

With jobs few, grads lured by unpaid work

By Steven Greenhouse / *New York Times News Service*

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Confronting the worst job market in decades, many college graduates who expected to land paid jobs are turning to unpaid internships to try to get a foot in an employer's door.

While unpaid post-college internships have long existed in the film and nonprofit worlds, they have recently spread to fashion houses, book and magazine publishers, marketing companies, PR firms, art galleries, talent agencies and law firms.

Although many internships provide valuable experience, some unpaid interns complain they do menial work and learn little, raising questions about whether these positions violate federal rules.

Yet interns say they often have no good alternatives. As Friday's jobs report showed, job growth is weak, and the unemployment rate for 20- to 24-year-olds was 13.2 percent in April.

Melissa Reyes, who graduated a year ago from Marist College with a degree in fashion merchandising, applied for a dozen jobs to no avail. She was thrilled, however, to land an internship with the Diane von Furstenberg fashion house in Manhattan. "They talked about what an excellent educational internship program this would be," she said.

But Reyes soon soured on the experience. She often worked 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., five days a week. "They had me running out to buy them lunch," she said. "They had me cleaning out the closets, emptying out the past season's items."

Reyes finally quit when her boss demanded that she also work both days of a weekend. She now works part-time as a model.

Rules on unpaid work

The Labor Department says that if employers do not want to pay their interns, the internships must resemble vocational education, the interns must work under close supervision, their work cannot be used as a substitute for regular employees, and their work cannot be of immediate benefit to the employer.

But in practice, there is little to stop employers from exploiting interns. The Labor Department rarely cracks down on offenders, saying it has limited resources and that unpaid interns are loath to file complaints for fear of jeopardizing any future job search.

No one keeps statistics on the number of college graduates taking unpaid internships, but there is widespread agreement that the number has significantly increased, not least because the jobless rate for college graduates age 24 and under has risen to 9.4 percent, the highest level since the government began keeping records in 1985. (Employment experts estimate that undergraduates work in more than 1 million internships a year, with Intern Bridge, a research firm, finding almost half unpaid.)

"A few years ago you hardly heard about college graduates taking unpaid internships," said Ross Eisenbrey, a vice president at the Economic Policy Institute who has done several studies on interns. "But now I've even heard of people taking unpaid

internships after graduating from Ivy League schools.”

Menial jobs

Eisenbrey said many companies were taking advantage of the weak labor market to use unpaid interns to handle chores like photocopying or running errands once done by regular employees, which can raise sticky legal questions.

Eric Glatt, who at age 40 interned for the movie “Black Swan,” is one of the few interns with the courage to sue for wages over the work he did.

With an MBA and a master’s in international management, Glatt wanted to get into film after a previous job overseeing training programs at the American International Group, the big insurance and financial services company. For “Black Swan,” he prepared documents for purchase orders and petty cash, traveled to the set to obtain signatures on documents and tracked employees’ personnel data.

“I knew that this was going to be a normal job and I wasn’t going to be paid for it,” he said. “But it started kicking around in my mind how unjust this was. It’s just become part of this unregulated labor market.”

Glatt filed suit, accusing Fox Searchlight Pictures of minimum wage violations. The company says it fully complies with the law and provides interns with a valuable, real-world work experience.

“The purpose of filing this case was to help end this practice,” said Glatt, who now plans to go to law school. “That was more important than my working on the next blockbuster.”

Some interns say their experiences were helpful. Emily Miethner, a fine arts major at Hofstra, took an unpaid position at Gawker after graduating in 2010, doing research and social media for the news and gossip site. After two months, she moved to an unpaid internship at Flavorpill, an online cultural guide.

The knowledge she gained at those places, she said, was crucial to her landing a \$35,000-a-year job as social media coordinator at Sterling Publishing. “More than just the individual tasks that I did, it was being in a great company culture and meeting a lot of people,” she said, noting that she was able to work without pay partly because she stayed at the home of her boyfriend’s parents.

Ross Perlin, author of the 2011 book “Intern Nation,” said post-college internships used to be confined to a few fields like film but have become far more common. “The people in charge in many industries were once interns and they’ve come of age, and to them unpaid internships are completely normal and they think of having interns in every way, shape and form,” he said.

Joyce Lee, who received a film degree from Wesleyan in 2010, moved to Los Angeles and did six unpaid internships. She is now in New York making her own film and supporting herself by again working at a coffee shop.

“If I ever become a famous filmmaker,” she said, “I promise I will pay my interns.”

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