Ask for More as an Intern
by Peter Vogt
MonsterTRAK Career Coach

You didn't sign up for a several-month sentence at the copy machine, yet there you are at your internship, making copies for hours. And then you go home each day and gripe about it to anyone who will listen (or pretend to).

Why not do something about it? Seek out more challenging assignments -- the kind that will give you the skills you'll really need in your future career.

Here's how in three steps:

1. Master the Little Stuff First
   How can anyone know you're capable of doing more than sharpening pencils if you don't first prove you can handle grunt work?

   Your supervisors and colleagues won't give you complex projects "if you can't demonstrate your ability to learn from even the simplest tasks," says Sue Leister, director of the internship program at Alverno College in Milwaukee.

   Elizabeth Baker recently finished an editorial internship at Islands magazine. She began her stint with a classic intern task: Filing. "At first, that's all they had me do," says Baker, a sophomore at Scripps College in Claremont, California. "But I stayed extra hours to get projects done so that I could move into more challenging ones.

   "Baker earned respect by putting in the extra time to do a good job on her assigned task. And with that respect came the opportunity for more responsibility. She advanced to writing an article for the magazine, as well as fact-checking and researching.

2. Learn What Others Do — And What Needs Doing
   Being an intern means you typically have the flexibility to attend any company meeting, training workshop or planning session that interests you. All you have to do is ask.

   The payoff? You'll figure out what other people in the organization are working on as well as what they might need help with.

   "I never sat around and waited for things to come to my desk," says Baker. "I was always asking for things to do or to help with projects or just to see what others were doing. You can learn a lot from those around you."

3. Write a Proposal Outlining Additional Projects
   You might think your ticket to better assignments is "anything else you'd like me to do?" But that approach is often too informal and vague, says Nancy DeCrescenzo, assistant director of career services at the University of Hartford in Connecticut.
What's more effective is to write a detailed, well-thought-out proposal describing additional tasks you can handle, she explains.

"A written proposal can be shared with other departments and/or managers as well as your faculty advisor," DeCrescenzo says. "It makes a nice future portfolio piece as well."

Your written proposal also will serve as a "cue card" to lean on when discussing your work with colleagues or your boss, she adds. And that's critical, because a compelling demonstration of your ambition now could mean a full-time, permanent job with the organization later.

"I remember speaking with an employer who was getting ready to hire one of our co-op students upon his graduation," says Amanda Pacheco, a career counselor at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. "[The employer] had two students to choose from: one with mediocre technical skills but who took the initiative to seek out projects that needed to be done, and one who had top-notch technical skills but lacked drive.

"The employer chose to hire the student with the mediocre technical skills, as a direct result of his go-getter attitude," she explains.

So instead of griping, start typing a proposal to turn your internship into the groundbreaking experience you want it to be.

The purpose of this article is to both provide information and facilitate general dialogue about various employment-related topics. No legal advice is being given and no attorney-client relationship created.