



## Episode 134: Personal Productivity

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're sharing some personal productivity tips which you can use to organize your life and get everything done. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. Together we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website, [CareerDicta](#). I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#).

If you enjoy the show, please leave a [review](#) or rating on your favorite listening app. And if any questions don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com](#) and we would love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're sharing some personal productivity tips which you can use to organize your life and get everything done, and wow, are we going to geek out on this because you and I love talking about this stuff.

Alison Monahan: Well Lee, let's share with our loyal listeners what is our very favorite productivity tool.

Lee Burgess: Oh, it's called Trello. We've talked about it before on the podcast. It's free, it's amazing and it basically solves all your life problems that require you to like compile information. There's so many reasons we have a deep love for Trello. I think for me personally one of the things I love about it is you can use it for so many different things, but you get to use the same tool. We use it internally for a lot of business purposes, but you and I have really started using it to manage our to-do lists which can get super cuckoo and out of control.

Alison Monahan: I've used it to find an apartment. I've used it to plan vacations. It's really basically whatever you need plan, particularly if you're working with someone else but even on your own, it's kind of amazing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's kind of amazing. We've had students use that to manage big research projects, to take notes and organize notes because it's a very flexible tool and I think for me I have been really tied to my notebook which something you and I bonded over early on is we both love taking paper notes and there just reaches a point where paper notes are starting to become not practical anymore. I've tried a lot of, I've tried Wunderlist, I've tried lots of different lists, tools to manage to-dos but they're not necessarily flexible enough to manage the entirety of my professional and some of my personal life.

Alison Monahan: Right, so what Trello kind of does is I mean, when you talk about a list, if you just listed out everything you need to get done it's going to be completely insane and like a hundred things long and you're going to look at it be like oh my gosh I don't even know where to start, like which of these are a priority, like what is in progress, I have no idea.

So what Trello basically lets you do is you can make separate lists which doesn't sound that powerful until you start thinking it really is a process. So, with a lot of the stuff that we all need to get done, it's not just you, say for example, I want to call and schedule a haircut and then I call them and they're going to call me back. Okay, well, is that still on my task list or not. I need a place to kind of put that. SO, on Trello, you can have a category that's like, that's the waiting area. And if I don't hear back from them in a couple days, maybe I need to move it back to my to-do list and actually call back. At this point it's kind of not really your responsibility.

Lee Burgess: Right, because it's not your responsibility but you still have to babysit the process.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. And so, any time you're working with a group of people you can see how this would be really powerful. Say that your study group is writing its own essay questions or something and there again, there's kind of a process, like somebody needs to write the question, they need to distribute the question. You need to have a timeframe for how long people have to answer the question before you get back together to talk about it, that kind of thing.

On Trello, you could have a study group board and you assign Lee to write a question on torts and you put Lee's due date on it and then say Lee is going to have someone else in the group review it before she circulates it to everyone else, so she can move it to the to review category. When it's ready it goes in ready and everyone gets the notification, like your torts question is ready. Maybe than the due date changes, so is the due date that you're going to submit them to each other and review your answers.

So, all this can happen without any email, which is amazing.

Lee Burgess: Which is amazing,

Alison Monahan: You don't have to go back and forth about oh, Lee needs to send to Bob that the question is ready for Bob to look at the Bob needs to send it to the group after he gets some other feedback from Lee and he's going back and forth. Then the whole group gets an email and you're looking in your email and you're like you can't find the question. Trello is just like oh, I'll just pop on to the board, the link's attached to it, there we go. It just saves you a lot of this back and forth that can be really maddening and a huge waste of time.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And email can be such a terrible way to organize your life. I mean we've all used it to organize our lives, like sending ourselves emails, remind ourselves to do things, but one of the things that is amazing too about Trello is if you use it for your own personal productivity tool where you're tracking all the things you need to do you can email your board and basically like forward an email that's in your inbox so it goes on your to-do List which is brilliant because one of the things that happens is that that email sits in your inbox and then it just like disappears. Never gets done.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I only display things that are starred as unread but within hours in a Gmail account, the stuff from the morning is already scrolled off on to the next page. And I've unsubscribe from every single mailing list and I've tried to cut down on notifications and all the stuff but still inevitably you get a lot of email.

