Students complain about being treated as cheap labour, but companies say some interns are too demanding

**Jean Loo**

**Undergraduate** David Tan, 23, worked at a storage firm for two months during his professional internship last year. He was supposed to learn the ropes of the logistics business, from administering to marketing.

Part of his time was spent cold calling potential new clients and working on a project to increase the client base. Some interns are too demanding, and they have good reasons for asking them to do what they might think are menial tasks.

Mr Anthony Chua, vice-president of Storshah, the storage company David interned at, said: "Sometimes we do get fussy interns with high expectations."

He stressed that the company's approach was to start them bottom-up so that they would eventually excel at management positions because they had had a taste of low-level work.

"Ultimately, we want them to be able to multi-task and adapt themselves to a changing environment," he said.

The two polytechnics and two universities contacted said they had policies in place to ensure students on internships are given meaningful work.

Mr Ng Boon Hwang, director of Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Office of Professional Attachments, said: "If negative feedback is received, the professor overseeing the internship will follow up by understanding the situation from the student and his organisation's supervisor."

"Should the situation warrant it, the attachment office will transfer the student to other suitable organisations."

At Ngee Ann Polytechnic, industrial partners are required to submit their training programmes to ascertain that the training goes according to plan, said a spokesman.

But students interviewed said they are afraid to speak up against their employers, which hinders schools from taking the appropriate action.

On average, Ngee Ann poly receives one to two complaints each semester, and they are usually from interns who were asked to serve drinks to visitors.

If an assessment of the learning environment shows that it is not conducive, the polytechnic removes the students from their attachment.

A spokesman from the Singapore Management University said that it has not received any complaints from students so far.

Its OnTRAC programme ensures that only reputable companies are selected for the internship programmes, and career counsellors are attached to the students to check on their progress.

Yet, speaking up might prevent other students from going through what 22-year-old undergraduate Veronica (not her real name) endured during her 10-week attachment with a marketing firm last year.

She said she and two other interns were not given any work to do.

Although the firm had wanted her to do door-to-door sales, this fell through when the company realised that it would violate the school's internship policy.

"I kept asking for work," she said.

"But nobody bothered about us at all." Veronica, like some of the others, would not reveal the name of the company for fear of getting into trouble.

But Mr Paul Heng, managing director of Next Career Consulting Group Asia, said interns need not suffer in silence.

He said: "Interns need to sit down with their bosses and agree on the duties and responsibilities for the few months that they're there."

He stressed that it was important to focus on the key performance indicators that they need to deliver so that there's little room for miscommunication.

"Employers should not mistreat interns as cheap labour and get them to do inappropriate jobs that do not match their education background," he said.

Mr Eddy Edwards, managing director of HBE Consulting, a human resource consulting firm, said organisations should have proper structures for internships.

But he also emphasised that every experience was a learning experience, and that it boiled down to the intern's attitude. "Although the job may not be compatible with the intern's abilities, one of the most valuable competencies is learning to cope in a working environment."

Some students who have had successful internships also had advice for their peers.

Denise Tan, 21, a third-year economics major at the National University of Singapore, said it helps to be open-minded and receptive to change. She also said that interns should know their rights and speak up.

For the past two years, she has made it a point to intern at different financial companies during term breaks.

"I find it fulfilling and enriching to gain a deeper insight into work life," she said. "It also helps to prepare me better for what to expect in the future."

Others, like Josh Koh, 24, a computer engineering student from NTU, said the challenge was to find meaning in the work given.

He was posted to a petroleum company for five months last year. Most of his internship was spent making banners and posters for safety campaigns, which was unrelated to his area of study at all.

But he said he was happy to be in a different work environment. "It certainly helped to sharpen my sense of creativity," he said.

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