

# Internships: how these should work in strength and conditioning

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## INTRODUCTION

Strength and conditioning (S&C) has seen a marked increase in popularity over the last 10–15 years, leading to vastly increased numbers of salaried roles. Consequently, with an ever growing pool of coaches, the demand for employment opportunities has also grown significantly, and this in turn has led to a huge increase in the number of 'internships' within teams and organisations. S&C now represents, therefore, a very competitive recruitment field where potential employees are willing to consider taking on internships in the hope that they will nudge ahead of the pack with a greater bank of 'hands on' experience and contact networks.

With such an increase in the number of internships, it seems timely to look at how these are managed. Historically, within the S&C profession, there has been little governance of the structure, expectations and standardisation of these internships. This lack of governance has led to a situation whereby the role/function of an internship has been open to broad interpretation.

### Why standardising internships is essential

Developing a well-designed, standardised 'internship' for employers has two main advantages: 1) they will be able to recruit someone they consider has talent in order to develop and train their skills; and 2) such a structure will create a realistic extended probationary period in order to assess whether the individual selected has the potential to excel/progress in their organisation. Likewise, the selected intern will gain valuable practical experience and an opportunity to assess the direction in which he or she wishes his or her career to go.

However, due to the lack of guidance and standardisation there have been instances – mirrored in other industries and professions – of 'internships' that are not only exploitative, but crucially are driven by the needs of the employer, as opposed to being a two-way mutually beneficial relationship that sees all parties develop and excel.

Often advertised with no salary or 'benefits in kind', it is important to consider the issue of employment rights. It is possible to have a different status for tax purposes to your worker/employee status generally. Additionally, in recent years there have been issues over the national minimum wage,

which is now enforced by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

The rights of an intern are dependent on whether they fall within the legal definitions of 'worker' or 'employee' or whether they can be classed as a volunteer (for which there is no specific legal definition). The table on the next page contains a list of these working definitions. Clarification of these definitions from the outset is crucial before a team or organisation can determine the status of any role they advertise: these terms signpost the rights of any prospective new staff and, crucially, outline what must be provided. The mutual benefits of an appropriately designed 'internship' are abundant if the internship is created for the right reasons. However, to recruit someone on little or no remunerative award simply as a result of that person's goodwill – or because of the demand for opportunities in that field of work – may be against the law, and almost certainly will fall short in delivering the potential benefits to both the organisation and the individual.

### How to make the most of your intern

Once an organisation has assessed the government's guidance on the legal definitions for workers, and how they align their need for an internship with them, they can then consider how to develop an 'internship' that will deliver key objectives for all parties. From the

## WORKING DEFINITIONS

Below is a summary of the different working definitions as categorised by the government. More detailed information can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/employment-status>

**WORKER:** You are classed as a worker if you work under a contract (which can be verbal) whereby you undertake to perform the work or services personally, and the organisation you work for cannot be classed as a client or customer of your business. In return you are entitled to a reward which might be financial but might be a benefit in kind: for example, offering people formal/informal continuing professional development (CPD), kit and so on as an alternative to financial payment.

As a worker you will be entitled to the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and the statutory minimum level of paid holiday, as well as other statutory rights. In addition, workers cannot be forced to work more than 48 hours per week, and are entitled to minimum rest breaks. However, it is worth pointing out that it is at the employer's discretion as to how much they choose to pay someone above the NMW. As is often the case in sport – due to reduced funding and increased demand for employment – salaries and rates of pay for support staff do not always compare favourably with those of other professions. In the case of S&C, because it is such a competitive industry now, it has often been the case that 'workers' in this field have been paid as low an amount as the employers think they can get away with.

**VOLUNTEER:** Volunteers are not paid, although they can get expenses to cover travel, food and drink and any equipment that they have needed to purchase for the job. They are not entitled to the NMW or employment rights, but volunteer

status is perhaps one of the most common areas where organisations fall foul of the law. If any payment (no matter how small) is given, a volunteer immediately becomes a worker or employee.

**EMPLOYEE:** Working under an employment contract as an intern, you will still receive the same rights as a worker, but you are entitled to extra employment rights and responsibilities such as statutory sick pay, maternity/paternity leave, minimum notice periods and you have the right to ask for flexible working arrangements (although there is no right to have these). Therefore, an intern needs to check to see whether the terms of his or her internship mean that he is actually an employee, and will be entitled to all as above.

**SELF EMPLOYED:** Self employed workers operate on a contract basis operating through their own business. As a result they do not receive employee rights, although they will still receive some support over matters of discrimination and health and safety.

A person can hold self-employed status for their own contract work while at the same time receive full employee benefits in a full-time role – or in any other role where they are working as an employee. This is common in the strength and conditioning field, where someone may have full-time employment but also carry out self-employed consultancy work for a different organisation. It is important to add that self-employed individuals are still required to submit their own information regarding the payment of taxes, even though their full-time role is subject to taxation through the PAYE system of their employers.

outset it is important to understand the difference between an internship and a standard salaried role. Although there are commonalities between the two, an intern by definition is a recent graduate or student receiving practical training in a working environment. Work placements of no more than a year undertaken by students as part of a UK-based higher or further education course are exempt from the minimum wage. This applies where the work placement is a requirement of the course.