Lee Burgess: And especially if you're in school and you're part of some student groups or you're on the Law Review. You're going to get a lot of information coming at you and you need to keep it organized.

Alison Monahan: Oh my gosh, anyone on a law journal who's listening to this, who has any input into your process, make your editorial board, start using Trello.

Lee Burgess: Oh my gosh, I would have been so excited if that could have happened, if Trello had existed when I was on the editorial board.

Alison Monahan: Right, because it's just such a disconnected process with so many people and everyone needs to know, there are people who need to know where all the pieces are and I'm already envisioning myself as a consultant to a law journal to set this up because you should be doing this.

Lee Burgess: It really does streamline how you can collaborate with others and to just track things. The other thing that I'm terrible about is the stuff that needs to be done not immediately, both personally and professionally. The stuff that we say, oh, we should really take care of that March, we should really take care of that over the summer. And then there's no list where that has existed, and I think these online tools and Trello the way that allows you to set up lists is I can have a list that's like stuff to do in the future.

Alison Monahan: Like do this year.

Lee Burgess: Do this this year, do this this month or just do this with dates on it and the dates are going to like change color if they get closer to remind me that things have to happen in a certain period of time.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. So, say that you know you commit to something off in the future which sounds great like, oh, of course, I'd love to come and give a talk at this bar association meeting next August.

Lee Burgess: It sounds like you're talking about what I have done.

Alison Monahan: Right, everyone who commits to things in the future and doesn't think that their future self is going to have to actually do them.

Lee Burgess: Right. Yes, in fact, I am excited to be presenting a presentation at my law school this weekend about the bar exam which is something I committed to last fall and February sounded super far away. I'm recording this right before February and let me tell you, it's not, it's like a few days away.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's the problem, these things show up. I have a paper to write for my class and it's not due until the end of the semester, but you probably don't want to start working on it the week before. You need to have some preliminary milestones. Again, break it down. When do you need to have a topic, who are the people you need to talk with that topic about. Do you need approval? How are you going to do your research? What research have you done? What sources are you going to use? All of this can be in one place which will drastically simplify your life.

That's I think one of the really key points and we're talking about this partly because recently we read an [article by the founder of Trello](#) how he was using it and we've really gone completely next level. We'll link to this in the show notes. But one of the key takeaways there was that everything in your life needs to be in one place. So, we're raving about Trello, but it could be something else. It could be a bullet journal, it could be a traditional paper planner. In theory, you could have a list or series of lists and then to do software.

Whatever works for you is you have to get everything down in one place. And so when you're talking about like how amazing it is that you can send an email and it goes on your Trello board, that's an example of you're basically collecting something that you're getting ready to forget but your brain is still kind of niggling about it and like wasn't there something, somebody send me that email, I know I'm supposed to do that thing but I can't really remember. Because if you don't get this stuff down, you're taking mental energy to try to remember it and inevitably you're going to forget.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I'm looking at my Trello to-do list right now and I've got like work, work, work, work, work and then it's like pack this essential oil to send to my mom and dad's house because my mom sent me text that she wanted me to see if I had some more of this essential oil that I could just like drop in a bag and drop off by your house. But If that didn't go on my to-do with I would not go home tonight and go look for that and remember that I needed to get that for her because it would've been gone.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, one of the things that I added to his suggestions was actually a to-buy list for things like this where I ran out of dried shitake mushrooms. What are the odds that when I'm in the one store that sells shitake mushrooms I'm going to

remember that that's what I needed or seven other random items, like wax paper? But now, every time I go into a grocery type store I just look at the to-buy list because it's on my phone and I'm like, oh gosh, yes, I need those dried mushrooms. And yesterday I actually bought them in the one store that I knew had them. It was amazing. I was standing in line at the checkout counter and then I was like oh, I think those are on my list, let me check.

