



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today we're talking with ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones about the secret life of law firms. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan and typically I'm here with Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you're truly 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](#).

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Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today, we're talking with ex-BigLaw recruiter, Sadie Jones, about the secret life of law firms by which we really mean large law firms. So welcome Sadie.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me back.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. So before we really dive in, let's talk a little bit about the incident that actually prompted this podcast. So, you've seen the [Above the Law article](#) that we were both a little shocked by. Tell me about that.

Sadie Jones: I was partially shocked and partially not shocked. So it was an article about a goodbye email that had been sent by an associate at a large law firm. You know, who was leaving and it was pretty standard. And then there was a response back reply all to I believe the whole firm. It might've been the whole office. That sort of, I felt like shamed her for having sent that email and basically said no one really knows you or cares about you and why would you send this to everybody? And it was from a business person at the firm. And that was the article. And then in response, other like leadership replied back and kind of told the associate that it was fine and I think that that response was inappropriate. And that was really what the article was about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it is kind of funny because somebody who is listening to this who's not worked at a law firm might be looking at us, that's kind of stupid, why did this girl like tell everybody at the firm she was leaving? But as you said, completely standard. This is where-

Sadie Jones: Absolutely, if I anything I would say that I've had situations where someone doesn't send out a goodbye email. That's a big deal.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, you would never leave without doing that. And I mean this is one of those things...



- Sadie Jones: Yeah, it's offensive.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah I kind of remember when I was working in firms cause I summered a bunch of places, I worked different places and I remember you're kind of getting these emails, you're like who are these people? And like why am I getting this email of someone I've never even heard of who's leaving to go to another firm or do whatever? But it's just a thing that law firms do and they all do it.
- Sadie Jones: Yes. Absolutely. It's really expected of you and I think if you leave and you haven't sent one, no one knows you left and you know they can't believe it.
- Alison Monahan: Or if they wanted ... Right, I mean maybe somebody wants to follow up with you, they might want your personal email, I mean you know, somebody who's listening to this from the business world might be like well why don't you just contact the people who might wanna know? But that's, for whatever reason, that's just not how things work.
- Sadie Jones: It's a unique law firm thing because I think it's such sort of a tight culture a lot of times that you wanna know what's going on with everybody even if you don't know them.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. So we're gonna talk in a minute about some of the reasons we think law firms are weird. But I thought this was really, a very telling incident because I mean, A, the guy who sent the response email was clearly an insane jerk. And the idea that anyone would think that was ever appropriate to send, even if that's what they were thinking, that was shocking to me. But that idea that he's working in a business capacity in a law firm and doesn't understand this culture basically he made himself look like the idiot here.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And it said that he actually hadn't been at the firm very long so I think it's definitely true that he didn't understand the culture. But I would say it was shocking, but it was in a way not shocking because I think that the unique personalities and like you said, some crazy people, tend to exist at law firms, so the fact that something crazy and totally out of line came out, that to me is the less shocking part.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean definitely, there are a number of similar incidents that we can probably all refer to if you're curious about them, go to Above the Law, find this particular article, click on the category, you'll probably find all kinds of inappropriate emails that were sent to the entire firm, some of them coming from associates who are leaving and send a barn burning email to the entire firm about everything they hate. I mean there's the infamous one at the firm I was working at about checking your email at three in the morning with about 8000 typos in it. Yeah, the "reply all" culture of law firms is actually really funny sometimes.



- Sadie Jones: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: But I think the point to make here is if you're starting your practice in one of these places, you need to understand that there are things that probably are gonna seem weird or non-intuitive to you but you need to be careful about not stepping on toes about things you don't know cause obviously this guy did enormous damage to his personal reputation by sending this.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I mean, even not knowing anything about law firms, the fact that he was somebody that felt the need to ever send something like this to anybody says a lot about him.
- Alison Monahan: Right, exactly.
- Sadie Jones: But I agree, and especially when you start seeing things that seem a little odd but like are happening over and over again or things like that, obviously you should ask somebody about them rather than just not understand. Like maybe it's something that someone can explain who's been there longer.
- Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. So let's talk a little bit about what underlies a lot of this weird stuff that I think you see in law firms. And the first thing on this list that I made was actually what you mentioned just a minute ago. So, people particularly higher ups are people who have been around for a while in law firms, they like to pretend that they're still partners in these sort of genteel, egalitarian organizations where everyone sits in a room and figures things out and they're all buddies. And they like to pretend it's not a business right?
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I think partners tend to refer think each other as like my partner a lot of times.
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Sadie Jones: But that's not actually correct.
- Alison Monahan: Well I mean they may or may not be, there's lots of ways you could be a partner these days.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. But, it's like not necessarily correct and that you really believe everybody who's a quote-unquote "partner" is like equal to you.
- Alison Monahan: Right. And you know I think a lot of the intrigue at firms in particular as you get a little bit more senior is around things like billing and origination credits. And so basically they're all fighting for the money, but they wanna pretend that they're not. And they wanna pretend that they're not business people. And they're not running a business.



