

Are Unpaid Internships Fair?

HR professionals split on unpaid intern fairness

By Kristina Hidas

Last year when Facebook CFO Sheryl Sandberg posted an unpaid internship position for her Lean In Foundation (a non-profit that exhorts women to “lean in” and ask for more pay, more responsibility, and more power in the workplace), reaction on social media was swift. People found it ironic that Sandberg, who had just sold Facebook stock for more than \$90 million, was advertising for unpaid labour, requiring applicants to “lean out” just a bit and work for free.

It's a debate that continues especially here in Ontario after the provincial labour ministry shut down unpaid internship programs at two magazines (The Walrus and Toronto Life) and prompting other publishers to follow suit.

The Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) recently surveyed its 20,000 members on how they (as professionals who oversee internships) felt about unpaid internships.

Exactly half of the 850 survey respondents said there is a place for unpaid internships, and that they provide young people with important work experience, as well as an opportunity to build networks and acquire important, transferable, skills.

But just as many answered that unpaid internships are never right and that they only benefit the organization—never the intern. Many respondents said that no organization should be exempt from the Employment Standards Act, particularly when it comes to the minimum wage.

Seventy-six per cent of

respondents said that, regardless of whether they think unpaid internships are right or wrong, they are concerned about the issue – either because they believe that doing away with unpaid internships would mean lost opportunities for young people to gain valuable and much-needed experience, or because they consider them exploitative.

A majority – 62% – of HR managers said that any kind of unpaid internship that is not part of a training or educational program should be outright illegal. Of those respondents who work at organizations that currently offer unpaid internships, almost 60% said they should be illegal.

Over the past five years, a third of respondents have seen the number of unpaid internships at their organizations

increase, which they attribute not to an increase in opportunities for young people, but to increasing vigilance over the “bottom line” by companies. Members who completed the survey made a distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, saying that any employer making a profit should pay its interns, but that the same doesn't hold for the non-profit sector.

Many members made the point that if unpaid internships continue to exist, they should do so only within specific frameworks: that they be run as part of a larger educational program; be limited in length of time (i.e., three to six months); and offer compensation for travel costs. ▣

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