Lee Burgess: That's brilliant. I just added the to-buy list on to my Trello board as we're talking right now because that's very exciting.

Alison Monahan: And if you think about some random thing that you need, it's like, oh, I really need to buy like a random item from Amazon or whatever and for some reason you don't have time to look for it, I can just email it directly to my board and then at some point I'll look at it and be like oh, I totally did need to buy that, I should do that right now.

Lee Burgess: That's amazing. See guys, it's just all about putting everything in one spot. And the mental load of keeping track of details in your head is so exhausting.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, we're terrible at it. Humans are not good at this.

Lee Burgess: And the more complicated your life gets, the worse you become at this.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. And you know me, I'm like the biggest scribbler on the back of notepads and envelopes and receipts and things like that. I mean, that's literally how I kept track of my to-do list until fairly recently. I know from experience you are going to lose that one piece of paper that you really need. It's fine if you use a paper planner or a bullet journal or something and you put it in there because then your odds of losing that are hopefully fairly low because it's probably your most prized possession. I do think you actually have to really seriously think about how you back that up because if you lose your paper planner basically your world is disaster. I don't know how you back that up, but you probably want to think about it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's a that's a really good point which is another benefit of the interwebs. The online space you can access it from multiple devices. The other thing that I think you and I have noticed since keeping these to-do lists is that if you have a half hour where you're killing time between things and you don't really want to start another project, you can scan your to-do list and see if you can just knock some stuff out.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely and we're going to talk about this soon because I have read an entire book based on a recommendation in this article and that's really one of the things that talks about. So, the book that I'm referring to is called [Work Clean](#), and it's what great chefs believe it or not can teach us about organization. It's by this guy Dan Charnas I guess his name is, we can link to it.

If you think about a professional kitchen, they have this concept of Mise-En-Place which you probably are familiar with, I don't know Lee.

Lee Burgess: Yes, because I've taken a cooking class before. They taught me how to do Mise-En-Place. I'm terrible at it doing it in my own kitchen but I appreciate the benefits of it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so the idea which is really interesting is when you show up to culinary school, most people in their regular lives are kind of just organized and don't really have, they're not as efficient as they could be and that's fine. When you're cooking whatever for your child, like you don't need to have everything laid out in advance and that kind of thing, it might improve your life slightly. If you're in a professional kitchen, you have to have everything basically prepared within arm's reach and you have to have all of your steps down so that you're not wasting a lot of time and energy.

Think about for example if you were in charge of plating the salads, which is probably the lowest level of any chef or any cook ...

Lee Burgess: Totally be what I would be put in charge of.

Alison Monahan: You step in and they're like, okay, you don't really know what you're doing, we can't really trust you to cook but it looks like you could probably assemble some salad ingredients and get them out. But imagine that that has to go on the side of a plate with someone else who's cooking the protein or imagine that instead of having all of the pieces prepared and ready to go, you're running back and forth to the refrigerator every time you need to get some goat cheese. Then you run across the kitchen and then you're like, oh no, I forgot to get the lettuce and you run back. You would not last very long in this kitchen. And this restaurant out last very long because they can't get the food.

So, his point, what's really interesting about this book is like this is a very high-pressure situation where people are working together to do very specific things and they have to get it done. Your ingredients are perishable, people are hungry. If you're sitting there hungry, one or two minutes is enough to leave a bad Yelp review. So, the point is, chefs have really come up with this idea that's been around for quite a while about how to go about doing this stuff. A lot of it as it turns out potentially applies to knowledge work, like law school or lawyers.

So, I'll just run through a couple of kind of the takeaways here and we can talk through them, but I think there's a lot, it's a fascinating book, you can read it this summer or something. I think there's a lot to say about just the way you think about doing your work. Because when you think about knowledge work it's like, oh, well, you just have to go to the library and do it but that's not really the case, like what if you show up and you don't have the book, or you don't have your highlighter, or you don't have this or that and you can't do your work. A lot of these concepts really apply equally well to everyone.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, you've got to have all your tools whatever you're planning on doing. If you're going to go to the school and do an outlining session you need to have your supplement and maybe a printed old outline for something else and your laptop and maybe some snacks and various other things that you need to kind of get through your afternoon so you're not wasting a bunch of time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, because if you show up and you're like, oh, I forgot my supplement, oops. Number one is basically you've got to plan. So, if you're a cookbook you actually spend a lot of your time planning. So, you're thinking about like what do you need to buy and how are you going to cut it and how are you going to prepare it, but the same thing applies to a law student. You've got to plan your day, you've got to plan your semester because otherwise I can pretty much guarantee your stuff is not going to get done.

We talk to a lot of people, students who are like, well, I think I did poorly in legal writing because I didn't have time to do my assignment. And it's like okay, you had the same amount of time as everyone else your class, you just didn't do it. I'm not as sympathetic here, like you have the time, you just did not do a very good job planning and you ran out of time because you didn't start early enough, or you didn't whatever it was. If you're listen to this I think the biggest key to productivity is unfortunately you've got to make some plans.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. At the beginning of your day before you leave home or even the night before, like get your stuff together so you're not making quick decisions to get out of the house because that's when you forget stuff.

Alison Monahan: So, one of the things I do every morning is I double check my calendar and I see what meetings I have scheduled, and I actually set a timer on my phone 15 minutes in advance at those meetings. Otherwise I'm like, I'm going to remember this. If I'm deep in something else or I'm like out running an errand, half the time I'm like why is this alarm going off and I'm like, oh, because I have a call in 15 minutes I need to go and take.

Lee Burgess: Totally.

Alison Monahan: Stuff can show up on your schedule unexpectedly or that kind of thing, but I think just taking those few minutes to plan your day is really going to make a huge difference.

Lee Burgess: I think that's very true.

Alison Monahan: Another thing they talk a lot which I think is underestimated for students is really arranging your space and making sure that you have some place that works for you to study in.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's really interesting because I did have this takeaway when I did some cooking classes where they were talking about how important it was to

have a bowl where you put all of your scraps as you were cutting. It's like, this is where you put all of your food scraps. It's like right next to the cutting board and it's like cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. Cut things go one place, trash goes in here and then to clean up you just like pick that up and you compost it or do whatever you need to do. And of course, I was like, oh, why can't I just like go take it over the compost. But then I realized how much more efficient it was to just have your left hand goes into the trash bin and then your right hand goes where the food prepared food's going to be. And you start to see that like if your space makes sense you are a lot faster and less kind of discombobulated.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. That's one of the things the book talks about in the office context too is if you're dealing with a super messy desk where you can't find anything, or your space is just totally disorganized, like just get rid of everything. Start from scratch and put back the stuff that you really need. And you'll realize like you don't need a lot of the stuff here. Maybe you need a bookcase that holds your books, but you don't need them all open on the ground which I used to love to do.

So, it's like clean up as you go so if you're switching projects you're clearing your mind basically. Just thinking through your physical space and how it's working for you can really be a huge part of productivity because you want to make sure you have the stuff you need. One of the things I think I always found to be a stressor in law schools for some reason, either I didn't have it, or it wasn't working or was it my friend, they didn't have it was a printer. It's just like have a printer that's working. Again, I have a printer, but the cartridge is old and it won't print anymore. It's like, oh. These are maddening because then you have to leave your house you have to go to the printer and you've completely disrupted your flow. You don't have the stuff you need to start working. Maybe it was on your to-do list you would have either ordered your printer cartridge or made a note to get it printed while you were out doing something else so that you had it.

These are the things that's like okay, how much does a printer cost. I know you're a student but it's probably worth it to have one.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's probably something you need.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You're in law school for three years, buy yourself a printer.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Alison Monahan: Other things I thought were interesting and I think are totally applicable to school is slowing down to speed up. Doing things deliberately to begin with and then maybe doing them faster. So, for example, we just did a recent episode about multiple choice questions and one of the things people try to do is they rush through them and then they get them all wrong.

