interns worked with editors and helped write and edit content, with a focus on possibly transitioning into a permanent role at the end of the placement.

“We’re a small organisation of volunteers, one that subsists largely on grant applications, fundraising events and the occasional generous donor or subscriber,” Hartnett says.

“Despite that, I can’t ever imagine us offering unpaid internships. We actually had to put our 2016 summer internship on hold while we figured out how to actually afford it long term. Kids get fucked over well enough by boomers without us putting the boot in as well.”



**Humanitarian organisations like the UN are notorious for championing human rights while advocating unpaid (or what they like to call ‘volunteer’) internships. Like those in creative media, non-governmental organisation (NGO) internships are highly competitive: even high-achieving aspiring diplomats find themselves at the mercy of the unpaid internship paradigm.**

Take Amnesty International New Zealand. They received 70 applications for the five spots available in their latest intake, in which interns will work about 20 hours a week for five months. Amnesty International executive director Grant Bayldon says they would love to pay their interns, the “human rights leaders of tomorrow”, but as a charity it just isn’t possible.

“Amnesty International is very clear that this is a volunteer programme,” Bayldon says. “We ensure we come to a mutual agreement with each intern on the hours they want to spend volunteering, to fit around their work or university or other commitments, and an agreement is signed to make the relationship clear.”

He says that mothers with young children, full-time students and former refugees have completed internships at Amnesty, and the organisation has worked hard to structure a programme that’s as accessible as possible.

“We are confident that participation in our volunteer internship programme reflects the diversity that we value as an organisation.

**Who could forget former UN intern David Hyde? He made international headlines last August when he was forced to live in a tent on the banks of Lake Geneva because of sky-high rents in the Swiss city.**

Following his brush with fame, Hyde started work on a documentary with his partner Nathalie Berger about unpaid internships at the UN and the growing global movement against them. While Hyde's story helped launch initiatives like the We Pay Our Interns coalition and UNICEF's pilot paid internship programme, he says it's not enough. Unpaid internships should be illegal across the board.

"Unpaid internships are morally indefensible because they are both exploitative and exclusionary and contribute to increasing inequality," he says.

"Above all we need companies and organisations to recognise that paying someone for a day's work is not only their moral and legal responsibility. It's a fundamental human right."

**David Cormack remembers fondly his time as an unpaid intern for working for Bill English. As part of his studies, the self-proclaimed leftie worked in English's office a few hours a week and says he's greatly benefitted from having the finance minister and deputy PM as a long-time referee. He still catches up with English every few months.**

The Hon. English didn't respond to questions about government policy on unpaid internships, but did say he enjoyed the opportunity to work with David. "I'm pleased to see he has continued his interest in politics."

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These days Cormack co-owns and operates a communications and publicity firm. Despite his own positive experience, he says he would never expect other interns to work for free.



“I’d certainly look to hire grads and other people wanting to get a foot in the PR/comms door but I’d, you know, pay them. Because people have to eat.”

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*\* The Spinoff has chosen not to name interview subjects (even those were comfortable being named) who spoke candidly about their negative experiences as interns, so as to protect them from the tyranny of google’s long memory.*