

RIP Internships? (hello, voluntary placements?)

Ali Thomas, Volunteers Project Manager

Plagued by controversy and bad press, the internship could soon find itself facing extinction. The outing of some companies masking real jobs as unpaid internships to gain free labour has brought the grim reaper knocking at the door. Even if the internship escapes this fate under the new guise of the voluntary placement you can bet that those companies will be up to their old tricks again before too long. So where does this leave organisations that design their internships to offer the excellent development, training, insight and networking that all internships should. Could it be that the actions of a few will unfairly kill off the internship as we know it?

Interns, by law, are not defined. Potentially, this not only leaves those seeking internships at risk but also risks damaging the reputations of those who offer them if they are handled badly.

Here at the Museum, our internships are career-focused opportunities that aim to provide participants with rewarding experiences that can help them to build a unique and beneficial career portfolio. In the current economic climate, where people can find it very challenging to find employment, an internship can provide individuals with an invaluable boost in the job market.

We place tremendous value on the time, skills and commitment that each of our interns brings to their internship and specifically design and tailor activities to be as beneficial as possible for the individual as well as the Museum. Whether it be marketing a blockbuster exhibition or researching and designing a new one, we provide structured, professionally enriching experiences for all those taking part.

The question of monetary reward

The key to a good internship is the educational and developmental elements that form the very basis of what an internship is all about. These should be the primary factors to consider when choosing an internship – whether or not it is paid should be incidental. The main aim of undertaking an internship should always be to gain skills and experience that will benefit you in your desired career path.

If an internship does happen to be paid then this should be a bonus, not a deciding factor. Likewise if it is not paid then this should not be held against it. In December 2013, interns dressed as Santas were seen demonstrating outside the art gallery they were interning at chanting 'all we want for Christmas is pay'. But something to consider is that attaching monetary reward to an internship can change its parameters.

Introducing pay can blur the lines between job and internship. The beauty of internships is their ability to bend towards the motivations of the individual, so that they can develop any skills and gain any experience they desire. By its very nature an internship is a mutually beneficial opportunity with the motivations of both parties at the very heart of it, but when a monetary reward is introduced you risk upsetting this balance.

Once pay comes into the equation you run the risk that an internship will in the eyes of the company become more about what they need to get out of you – given that they are paying for your services – rather than what you can get out of it. Some places are looking at adopting the London living wage for their internships, but if internships stray into the territory of poorly paid jobs then many of the benefits

of undertaking one may be lost. In a job there is less flexibility towards development, less motivation towards education and more priority given to getting a task done.

Education not exploitation

Say an organisation offering an internship has taken the time to plan a developmental and experiential opportunity and has put resources into recruiting openly and fairly for someone for this role. The opportunity is voluntary and unpaid but there is an effective reward and reimbursement system in place to ensure the intern is not out of pocket. They also provide the intern with a meal when they are on site, which theoretically under law is seen as a financial reward.

The organisation has already made an incredible investment, both financially and in terms of resources and time, to set up and implement the internship. The only cost to the intern is their time, energy and brain power because although the internship is unpaid, travel expenses and lunches are covered. In return for investing their time the intern is taught skills, given training and provided with a career-focused experience. It's important to always remember that people enter into the internship arrangement willingly and with enthusiasm. In addition, it is surely a positive thing for someone to be developing themselves and their future ambitions whilst helping to support an organisation they feel passionately about at the same time.

Here at the Natural History Museum, demand for our internships continues to far outstrip the opportunities on offer. Whilst scaremongering by the press continues to cause the decline of internships elsewhere, we are still committed to putting our resources into providing high-quality internships to those wishing to develop

their skills, experience and training. We believe we have established an exciting and dynamic programme that is mutually beneficial to both parties. We hope to stick to this premise and continue to offer valuable, developmental experiences rather than create poorly paid opportunities that would lessen the creative nature and all-encompassing experience that an internship can offer.

Natural History Museum internships at a glance

The Museum offers around 35 unpaid but supported internships each year across a breadth of the Museum's activities. These are offered in the following departments: Library and Archives, Fundraising, Marketing, Press Office and Content Interpretation.

So what's the difference between an internship and a volunteer position? The answer can be easily pinpointed to the level of commitment and investment being made by both parties – the Museum and intern alike.

Internships can be between a minimum of one month and a maximum of three months with interns attending three to five days a week. We also give flexibility to participants so they can accommodate part-time work or balance their internships with other commitments.