So, it's a really hard to get students to slow down, maybe take twice as much time and then you actually get better at it eventually. But you have to slow down and really think through your process and then it applies to all kinds of things. Are you making an outline? Do you normally just throw a bunch of stuff together and like hope for the best? Well, that's probably not the most efficient thing to do. So, you know, maybe you need to really slow down and think through particularly at this point in the semester, you've taken exams, what worked for you, what pieces of your study aids were the most helpful. And then you can put those together and do more stuff like that.

Lee Burgess: It is hard sometimes when you're feeling overwhelmed to slow down and do some of that planning or slow down to be methodical, but it really does help. It's like the more panicked and overwhelmed you feel the more you probably need to slow down and take a step back.

Alison Monahan: Right, and can even be physically. We talk about breathing and even on an exam, like okay, you're panicking about a question, just take a few deep breaths, like you have the time to do that.

Lee Burgess: Yup, exactly. But you need to really kind of you know slow down, take a step back and then sometimes slow down the work and then you can figure out how to organize it all. My recent nonprofessional story about this was I was hosting holidays at my house and I had a lot of people coming over. I was responsible for multiple meals. I have family members who like very specific things. My head was going to explode. It was one of these things where I was like I was ordering desserts from one place and I had shopping list at the Farmer's Market and then I had another shopping list at the grocery store and the I had a shopping list for things ...

And I realized that I was spinning out of control because I didn't take any time to just slow down and like figure out how I was going to get all the stuff done and then I just finally got out my notepad, I did do it on a notepad. Although now I would probably do it on Trello and I just said okay, I need like a Farmer's Market last and like another list and then like the list of how I'm going to cook all this stuff and when. By just taking time and organizing everything, all the sudden, the holidays didn't seem so overwhelming and as we got closer to the event I could take my lists down to my kitchen and be like this is the plan for the holidays. This is how it's going to be executed. Everybody got fed and everybody had what they needed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's fascinating in this book he actually has charts that they apparently give students at the Culinary Institute of America on their first day. Every single thing that they cook they basically have to have this chart filled in where it's like what are my steps, what are the order I'm going to do them in, what ingredients do I need. Basically, if they screw something up and the meal is a disaster, the first thing their instructors do is ask to see their chart.

Lee Burgess: Interesting.

Alison Monahan: Because they're like most likely what happened was something that you didn't do correctly in the planning process. You forgot a step and so you didn't have the sauce at the right time or whatever but they're like that wasn't in the moment, that was when you planned.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's really interesting.

Alison Monahan: I think in the student context if you have gotten grades you're not happy with, it probably wasn't random fluke. There's probably something going on in your personal productivity that caused that to happen. So, you got to figure out basically by deconstructing your process what was it. What was it that caused me not to be prepared in the way that I wanted to be for this exam, and how can I change that going forward?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's interesting. I can also think, I was just working with a student on the pre-planning process and how important it is for you to have habits about how you approach an essay question to be very methodical and have the same approach. And oftentimes if a question breaks down, like your answer was not organized, the first thing we do is say, well show me your scratch paper.

Alison Monahan: Right, like what was your outline? What were you working from?

Lee Burgess: What was your outline? When did you organize it? And then you oftentimes see that there was no outline and there was an outline but it wasn't organized.

Alison Monahan: There was a gaping hole. It's like, well, here's where you missed this problem. It wasn't in writing, it was in the fact that you didn't see this fact then triggered this issue. We can point to this gaping hole from the get go. There's a lot more in the book, I think it's actually super interesting, people can look at it.

One of the other things I think is a combination factor is making first moves and then finishing actions. So, a lot of times you have a task that just seems so incredibly overwhelming. You have to write your Law Review and you're like, oh my gosh, where would I even start with that. If you talk to some people who've done this, or I think there probably is even a book that you can refer to, there are lots of people have done this before and they can kind of point you in that direction of this is the first thing you need to do. Probably you probably want to pick a topic. You've got to do something to get started. So, you've got to make that first move but then you also have to train yourself really to finish things because how many people particularly students have all these unfinished projects. Your outlines are like 90% done but not quite there. That is incredibly draining.

Lee Burgess: It really is. You've got to knock things off.

Alison Monahan: Think about sometimes too, like okay, if I have all these things that are almost finished but I haven't quite committed to them because I'm a perfectionist and they're not as perfect as they could be, it's like in the programming world, you just got to ship it. You've got to put it out there. So, you're submitting a proposal for something or you're doing a first draft of something. At some point you just have to put it out there and get it off your list and then oftentimes you're going to get feedback on it and make it better and that's part of the process. If you don't ever finish anything you can never move on.

Lee Burgess: So true.

Alison Monahan: I don't know. I think there's a lot to think about in this type of mindset. One of the other things he talks about which I found completely enlightening, although it probably should've been obvious before, there are really two types of things that we do when we're working. There's the immersive time, which is like really deep work and then there's the process time.

So, process is this stuff that doesn't really take a whole lot of mental energy but it's easy to put off and if you delay it, it means other things are not done. Say for example, you want to order a study aid for a class you're struggling in. That's going to take you what, maybe five minutes on Amazon, maybe like 20 minutes if you go to the campus bookstore. But you keep forgetting to do it, so you can't study for the class because you didn't spend the five minutes to order the study aid.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's very true.

Alison Monahan: You're in charge of a club. Somebody asked for your feedback on a possible venue and you never respond to the email and now they're waiting for your feedback so now the entire event is not moving forward, it's totally your fault. It would take you again five minutes to be like, well, I went to this place, I think was pretty good, here's another option, get back to me on that.

Lee Burgess: When we were incorporating this new to-do list, one of the things I've been putting off is going in to get new eye glasses. It was one of those things where I'm like, oh, I need to do that, and I was finally like just make the appointment because step one is making the appointment and you have to go and I would never have gone if it hadn't been on my calendar. Then I just got new glasses and it's like, oh, these are so clear and unscratched, it's like life changing. Why didn't I do this months ago.

Alison Monahan: I think we all have these things where they just, I mean, for me what I found a lot of times the thought of like, oh gosh, I really need to do that pops up at some random time and I think I'll never forget that. Like of course I'll remember that. Then 10 minutes later you're like, what was I thinking about, I have no idea. And then I have to like reconstruct my entire history, like okay, well I was walking, and I saw this store and maybe the store triggered the thought or

maybe I was at the bank, did I need to go get money. Did I see something. Like just turning all this mental energy and it turns out that you really needed to schedule a haircut. And you saw someone whose hair you liked and you thought like, oh, I really need to get a haircut on the schedule.

Or, you know, it could be more serious stuff like you need to submit your list of OCI bids to your school or you're not getting any interviews. These things happen. People just don't do that. When you really think about what type of task you have, and the other problem is these immersive tasks like the deep-thinking ones, that's something you alone can do. You have to sit in the library, you have to make sense of this material for yourself, you have to take the practice test, all that kind of stuff. But again, you can't take the practice test until you found one so that's a process task. Find hypo to work on. But if you don't schedule this deep work that's not going to happen.

Lee Burgess: Most people don't enjoy scheduling the deep work or having to block off huge times in your calendar, but you and I have recently had to do that because we've had some big projects that needed to get done. It's the only way to get stuff done.

Alison Monahan: And it's kind of liberating because you just plan your day around it, you plan your week around it. For me I was like okay, on Wednesday I am blocking out five hours to do this project. And when people invited me to lunch I said, no, I can't go because I'm doing this project. And like what, I'm like, it's on my calendar. The amount that I got done in like one five-hour session was incredible.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I think the key here is that you can think about which type of tasks are in each category and then you plan time for both of them. Maybe 30 minutes twice a day you might do all the annoying process tasks that build up because if you can knock off five or six things in half an hour, how, your life is just so much easier. You're going to have new eyeglasses, you're going to have a haircut. You're going to have a suit for the interview. Whatever it is. You've got to put these pieces in motion.

