



**HOW SHOULD I PAY MY INTERNS?
A LOOK AT COMPENSATION, CREATIVITY, AND
MORALITY IN BUSINESS TODAY** Nir Bashan

For as long as there have been humans on earth, the ability to find meaning in work and pay has occupied a fair amount of our thoughts.

Philosophers like the greatly underrated John Locke in 1690 went as far as equating labor to one's own natural rights—as natural as eating and breathing. Having been widely read at the time and cited numerous by the framers of the US constitution, his philosophies were and still are profound. The amount of time, energy and writing he devoted to exploring the meaning of work and compensation was intense. John Locke went on to say:

When a person works, that labor enters in to the object. Thus, the object becomes the property of that person.

—John Locke's Second Treatise of Government, Chapter 5

For Locke, there was no separation between effort of one's own work and the ownership of that work. If a person wanted to till a field and reap the rewards of the harvest, then to Locke that harvest was the property of the person who put in the effort. It was literally theirs and theirs alone. It's a common notion these days, that work we put into something is a form of ownership of that work, but back in the 17th century this was a revolutionary thought in a world ruled at the time by monarchs and totalitarians.

This thought of ownership of one's own labor has evolved into something we fundamentally hold as true today. It's intimate. Work is a part of who we are. It is therefore no wonder we ask our children what they want to do or who they want to be when they grow up—it is so ingrained into our DNA! We feel that work provides us a purpose in life. A meaning and identity tied to our very humanity. An exposition as to who we are on an innermost level.

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Even the Bible deals with issues of work and pay as a calling that is noble, necessary and worthwhile—one that has wide ranging implications on how we view morality:

Do not extort the wage of the poor and impoverished from among your kin, or the strangers that reside in your land, and within your gates. Each day you shall pay him his wage—the sun shall not rise upon it—for he is poor, and he has staked his life for it...

–Deuteronomy (24:14-15)

The connection of morality to work and pay is something that cannot be separated even at it's most elemental root. We are taught from the bible that pay for one's labor is implicitly a morality issue—if we assign a task we must pay for that labor. There is no ambiguity here, and this is a repeated motif throughout the Old Testament. Additionally, since most people in biblical times were paid at the end of each day. Withholding pay until the next day was considered stealing from your employees. Heavy stuff even by today's standards.

Here in 2022, many new businesses and startups find themselves in a tricky position—trying to move forward without having the ability to pay someone for the help they so desperately need. And today more than ever, the need for specialty labor may mean the difference between success and failure. So what is any enterprise—big or small—to do? Do we pay interns? Do we not pay interns? Are we stealing from them if we don't? What if we don't have any capital for compensation?

It turns out that there is hope.

When we view pay and work through a creative lens, all kinds of possibilities open up which allow innovation to take hold and create new and interesting models of compensation. Creativity, which allows us to envision a world that can be, not a world that is, is often underappreciated and underutilized in modern business. And the power that we gain by seeing what is possible and not being limited by what we perceive as a limitation can be the one tool that will allow you to solve any problem in the modern workplace. Any business that does not utilize creativity today is bound for failure. And issues of pay and labor do not escape the power of creativity to help solve this dilemma once and for all.

Take a look below at three creative tools that you can use now in lieu of money compensation to ensure that your interns are paid by harnessing creativity as your tool:

TOOL 1: SHARED OWNERSHIP

Everyone loves to own things. We have a deep seated desire to own, hold, touch and feel tangible items. And so companies are no different. When we can offer someone a piece of ownership within a company, we offer them the possibility of tangible, meaningful reward. And this can often be instituted in lieu of any immediate capital payment.

So instead of money compensation, try an ownership share. An ownership share is literally a deferred payment structure to an intern or other person payable if and when revenue is generated. You can get creative and structure this any which way you want, but shared ownership will allow a payment at some point when the fruits of your labor are harvested.

The concept is really all about splitting the overall ownership of the company with stakeholders who help the company go from vision to reality. You can offer a little bit of ownership or a lot. It's up to you to decide the value of the needed work.

And here is the best part: If you are able to share ownership later when potential profits come in, then you may get people invested in your vision that otherwise would not be. And therefore shared ownership becomes a very powerful tool. Again, people love to own things. So why not give away ownership for a gain in expertise? Many successful startups have been founded this way, and the potential for sharing ownership is limitless and exciting. And is bound only by the capacity of your imagination to create something that is enticing to a prospective intern, employee or soon to be partner.

