



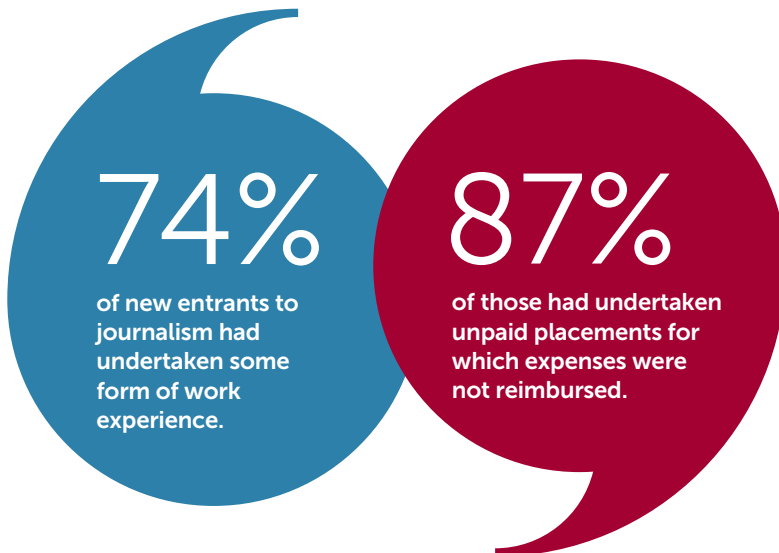
Work Experience and Internships

A Best
Practice
Guide

Introduction

The NCTJ has regularly argued that the existence of lengthy, unpaid – and often ad hoc – work experience placements in the media sector is both morally wrong, and can act as a barrier to entry.

Research commissioned by the NCTJ in 2018 found:



Sometimes multiple unpaid placements had been undertaken.

In recent years it has become more widely understood that individuals from financially disadvantaged backgrounds can effectively be excluded from placements due to associated living and travel costs – and that this can have a negative impact both on prospective journalists and on the diversity of the journalism industry as a whole.

The 2017 government-commissioned Taylor review of modern working practices described unpaid internships as:

“an abuse of power by employers and extremely damaging to social mobility.”

Networks and wealth should not open doors that are shut to hard work or poverty.

Alongside the moral imperative for change is a legal one: failing to pay a person for work they undertake outside of formal training is against the law.

Furthermore, the way in which unpaid positions are made available and filled is sometimes opaque: work experience placements are not always advertised and recruitment is in some instances carried out in an ad-hoc fashion, with an emphasis on contacts over qualifications or evidence of commitment.

One consequence is that students training for industry-backed NCTJ qualifications can struggle to gain the experience they need, while others who have previously shown little obvious interest in the trade get a chance because they are well-networked.



Best practice

Having consulted with employers across the sector, the NCTJ has created this guide to best practice in the arena of work experience and internships.

It is designed to be used by companies offering, and individuals seeking, placements. The guide should help to make work experience and insight opportunities more meaningful. It should not discourage placements from being offered.

Its aims are threefold:

01

To end the practice of lengthy unpaid work placements (and any unpaid placements of over a day or two not undertaken within the context of an accredited training course).

02

To ensure that work experience opportunities are appropriate and relevant to the people who undertake placements (and to those offering them).

03

To encourage transparency and consistency of recruitment processes in the field of work experience.

In addition to these aims, the NCTJ hopes this document will provoke debate around:

The narrative that has developed about work experience in London somehow outweighing placements undertaken closer to home. Plainly there is a concentration of opportunity in the capital, but employers should be encouraged to challenge the idea that experience in London is preferable to that undertaken elsewhere.

The questionable merits of individuals undertaking multiple placements, sometimes amounting to many months of experience for little or no pay.

Why is work experience important?

For individuals who have made a decision that journalism is the career for them, and can demonstrate that perhaps by virtue of having begun a formal training course, exposure to a working newsroom can be a hugely important part of their development. Indeed, there are many benefits.

Not only does it provide an opportunity to translate skills learned in the classroom, and to hone them, work experience gives potential new entrants to the industry a chance to understand the culture of a media business and to meet people in the kind of roles they would like to fill themselves.

We advise students on NCTJ-accredited courses to complete short journalism placements as part of their training and to request payment of reasonable expenses from employers as a minimum.

After successful completion of their courses, no trainees should work for free and ought to be paid at least the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage as applicable. They are, after all, qualified journalists.

What about for those who have no experience of journalism?

Some people seek out work experience opportunities even though they have had no prior training in journalism. This can offer them a valuable insight into whether a career in the media might be something they wish to pursue, perhaps through formal training on an NCTJ course, or as part of an in-house scheme.

However, the type of experience that might suit a candidate with no knowledge of the trade will – or at least ought to – differ from the sort which a journalist-in-training would benefit from.

This is true from a practical and a legal point of view.





What type of placements should be on offer?

Whatever type of work experience is available, it is vital for it to be properly structured. A programme of activities should be prepared in advance and there must be an element of supervision, even allowing for the busy nature of newsrooms.

Insight day(s)

Individuals with no prior experience or training are unlikely to have the skills needed to undertake many journalistic tasks. Asking them to do work that will not ultimately be used offers little benefit, and none at all if no member of staff is available to explain properly how the work ought to be done and to offer a guiding hand.

A better option in this scenario is to offer an insight day, providing a chance for someone who may want to discover more about journalism to see a newsroom, perhaps attend a news conference or shadow members of staff, or be shown how editorial decisions are made.

These insight experiences might last for half a day at one end of the spectrum to 2/3 days at the other.

The intention of the placement is to inspire an individual to consider a career in journalism – formal training may be their next step.

Training placements

For those who are already training to be a journalist, work experience is likely to be a key part of their development, helping them to be “newsroom ready” once they have qualified.

Individuals undertaking the NCTJ Diploma in Journalism should be capable of undertaking journalistic tasks such as straightforward news-writing or conducting voxpops, or researching stories using online tools or phone interviews. They should have an understanding of media law and are very likely to have a grounding in shorthand.

As such, candidates (and the placement provider) are likely to benefit from a rather more extended period of work experience during which they are actually learning through work they undertake – albeit that they should be guided and offered constructive feedback.

The NCTJ generally recommends placements of one to two weeks, or an arrangement where a student undertakes a day-per-week placement during their course.

Internships

A longer, more structured internship tends to suit a candidate who is taking their first career step, potentially providing a gateway into employment with the provider. Internships – particularly those lasting for more than six months – might themselves include a significant, formal or semi-formal training element. Individuals who have already undertaken training ought to be well-positioned to succeed in such roles, putting their existing knowledge into practice and learning the particular culture of their employer. Most internship programmes run between three months and one year. They should offer a clear route for progression into a permanent role.



When and what to pay

The cost of undertaking work experience can be prohibitive to people from low income backgrounds. Travel, accommodation and subsistence costs can quickly become significant, especially if an individual is away from home. This basic point is important for all employers to bear in mind. It is also important to recognise that gaining insight into work is an important opportunity for people interested in the media sector.

People who are undertaking work placements during (or immediately after) the completion of a practical journalism teaching course are effectively doing so as part of their training. Provided that their placement is limited to two weeks, a decision as to payment is at the discretion of the host company. The NCTJ's view is that travel expenses at least should be offered, where practicable (and where doing so will not remove a company's ability to offer placements).



It is recommended that for those unable to make a daily commute a contribution to accommodation costs should be offered. Equally, the NCTJ encourages all prospective journalists to understand that work experience in local newsrooms is as valuable as placements undertaken at national outlets.

Any placement that is longer than two weeks is likely to move beyond mere training and into work. As such, lengthier placements and internships are likely to amount to employment and should – not only as a point of principle but of law too – be paid at least the UK National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage, as applicable. This should be the case whether or not the placement/internship itself includes a formal training element alongside work.

An individual who wishes to have a short insight into newsroom life is not – and should not be – there to work.

There need therefore be no expectation of payment, although expenses to cover travel may be offered.

During the coronavirus pandemic, some media companies offered remote work placements. These rarely replicate in-person experiences, but they are not without merit – and in some situations may make it easier for an individual to take up a placement. Such virtual offerings should be considered, but the same best practice applies with regard to duration and remuneration.

Making work experience recruitment transparent

Work experience is likely to be most meaningful (for both parties) when placements – of whichever sort – are structured in a way that makes them relevant to the individuals undertaking them.

For this to happen, it is important to have clear, consistent and transparent processes around work experience applications. The following tips may be useful for companies offering placements:

01

Make clear to applicants what types of placement you offer, and what level of experience or training is required for each sort.

02

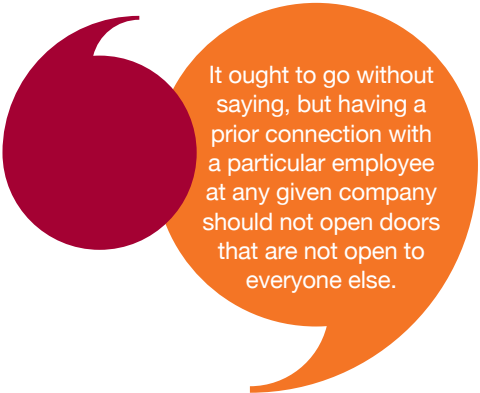
Designate one individual to manage or sign off work experience placements. Depending on the size of the organisation, decisions about placements might be delegated to departmental level – but there should be a consistent approach across the board.

03

Ensure that individuals coming in for insight days or training placements have a clear programme for their time with the company. They are learning about the media industry and should be inspired by their experience.

Ideally work placements and internships should be advertised publicly, and widely. Opportunities should be offered on merit, using standardised criteria. The NCTJ can promote placements on its social media platforms, website and newsletters.

Insight days offer a chance to give a newsroom taster to individuals who perhaps contact a company on spec. But here too, transparency is vital if the media industry is serious about opening up opportunities for all, on merit.



It ought to go without saying, but having a prior connection with a particular employee at any given company should not open doors that are not open to everyone else.

Work placement pledge

The NCTJ hopes that many media organisations will commit in particular to making their best efforts to follow these recommendations in the future:

01

Medium to long-term placements/internships (i.e. more than two weeks in a single stretch) will be paid, at least the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage, as applicable.

02

Training placements undertaken as part of recognised qualifications may be unpaid but will not exceed two weeks in length (or continue indefinitely at regular intervals, e.g. a day per week for many months).

03

Training placements of two weeks or less will be paid at least reasonable travel expenses, where practicable.

04

Insight days may be unpaid but will not exceed three days in length. Travel expenses or other remuneration may be offered at the discretion of the host company.

05

Recruitment for all work experience placements and internships will be based on transparent criteria, and positions awarded fairly on merit.

The NCTJ recognises that many companies already go further than this, and their approach is very welcome.





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