You can set your deep work times like probably on the weekend, like three or four hours, and again, that's then protected time. And you do the same thing with exercise or whatever it is, protecting that time. I will admit I have not been to the gym this entire year and I keep thinking I'm going to go and I know I'm not going to go until I actually put it as an appointment on my calendar.

Lee Burgess: It's true, yeah. It's like the only way it happens.

Alison Monahan: It's pretty sad but it is true.

Lee Burgess: And you have talked to me about the Periscope technique too, where you work intensely for about 45 or 50 minutes with no interruptions and then come up for air.

Alison Monahan: [I've got a post on the Girl's Guide website call it the Circles](#). This book referred to as the Periscope. But yeah, basically the idea being you go deep and then most people's brains can't focus for much longer than about an hour anyway. You do you know legitimately need to deal with things throughout the day, so you come up for air, you check your voicemail, you look for urgent emails and then maybe you take a five or 10-minute break and then you go back into the next session. I think that can be a really effective way to work versus sometimes students say, oh well, I'm just going to go to the library and study for four straight hours.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You're probably a lot less effective at the end of that four-hour period than you were when you started.

Lee Burgess: And I think it helps too if you have a very specific goal that you're doing for that time too because usually that's like one task or one part of a project or something like that. So, it can be very overwhelming to say I'm going to sit down and like do my criminal outline. It might be easier to say I'm going to outline the section on homicide and see where that gets me.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think the more specific it can be about what you're trying to get done, the more likely you are to achieve it because really, you're committing to a process of making decisions about what to work on, prioritizing versus just kind of randomly dealing with life as it comes at you. A lot of law students I think feel like I'm just so overwhelmed with what my professors are telling me to read and my legal writing and like okay, I get that, but you still have to prepare for exams. Like when is that going to happen?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And you kind of have to take control over your time. The more control you have over it I think the less overwhelmed you feel. Because when you start allocating time for things and getting more stuff done, you're going to feel less overwhelmed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's amazing. You're like wow, I'm so productive.

Lee Burgess: I know. One of the things we have recommended to students in the past is when you really feel like you don't have enough hours in the day is to track your time a little bit. See where the hours are going because you might find out you're not doing five hours of work at the library and that's important information to have. Then you need to come up with a new plan to better utilize those five hours so you're getting the benefit of the time that you feel like you're putting in.

Alison Monahan: Right. If you sit down to outline a section of homicide and you give yourself three hours and you only get through one quarter of it, that's actually valuable information. Either it's much more complicated than you thought or for some reason you aren't really focusing, you aren't getting anything done, you were spinning your wheels. But you've got to kind of analyze, like okay, what happened here. I didn't achieve what I thought I was going to get done so what is it that stopped me from doing that so that you can plan better in the future.

So, I think the key really to productivity is pretty simple. You've got to get clear on what's most important and then you just got to figure out a way to get those things done as smoothly as possible. In some ways this is hard but it's not that complicated.

Lee Burgess: No, but it does take a little bit of time investment in the beginning to create these habits that will in the end save you a lot of time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and getting your tools in place. If we go back to the Mise-En-Place, like if you don't have a knife you can't cook. You've got to make sure you have your knife and like what type of knife and do you need different types of knives. It's the same thing with if you're a law student, like, if you're going to make your outline you probably need your book and you need a supplement, you need your class notes. Again, this is something you're going to replicate basically for every single outline that you ever make. So, you may as well work on getting it right.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. Productivity in law school I think a few things to think about is you want to have one place where you have all your required activities and tasks that you can easily access. So, we're obsessed with Trello, but we've talked about other tools. We know people who bullet journal, paper planners, things like that. But whatever you do you need to pick a method and try it for a while and house everything on it.

Alison Monahan: I think another key thing that sometimes gets overlooked is you need a way to easily update that. I think that's kind of the magic of our new Trello approach is that you can send an email, or you can star a message or something like that it goes on to that board. And I think for me that was kind of the missing piece with a lot of my other methods is that maybe I didn't have the index card that had my to-do list on it so I can't update it. And then I start another one and then at some point I have to spend time consolidating them or maybe I'll lose one. That's not great, it just, it's a waste of time.

