WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work experience at a cost

Some “interns” are being exploited, writes Fiona Macdonald.

P articipating in an internship or work-experience placement can be a positive and valuable experience for someone starting out in their career. However, not every unpaid placement is set up to benefit the person undertaking it, and some could be plainly exploitative.

While an internship might be presented as an opportunity for a young person to get a foot in the door, if its main purpose is to have someone perform, for free, work that would usually be undertaken by a paid employee, it is probably of dubious benefit and the arrangement may even be illegal.

Unpaid work experience has long been a feature of the Australian labour market and can be of mutual benefit to workers and employers. However, growth in unpaid internships in recent years has led to new concerns that they are being used as a substitute for paid employment.

A quick internet search throws up a host of internships that may be attractive to students and new graduates. Many are in areas such as marketing, public relations and multimedia design, or in “creative” industries, including fashion, the media, arts and entertainment. Also on offer are internships in public policy, business consulting, IT network support, accounting and finance.

The industries in which unpaid internships appear to be common are those where there is likely to be a good deal of competition for jobs among young workers and other people who need to gain experience. Some internships appear to be targeted at people who are vulnerable to exploitation.

An internship or work placement undertaken by a student as a requirement of a degree or other education course is usually a short-term structured placement that provides workplace-based learning and observation opportunities. This type of work-experience program is recognised under Australian employment legislation as a “vocational placement”, for which a person is not entitled to be paid.

Unpaid work experience has long been a feature of the Australian labour market and can be of mutual benefit to workers and employers. However, growth in unpaid internships in recent years has led to new concerns that they are being used as a substitute for paid employment.

A quick internet search throws up a host of internships that may be attractive to students and new graduates. Many are in areas such as marketing, public relations and multimedia design, or in “creative” industries, including fashion, the media, arts and entertainment. Also on offer are internships in public policy, business consulting, IT network support, accounting and finance.

The industries in which unpaid internships appear to be common are those where there is likely to be a good deal of competition for jobs among young workers and other people who need to gain experience. Some internships appear to be targeted at people who are vulnerable to exploitation.

An internship or work placement undertaken by a student as a requirement of a degree or other education course is usually a short-term structured placement that provides workplace-based learning and observation opportunities. This type of work-experience program is recognised under Australian employment legislation as a “vocational placement”, for which a person is not entitled to be paid.

For example, an overseas-based company is looking for a public relations “intern” to work from home performing internet-based research to identify social-media sites that might be suitable for marketing the company’s products in Australia.

The intern’s contact with the company is to be by email or Skype “if need be” and one of the main requirements of the position is to “get the task done in a reasonably short time frame”. There is no indication of any opportunity for the unpaid “intern” to engage in structured learning, or even to observe others in the workplace.

It seems fairly clear from the details of some of the internships on offer that their purpose is primarily to support the normal activities of the business.

Fiona Macdonald is a research fellow at the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia.