



Episode 94: Summer Job Success (with Sara O'Connor)

Alison Monahan: Welcome to The Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Sara O'Connor, one of our law school and bar exam tutors, about setting yourself up for summer job success. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan. Normally, I'm here with Lee Burgess, my co-host. We are here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can possibly be. Together we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the [contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com](#) and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back. Today, we're talking with Sara O'Connor, who is one of our law school and bar exam tutors. We're talking about setting yourself up for summer job success, regardless of the type of job you're going to be doing. First off, Sara, could you give us a bit of background on the types of jobs you had in law school and even before, to the extent that they're law related?

Sara O'Connor: Sure, Alison. I'm glad to be here. I, fortunately, had a cornucopia of experiences. Because before I started my first year of law school, I worked at a District Attorney's Office in a relatively small Pennsylvania county. Then, after my first year of law school, I interned with a Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court for the first part of the summer. For the second part of my summer after first year of law school, I interned with HUD, Housing Urban Development, in Pittsburgh. Finally, after my second year of law school, I interned at a large international law firm that's approximately 2,000 attorneys worldwide. A little bit in law school, I did another round of clerking with the Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court because it was just so freaking amazing.

Alison Monahan: That's awesome. It sounds like you've had a wide variety of legal experiences. Did you find there were any commonalities in terms of what the people who hired you were looking for, for you to be successful in each of those jobs or were they really totally different?

Sara O'Connor: I think with respect to some of the tasks that were assigned, they were different. Obviously, I don't need to prep an opinion letter like I might for a judge in a law firm. When you're working for a government agency like HUD or the District Attorney's Office, you have a different role in a way than you do in private practice. However, there is the common theme that some summers get tripped up with respect to simply knowing what the assignment is.

Alison Monahan: Right. That's always a big one.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. You'd be surprised. There were times when I'd be sitting in an office feeling slightly overwhelmed going, "Wooh." There are some new legal terms that I'm not sure, I know the meanings of or the like. The time when you get the assignment is where you should ask questions if you have them. Many partners or individuals that may be your supervisors may not frankly remember that, once upon a time, they may have had to have new legal concepts that weren't covered in your first year of law school explain to them. It's not unusual. One of the things that surprise me when I started working in the legal field is, you feel all great and powerful after you get some law school underneath your belt, but there's still a lot of the time you're looking up new areas of law or trying to figure out how different facts apply to some Black Letter Law. Just make sure you know the assignment and ask questions if you have them.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think that's absolutely correct. I remember, I was a Civ Pro TA. This story is from my first summer where I was working in a smaller law firm in New York City. At some point, one of the 2Ls came in and she's like, "I can't believe it. I just got yelled at because of some *Eerie* question. Who remembers *Eerie*?" I had just taken Civ Pro. I was like, "Well, it tells you what law applies, right? State or federal law. That seems important." She'd go, "Well, who's supposed to remember that?"

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: It was one of those moments of like, "Yeah. You're not just going to like law school classes just because. You're actually learning things you need to remember." And, particularly, if you're a litigator, that's always the huge one. If somebody gives you an assignment, you need to be really sure you understand exactly what type of law they're looking for. Because if you spend two days going off and doing research on a Delaware State Court case and you come back and I'm in Federal Court, I'm going to look at you-

Sara O'Connor: Bad News Bears.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Like, really? This is a total waste of your time. It's clear you have no idea what you're supposed to be doing. Part of that, I think, is on the assigning person to really clarify, but again, like you said, they don't necessarily remember. They need to tell you "Oh, we're in federal court, so I need federal cases. They need to be in this district," whatever. I've seen that more than once with associates too. It's not just summers.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think understanding what you're being asked to do and then asking questions to the extent that you don't understand what you're asked to do. Also, figure out how to ask those follow up questions in a way that's not

annoying to the person who gave you this. For example, assume this person is busy. They probably don't want an email every time you have a question or a thought that might be pertinent. You can collect all of those and send it every few hours or once a day like, "Here are my questions." Try to reflect on that.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: I think there are strategies that we can employ here, right?

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. That's one of the go-to methods for when you have questions. You want to work up to the point where you think "I've done my due diligence." Because the person who has assigned you assignment is because they need it off their plate.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sara O'Connor: There have been times when I felt like peppering the assigning partner with emails upon emails. I've also been on the receiving end. I got to tell you, neither way feels good.

Alison Monahan: No.