Lee Burgess: You also need to have a well-equipped workspace that has all the things that you need. So, if this is maybe at your home, you might have a desk and a printer and various other tools that you need. But if you are working most of your time at school then you need a backpack that has those tools in it. So, you typically carry what you need with you, so you don't get to school and realize you don't have what you need to get stuff done.

Alison Monahan: You've got to get organized. There's nothing more frustrating than sitting down to do something and then finding out you don't have the one thing that you need to do it. It's maddening.

Lee Burgess: It's super maddening.

Alison Monahan: I think also in terms of planning time you've got to have a clear time for deep work and also a plan for dealing with these process tasks that can just totally overwhelm you. And then I think also processes and a way to organize things like your legal research and writing assignments. And part of this is you need to have an eye towards making it easy to pick up where you left off.

Say you're doing legal research, you don't want to have to remember what cases you were thinking of using or what ideas you had about a certain case or statute or something. Make sure all of this is somewhere where you've recorded that information and then when you look at it, you're like, oh yeah right, I do recall this case and then let me see what my not was. Oh right, this was what I was thinking about doing with it. That's going to help you a lot.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also think something we should add to this list is so how to handle email because I think email can be a huge interrupter when you're doing deep work and things like that. I know we mentioned keeping your phone on silent, turning off the internet.

Alison Monahan: Seriously just turn it off.

Lee Burgess: I think you need to like turn off your email or schedule another set of time where you kind of comb through your email so you're not constantly like interrupting yourself to answer things because that is really a way to interrupt productivity and make you feel even more scattered.

Alison Monahan: No, I think if you're, literally, it wasn't a joke, I think if you're doing deep work you turn off everything else. This is not a time to be interrupted by email from Career Services bugging you about something or some event that's happening. Just turn it off. We had talked about deep work before, but your brain is going to get distracted by these interruptions and it's much harder to stop and start than to get to a point of flow and that's really what you're going for now.

Lee Burgess: And then it's just going to take longer and you're not going to be as productive. And who wants to do extra work, no one.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. You're just going to be spinning your wheels and you're like okay, I didn't get anything done. Now that task is still on my to-do list and I have six hours less time to get it done. Awesome.

Lee Burgess: Yup.

Alison Monahan: It's similar to the legal research. I think having some sort of process that you've honed for creating your study aids, that again, that enables you to work on them when you have time and not waste time figuring out what you need to be doing is going to drastically streamline your life. So, you know what works best for you and maybe you have to change it a little bit per class or whatever, but these are not things you're going to create in one sitting. You're going to work on them and then maybe a week later or two weeks later, you come back, what are the pieces you've kind of collected. You need to make sure you have some way to keep track of that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's very true. And then I think if you're trying to think of any last tips around productivity I think you've got to give some of these tools a try for a little bit. Any time you change up your habits it's going to be a little bumpy and you're going to want to streamline or tweak or add things. [The article that we're going to link to by the Trello founder](#), that was really great for both Alison and I to start our new to-do list like plan but then we've each customized it and tweaked it based on what our life needs. I think that that is something else you want to give yourself time to do. The first day you try some sort of a list is not going to be the most seamless day.

Alison Monahan: Frankly you're probably going to be totally overwhelmed at all of the things you just put on that list. If you actually get everything you need to do in one place, it's probably going to basically give you a heart attack. You just have to start chipping away at it piece by piece and then you'll see it get more and more manageable and then hopefully at some point you're on track with a process that really works for you that enables you to feel like you have things under control.

Lee Burgess: Yup, absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Well, with that, unfortunately we are out of time, speaking of time. If you enjoyed this episode of Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave review and rating on your favorite listening app because we'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at [Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:Lee@lawschooltoolbox.com) or [Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com). Or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening and we'll talk soon.

#### Resources:

- [Find Work-Life Focus: a Trello Insider's Guide to Personal Productivity](#)
- [Work Clean: The life-changing power of mise-en-place to organize your life, work, and mind, by Dan Charnas](#)
- [Need to Get More Done in Law School? Try the Circles](#)