Sadie Jones: But I think if you hear partners talk to each other, they usually know where they are in the food chain and where everybody else is and if they don't, they wanna know, they figure out and it's like a document by accident gets left at the printer that has that sort of information which is something I might've heard of. People will look.

Alison Monahan: Well, of course they're gonna look. And a lot of this started in the 80's when the America Lawyer I think it is put out their top law firms by profits by partner and suddenly everyone knew where they stood in relation to their peers at different firms at least on average. And I think that really changed the culture of law firms because suddenly, if you knew that you graduated in the same class as person X and you knew that person X was a partner in your same year across town and you knew that on average, partners in his year at that firm were making 50,000 dollars more per year than you, then suddenly people starting thinking oh, why am I not making that? I should be making that.

Sadie Jones: And in the same way I think even having profits per partner changes the culture of the firm because all of a sudden, you know, I think the competitiveness just goes up in the whole place.

Alison Monahan: Right. And certainly a lot, I mean, this is important consideration understand if you're look at different firms, is firms pay people differently. So some firms still have a more egalitarian model where if you started in this year, you make this amount of money even if you're partner. I think straight, what do they even call that? I can't remember.

Sadie Jones: Equity partner?

Alison Monahan: Right, but what are they call it, oh lock stub.

Sadie Jones: Oh, right like associates.

Alison Monahan: Right, so you know, that's becoming I think less and less common. I think more and more it's sort of the more eat you kill model which basically means if you're bringing in business, you're gonna get a chunk of that business in terms of your pay. But different firms do these things differently and I think that's an important consideration to look at because that can really impact your experience there.

Sadie Jones: And I think along those lines, things like bringing in groups of partners or mergers or things like that or somebody came in and had a set deal, sometimes that can sort of change things and there's a feeling about them and I know, people can negotiate really well when they're starting somewhere and they're in this bracket and everybody can have a feeling about that who have already



been there. So kind of you know, have they taken on a lot of lateral partners or groups, or what's that like cause I think that really affects the culture.

Alison Monahan: No, that's a great point. If you think that you're gonna work at a certain firm and you start there as the summer, and you think you're gonna work with a certain group of people, you know you might wanna be aware of where those people came from. Are they from within the firm or did they just move there a year ago? Because that may impact your experience.

Sadie Jones: Cause I think traditionally law firms, and some of the older really conservative sort of firms, they kind of pride themselves on you start as a summer associate, you make your way up, we don't do a lot of lateral things and I've worked at a firm like that. And I think the culture can be different than sort of a newer maybe firm that's bringing in lots of new and different people and combining them.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and I think it's worth looking too like who is on the managing committee, like what type of people are they, how old are they. Cause right now I think we're in a time of transition where I think a lot of the torches are kind of starting to pass to a younger generation who maybe they wanna run things differently, maybe less genteel, more competition, whatever. You know these are just things to be aware of.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Like what you're getting into. Certainly firms do have different cultures and some of them are more, I don't know, I guess nicer is the best way to put it, than others.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.

Alison Monahan: I mean I think there's a lot that comes out of this kind of like oh, we're not business people. I mean one of them is firms hate to pay money for non-lawyers for anything. So things like HR, IT, marketing, that kind of thing, business development, lawyers tend to think that they're qualified to run every aspect of this business along with billing two thousand plus hours per year and I think that has some really, you know that can impact things on the ground. I'm actually, I'm not even sure any place I worked had an actual HR department. What about the firms you were at?

Sadie Jones: Yeah, a lot of times the office administrators is the HR person, so I think the idea is, and you know a lot of times that person isn't really qualified and doesn't know a lot things. So I think really what happens is everything is staffed really leanly, you know same for marketing department, which law firms actually really need. You're going to be going to them all the time for client stuff. And I



know a lot of times it's like very tight and they're working with multiple practice groups and it's hard to get what you want and I think that can make it harder. But that's something I actually think to consider when you're looking at different places cause you can kind of see some of that.

There are places you know that I think do put more into those sort of things and like realize that marketing's important for example or what not. But yeah, I mean that is something you're gonna deal with is that there aren't necessarily gonna be a ton of people to help you with these different things and to ask HR questions and to get tech help. I know that that's a really big deal when your computer doesn't work for example.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I would say on balance, the IT in law firms is horrific. It's just awful.

Sadie Jones: I agree.

Alison Monahan: I think you, even if you're looking at firms, I think you can consider like are there firms I'm looking at that do seem to be more professionally run, you do have people actually dedicated. I mean it's kind of crazy if you're running a business with thousands of people working for you which a lot of these firms do, that's not that crazy, if you combine all their offices, and they literally have like no one doing HR.

Sadie Jones: Well I think a way you can actually look for that is a more recent trend is to have like chiefs of different departments. I would say that was a trend and then it went down because I think in the kind of economy.

Alison Monahan: Recession.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. You know they got rid of a lot of those people, I do think some of them are sort of bringing them back, but that stuff you can even see on the website because if you're like a chief of something, even if you're not an attorney, you will be listed, you can see like do they have business people running things? There are some firms that have COO's, people aren't actually practicing lawyers.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sadie Jones: I mean, even knowing that the chairman of the firm, is the chairman just working as a chairman or do they also have a busy practice? Cause I think that has affected places I've been.

Alison Monahan: Oh I think for sure. I mean the reality is you know you can't be a full time lawyer and also run a thousand person business effectively. That's just not, I mean if you're business first listing, that's crazy. Of course you need a COO, CFO, a CEO.



You know you need people to do the management. But, lawyers believe that they can do everything and everyone else's jobs, so that's just what they do.

Sadie Jones: And I think what happens in the end is that they're always gonna put their client work first, so the other stuff is always gonna suffer. Even if you have you know, a partner who is in charge of the office, they're gonna neglect things if they have a busy practice.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah I mean one place I summered, the head of the summer program, was at trial during the summer.

Sadie Jones: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know so of course if there were issues, you'd be like well you know, we should really talk to this person about that and they're like well, I'm at trial. I can't talk to you about some random summer associate problem.

Sadie Jones: And you'd think in that case, they would assign someone else to do it over the summer but I think people don't wanna give that up.

Alison Monahan: Right it's like this person wanted to be, oh no I'm in charge of things but I'm also going to trial. I mean that's terrible management. It is terrible management. And most law firms, let's be frank, are pretty terribly managed.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.

Alison Monahan: And this is not just kind of the COO like managing partner of the firm type of chairmen level, it's also the reality that most law firm partners are not really the greatest people to work for and some of this is their fault and some of it's not. But you know a lot of it, they have no real training in management, most of them are not particularly interested in managing people, they just basically wanna do their client work.

Sadie Jones: Yes. And I think you know, the social skills of certain people aren't at the same level that they might be if it was another industry.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Sadie Jones: Because like things aren't required as much a lot of times.

Alison Monahan: So I mean where you've worked for example. Like if people became a partner, did they get any training and managing other people or if they became a senior associate and they were gonna have a team? I mean, was there?



- Sadie Jones: I would say there was probably a weekend like this is gonna be what it's like to be a partner and that was probably one session on that.
- Alison Monahan: Okay.
- Sadie Jones: In all the time they were there. And that's probably the most that I've seen.
- Alison Monahan: Right and that you know-
- Sadie Jones: So I think it's more innately, you know are you good at that or not, people aren't gonna teach you, so yeah.
- Alison Monahan: Well or that is a skill you need to develop on your own. I mean I was reading an article this morning about 10 things to do when you become a manager and one of the points they made was like look, the first thing on this list is you need to evaluate realistically whether you are actually a person who is set up to do this right now. You know and if not, what are the skills and qualities that you're missing and how can you develop them or don't do this.
- Sadie Jones: Yup. Absolutely.
- Alison Monahan: But the reality is people are super super busy. Time becomes, you know when you're billing by the hour, the idea that you would sit for a couple of hours and read a book on management so that you could better manage your team, I mean when are you gonna do that?
- Sadie Jones: But I think the part that people are missing here is that it's gonna help you to do that. And I think, and that's what I would always encourage people when we talk about mentoring other people, or working with summer associates when you're like a mid level or something, I would say these are the people that are gonna work for you, why would you not wanna help shape them into someone that's gonna help you?
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Sadie Jones: It's selfish.
- Alison Monahan: It is, it is. And I think, I mean part of this also comes down to the actual model of the law firm which is the up and out model which they don't really like to talk about very much. So what does that mean, Sadie?
- Sadie Jones: So, that basically is if you don't move up, you're out. So there isn't gonna be room for everybody. It's a pyramid. And so, you're basically gonna be asked to leave at some point or are expected to leave at some point for the majority of people. And so there are some people who are gonna you know get to the top



and be a partner, but going into it, I don't think people realize that there's a point where you won't get to go further.

Alison Monahan: Right, even if you want to. You can't just keep working indefinitely because you kind of like it there.

Sadie Jones: Right. And I think that's a piece that a lot of people do not know about law firms and law firms do not advertise, and they don't necessarily want you to know. I don't know why they don't because I think it would be easier to sort of understand how it works so that you can plan accordingly, you can figure things out, it helps them. Cause I think it's difficult if you get to a point where you're really being asked to leave and you don't understand why and you know it can be hard. And usually you're given sort of a time frame to get out.

Alison Monahan: Right which may be six months or something. And so at what point does this kind of begin? I mean I think it varies by firm but are they kind of standard?

Sadie Jones: It does. I would say you know starting in your fourth year.

Alison Monahan: Really? That early?

