Manifesto For Digital Arts Work Placements

This Manifesto for Digital Arts Work Placements aims to put forward best practices for internships, volunteering, and research collaborations in a way that can help set up and support the best access, the best experience and best development opportunities with NEoN and any higher education institutions (HEIs), cultural organisations and individuals across the digital arts community.

Manifesto (noun.) A public declaration of policy, views and aims.

Paid and unpaid work should not bleed into each other.

NEoN aims to keep paid and unpaid work separate. A key difference between paid and unpaid work is the element of responsibility. Once someone has to make decisions of their own accord, this shifts responsibility onto them that shouldn't be expected of a volunteer or anyone else in an unpaid position. NEoN recognises that having responsibility involves using significant energy which should be compensated for monetarily, beyond networking and training.

People in arts work placements may often feel like they have to work many hours overtime in order to "prove" themselves, or to make up for time in a workday that they took off for lunch. This is a damaging notion that leads to people being uncompensated for their labour when this is not something that should be happening, or leads to volunteers working more hours than they actually want to. If paid and unpaid work are separated, this creates clearer ideas of what is expected of each person who contributes to NEoN.

Volunteers are valuable and an integral part of creative arts.

We have achieved the Volunteer Friendly Award with Volunteer Dundee, who define volunteering as "the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of the community, undertaken by choice and without financial gain." Those who give their time to NEoN are hugely appreciated, and NEoN is committed to providing a healthy environment in which volunteers have freedom to do the amount of work they want to do. Although volunteers are consenting to undertake work without any financial gain, NEoN has a responsibility to supervise and keep volunteers safe.

Volunteer exploitation of any sort is never ok, and volunteers have every right to engage in conversation with NEoN about in what capacity they want to volunteer, and what they are or are not comfortable doing. While paying people for their labour is important to NEoN, there is a need for volunteers, especially as a part of any festival economy. However, it is worth interrogating whether this type of volunteer model is sustainable or even ethical.

For many people, volunteering is an important path to paid work.

We recognise that many people, especially young people, volunteer in order to gain skills and experience for paid employment, and that it is very important for NEoN to actively facilitate development for volunteers. This includes training volunteers, providing opportunities to network, and providing references where appropriate. There must be a two-way street between the work volunteers do for NEoN, and the benefits that volunteering for NEoN provides.

Those who volunteer for NEoN and show interest in our mission of advancing the understanding and accessibility of digital and technology-driven art forms, are encouraged to apply for paid roles. We aim for our volunteering positions to equip people with the skills needed to thrive in our paid roles in the future. NEoN recognises that just because someone is only able to give a small amount of time to NEoN in a volunteer capacity, this doesn't necessarily mean that they are not suitable for a paid role, or that they do not have the needed skills.

Volunteers who have shown commitment to their work and our mission and are interested in a paid role will be encouraged to apply for one regardless of how many hours per week/month they have been able to volunteer - there are many reasons as to why one volunteer may not be able to give as much time as another. The future of digital arts depends on actively training people to move into new roles and to have people develop as digital artists, curators, and arts administrators.

Pay people wherever possible.

While NEoN does not have exhaustive funding, we aim to pay people for their labour wherever possible, and we make it very clear to an individual whether they will be paid or not. We are highly conscious that opportunities in the digital arts sector are often either unpaid, or that paid opportunities require prior experience that's specific to the arts sector, which would be voluntary and/or difficult to access. This systematically restricts people from marginalised groups to work in digital arts and is something we directly want to combat. Those from ethnic minority groups are more likely to be from working-class backgrounds and are therefore often "time poor" meaning they can't do the unpaid work that's so often seen as a requirement to go into paid work in digital arts. If we want to do the work to decolonise digital arts and bring people of colour, disabled people, working-class people, and other groups into the industry, it is unrealistic to expect applicants to have done unpaid labour when many people simply can't do that due to circumstances that are out of their control. Paying people at every stage of their career is not only best practice, but also sets realistic expectations for how people should be compensated for their labour in the future.

Digital arts work placements should not be exclusive.

