

Should you ever work for free?

By [Karen Gately](#) on June 4, 2019



As General Manager of Muffin Break Natalie Brennan recently discovered thanks to social media, not everyone thinks it's OK to ask people to work for free. Brennan told [news.com.au](#) "There's just nobody walking in my door asking for an internship, work experience or unpaid work, nobody."

Brennan argues the reason for the decline in people looking for unpaid opportunities is over confidence and an inflated sense of importance among the millennial generation. "I think everybody thinks social media is going to get them ahead somewhere". "There's definitely that inflated view of their self-importance because they have X amount of Instagram followers or this many likes. That's dangerous."

Unsurprisingly Brennan's comments sparked furious debate on social media, revealing two prevalent schools of thought. Some people think it's never OK to ask for free labour and that millennials are right to expect more from employers. Others believe people should be grateful for any opportunity to gain experience and improve their employment prospects.

Arguably the real answer lies somewhere in between these polar opposites of opinion.

Step into the shoes of an employer for a moment. For many senior leaders, providing work experience opportunities is seen as a community service. Why you may ask?

Because it takes time, energy and resources to add anyone to the team. Irrespective of whether they are being paid. Someone needs to invest time determining what work the person can do and supervise them to ensure they are among other things safe.

Of course, there is room to argue that isn't a lot to ask of an employer, but it's only fair to recognise the contribution these businesses make to helping people in their community to get ahead. Internships can be especially demanding on resources when organisations invest in structured learning programs to ensure participants take real and meaningful value from the experience.

If you are struggling to kick start your career, or find yourself in an industry where everyone is looking to hire people who have done the job before, an internship may be just the break you need. Not only can you gain relevant experience to add to your CV, chances are you will also build relationships and make connections with people who can help you to win your dream job.

Employers who understand the power of their employment brand are likely to be careful not to take advantage of the people who volunteer their labour through work experience programs. There are of course cases of employers doing the wrong thing and simply leveraging interns to reduce their payroll costs. The easiest way to tell the difference between dodgy employers and those who operate with integrity, is the effort they are willing to invest in creating quality work experiences that lead to real learning.

Never choose to work for free when the employer is neither interested in your development nor operating within the boundaries of the law. It's an all too common practice for employers to expect prospective staff to complete numerous unpaid shifts as part of the hiring process. In one recent case I was made aware of the employee went unpaid for 6 shifts before finally having their employment confirmed. When challenged the manager argued they wouldn't have hired them without the experience gained on those shifts. Any reasonable person would argue they were in fact just trying to save money.

Have answers to the following questions before agreeing to unpaid work:

- Is the employer focused on my career development or are they just looking for another pair of hands to get the job done?
- Is the work I'll be doing clearly defined and likely to keep me busy?
- What skills and experience am I likely to gain? How will this experience help me to convince future employers that I have what it takes?

Let's be real. Not every work experience opportunity is going to be ideal. There will be tasks the employer asks you to do that won't lead to any particular skill development.

Fetching coffee and shredding paper for example may be things you need to be willing to help out with, but if that's all the employer has you doing, there is little value in being there. So long as in the balance of things you get exposure to valuable experiences and connect with people in your industry, working for free might be worth giving a go, for a short time.



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