Sara O'Connor: It's your responsibility to try and take it as far as you possibly can. We might get to this later, but sometimes paralegals might be able to help you out a little bit, particularly if the paralegal works largely with one or two partners.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think that's a good point that we will touch on later, which is how you can use these support staff to help you and for your advantage. Because I think part of this is a lot of people going into these summer jobs, particularly, as 1L like ... Or, even it's a 2L, to some extent, you haven't really worked in a professional environment before.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Particularly if you're in your mid 20s and then suddenly, you're working with the secretary or a paralegal who's in their 40s. I think navigating that could be a little bit challenging.

Sara O'Connor: I think to hopefully save some people from a weird, quirky realization that I made, probably, sometime during my second summer, or my second-year summer clerkship at the big law firm is, I was someone who, whether fortunately or unfortunately, went straight from high school to college, from college to law school, to law school to job.

Alison Monahan: Wow.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. So, while that can be great, one of the detriments is, this was my first real time after I had finally scored my forever home at a law firm, the idea that the assigning attorney doesn't have the answer bank for you. This is no longer a test. You aren't being tested. You are the one who is supposed to provide the answers, and the reason why you were given an assignment is because the assigning person may have some inklings as to what the right answer should be but does not have the answer key. That's your responsibility.

Alison Monahan: I agree. I remember having that realization as well, where it's like, "Gosh, all these assignments are getting really hard and it's unclear what the answer is." Finally, some nice associate took me aside and they're like, "Oh, that's the point here. If we could just look up the answer, someone would already have looked it up."

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Again, also as a summer, the reality is, you might get that wild goose chase assignment that no one really wants to do because they think it's pointless, but the managing partner has some bee in their bonnet and things that we should track down this research. You're getting in a lot of cases the stuff that no one really thinks you're going to find a great answer to, but that's your job to track it down and make sure that's actually true.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. Especially during the summer associateship, they're trying to make sure that you have the analytical skills to determine where the best places are to prod even, if you're trying to prove a negative and that there is no law on this because part-

Alison Monahan: Right. That's always really fun when you get that assignment. Like, "Go and make sure there are no cases on this." You're like, "Really? In the entire world, I'm supposed to go and make sure there are no cases on this. Great. Thank you."

Sara O'Connor: Awesome time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. There goes four days of my life down the rabbit hole. All right. Well, let's dive into this a little bit more, because you spent several years as a big law associate, which means you've had a chance to participate in a lot of summer associate activities on both sides. [What makes someone a successful summer associate?](#) What are the things they can do to ensure they get an offer or to ensure they get a non-offer?

Sara O'Connor: Some common things, should be Captain Obvious, but in large summer classes, you may be surprised: show up on time, look put together, meet your deadlines, submit polished work, don't allow yourself to burnout or freak out. Trust me, been there, done that. This is a black little tea kettle telling all of you guys not to do the "freak out" that sometimes happens when you're stressed. Some of the

best ways to not get an offer are to get horribly intoxicated at work events, it does happen.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I actually summered with a girl who jumped into the Hudson River.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. It's crazy what some people do. I know of one instance, not necessarily where I worked, but where an individual had some bias against women and it became abundantly clear. That's the kind of stuff that it's wonderful to know that that gets weeded out, but heaven forbid you have inappropriate social biases. Put them away at the workplace. That's not where they belong.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Actually, there was a summer at one place I worked who also did not get an offer, more or less for that reason, because several women, basically, came forward and were like, "I'm really uncomfortable with the way he's behaving towards me." The firm, at some point, is just like, "We don't care how great you are. That's a liability."

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. It's wonderful when you work at a place where you find out, frankly, that that kind of thing happens because it's like, "Oh, okay. Good." Because sometimes, for better or worse, there's law jokes or law gets a bad rap. It's wonderful when you hear from certain employers who just do not tolerate that behavior. So, it's important to know that behavior is just not tolerated.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Well, they would've tolerated it and a partner who is bringing in a ton of business, but they were not going to tolerate it in a summer they hadn't even hired.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Exactly. That also reminds me, I've known instances where some people try to use their family names or family connections to short shrift on work. For the most part, that also does not pass muster. They're hiring you, not necessarily your connections. At the end of the day, just do your work, be respectful and make sure that you enjoy the place as much as you hope the place enjoys you.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think that's key. Any summer job, you're evaluating this experience as much as they're evaluating you. All right. Let's talk a little bit more about the work aspects. I know sometimes people think being a summer or even working outside of law firm like, "This is just going to be a big joke. I'm not really here to do work," but I didn't find that to be true.

Sara O'Connor: No. I did not either. I think all of the people that I summered with and my different roles would agree with me. If you went to law school or tried to get a law job because you think what's portrayed on TV is going to be what it is, you better watch *Better Call Saul*, because it does take hard work. It does take effort. A lot of larger firms will still incorporate social aspects to their summer program, but you still need to get some projects in because at the end of the day, you are being reviewed for the work product that you do, how you

communicate about your work product and whether or not you're able to make deadlines. I think when I was in summer, I submitted, I don't know, eight to 12 different projects, obviously, of various different lengths, during an eight-week period.

My rule of thumb that I generally advise to summer associates is, unless you're doing very small turnaround projects, try and aim to get one project done a week so that you have a portfolio that the potential employer can actually review you on, and heaven forbid, one assignment doesn't show your strengths. You have other projects to show, "Yes, I can do this and I am going to be an asset to your team."

Alison Monahan: I think that's great advice. I made a hobby out of being a summer associate, I did it three different times. The second summer, I remember, the first two weeks I worked, I literally worked every day, and some of those were until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning because I just go thrown onto this team that was submitting this huge set of briefings and they were like, "Great. We have another warm body. Awesome. Let's make it happen." And so, I was in the war room at 4:00 in the morning, you know, that kind of thing. Later in the summer, I wrote an Amicus brief to the second circuit, basically, about myself.

Sara O'Connor: That's so awesome. Terrifyingly awesome. I love it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You never know what crazy stuff you're going to get thrown into. Do you have any suggestions that people went to a firm or really, to any type of job, expecting certain types of work and they're not getting that type of work? Is there anything you can do at that point?

Sara O'Connor: I think part of it depends on the size of the law firm and how your summer program is set up. Optimistically, these were things that you would have learned during on campus interviews or during your interviews so that you would know whether or not you're supposed to be working exclusively for one or two partners or it was like a free for all system.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sara O'Connor: If you're working for one to two partners, in a way, you're a little bit more stuck, but because the firm understands that this is still you also trying to determine if they're the right fit and not just a one-way street, that's something that you can certainly raise with the partners. It might simply be that the tasks you want to do are something that just, unfortunately, have to wait until you've actually passed the bar.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sara O'Connor: That's a possibility. It's not necessarily that they're holding the bar and you'll never get to do this. It's just something that will have to wait. Instead, for example, let's say you wanted to take a deposition.

Alison Monahan: Yeah right.

Sara O'Connor: Yes, that's not going to happen, but if you want to get a sense of how the firm does it, you could ask to shadow a deposition. It's a way to get a balance or a taste of what you want without actually being able to do it. At a larger firm, at least, the firm that I worked at, it was very entrepreneurial. You didn't really have someone as some firms do have this task database where they assign tasks to the associate. At my firm, the associates actually "pounded pavement" to knock on doors and get assignments from various partners. You'll get a sense of which way your firm is either expressly or implicitly. Don't be shy to knock on someone's door and ask for an assignment if they work in the area of law that you're interested in.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think that's true. I think this is something worth bringing up in your interviews. Once you have the offer, I would necessarily bring it up in a first-round type of screening interview, but once you have an offer to go someplace, I think, it's totally fair to ask them "How was work assigned? How would I receive assignments? Do I have any input into that process?" Because you may have preferences one way or the other. Some people might listen to that and be like, "Oh my gosh, I'd have to get to talk to a stranger to get work." It could be like, "This sounds horrible." Other people, that might be appealing, like, "Yeah. I want to hustle. I want to get those assignments from that partner that I want to work with." I think a lot of it is just really personality driven.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. For those people who think, "Ugh, going to meet a stranger and ask for work," for better or worse guys, that's what we do as attorneys.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. You better be used to it.

Sara O'Connor: If you don't meet with clients, you don't get work. Think of it as baby steps in the right direction even if you are an introvert. Don't feel like that skill is completely out of the realm. If you read about Warren Buffett, he used to be an incredible introvert and taught himself to be able to speak publicly. I think he's doing pretty well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Exactly. If you're like, "Absolutely, no way at this point, can I possibly go and knock on somebody's door," we had this thing called email. You could use that and compose a very polite, nice email that you maybe run by your friend and have vetted and to be like, "This does seem reasonable?" And then you send it. Maybe the person picks up the phone and you have to talk to them later, but at least, you don't have to start out by just knocking on the door of the stranger, but the point being, you're going to have to put yourself out there and really advocate for yourself to a certain extent, within reasonable boundaries, to

get the type of experience that you want to have. I think this applies more broadly wherever you're working. If you're working for the DA's Office or you're working for ... Judges, probably are a little more ... They just tell you what to do, typically, I think.

I clerked for a judge for a year. He would sometimes definitely ask us, "Are there certain cases you would prefer to work on or not work on?" Because they do have clerks, they have interns, they have a variety of people who can do certain task or if there's something you're dying to do, you could put that out there and maybe it comes back to you or maybe it doesn't. I think it's worth figuring out how this stuff works, and who should you talk to? Is there someone coordinating your program you can talk to? Is there someone assigning work? How does this work? You can definitely go up to people at cocktail parties or whatever, that you've been stalking and know that you want to work with. Introduce yourself, like, "Oh, I really would love to work in your practice area. If you have any assignments, give me a call. I'd love to do them."

Sara O'Connor: Exactly. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: All of these skills are also what you should be trying to develop this summer. It's not just about the work.

Sara O'Connor: One of the fun things is, [for those of you who might be going into big law](#) and perhaps, even in medium size law firms, these cases that you work on as a summer, don't be surprised that they follow on your desk day one when you start two years later after you passed the bar. Many cases at big law firms can be a very large mammoths and partners will remember you, and they will very likely be your first source of work come day one, week one. That's why I keep stressing, make sure they like you as much as you like them because once you've landed that job, you have reached the finish line to the marathon that was your education.

Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah. I think that's right. You work with summer associates and if somebody came back two years later, what are you really evaluating about them? Do you do that in a formal sense? If you work with a summer, are you asked to evaluate them formally? What are you informally evaluating them on to really consider if you'd want to work with them if they show up two years later?

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Formally, again, I think it can depend on your employer but some staples stand out as indicative across the board. Predominantly, you want to make sure that [your writing](#), your speaking, and your analytical abilities are shining to the best extent possible. Now, no one expects you necessarily, unlike Alison, to be able to brief some circuit.

Alison Monahan: It was a weird situation.

Sara O'Connor:

Yeah. They are able to assess whether or not you've reached benchmarks for where you are in your legal career and legal education. I would say that analytical skills are arguably one of the most, if the most important of the critical skills, because presumably, you're able to work on writing and speaking, but analytical skills, hence, arguably why we used the LSAT for better or worse as the gateway, really reign supreme. That's why to the extent you haven't gotten your IRAC, issue, rule, analysis, conclusion down, you should, maybe, check out some of our Law School Toolbox articles about it because it's unbelievably necessary, particularly, if you're going to be a litigator. Although, there are still components of that for corporate work and agency work, certainly [writing](#), speaking, analytical.

Next, do I have any concerns about this individual? That, to me, means what I feel comfortable bringing this person to a client meeting, whether formal or informal, like at a lunch setting or at a business meeting. For example, I would not feel comfortable bringing someone who had issues working with women to a lunch and learn. That's something that I would certainly raise. If I feel as though they were really contributing to case strategy, heck yes, that's someone that I would want to bring to a client meeting. You better believe it. One of the other things is, do I feel as though the person has a potential to grow? That one's a little bit more amorphous, but frankly, after you get your toes wet as a summer and when you look back on where you've come after five years of practice, you'll be able to see a little bit more about what I mean when I say, "Do you see someone has the potential to grow?" Some people, for better or worse, actually, are checked out. You can see that.

Informally, one of the things that I love to see is people with moxie and drive. It's one of my strengths. Sometimes it takes me more than one time during law school to learn a new concept or stretch something or deal with a hypothetical, but gosh darn it, if you've got determination, you're going to figure it out. I think determination and drive and willingness to be part of a team, now, that doesn't mean to lose all work-life boundaries, of course, but to be willing to work on a team is also very important. Because Alison is right, there's going to be times even if you work at a smaller law firm where you are having to work later at night than you wanted or over a weekend or sometimes having to miss a family event or something personal. You want to know that the people by your side are people like you who are driven and willing to get the job done no matter what.

Alison Monahan:

Yeah. I also missed my own birthday party that week. Suffice it to say that I did not return to that firm, but yeah, I think the point you make about being able to learn is so critical. No one expects you as a 1L, 2L or even a 3L or even a young associate, no one expects you to be perfect. But as someone who's handed out work, if I give you explicit instructions or I make a correction to your work, I expect you to pay attention. I expect that the next time I get a similar assignment, I'm not asked to make the same correction because that's the thing that people are just like, "You know what, this person is not worth my time."

They're not developing. They're not trying. I can't be bothered." That's not the attitude you want people to have towards you.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. To piggyback off that a little bit, one of the most terrifying things that people are concerned about is, "Oh goodness, what if I get something wrong?" To piggyback off of your comment, there was one project that I did for a hardcore bigwig in our firm where the mid-level associate had found a case that I had found but didn't include in my memo because I thought it was distinguishable and completely not useful for our purposes. So, when the mid-level associate and I met, he had said, "Do you want me to incorporate this case into your work or do you want to yourself?" I said, "It was my mistake. I'm going to handle it." When I handled it, I made it clear as to why I thought it was distinguishable. That was something that was called out by both the bigwig partner and the mid-level associate. The idea that, (1) I was willing to see that there was a mistake, (2) I was willing to deal with it professionally, and (3) I didn't pass it off to someone else or make excuses. Making excuses, we can add that to one of the best ways to get a non-offer. Own a mistake if you have it. There are, actually, professional rules or responsibility about that, but mistakes do happen even if you are the best and the brightest and so learn from them.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. If you make a mistake, you need to correct it, you need to take ownership of it, and you do explain why it's not going to happen again. Basically, I think, the whole concept here is, any time you're working with other lawyers, don't make things their problem that don't need to be their problem. It's your problem. If someone gave you an assignment, it's basically your problem. Well, let's talk about that because we get a lot of questions, or I get a lot of questions, at least. What should you do if you're asked to do an assignment and you just have absolutely no idea where to start?

Sara O'Connor: That is so often true. particularly, as a younger associate learning about a new area of law. One of the best things you can do is, start with the treatise – I kid you not. Now, some law firms have better law libraries or no law libraries. If you have a library staff, try and consult a treatise. You can even ask a partner if it's in an area of law that you yet to learn about. Insurance coverage, for example, was one of my bread and butter practice areas when I was an associate, but that wasn't something I took in law school. Guess what, every day for about a year was a new adventure for me. You just refer to materials that have come before you. Sometimes, there's actually, depending on the law firm you work at, a database of past work product, so you can search it for some of the legal terms that were part of the assignment to get your feet wet. Because one of the biggest mistakes, I think, people do with research is, as soon as they get a project, they start typing in buzzwords into Westlaw or Lexis Nexis.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. That's almost never a very good place to start. You shouldn't be doing case law analysis until you understand the parameters of the area you're working within.

Sara O'Connor: Bingo. Bingo, bingo. Another thing is called the internet and Google.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Sara O'Connor: There's, oftentimes, where before I consulted treatise or if there isn't a treatise, which is happening more and more as we become just a tech-heavy industry is, Google to get used to the lay of the land. First and foremost, you need to learn about the lay of the land. Second of all, hopefully, you have been able to ask some questions to get a little bit of background when you were having your task assignment. Now, some people are a lot more blunt and just say, "Here it is. Go forth." You can also consider asking some other associates for some guidance, but also remember that they, too, may be part of the evaluation process and so you don't want to rely too heavily on others because first of all, they're busy people too just like you. Second of all, I would hate for someone to get a review like can't think critically on their own.

Again, try and do the obvious things, like consult a book and consult Google before going into a tizzy.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think, sometimes, I mean part of this is that lawyers aren't necessarily greatest managers, and so they're not really thinking: "Okay. What background does this person need in order to understand what I'm asking them to do?" So, I think when you're in that initial meeting, (a) always bring a notepad. Never walk into any meeting in a law firm or law practice or anything without a notepad because you should be taking notes. And, I think it's fair to ask, even in that initial meeting or later, with someone who is a little bit lower on the food chain, "Could somebody get me the five-minute background of this case so that I understand the basics of who are the players, what are the key issues?" Just so you have a little bit of context. Or alternately, is there a place I can go? Can you refer me to somewhere to go and get this type of background?" I think that can often be really helpful.

Sara O'Connor: Another thing that you should ask during the assignment meeting is, "What client is this for? Approximately, how much time should this take?" Sometimes they have no idea and that's fine, but if they were thinking, "Well, Sara is going to spend three hours on this, and she spent 30. That's a problem."

Alison Monahan: Right. Also, how much research can I do in terms of using Lexis and Westlaw.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: You don't want to be running like multi tens of thousands of dollars of searches on a pro bono case, things like that.

Sara O'Connor: Also, make sure to ask when the deadline is.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sara O'Connor: Know the deadline.