The intern arrangement should be as much about an employer's desire to develop a person and his or her employability as it is about an intern's desire to gain experience. The interests of the organisation should be in developing talent (that they may or may not see as part of their future plans), as opposed to exploiting a cheap employment option. The internships rated most highly in industry reflect this.

Duration of internships can range from a few weeks in some cases to 12 months,

depending on how the organisation best feel their aims can be achieved. Although internships are often at entry level positions in terms of the personnel they attract, that does not mean an internship is ever seen as an inferior role in the top listed companies. On the contrary it is often considered to be one of the most significant areas of recruitment because – once it is carried out correctly – not only can a potential future employee be assessed and developed as part of a comprehensive training programme, but they are also recognised for how much their own unique personalities and skill sets can be used to develop the company over the long term.

In addition, these companies will always look to increase specific skills and knowledge in the individual, to enable an understanding of key roles within the organisation and also to give the intern a thorough insight into the challenges of the organisation/profession. The internship can act as a probationary period for all parties, with successful interns not always remaining in a particular industry once they have

had a chance to live and work there. The most important factor in all successful internships has to be the fact that they are seen as a mentorship process, where people genuinely want to develop individuals into well-rounded and suitable candidates for future positions. Successful organisations value this opportunity more than any other part of the internship process.

### How do we best design and manage a rewarding internship?

The recruitment process for an intern should reflect the company's recruitment policy for any role. This gives both the organisation and the intern the best chance of achieving their objectives. The following recommendations are suggested to ensure best practice in internships:

1. The role is compliant with the government's guidance: employers need to be sure they understand the legal status of their intern. Internships are subject to scrutiny from inspection to make sure that interns

## WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS TO EMPLOYERS FOR ACCEPTING AND EMPLOYING INTERNS?

### SKILL SHORTAGES:

It is not uncommon to see an internship position result as a consequence of a genuine skill shortage within an organisation. An intern may be asked to cover an area that previously had not been possible: for example, when a sports club introduces strength and conditioning interns to their support staff.

### FUTURE TALENT:

As previously mentioned, the internship period can be an opportunity to build future talent. No-one wants high turnovers of staff, or lengthy introductory phases of employment where productivity can suffer as new members of staff learn the specifics of a role.

### SHIFT IN ORGANISATIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS:

There may be a requirement in managing a change in organisational demographics.

### AN EXTENDED INTERVIEW PERIOD:

A traditional interview process rarely tells us all we need to know about a person and their skills and crucially their skill gaps. An internship allows an entire organisation to take part in the assessment and development of interns in order to guarantee the most success in their role.

### MANAGEMENT/MENTORING FOR EMPLOYEES:

Crucially in many organisations there is often not the opportunity for current employees to gain valuable experience in managing staff. Assigning an intern to these staff members can give them the chance to develop into more rounded managers.

### WORK:

The undeniable benefit of any intern is still that they can deliver – when adequately trained and managed correctly – valuable work for the organisation.

are rewarded financially – specifically around the payment of NMW – and given full statutory rights. What companies choose to pay above that is really down to how they see the role and the resources available to them. In competitive fields such as strength and conditioning, this will often mean that companies ask for a high level of qualification/experience due to the large talent pool available. Financial reward and benefit is commensurate with responsibilities, but always relative to the overall budget. If the role is not full-time, flexi-time and flexible work practices should be followed.

2. The best internships empower and give responsibility from the outset, with ‘real’ working projects that reflect the duration of the internship. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly set out from the beginning.
3. An appropriate intern manager should be in place: one who guides, develops and mentors the intern throughout the full duration, with timely assessment opportunities and reflection.
4. There should be a thorough intern/

organisational induction process in which the role of the intern is presented to all members of the organisation. This will not only allow the intern to be seen as an integral part of the organisation, but will also give all staff an opportunity to meet the intern. Throughout the course of the internship, the intern should have an opportunity to experience all parts of the organisation, not merely be restricted to one speciality. At the beginning of the induction, skill gaps and objectives should be established. Also, attention should be given to wider employable skills such as analytical thinking, communication skills, accepting criticism and time management.

5. A handbook and activity logbook should be kept, with opportunities to reflect and review on work carried out by all parties throughout the internship.
6. Work conducted by the intern should be showcased inside the organisation.
7. There must always be an exit interview, where there is a constructive and honest review and an opportunity for all parties to contribute.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, there are many pitfalls in the recruitment and development of internships. A clear understanding of the government’s guidance on the legal rights of interns is obviously essential and it is important that both company and intern are clear about what is expected.

Key factors to bear in mind are:

- the internship should be for a short period of time
- the internship should be a genuine learning experience for the intern
- there should be no obligation to work particular hours, but at best a suggestion for a certain number of hours per week
- overall there should be no commitment by the intern – the arrangement should be informal, not a ‘contract’, so avoid language which implies obligation
- avoid making payments other than actual expenses, and avoid promises that the internship will lead on to employment.

It is perhaps worth reminding interns (and oneself) that the long term reward in any career path often comes from the opportunities, professional networks and friendships developed, and from working together for a common goal: benefits which reach far beyond the financial remuneration of a role.

## AUTHOR’S BIO



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Previously he developed and ran a busy department at the University of Northumbria for eight years, which helped many developing coaches to progress into full-time roles in strength and conditioning.