

Will work for free

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 22, 2011 NCR Today

When I was in college, well-meaning professors and counselors encouraged me to seek out summer internships in journalism as a great way to make contacts and launch a career. But I couldn't afford it.

I worked every summer to help pay for my college expenses, and drove my father's bread truck on the weekends so he could finally get a day off. The idea of working for nothing -- for something vague like contacts that may or may not pay off down the road -- seemed like an extravagance in which I could not indulge.

But something else drove me away from internships, too. I couldn't shake the idea that my labor -- however inexperienced -- was actually worth something. If I showed up, put in my hours, and did the tasks at hand, it seemed to me I ought to get paid. And if I couldn't do any of those things, I fully expected to be fired.

It was that simple to me then -- but it is, apparently, not so simple anymore. According to Ross Perlin's book *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little from the Brave New Economy* [1], unpaid work is now rampant. Interns are now not extra college kids standing around being mentored in the workplace. They are doing grunt work, picking up the slack in a downsized corporate environment by doing, for free, jobs that other people were once paid for.

For example, Perlin notes, nearly 8000 "interns" work each year at Disney's very profitable theme parks. And don't expect the government to intervene: 20,000 interns descend upon Washington, D.C., every year.

Beyond this, Perlin writes, work-for-nothing has become a barrier for students who -- like me all those years ago -- can't afford to give their labor away. Ultimately, it becomes a mechanism enforcing the widening gap between the haves and have-nots -- cutting off entry-level opportunities to gifted people without parents well-off enough to subsidize their summers.

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[1] <http://www.versobooks.com/books/797-intern-nation>