Alison Monahan: Any preliminary deadlines. Like, "Okay. You're telling me the absolute final deadline is Friday. Would it be helpful to you if I gave you an update on Wednesday?"

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: You should probably be doing that, anyway.

Sara O'Connor: Agreed. Agreed.

Alison Monahan: There's nothing worse than getting work product from someone, and it's the day of the deadline. It's the last hour. They've been working up to that deadline, and you get it. You're like, "These are all state court cases. We need federal cases. This is pointless. Now, I have a real problem."

Sara O'Connor: It happens. It happens.

Alison Monahan: It totally happens. These are not hypothetical situations. I think if you can, it's always good to check in as you're going. Again, you don't want to be annoying, it's a balance. But if you have a week-long assignment, you might want to check in on a Tuesday: "Hey, this is what I've done so far. Does this look like I'm on the right track? Okay." Check in on Thursday: "I'm finalizing my work. Here's what I've got. I'm going to send it to you tomorrow at three o'clock." Having those checkpoints, I think, really just smooths the way.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: All right. Next question. What if somebody asked you to take on more work when you already feel overwhelmed, and you know you're not going to be able to do a good job on it? Can you say no?

Sara O'Connor: You can say no, but you should really evaluate what your concept of too busy means.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think I'm working until 6:00 every day.

Sara O'Connor: Right. Right. If too busy-

Alison Monahan: FYI, that's not too busy in a law firm like this.

Sara O'Connor: Right. Exactly. Too busy means you have to stay an extra hour later. That's not too busy. If too busy means you'd literally have to be up until midnight for three days in a row, that's too busy. I will say that-

Alison Monahan: I'd say that's too busy to take on more work. I'm not sure it's too busy to keep doing that.

Sara O'Connor: Yes. Exactly. Exactly. Partners understand if you're working for more than one person, although sometimes they need to be reminded of that. One of the good ways to help you field it is to say, "Well, partner Sara gave me an assignment due Tuesday and partner Alison has one that she also wants done on Tuesday. It's Monday and I can't get them both done. Partner Sara, how should I respond to Partner Alison? Am I able to push your deadline or should I see about the deadlines getting worked out?" Sometimes the partners will agree to push between them. That's a good way to say, "I want to get both of these done but how do we make this possible." Because every once in a while, you'll learn that a deadline is actually a little bit arbitrary or it's been built in as an extra, extra buffer.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think that's the key. I found that to be effective too. You basically want to put it back on them like, "Hey, I would love to take on this new assignment, but I'm really maxed out working for Partner Sara. Do you want me to have her give you a call?"

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Right.

Alison Monahan: Mostly, often times the person who wants to give you the new work at that point or really just back off and be like, "Oh, I didn't realize you were working for her. Let me find somebody else."

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Or-

Alison Monahan: If they really want you, they'll actually go and negotiate.

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You don't want to say, "No, I can't do it," ideally.

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: Maybe you can't but you need to make it their own problem, basically.

Sara O'Connor: I will say, one partner gave a piece of sage advice and that when you're saying no, if you truly are too busy and trying to determine if a deadline is arbitrary or if it's firm, one thing that can drive some partners crazy is if you say, "No, I'm too busy because," and list all of the different things that you're too busy to do. Because guess what, partners are busy people too, and some partners may not mind if you tell them all of the different things that you're working on as justification, but I'd wager that their list probably trumps your list. Giving a list of all of the different things as if it's an excuse, probably, is not your best tactic.

Alison Monahan: Right. If your list is long enough, at some point, you're like, "Well, are all of those really top priorities? Is there not anything that you can shift around?" You got to be judicious. I think your primary responsibility is to the person who's already given you work to do before you take on more, but you need to be thoughtful about how you approach it if somebody really does want you to do something else so that they don't hate you.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. I-

Alison Monahan: Which can happen.

Sara O'Connor: I will say, if this is a constant theme for you, that every week in the summer it seems as if you are too busy, and we've explained to you what too busy actually can mean, maybe, it's not your right forever home.

Alison Monahan: Right. That's basically what happened to me. I had two partners who literally thought I was working for them full-time, where full-time was 60 hours a week. At some point, you're like, "I can't work 120 hours a week. That's not feasible." In that case, I went to the person who was managing the summer program, and I was like, "Look, here's the situation. Something needs to be done because I can't work full-time for two different people when both of them are very, very demanding situations." He was like, "Well, I don't really have time to deal with this. I'm at trial. Just go tell one of them you can't work for him."