NEoN recognises that a long-term goal when setting up work placements is not to simply "create space" for marginalised groups - the long-term goal is to dismantle all forms of white supremacy, ableism, queerphobia, classism, and other forms of discrimination within the organisation and in digital arts as a whole, so that people of all backgrounds can thrive in the industry. We hope that this manifesto will begin to set standards and expectations for work placements in the digital arts industry outside of NEoN.

All opportunities have explicit declarations that those who are carers, parents, transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer people, those who are neurodiverse and/or disabled, people from Black, African, Caribbean, Asian, Multiple or any other ethnic groups, people from the queer community, people from working-class backgrounds, people from different religious backgrounds, students, and young people are all highly encouraged to apply.

These groups have historically been and currently are restricted from accessing the creative industry, and more privileged groups must make an effort to foster inclusion with the intention of abolishing discrimination and prejudice, and paying people adequately, so that marginalised groups can thrive in the industry. Digital arts can't reach their full potential without input and engagement from as many of these groups as possible. Digital arts should never be exclusive. They should be open to all, and therefore open to be shaped by all.

Reach out everywhere: people need digital arts everywhere.

To truly decolonise digital arts work placements, NEoN and other organisations must do the work of community outreach when looking to fill placement positions. As an organisation that aims to advance the understanding and accessibility of digital and technology-driven art forms, it is best practice to provide opportunities in digital arts to as many people as possible, especially to people who may not be aware of digital arts at first, but then find that it's something of interest to them.

People who are interested in digital arts should have access to them and access to applying to work placements, as per the right to participate in cultural life (Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

We are all gaining new skills as we go.

NEoN aims to provide clear specifications for all work, and recognises that boundaries and expectations are key to people doing their best work, especially those who may apply to internships with NEoN. People who apply to work placements and/or volunteer with NEoN will have different levels of experience, and they should be given the relevant mentoring, tools and knowledge to do the job they have been selected for. Uncertainty about responsibilities is a

huge factor that discourages capable people from working in the creative industry, especially the groups that we are trying to widen access to, who are likely to be early in their digital arts career. Especially in digital arts, it's important to here isn't a binary switch between "qualified" and "unqualified."

There is a notion in the arts, particularly in digital arts, that people who are in paid roles have all the knowledge and skills from the onset. This isn't true. Learning on the job is expected in the digital arts sector, especially in internships, and every role you have prepares you further for the next one you'll take up. Art is not perfect and neither are people - making mistakes or having some gaps in knowledge does not mean failure. However, just because art itself can be abstract, messy, and have unclear boundaries, that doesn't mean work *about* art should be unclear.

Support is key to comfort and success in a placement.

Whether someone is doing a paid placement or is a volunteer, feeling supported in a work environment and in work contexts is hugely important. NEoN commits itself to providing support and adjustments to the best of our ability. This could be in the form of childcare, travel costs, assistive equipment, lunches for volunteers according to timebanking, and working from home. Those who are not paid for their work are entitled for the hours they work to be as flexible as possible, and those who have paid placements have the right to engage in conversation with NEoN about flexible patterns of working that would be preferable to them.

In our mission to widen access to the industry, we are conscious that different people need different things in order to feel comfortable in a work environment. We all have different access needs in order to do our best work. When going forward to volunteer or enter an internship, individuals will be able to complete a form regarding their access needs to succeed at work.

It is important to NEoN that we check in with interns and volunteers about whether they would benefit from any extra support or direction. It can be difficult to ask for help due to the nature of creative work and the "but art is fun!!!!" idea. Asking for help or clarification is all too often framed as a sign of weakness when this isn't true at all. Having clarity is essential in order to do a job well. When people are under the constant pressure of "am I doing this right?" that consumes time and energy that they should not have to be expending.

If and when miscommunications happen, they can easily be rectified if NEoN creates a culture of being able to ask for help and clarification when needed. This doesn't reflect badly on any party, it simply makes everyone's work and lives easier. If it is an intern's responsibility for whether a piece of work does or does not "succeed", that should be made explicitly clear to them and they should be given all the tools and support they need in order to manage what is expected of them.

