



“MY 10-MONTH INTERVIEW”: UNPAID LABOUR FOR PERFORMANCE AND MEDICAL STAFF IN MEN’S PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

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Introduction

Working in professional sport is often perceived as a glamorous and highly paid lifestyle; however, for many working as performance and medical staff, their careers begin with unpaid labour, such as an internship, placement, or volunteering. These can be opportunities for people to build a professional network and develop soft skills.¹ However, unpaid labour is often criticised. This is because there are numerous examples of unpaid labour not providing enough benefit to those undertaking the work, such as providing inadequate workplace training. These positions have, in many sectors, become an expectation for a career in the industry.^{2,3} Unpaid labour has also been criticised for disadvantaging those from lower socio-economic positions and those with dependents, who are often unable to afford to work for free.⁴

From the outset, we want to emphasise how we appreciate that some professional men’s football clubs, particularly those at a lower level, may be reliant upon unpaid labour to support their performance and medical departments. Therefore, this article is not an attempt to criticise every club that uses unpaid labour but to highlight the importance of these positions being more than just free labour and how they should offer a learning experience for the individual.

Unpaid Work in Football

Football clubs have previously been accused of exploiting interns, particularly in terms of working hours and role expectations for unpaid individuals.^{5,6,7} This is often justified by those within clubs as providing an opportunity in an incredibly competitive and saturated market. Successful placements or internships

typically involve mentoring by senior industry professionals and considerable time invested in the individual’s professional development.⁸ However, within football, there is limited evidence of these opportunities existing.

Unpaid work has been found amongst scouts as crucial for developing contacts, which is highly valued in the closed world of professional football.⁹ Unpaid work was not guaranteed to lead to paid positions, but it was the trusted network of relationships that was important for hearing about unadvertised roles or becoming an internal hire. Scouts would work without any remuneration (such as pay or expenses) but were motivated by their ‘love of the game’ and their dream to establish a career in football. Many felt that a paid position would ‘be around the corner’, but this was only the case if they

developed contacts and trusted networks, which was viewed as the main benefit of continuing to work unpaid.⁹

The Chartered Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (CASES) (formerly known as BASES) position statements on work placements and internships^{10,11} provide a list of good practice recommendations for organisations. These include:

- Ensuring mutual benefit and understanding the benefits.
- Identify the position of the individual and the resources required, including an appropriately qualified supervisor.
- Establish the employment rights of the individual, including pay (if required).
- Decide the format of the internship/ work experience.
- Follow good practice in recruitment, selection, and administration of roles.

Although these recommendations provide examples of what CASES deem 'good practice', there is limited exploration of the degree to which these recommendations are followed. This article aims to discuss the experiences of medical and performance staff in internships, placements and volunteering.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with 19 performance and medical staff working in the first team at men's professional football clubs in the United Kingdom.

15 of the 19 performance and medical staff undertook a placement, internship, or voluntary work at professional football clubs before their first full-time, paid role. The four participants (Sports Scientist 1 and 2, and S&C Coach 1 and 3) who did not undertake unpaid work in football had a placement or internship in another sport before their role in football. Participants were recruited over the course of a year using LinkedIn, personal contacts of the research team and a snowball sampling method.

A Rite of Passage?

There was an expectation that individuals would have to endure a period of working unpaid – this was viewed as a rite of passage to a career in football. People are likely to be more willing to engage in hope labour – underpaid work with the hope that future employment opportunities will follow¹² – in industries they dream of working in, such as football. Similar issues have been found in the creative industries,^{13, 14, 15} where many also become

involved because it is their dream to work in that sector. In football, like the creative industries, the normalisation of unpaid labour practices means individuals see little alternative other than to accept this as the route into work.

Although there were frustrations about working unpaid, most considered it a positive opportunity. S&C Coach 4 stated: "You've got to do the hard work. No one ever wants to work for free". Sports Scientist 4 said that unpaid work provided "good opportunities to gain experience and exposure in different environments", as well as to "build relationships with coaches and practitioners", which became important for future employment opportunities. Similarly, Physiotherapist 2 said he felt "the easiest way to show somebody how good you are at what you can do is by going and doing it".

Clearly, working for free is not something anyone would like to do; however, this was perceived as an opportunity to demonstrate ability and show worth to prospective employers. The lack of pay did not negatively impact their motivations.

SPORTS SCIENTIST		
Participant	League of Current Club	Level of Club They Worked Unpaid At
Sports Scientist 1	Premier League	N/A
Sports Scientist 2	EFL Championship	N/A
Sports Scientist 3	EFL Championship	EFL Championship
Sports Scientist 4	Premier League	Premier League
Sports Scientist 5	National League	National League
Sports Scientist 6	Scottish Premiership	EFL League Two

S&C COACH		
Participant	League of Current Club	Level of Club They Worked Unpaid At
S&C Coach 1	Premier League	N/A
S&C Coach 2	EFL Championship	EFL Championship
S&C Coach 3	EFL League One	N/A
S&C Coach 4	EFL League One	EFL League Two
S&C Coach 5	EFL Championship	EFL Championship
S&C Coach 6	Premier League	EFL Championship

SPORTS REHABILITATOR		
Participant	League of Current Club	Level of Club They Worked Unpaid At
Sports Rehabilitator 1	EFL Championship	EFL Championship
Sports Rehabilitator 2	Scottish Premiership	EFL Championship
Sports Rehabilitator 3	Premier League	National League North

PHYSIOTHERAPIST		
Participant	League of Current Club	Level of Club They Worked Unpaid At
Physiotherapist 1	EFL League Two	EFL Championship
Physiotherapist 2	EFL Championship	EFL League One
Physiotherapist 3	EFL League Two	EFL League One
Physiotherapist 4	EFL Championship	Premier League

Tables 1-4: Participant Information



The Reality of Working for Free

Those beginning unpaid work often expect this period to provide a structured learning experience, which involves mentorship and developing necessary industry-relevant skills for future employment.¹⁶ However, many participants' experiences lacked structure, and some were treated as "an extra pair of hands" (Sports Scientist 3). There was limited discussion of formalised feedback opportunities or performance reviews – individuals were reliant upon informal support by a mentor, which was not always available.