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. That's going to go really well. Of course, it was a total disaster. Again, that was not a good fit for me. It was not a good long term solution. Sometimes you get caught in these situations that really aren't your fault, even though you're the one who ended up being not treated so nicely, but these things happen. You just have to roll with it. All right. A couple of quick questions. We're running out of time. How can you get feedback in your summer job? Is this a reasonable thing to try to do?

Sara O'Connor: Ask. Ask, ask, ask. If you've asked, and they've said yes, and you haven't heard anything for about a week, ask again and just send a friendly reminder. Some people don't like giving feedback. That's more of a personal preference for some people, but if it's a good firm and if it's something that you really want, it's certainly something that is reasonable for you to request and reasonable for you to try and get. Some law firms or companies will actually have a mid-summer check in to let you know how you're doing, things you can work on to improve, what's going well. That's what my firm did. All of us found that to be very helpful. That kind of thing, whether that exist or not, and whether or not feedback is something that's given is something that should have been discussed somewhere during the interview process. Optimally, you'd know about it but it's certainly something that you can and should ask for and do follow up as needed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think if you've submitted work for someone, it's totally fair to either drop by their office or maybe ask them to get a coffee and just say, "Hey, I gave you this," whatever it was—deposition response or document, whatever. I don't know, whatever you do these days as a young lawyer— "I did this work for you and I just want to check in and see if you had any thoughts on it, any ways I could make it better, any things you were concerned about." Again, people are busy. It doesn't occur to them that they need to be coaching you along. I think it's totally reasonable. I don't think you can expect people always to do it, but it's a reasonable thing to ask for.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: All right. A lot of people in their summer jobs, whether they're firms, whether they're working in government, or whatever it is, are looking for a couple of things they need later. Writing samples and references. Do you have any thoughts on how to get these so that you have them for later?

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. I think writing samples ... Alison, I'm interested in your thoughts too, but I think writing samples are really tricky to get ...

Alison Monahan: I agree.

Sara O'Connor: ... because it's confidential information.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Let's just be clear. One thing you cannot do is just take whatever work product you did and submit it as your writing sample without asking anyone. That is not a good idea.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. With the chambers, there were some things that I would have loved to have used as a writing sample to try and go through OCI, but guess what, that's like internal chambers communications. You can't do that. With the law firm, we're talking about real, live clients who are dealing with real, live disputes. So, this is different from your LRW class where the names and the facts are made up. Now, I think, if for whatever reason your law school doesn't have an LRW program, which is now pretty darn atypical, you can ask if you are incredibly desperate to see if there's something that you can do for a writing sample, but understand that a lot of stuff would have to be blacked out.

Some law firms, though, have mock trial programs where it's a fake mock trial just like in law school, or sometimes associates will help partners out with articles like news updates on new cases that have come out. That stuff that's more likely to be able to be a writing sample because again, we don't have necessarily confidential information, particularly if we're talking about they're writing an article with a partner. The article has already been published. I don't see why that would be an issue.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think you just have to be really judicious and think about what it would be reasonable to use as a writing sample. If you're applying for a clerkship, and you were asked to do a summary of a particular area of law that was more general, that might make sense. If you are, whatever you want to use, you need to get explicit permission, preferably in writing, and you're probably going to have to make some edits or redactions. Whatever the final version is, you basically want to get sign off on that version so that you're not in a situation where you're circulating a writing sample or someone finds it and they're like, "We never gave you permission to use this. This is a breach of client confidentiality. This is a huge problem."

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. That's such solid advice, Alison. When it comes to a letter of recommendation, my question would be, "What am I recommending you for?"

Alison Monahan: Exactly. Sometimes-

Sara O'Connor: Go ahead, Alison. Go ahead.

Alison Monahan: Well, I'm just saying, if you're applying for clerkship, that's one thing. If you're applying for other law firms, hmm.

Sara O'Connor: Right. Exactly. Know your audience and what you're requesting. If I employed you for a summer and you've done stellar work, I'm going to feel really conflicted and may not give you an offer if you say to me "Oh, it's because I want to work for another big law firm. Things just didn't work out here." That's not best way to do that.

Alison Monahan: No. There may be circumstances where it makes sense. You're moving across the country, and they don't have an office in the city that you're going to or something like that. Or you've decided to completely switch practice areas, and they would just have absolutely nothing to offer you. You can think of scenarios where that might be reasonable, but typically, if you're just asking like, "Hey, I want to go to your competitor. Can you please give me a reference letter?" Probably not going to happen.