Sadie Jones: Yeah, I think it can. I think it depends how you're doing. But that's when I would start thinking about it because by the time you're like a fifth or sixth year, I think it can be harder to figure out what your plan is because you don't wanna get too senior that you can't move on to something else. Or it's gonna get harder. So that's where I would start thinking about it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's really early cause I mean in my mind I'm thinking, well by the time your seventh or eighth year, if you haven't made partner you need to leave, but I think this is a good point because you don't want to put yourself in that position.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, I know a lot of people who ended up in that position and had a lot of trouble finding something because they were too senior. Or they didn't know what else they should be looking for and so they hadn't necessarily developed the skills that they needed to go in a direction like government work, in house, things like that. So I would say, I guess I would start thinking about it earlier rather than later whether or not you're being pushed out at that point. But in my experience, less and less people are getting to the seventh year.

Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure. I mean the attrition rate by the fifth year is something like 80 percent.

Sadie Jones: So, I think that's something that no one really thinks about when they're starting as a first year. But I would think about what your strategy is, think about what



you want out of this. Are you trying to get all the way? You know, are you trying to figure out what's next?

Alison Monahan: And what are some signs that people either are or are not kind of on the partner track at different points?

Sadie Jones: Well, I think that you know if are having reviews, and I think you need to listen carefully to what people are telling you.

Alison Monahan: Or not telling you.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Read between the lines.

Sadie Jones: Because I think if they really think you're a superstar, you're partner material, you are gonna hear that. You really are. You're gonna have somebody who has taken you under their wing, because that's what you really need. You need a supporter. You need a partner that's gonna take you there, and so if you, whether or not they all like you, if you don't have that person it's gonna be really hard to move on.

Alison Monahan: Right so last time it's just a mentor, now we're talking about this sponsor. And this sponsor is a person who when you are not in the room, stands up and says I can not do my work unless this person is a partner, they need to be a partner.

Sadie Jones: And you need to know how important that person is is the other thing. Cause I've seen people kind of think that they're riding with somebody who's gonna do that for them, and that person doesn't have any sway.

Alison Monahan: Right, you have to be with the right person on this one...

Sadie Jones: Cause not all partners do. Yeah. So I think that's something you do kind of get to know at a firm. Like I don't think it takes very long to figure out who's important or who's considered important. So I think that's important. Also just what's the feedback you're getting? Like, are you getting work? Are people wanting to work with you? Cause that's a big thing at a law firm. Sometimes things are just slow, and I would get that, but it's rare that the people who are really great and people like, don't have work.

Alison Monahan: Right. So if you finish up a project and you're asking around and nobody's willing to give you anything to do, that's probably not a great sign.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. I also think that it can be hard to get honest feedback at law firms but I do think you will if there's really a problem but you need to hear it. So I think



sometimes associates do get honest feedback that things aren't going well and for some reason, it doesn't sink in. So I think you need to be careful to really like take the feedback, criticism, whatever it is and try to, rather than be defensive, figure out what they're really saying to you. And sometimes you're not a right fit for that place or that practice group and I think it would be better to figure out for yourself what's next than to kind of try to make something work that's not working.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and do you think it's fair to ask people directly, like how do you think I'm doing, I wanna be partner?

Sadie Jones: Yeah. I do think that's fair. And I think not a lot of associates do that and in my experience, people appreciate it more just being straightforward. No one's gonna promise you anything even if you're doing great. No one can tell you that you're gonna make partner. But if that's something you want, I don't see any reason that you shouldn't be open about it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and some firms more and more are starting to [have people who are basically in charge of associate development](#) and that type of thing. In fact we did a podcast with one of them that we can link to. And that can be a helpful resource I think because they can kind of, they know the firm, they know the players, they probably know something about the economics of the firm although they may or may not tell you that I'm guessing. But you know they have some sort of information or can probably help you figure out some stuff out and can help you really think about, you know, is this the right fit for me, okay if so, what are the things I need to do? Who are the people I need to talk to or the experience as I need to have to position myself, to move for partner or okay, this is probably not what I wanna do, what are the experiences I need to have to get to my next point?

You know having somebody you can talk to confidentially about that, I think is really valuable.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I think like you said, to be strategic about it is smart. And I would say, look at just at what they've done in the past or in the past few years. How many partners did they make? What offices were they in? You know that kind of thing. Like what's in the mix. Cause I think that is an indication. You know if you know that they've never made a partner in your office, that's not a good sign.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and I think that's something people really underestimate or at least outside factors that basically don't have anything to do with you if all the partners are coming from the home office and you're in some satellite office, okay well that's a pretty good that either you need to move or you need to find something else to do. And being realistic about, you know saves you from being



an eighth year who's just blindsided. Well all my reviews were fine, it's like yeah but, your practice area isn't really popular and also this is a satellite office.

- Sadie Jones: Yeah because the misconception that some people starting out might have is that you're a good lawyer, they think you do good work, why wouldn't you make partner? And that's not how it works.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think for a different generation at least my understanding from talking to various people who are an older generation, like that kind of was the way it worked. I mean I remember the judge I worked for describing at like well you know, if they hired you and showed up everyday and like didn't spill a drink on somebody's wife at a party, you probably became partner. That's just the way it was.
- Sadie Jones: And I think there are some boutique firms left that still essentially do that but yeah, none of the big law firms.
- Alison Monahan: No, I mean the reality is-
- Sadie Jones: They don't do that anymore.
- Alison Monahan: Is they have a summer class or whatever of 100 people. A couple of those people eight years later might end up being partners.
- Sadie Jones: Right. And I think part of the reason that law firms can be really competitive is because usually there's somebody in either your class year or around your class year and you know that you're competing against them for it. And I think that can be difficult.
- Alison Monahan: I mean to be honest, I think it's funny when people come in as first years and they're gonna be like I'm making partner. It's like oh come on, you've been at the firm for like a week. You don't know anything.
- Sadie Jones: I had a summer associate tell me that once. That she was going to run the firm.
- Alison Monahan: Wow. I don't know. I just think on some level, be realistic. Like put this in the back of your mind to be thinking about it but also you probably don't need to be spreading your partnership dreams around your first week. It just makes you kind of look like you don't know what you're talking about.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. Absolutely. But I think that if that's your true goal, at least you can do your best to try to position yourself to like have a shot at it but I think you always have to assume that it's not gonna happen.



Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's right. And you know, you can also think about like hey well if this didn't happen, what's my plan B at the firm, is there anyway I can stay on here doing what I do, would I like to do that, if not, you know you need your plan B and you need your plan C. Unfortunately just getting the big law job does not solve all of your career problems forever for most people.

Sadie Jones: And I would also think about, there are other positions at law firms that are possible, that in some ways are better than being partner. Like being Of Counsel, and there's even some where like they sometimes call them career roles where you kind of get off the track and it's an alternative where you might make less money but you also might have fewer requirements, and you might feel like you have more job security because it's a little bit more stable. So that's something else to consider that law firms a lot of times these days are looking at ways to reduce cost and a lot of times that can work.

Alison Monahan: Right. Which a lot of people don't know. I mean I had no idea until I had worked at a firm for a while and heard about the associate becoming an equity partner at a lot of these places, you have to pay a lot of money. It's crazy. Like you have to take out a \$100,000 loan or something to become an equity partner.

Sadie Jones: Yup. So you're buying into the business.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you're literally like buying your way into partnership. Which just struck me as crazy. I was like wait, what? Like, I have all these student loans, I've like worked for eight years for this dream and now I have to buy it? Wow, okay I did not know that in law school.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, and I think the other thing is I think that it used to be at least job security, that it was like what you were gonna do forever and it's unusual that a partner stays somewhere forever anymore. And partners get asked to leave all the time. So I think you have to think about what that role really means.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's probably not like you're gonna go hang out at the barbecue with all of your new buddies who are now partners. It's actually a very competitive and cut-throat universe. Pretty much your entire career it seems like.

Sadie Jones: Yup. And you're always gonna feel pressure to have more clients and to be building business and you know. It's not easy.

Alison Monahan: No, it's not an easy life. I think that's very fair, it can be very remunerative in some cases, in a lot of cases I don't think it actually is that remunerative in terms of money anymore but you just gotta think about what you want and be realistic about what you're getting into here.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.



- Alison Monahan: Alright. So, let's talk, we'll shift gears a little bit. Because I felt like at every firm I was at, there were always a lot of unspoken expectations or like unspoken rules that somehow we were supposed to know but they were never really laid out. Let's talk about, what have you seen?
- Sadie Jones: Well I think at some firms, like face time is a big deal. So, you know that you are physically there, that somebody can walk by your office and see you, that if they call you up, you know the partner expects you to show up. And I think some people don't realize that. They figure they can work from anywhere, why does it matter?
- Alison Monahan: Right and sometimes the firms are frankly not honest about that. Even before or even like in your training. Like oh, of course, you know you've got your cell phone, you can be anywhere, you can work from the beach. It's like that and often times is not really true.
- Sadie Jones: And I think sometimes it just depends who you work for but I would say, I would talk to other people and try to figure out what are the expectations of that group or that partner or the firm?
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely I mean sometimes one of the things you need to figure out is when if you are expected to be in the office, when are you expected to be in the office? You know, you're working for somebody or a team that comes in really early, or you're working for a team that stays late. And one of my people to work for when we first started working together basically said to me, never schedule a meeting for me before 11 and I'm like we're gonna get along fine. And I'm like I'll stay late, but I don't wanna come in early. So we got along great. But if that's not you, even if you have other obligations, and you'd rather start working at 7AM, like that's probably gonna be a problem.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely. I also, you know on the opposite I feel like some people notice like why is she always staying so late? Doesn't even seem like she has that much to do. So people will knock about that.
- Alison Monahan: Oh, there's just no way to win here.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. Law firms tend to be an environment where people are watching, people are looking at what you're doing, and that's what I think you have to be aware of.
- Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, one of my friends summered some place where literally their secretary was required to write down when they came in and when they left and where they were.
- Sadie Jones: Wow.



- Alison Monahan: And this was a top firm. I mean this was like really? In New York City.
- Sadie Jones: Shocking.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. So you know you might think oh I just have to bill a bunch of hours, but you need to figure out when people expect you to be there. And that was frustrating for me cause I was like I don't even talk to anyone on most days except my secretary. Like why can't I be sitting on my couch writing this brief where I'd be more focused? But that's just not the way it worked.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, and I think that's kind of how law firms work, you have to adapt to their rules versus you know, just figuring you're gonna do it the way you wanna do it.
- Alison Monahan: That's [why I quit](#) and became an entrepreneur, so I could do what I wanted.
- Sadie Jones: Exactly. But you know it's good to know what it will be like to actually, to work there.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, for sure. I think stuff, you know we've covered this a lot in other podcasts so I don't wanna belabor the point, but the things are always coming up around [how to dress in firms](#) and this varies by firms, it varies by office, it varies by location in the country, it varies by type of work, you know firms like oh well, all you need to do is really just remember to always have a suit ready in case you need to go to court. Just hang it on the back of your chair, back of your door and you'll be fine. But that's not really all that we're talking about here.
- Sadie Jones: No, and people will notice things like if you're dressed in a way that doesn't fit in with the rest of the office. I've heard lots of talk.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah and it doesn't even have to be that you're too casual. Like the firm that I worked for was very, very, very explicitly casual. And I'd gone out and had gotten this whole like very like nice business casual wardrobe and when I'd show up wearing my new nice pants, people are like why are you so dressed up?
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, so I would say I would figure that out before you go through the trouble of kind of buying your work clothes.
- Alison Monahan: Spending thousand of dollars. Not that I'm still upset about that. Of very nice clothing that I had no, you know, it would've fit in perfectly in your standard office in New York City but in San Francisco at a very casual firm, they were like, you should be wearing jeans. So I had to go out and buy all jeans.
- Sadie Jones: Right. And I think it can be hard to feel like you're not being yourself, but I also think that there's usually a way to dress in a way that you're comfortable but



also fits in with the culture of the firm because really, you don't wanna be the person that everyone's talking about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And you know you might find okay this just isn't the right fit for me and that's also completely legit, but yeah, I think you know, like it or not, you're kind of going to have to fit into the way that everybody else is dressing or you're going to be the one that everyone's like oh my gosh, did you see like ugh.

Sadie Jones: It's true.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's totally true. Alright. What else do people have expectations about? Oh, you made a great point. Let's talk about the vacation system because sometimes firms now are doing unlimited paid time off and people think oh my gosh, that's amazing I can go off and take a beach vacation in the middle of the week if I want to. Tell me about that.

Sadie Jones: So it's really a new system that I would say most law firms have adapted at this point.

Alison Monahan: Well it makes financial sense for them cause let's be honest, they do this so that they don't have to pay out your paid time off when you leave.

Sadie Jones: Correct. So essentially if you accrue PTO over time, and sometimes there's a cap, but sometimes there's not even a cap, they have to pay you when you leave for that time. And that can be upwards of \$20,000, \$30,000, you know at lawyer salaries when the hours add up. So, they really got rid of that so that they don't need to do that.

Alison Monahan: Not necessarily for your benefit of having unlimited actual vacation.

Sadie Jones: Right. So I would say that the line that they would give you would be, you're time is your own, you have your available hours you need to hit so we don't need to monitor, you know when you're in the office and when you're out of the office, the reality is there's a reason that people are getting paid out so much for all that PTO. Cause it wasn't just cause they were saving money, it was because they were not able to take it.

Alison Monahan: Great point.

Sadie Jones: And so the issue is, is that if you have, aside from not getting paid out at the end, if you don't have a set amount of time that let's say you need to take in a year, it's sometimes hard to take any time. Cause I think it was potentially easier to say like I have these two weeks I need to use.

Alison Monahan: Right.



- Sadie Jones: So you don't have that anymore. So, it's not that no ones take vacation, but I think it's like definitely not emphasized.
- Alison Monahan: Right and I think for me, I would always think well, I can take, I can go on vacation for a week, but then I just have to come back and bill extra hours to make up for that time so it's probably not even worth it.
- Sadie Jones: So, right. So it is true that the billable hours ultimately are your responsibility and you should be keeping track and you should know where you are. But, the reality is, it's hard to take any vacation and hit those hours.
- Alison Monahan: Right and sometimes too I think billable hours is also, there are a lot of unwritten expectations around that because they'll say, oh yeah, our minimum billables are 2,000 or whatever. But that's not really your goal and you need to figure out at your office and at your firm, what is actually expected of you. Because it may be that the expectation in your particular office is that you bill several 100 hours more than that as a bottom line rule. And if you don't know that and you're thinking, oh you know I'm totally on track, and then you get your review and they're like well you're not really billing enough.
- You know, these are ways to get trapped.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah and I think the other thing about the expectations are, some people I know would be like well, you just need to hit that in order to get your bonus, I don't care if I get my bonus. You know I make enough money. Well that's not really true. Because the reality is that you may be asked to leave.
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Sadie Jones: So you may not be able to keep your job. Now, lots of years, lots of associates don't hit their minimum, you know it's a slow year and what not, but you can't be too far under. If the billable hours are 2,000 and you're billing 1,600 that's a really big problem.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's a huge red flag and you need to be at least aware of that.
- Sadie Jones: Yes. And the other thing I would say is I've seen sort of the opposite which is that people are just taking a really long time to do things or over billing and people have to write their time off because partners know how long things should take. And so I have seen people asked to leave because they're not being efficient.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think you can get caught up either way on that one too. Again, as a Goldilocks type of situation because I definitely got feedback of oh, you're doing great work, but maybe it's not taking you long enough to do this work. You



know. I mean no one would ever admit to saying that but they do. And obviously if you're taking two times as long or three times as long to do something, I mean some of the stuff is pretty obvious if you're drafting discovery responses, people kind of know how long that should take. And if it's taking you a lot longer after you're up to speed, like that's gonna be a problem. So again, like you kind of gotta assess out what is the expectation here and try to hit that expectation and nobody's gonna tell you.

I mean not until it's too late.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I think all of that really does depend on the firm. There are firms where it should take you a really long time, it needs to be perfect. And I know there's other firms, that it should always be perfection but there's other firms where it's like, we want you to do the best but we don't want this taking forever.

Alison Monahan: Do the quick and dirty job.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. So I think to know what kind of firm it is is important. Because usually that is something that is sort of you know unwritten but it's there.

Alison Monahan: Right or even what type of case. You know cause if the case has an unlimited budget and you're going to trial for a huge multi-national corporation, and it's a bet the company type of case, well they probably want it to be perfect. If it's a smaller client with a smaller budget and you behave like that and suddenly you've blown half the budget in a week, you're gonna hear about that.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And most likely, the partner's gonna have to write off your time, and you don't wanna be the person.

Alison Monahan: Which they hate doing.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. Who did that to them because that affects them.

Alison Monahan: Right. Exactly. Cause they want your time billed and counted and paid for so that they can make more money because they get origination fees, etc., etc. So it really all comes down to this pyramid and billable hour. And the more you understand about that, the better for you.

Sadie Jones: Yup.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Another area that I personally found super weird and kind of annoying was rules around travel. So if you're traveling for a client. There's all kinds of stuff that either there's a rule, or the rule actually doesn't really apply. I feel like



we're in a first year hypo right now. Or things are on billing, travel and people sometimes get caught double billing. You know, let's talk about this.

Sadie Jones: Well, like for example I was at a firm where there had been a merger and the two firms did travel differently and it was a really, really big issue for the associates and it was hard to adjust to. But in the end, the answer was this is the firm now, this is the rule and there's nothing that's gonna change about it. So that's the other thing. I think you have to sort of accept and choose your battles. But it was really about whether you could bill your time for your travel. And this varies at different firms. So at some firms, you can actually bill any travel time and that counts for your hours. Whether or not it's getting charged to the client, and some clients maybe will pay for it and some clients won't.

The firm says, that's okay, you had to go so this counts towards your 2,000 hours. Other firms say no, it's only if you're actually working and we can bill it to the client that it counts for your hours.

Alison Monahan: That's pretty harsh.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. But I think more and more firms are doing that.

Alison Monahan: I'm sure more and more of them are doing it for obvious reasons.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. So you know, you might've given up your Sunday to fly across the country, I think what happens is that people are like okay I'm gonna get on my laptop on the plane.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean I feel strongly about this cause I would, all my cases were in Delaware and I was in San Francisco so I was constantly having to travel either to Delaware or to Washington DC and thank God I got to bill that time because our rule as I recall mostly was you're allowed to bill all the time from the time you leave until the time you arrive or whatever it was. However, it's expected that you'll be working when you can. Define that however you want. And that time you can not double bill.

Sadie Jones: That makes sense. And that seems fair. But I what I would say is yeah, just make sure you know what the rules are going into it and understand that there's nothing you're gonna be able to change about that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean I remember some crazy time where my secretary's inputting my time and I get this call, it's like so you've billed 26 hours in this day, how is this possible? And I was like well, I left my hotel at 5AM in Washington DC to go to this meeting and then I worked all day and flew back across the country and got home at like four in the morning or whatever it was and so I'm like do the math. I was literally working like 26 straight hours.