There were seemingly blurred lines between the role of an intern, volunteer, or placement student and that of a paid worker. This casts doubt about whether some of these individuals meet the threshold set by the UK Government to be classified as a worker.¹⁷ The unpaid role needs to be more clearly defined, to ensure that if individuals are brought in for work experience, placement or an internship, their role reflects the expectations of the position. This has led to a lack of standardisation about what is deemed an 'intern' or 'volunteer', as these roles can vary significantly between clubs.

Although individuals were thankful for the opportunity at a professional club, they were aware that these roles could easily be exploited if the benefits were not mutual: "They [unpaid roles] shouldn't be abused" (Physiotherapist 2). S&C Coach 4 described what he did as "free labour" and felt that the benefits leaned more towards the club. Sports Scientist 5 described working for "years unpaid", only receiving expenses which amounted to "20, 30 quid a week".

He said that now he is working full-time, he can look back and "appreciate" that time because it was worth it. Though this raises the question of what are the attitudes of those who did not make it to a full-time role in football and do they still see the 'value' in working unpaid?

Unpaid labour has previously been criticised for being exploitative, particularly concerning working hours and role expectations. S&C Coach 5 said that he had a sports science internship with an EFL Championship club, which was "20 hours a week, voluntary". This demonstrates the extent of some of these unpaid positions, which can be challenging for individuals to access if they are working full-time to fund their internship or trying to balance this labour alongside education. Many also worked without any expenses, meaning engaging in these opportunities actually cost them financially.

This brings into focus the moral questions of such roles being offered, even potential legal issues if the duties performed would qualify the individual to be classed as a 'worker' under the UK Government's definition. To our knowledge, there is no guidance provided by stakeholders within the football industry, such as the FA, Premier League or EFL, regarding unpaid labour, which highlights uncertainties about how these roles are regulated and managed within the men's professional game.

Getting a Foot in the Door: Does Unpaid Labour Lead to Future Employment?

Unpaid labour was viewed as essential to get a "foot in the door" of the football

industry (S&C Coach 5). Accessing the industry without insider contacts was challenging and, as discussed above, individuals felt they had to work for free to start their career. Many felt that unpaid labour was valuable for future employment opportunities, rather than any concern about the quality of the learning experience for professional development.

Despite the criticism levelled at unpaid work, there was often fierce competition for these opportunities. This meant many had to interview for these roles. Ironically, once individuals were within a club, they did not often interview for internal roles – once they were in, they were in. Of the 15 participants who worked unpaid in football, 10 were subsequently offered a paid position at the same club. No participants reported being promised roles in exchange for their unpaid work. However, the fact that 10 of 15 participants who did unpaid work gained a paid role at the club demonstrates the tendency for clubs to employ internally. To this end, individuals viewed this unpaid labour as a 'working interview' – an opportunity for them to demonstrate they had the skills, personality and, most importantly, the ability to develop trusted relationships, thereby securing a paid post. Throughout relevant literature,^{18, 19} trust has been viewed as vital in football employment procedures and the experiences of these performance and medical staff reflect this.

Conclusion: A Move Towards Better Practice

The key benefits of unpaid labour for performance and medical staff included gaining access to a guarded industry,

seeing the reality of work within football, and increasing opportunities for internal appointments. In this article, we have reflected on the participants' views that unpaid labour has become a normal step in the process of establishing a career within men's professional football. While we do not agree with the extent to which this has become normalised, we also do not necessarily suggest that such unpaid work should be stopped. We argue that unpaid labour can be beneficial to individuals looking to break into the football industry, as long as these experiences are mutually beneficial and follow fair workplace practices.

We suggest that any unpaid roles should be clearly structured, with specific responsibilities aligned with guidance of an intern, placement student or volunteer, rather than a worker. These roles should have realistic working hours, which are abided by, which is incredibly important given that many unpaid staff are studying or working elsewhere to fund working for free. Individuals should

also be paid expenses to cover any travel or accommodation costs that are incurred during work for the club. Unpaid labour can often exclude those without financial means to work for free; therefore, organisations need to more carefully consider the inequality that such roles can create. Finally, those using unpaid staff should offer access to opportunities that support their professional development, such as training with specific equipment, invitations to networking events and written feedback on performance.

We are aware that some of the issues raised will not occur in all clubs, and these examples of positive actions may already be embedded within unpaid labour at certain clubs. We advise those at clubs with mutually beneficial internship or placement programmes to highlight their good practice and demonstrate the benefits that unpaid work can offer more publicly. This could improve attitudes towards unpaid work and set more visible standards across the industry of what successful and beneficial unpaid labour should look like.

Summary & Recommendations

To promote ethical and developmental unpaid labour opportunities within the men's professional football industry, we recommend the following actions:

- Visit the CASES position statements on internships and work placements to follow good practice guidelines.
- Avoid using internships or placements as 'cheap' or free labour by ensuring they offer industry insight and learning opportunities (i.e. mutual benefit).
- Clear role expectations should be defined from the outset of any workplace opportunity.
- Place limits on the length of unpaid employment that occurs without offering individuals the chance to receive payment for their work.
- Implement formal mentoring with regular verbal and written feedback to support individuals and improve the quality of their work.
- Highlight areas of good practice to show the benefits of unpaid labour, while still identifying where poor practice occurs.

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