Varied and extensive role-related, as well as health and safety, training is always provided and interns are encouraged to sign up for any in-house training that is directly relevant to their internship.

Travel expenses for travel in Zones 1–6 or equivalent are provided and interns can claim £15 per week towards their lunch expenses.

Future prospects by Tom Brown



For the past two months I have been a prospect research intern for the Development Department at the Museum. I'm writing this article to tell you about my experiences and how the Museum's open-minded and flexible approach to learning sets its internship apart from those on offer elsewhere.

I've done my fair share of volunteering and interning in my time but there's something about this one that made it stand out for me. I have to say that my experience at the Natural History Museum has quite frankly been something else – in a good way. The reason for this I have to put down to the internship's unique approach to the learning experience and I wanted to explain why I have found this unique and worthwhile.

The reason I applied for this internship was to learn, and learn I did – but what exactly? At its core, I learned to carry out prospect research, a skill developed through experience and endless support and guidance from my managers and mentors. This encompassed general research, rating prospects, working in an office environment and much more. But although the internship was focused on prospect research, I was by no means confined to a desk. Instead I was encouraged to learn about the department as a whole and how each area worked towards a common goal. I was also encouraged to go beyond development to learn about how the Museum functions as an entity and explore the way development supports the organisation as a unit.

This degree of flexibility is what sets this internship apart from others. I was allowed to explore as much or as little as I wanted, allowing me to tailor my experience in order to

get the most out of my internship. Ultimately, I feel I haven't just learned about one single facet of the Museum's work – for example, prospect research – but rather how the whole Museum works and functions, making this a truly insightful and valuable experience for someone who is aspiring to be a full-time museum professional such as I am.

Throughout my time as an intern I have participated in developmental courses such as interview and emotional intelligence skills. Not only were the courses executed well but the range of relevant opportunities offered was expansive. I feel this has helped improve my general employability and workplace efficiency alongside the skills and experience I have gained in prospect research.

I feel I have been able to customise my internship to experience what I find most interesting and useful. Speaking from experience I can say this approach is very effective and as a part-time volunteer coordinator I'm inspired by such an open and varied approach to interning.

The emphasis on my learning and what I'm taking away from the experience has made not only for a great work experience but for a great life experience as well. It has been rewarding and enjoyable, educational and reassuring. I know now for certain that working in one of the big museums is really what I wish to do. This internship has been personal in spite of it taking place in such a vast institution. I didn't just feel privileged and lucky to be interning at a world-class organisation I also felt proud, so if you're reading this and have the opportunity to undertake an internship at the Natural History Museum, do it. You won't regret it.

Acknowledgements: A massive thank you to Julie Baker and Will English for their endless patience and guidance, Delia for learning with me and the whole Development Team for making each and every day a blast.

Dates for your diary

You are invited to the Museum's induction the Big Welcome. Please do book yourself a place if you have not attended already. You can do this by contacting Sophie Binder in Organisational Development at sophie.binder@nhm.ac.uk.

This induction is an opportunity for new Museum people to meet and network with colleagues from other departments, while gaining insight into various aspects of the organisation. This one-day experience involves a series of informative presentations and interactive tours, including a welcome from the Director. Lunch and refreshments are provided throughout the day.

• 24 June	• 9 September	• 25 November
• 29 July	• 21 October	

National Volunteers' Week Monday 1 – Sunday 7 June

It is the UK's annual celebration of volunteers and volunteering across the nation. National Volunteers Week plays a huge part in raising the profile of the millions of volunteers who regularly contribute to society, inspiring others to get involved too.

Save the date: Here at the Museum we will be celebrating your brilliance as volunteers and volunteer managers with a party on Friday 5 June in the Darwin Centre Atrium. All current volunteers and volunteer managers are invited.

Award nominations

Nomination forms for the London Volunteers in Museums Awards will be sent out to volunteer managers in June. Will you be nominated? Who will you nominate?

Publications

The new issues of **evolve** and WILD WORLD are out now. Copies can be found outside the staff restaurant. Please help yourself.



Writers wanted for Waterhouse Times

The Museum's staff magazine Waterhouse Times is being re-launched later this year and needs writers to contribute stories. If you'd like to share your expertise or passion please get in touch. Maybe you have an unusual hobby, you've done some interesting research, or you simply have something to say! Contact **Kerry Gilliland** at k.gilliland@nhm.ac.uk or **extension 5024**.

Contact

For more information on anything in this newsletter, please contact Ali Thomas, Volunteers Project Manager at a.thomas@nhm.ac.uk or on **020 7942 6048**.