

CANADA'S OPPOSITION TO UNPAID INTERNSHIPS HURTS THE UNSKILLED

Fergus Hodgson

There is a striking yet ignored contrast in the battle over Canada's prohibitions on unpaid internships, with the ban on federally regulated employers set to expire this year. It tells of the pressing need to rid ourselves of this barrier to vocational development, and for everyone, not just industries that account for six percent of the workforce.

On the one hand, thousands upon thousands of students graduate from universities each year with a truckload of debt and limited work experience. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau even announced recently a more than doubling of the number of fully and partially funded summer jobs, exclusively for full-time students seeking experience, for a total cost of more than \$200 million per year.

On the other hand, those who offer targeted job training in the form of an internship, with no entry fee and often no study requirement, have been demonized and hit with legal

penalties. For giving people a chance to learn and prove themselves, a *Toronto Star* columnist basically compared the non-paying organizations—which include the federal government and the White House—to slave owners, and the Canadian Intern Association says it is exploitation.

These voluntary relationships clearly benefit the participants, and perhaps that is why the strident opponents resort to hyperbole and fear-mongering.

When people seek an unpaid internship, they do so for two key reasons: either they cannot generate enough value to find paid employment above the minimum wage, or they are willing to forgo monetary compensation in exchange for experience. In both cases, the intern entering the relationship does so to gain valuable skills, garner contacts and references, and raise his long-term earning potential.



The person recruiting the intern also stands to benefit. Although she may struggle with a short-term, untrained worker, she may also end up hiring the individual later for a full-time, sustainable position.

If forced to pay the minimum wage, however, the manager will have cause to rethink and may forgo the process altogether. That is precisely what three magazines and Rogers Publishing did in 2014. Since more than four out of five employers see the completion of an internship as a marker of success in their companies, the prospective interns lost out from the curtailment.

In fact, students with internship experience both find employment more easily and are more likely to be satisfied with their new roles. As two academics affirmed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Internships have value, whether or not students are paid."

The irony is that the Canadian Intern Association, perhaps the most vocal

opponent of unpaid internships, is all for them when they are a bureaucratized part of a degree program, and thus limited to a select few. The last time I checked, that also cost both students and taxpayers in the form of tuition.

They might like to consider the damage inflicted on the less fortunate, who do not fit in or cannot afford the standardized university line. Those students also want to compete and have access to work experience, and even fellow students want to try their hands in unconventional fields. Unpaid internships do not magically become beneficial with a university's stamp of approval, and what's good for the goose is good for the gander. ©

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