Tailor internships and other placements to Graduate Attributes.

When setting up placements, especially when directly with higher education institutions (HEIs), evaluating the placement alongside the Graduate Attributes of Scottish universities is an important step for NEoN to take when wanting to collaborate with students and new graduates. While each University has differing Graduate Attributes, NEoN aims to make experience gained from placements and volunteering as applicable to future employment as possible. This involves making internship specifications clear, including as to why the work is needed within the organisation.

NEoN has potential access to huge groups of graduates from the Dundee area alone, and if we tailor the placements we offer to be strongly applicable to future employment of graduates, this will help prepare future generations for the digital arts industry. Building stronger links with HEIs means that we can facilitate an ongoing dialogue with these institutions about best practice for work placements in the industry which will hopefully have an influence beyond NEoN and Scottish HEIs.

Digital arts work can be fun and fulfilling, but it is still labour.

Artists are workers, and people who work in arts administration are workers, regardless of the content of the work. Digital arts is very often framed through the lens of relaxation and entertainment, and the people who are behind the scenes in admin, or even create the art, are forgotten about. NEoN is highly conscious that the narrative of work in the arts as fun and therefore relaxing feeds into a damaging culture of unpaid labour where paid labour is due, or paying people low rates if they are paid at all. As fun as digital arts work can be, it is not "free time," and NEoN aims to reflect this in our treatment of interns and volunteers alike. The enjoyment or perceived proximity to relaxation of an arts job never justifies a lower wage, or less support for volunteers.

Rest is a human right.

The assumed proximity of creative work to relaxation can mean the line between work and non-work gets easily blurred. People in internship positions, especially young people, can be particularly vulnerable to the blurring of work and rest or the absence of rest entirely, since there is huge pressure to prove that they're worthy of the position. They may feel like there's an expectation to be working at any available moment so they don't fall behind. Volunteers may also be susceptible to this in the sense that they could feel obligated to do as much volunteer work as possible in order to prove themselves worthy of paid work.

The separation of work and rest is essential to the preservation of better mental and physical health. If someone is struggling with their workload, or is struggling to rest or take a break from work, it's the worker's relationship to their work that's the problem, not the worker themself. Interns and volunteers have a right to not think about work when they are taking time to rest - as does everyone. Being in "work mode" outside of an individual's working hours has very detrimental effects on their life, including on their future work. People are entitled to "true rest time." NEoN is committed to upholding realistic expectations of work placements and volunteering, and engaging in continued discussion with interns and volunteers about what that looks like, since this may be different for each person and each mode of contribution to NEoN. Creative industries can never be sustainable if people in those industries are burnt-out. It devalues creative work to think of it as something that a worker doesn't need a rest from. A person's mental and physical health always comes before the work they do.

Manifesto Credits

Thank you for reading the Manifesto for Digital Arts Work Placements. The Manifesto was created by Beatrix Livesey-Stephens (me), who was commissioned by NEoN and supervised by Donna Holford-Lovell and Dr Michael Johnson. The Manifesto was made in Twine v2.3.14 with Harlowe 3.2.2.

The Manifesto is a living policy document that is subject to grow and change, acting as an adaptable knowledge repository. The Manifesto was hugely informed by my own experience of work placements, but you can see other sources and suggested reading below.

The interviews I conducted as part of gathering knowledge for the Manifesto were invaluable. I would like to thank James Morwood, Sabrina Logan and Ailie Rutherford from NEoN, and Sara Khan and Daz Skubich from Game Assist. I would also like to thank Saoirse Amira Anis for her guidance and support.

Sources & Suggested Reading

Disenchanted Chinese Youth Join a Mass Movement to 'Lie Flat' - Insider

Statements Towards The Establishment of a Proof-of-Rest Protocol - Emilie Reed

Surely, it's not that hard? - Saoirse Amira Anis

The Sound of the Future | Capitalism, Alienation, and Disability in Project DIVA: Future Tone - Game Assist

[why entry level jobs aren't entry level - Answer in Progress](#)