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TOOL 2: BARTER

One of the most powerful business strategies to compensate someone meaningfully when you do not have capital to exchange is as old as time itself: barter. Trade a product, service or time with someone else who needs it so that you can engage a mutually beneficial item without having to use cash.

The system of barter is almost perfect creatively because it sets loose attachments of financial assessments to any particular product or service. It's worth what you think it's worth. Barter deals more in perception than reality. What one perceives as value another may cherish—or not. It's really that fluid with barter. This system allows for an individual to assign a value to their labor, product or service—whatever that value may be—without any pressure to assign a physical price to it. And because the system of barter is so freely assessed, you may be surprised as to what some people view as an equal exchange. In fact, you may be shocked at how much you stand to potentially gain with barter. The value may be immense and certainly worth looking into if money compensation is not an option. So for instance, let's say you need a website but cannot pay for it, and you happen to be a lawyer—you can exchange legal services for help with your website. You may set it up as a 10 hour exchange of services or unlimited case work. However you set it up is up to you—get creative. Bartering is all about trading a good or service for another good or service of equal or like value. But without clear definitions of what may be more or less valuable to someone, there is plenty of room here to get creative and to try and set up a trade.

TOOL 3: PRESTIGE + PHILANTHROPY

It never ceases to amaze me how much people are willing to do for prestige and philanthropy. Decoupled from any immediate monetary gain. It is deeply noteworthy. For instance, I currently sit on two board of director positions for no money—yet I do it for the joy it gives me in helping others and the prestige it allows me in my professional life. These are things that bring value—and sometimes that value is far beyond anything tangible, like cash.

And it gets even better. It turns out that we live in one of the most generous countries in the world. The altruistic nature of our country is exceptional by any measurement. And there's proof: According to a recent World Bank study, the United States is by far the most generous country in the world, far exceeding charitable donations of any other country by 3 - 15 times! Wow. I hope that if nothing else you read today, this makes you feel good about your fellow citizens in a sea of constant bad news we hear about in America these days. The US is most generous nation in the world—so why not tap into the generous hearted nature of your fellow compatriots?

So how do we do this? We begin by looking at anything in your product or service that can you use instead of capital that has some prestige or philanthropical value. Think creatively. Is it a position on your board? Is it a prestigious honorary appointment? Or award? These things can be very powerful when trying to get an initiative going without immediate access to capital—and a process that can yield amazing results in the long term.

Generally, when offering prestige or philanthropy to an intern, partner or even mentor, you can attract someone who may otherwise not be interested. Or that you can even afford if you had the cash! Flattery knows no bounds, and in this case it's exceedingly true. You may be surprised by the caliber of individual you may attract to your circle by using the prestige and philanthropy tool. It is a surefire way to bat above your average and increase the chances of getting some seasoned help in any initiative. And with all the ways we are connected these days using the prestige and philanthropy tool may be easier than you think.

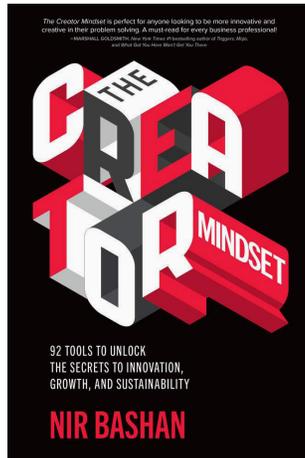
Humanity has spent many years debating the age old paradigm of payment and labor—just how much labor is worth and why it's assigned that value. Today the dialogue continues with jet setting influencers on Instagram making millions taking selfies or global CEOs receiving huge bonuses that may seem out of proportion with their effort—so I am certain that this debate will continue for many years to come. And it is a healthy conversation to have as we move into the more fluid economy of tomorrow.

I hope that these 3 creative tools above can help guide you when looking for help, labor, or assistance without having access to capital. Because at the end of the day, all the tools above are rooted in an exchange that both parties find worthwhile.

If we are involved in an exchange that is mutually beneficial—one in which both parties stand to gain—then we comfortably find ourselves well within the acceptable parameters of the proverbial moral compass. And we stand to gain something significant in regards to that resource to help us move forward, even faced with a lack of cash to exchange. ☒



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Nir Bashan is a Clio Award-winning and Emmy-nominated entrepreneur who has worked in advertising and entertainment. Now, he teaches top leaders how to harness the power of creativity to innovate and grow sustainable businesses. Nir has taught in graduate and undergraduate programs and holds workshops and presentations all over the world at companies like AT&T, Microsoft, NFL Network and jetBlue teaching non-creative people how to think creatively.

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