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Nicky is the owner of HR Support Consultancy. She has a BA(Hons) in Business Studies, is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and has been a practising HR manager for more than 20 years. HR Support Consultancy has provided the BVNA Members Advisory Service (formerly known as the Industrial Relations Service) since it began in 2002.

Volunteers and interns at work

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Volunteering is a popular activity. It can bring many benefits both to the person volunteering and the organisation who receives the services, and many people in our society increasingly depend on the services of volunteers. There are 15.2 million people volunteering at least once a month in the UK.

A lot of volunteering takes place with charities and not-for-profit organisations, but volunteering can also happen in other workplaces.

Volunteers

Volunteers aren't entitled to the national minimum wage if they are not paid (except for expenses) and they are working for a voluntary organisation or a statutory body. They are also not entitled to the minimum wage if they are only 'shadowing' an employee and no work is being carried out.

Although volunteers do not have an employment contract, it is good practice for them to have a volunteering agreement. Volunteers should have access to appropriate training and development, and usually will have a role description rather than a job description. This should detail the level of supervision and support, training, whether the volunteer is covered under the organisation's employer or public liability insurance, health and safety issues and any expenses that the business will reimburse. Equal Opportunities and how disputes are resolved would also usually be included.

Work experience

Volunteering is commonly undertaken by students who are not entitled to the national minimum wage. There are considerations when having young people in the workplace and risk assessments should take account of their inexperience. Many young people are not familiar with the workplace and may not recognise risks or be aware of what is acceptable behaviour. Close supervision may be called for.

Work shadowing

This gives students the opportunity to observe people in their day-to-day job. Students will gain an understanding of the workplace and some of the roles within it. Some jobs may not be suitable for job shadowing.

Expenses

As a volunteer, your expenses can usually be reimbursed. If you are paid more in expenses than you actually spend, you could be taxed on this.

Health and safety and data protection

All volunteers can expect the same level of commitment to their health and safety and to data protection as any employee of the business.

What are internships?

Internships are temporary work experience placements, normally aimed at young people who have little prior work experience and who are trying to break into a particular business sector. Internships started in the USA and are increasingly popular in the UK.

Internships should have advantages for the intern. The experience can increase a student's skills and knowledge for a particular job or industry, as well as gaining knowledge of working generally.

An intern's rights will depend on their employment status. If the intern is classed as a worker, they will normally be due the national minimum wage. They will also be due the national minimum wage if they are promised a contract for future work. If the intern does regular paid work for the employer, they will be classed as an employee and have employment rights. If an intern is a worker, they will also be entitled to a number of other employment rights including protection from unlawful discrimination and rights relating to paid holiday, rest breaks and maximum working hours.

Students doing internships as part of their further or higher education course are not entitled to the national minimum wage, or if they are under the age of 16.

Employers sometimes use these placements to assess a student's or graduate's capability and often recruit employees from their interns rather than advertising their vacancies externally.

For further support with this or any other HR issue, BVNA members can call the BVNA Advisory Service Helpline on 01822 870270 or email nickyackerley@hrsupportconsultancy.co.uk