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: All right. Well, on my watch, we're way over time, but we did promise people some tips about working with support staff. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Two big bottom lines. First, they are a resource; and second, treat them with respect. When it comes to them being a resource, I know it can be—at least it was a little bit for me—daunting, the idea of working with someone who may have been at your employer 10 years before you were even born.

Alison Monahan: When you put it that way.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. That's just a thing, but the secretaries, the copy staff, the paralegals, they are there to support you. They are not there to be your crutch. They're not there to be your work husband or wife, but they are there to help you serve your clients the best, most effectively, and most efficiently way possible. Do not be hesitant to ask them for help, especially when it comes to administrative tasks, that's not stuff that is billable hours, or your firm expects you to do when they're paying salaried support staff to help you out. That said, they are valuable employees. You need to treat them with respect. If you walk into your employer's place of business with the attitude that you are an attorney and somehow, that has made you blessed and touched, that is great way to get a no offer. Because you need to treat these people with respect and frankly, a lot of these people have saved partner's butts.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. There's a lot of loyalty going the other direction.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: You may be assigned to share a secretary who has worked for a very important partner for 10 years. If they have to choose who's going to be kicked out, it's going to be you.

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You want to think about ways you can get this person either on your side or the very least for them to be neutral about you. You don't have to totally kiss up or anything, but if you're going for a coffee in the afternoon, it would be polite to ask your secretary or a paralegal you're working with, "Hey, do you want me to pick you anything up?" They can say yes or no. You don't have to do it every day, but make those little gestures, because sometimes you're going to need that person to cover for you sometimes.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. One of the things that I did during my first week is, I actually took my assigned secretary to coffee for about half an hour and I said, "These are the ways in which I work. What are the ways in which you work? What are some things that are appropriate for me to ask you for help with? What are some things that..." Because they've worked with other summers probably.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. They know that you know nothing, basically.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. I loved the idea and it really cleared the air between the mystifying "how will this work for the next eight to 12 weeks?" Take them to coffee or sit them down and say, "What do you normally do? What do you normally not do?" They will be so happy to help you and help clear the air. Now, you'll know what are appropriate ways that you can use the support staff.

Alison Monahan: Right. Because you may find out, for example, if you ask, they're perfectly happy to edit your citations.

Sara O'Connor: Right.

Alison Monahan: If that's the case and you're submitting an assignment, you also need to know, "Well, how much time do you need to do that? When do I need to get you something so you have sufficient time and it's not the last minute for you to help me with that?" They'll say, "Well, I need 24 hours or I need eight hours" or whatever it is. You can build that into your deadlines, but oftentimes, you'll find out like, "Oh, wow. This is amazing. This person is totally eager to help me. This is great." Other times, they'll say, "No. That's not what I do. Here's what I do." Or they may have someone else who does that.

Sara O'Connor: Right. Do remember, at the end of the day, your work product is your own.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely. You cannot blame them if they mess up your citations.

Sara O'Connor: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: All right. Well, any other final advice for people who are starting their summer jobs soon?

Sara O'Connor: I think, enjoy it. It can be daunting. It can be intimidating, but they chose you for a reason, and you get to own up and continue to prove that reason for the entire length of the summer, while determining whether or not they have shown you that they are worth your forever time once you graduate.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think that's absolutely key. You're evaluating whatever organization you're working in as much as they're evaluating you. If you find that it's horribly managed and nobody is managing workflow and you're working this crazy hours and you're not getting the type of work they promised you and people were being mean to you, well, that probably indicates you might want to keep looking for your forever job. All right. Sara, well, unfortunately, we are out of time. Thank you so much for joining us.

Sara O'Connor: Yeah. Thank you, guys. Glad to have helped.

Alison Monahan: Well, yeah. Good luck to everyone starting their summer jobs. You can totally do it. Don't flip out. If you enjoyed this episode of The Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating [on iTunes](#) or your favorite podcast listening app because we would really appreciate it. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Typically, we have few episodes on Monday morning. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at lawschooltoolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening. We'll talk soon and good luck in your summer job.

Resources:

- [How to Make a Good Impression at Your Summer Law Job](#)
- [Getting Ready for Your BigLaw Summer Job](#)
- [Tips for Legal Writing at Your Summer Job](#)
- [Four Tips for Summer Law Job Success](#)
- [Are You Emotionally Intelligent? 5 Soft Skills to Show Off in Your Summer Law Job](#)
- [How to End Your Summer Internship on a Good Note](#)
- [Podcast Episode 45: Writing Effectively in Your Summer Legal Job](#)
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