- Sadie Jones: And if you follow the rules, yeah you're allowed to do that.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah I was like put in on the next day. Like just count it as a time change but I'm billing that time. Yeah. But the travel stuff can really get messy. A lot of like, for example one place I worked, they had rules written down which is pretty rare about when you're allowed to travel business class which seemed straight forward enough, you know flight's over whatever time, you can buy business class ticket, blah, blah, blah. And you know someone who was a friend of mine at the firm who was a young associate, read these rules and went and booked the ticket and got the business class ticket and the partners had a fit about it. And they were like what are you doing?
- And she was like, these are the rules. You wrote them. They're like but you're not supposed to do that.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, or maybe this client or all of that stuff. It's stuff you have to check every time or you know to make sure.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, you have to be careful about like who's booking your travel. The best option is if you can just get the travel agent from whoever you're working for to deal with it because they know all the stupid quirks of whoever you're working for. And they can decide what level of hotel room you get. What hotel, you know, all this stuff. Because you know you don't wanna be seen as like, even if it's being billed to the client, you don't wanna be seen as like burning money.
- Sadie Jones: People will remember that, and especially I think some of that stuff does matter what level you're at especially if you're new. You don't wanna be the person that you know, had to get the upgrade.
- Alison Monahan: Right. I mean I had this one guy I knew when I was a summer who literally was like, I will not fly if they can't get me an upgrade. I will just go the next day. And like he was known as that guy.
- Sadie Jones: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: You know. Probably didn't do wonders for his careers. It's like sometimes you just gotta suck it up and like sit at the back of the plane. And this applies to all sorts of different systems. I mean associates are always trying to game whatever system exists whether it's for dinners if you're staying late or car's home, any of the partners try to make rules, and then the associate's trying to take advantage of the rules and so there's kind of this endless battle, but I think somewhat you do have to take a step back and say okay, is it worth it for my career to not pay for my own dinner tonight when like maybe I could stretch it if I stayed a little bit later but I don't really need to stay.



You know you've gotta be kind of reasonable here.

- Sadie Jones: Yeah, and we're talking about a big firm where everybody is paid well and so exactly. Is it worth it for like some free sample or whatever?
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. Or like you know your 25 dollar sushi order. It's like you can pay for that yourself.
- Sadie Jones: Or you hit the exact number and things like that. And I would say generally, I would follow whatever the rules are for meals and that includes stuff you know, you're taking people out on interview lunches and things like that, don't push it.
- Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, summer associate lunches too. That's always a favorite. Like there's gonna be a limit. And if you're that associate who's always going over the limit and trying to get paid back, or you know you can't get paid back and then you send a Venmo to all the people who were at the lunch asking them for five dollars.
- Sadie Jones: That happened at a firm I was at.
- Alison Monahan: It totally happens. And you know, people know. People will remember.
- Sadie Jones: And I know that the email I saw was a very senior associate sending it around to a bunch of first years telling them that they each owed him 10 dollars.
- Alison Monahan: No, I've seen them. I've seem them asking summers.
- Sadie Jones: It's a huge mistake.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, when the firm finds out about it, they're just like you did what? Like really? You're a seventh year associate, how much are we paying you? You can't spot the 40 dollars that you weren't supposed to spend anyway?
- Sadie Jones: And also don't complain. When they tell you that you went over and you're responsible for it, do not complain about it. If that's what they decided the rules are and they're sticking with it, fine.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, so I think a general knowledge of what the rules are, probably don't push them and then if you do get caught in a scenario where maybe you're doing something slightly, that someone's upset about, just apologize and own it, and complain to your friends later.
- Sadie Jones: I would also say if you're generally not the person to break rules or do that kind of thing, you can probably get away with it every once in a while.



- Alison Monahan: Yeah. True. But you might decide not to anyway.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. Exactly.
- Alison Monahan: But you know you definitely don't wanna be the person who's doing it weekly every summer.
- Sadie Jones: I think the thing to remember is that even if a law firm is like one of the bigger ones, it's always small.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, they're not that big.
- Sadie Jones: Everyone knows. Yeah. There's no law firm that's that big.
- Alison Monahan: And they all gossip. I mean, let's be honest. All the partners gossip with each other, like they love giving each other a hard time about, oh I heard you guys had like a summer associate who jumped in the river. Ha ha ha. You know.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. And there's people watching that you don't even realize. Like their secretary, their legal assistant. There's people out there.
- Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, people know everything. These places are dens of inequity basically. Alright on a slightly more serious note, I did wanna bring up one other thing that I think sometimes trips people up which is rules particularly as a junior associate around contacting your clients. So sometimes people might think, oh I just have a quick question, I'm gonna pop off an email to someone at my client and ask them. And that might be fine and that might not be fine. So you just wanna sort of clarify with the people you're working for like hey, you know, I have this question is it okay to reach out to whomever?
- And they might be like yeah, of course go ahead or they'd be like oh I'd rather send it. You just don't wanna go over someone or look like you're going over or around someone in this client context.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And especially if you're junior the person. You know you should always defer to the people that are more senior than you and remember that the most important person in the situation is the client. That's who the law firm cares about. That's the person that's paying the bills, so you wanna make sure, you know also that's it's like, maybe the client only likes to talk to one person. And you just don't wanna say the wrong thing or step in something that you didn't mean to, by accident.
- Alison Monahan: Right, you just don't wanna overstep your bounds basically and do something that right, that puts the client in a state of mind where they're not happy with the firm for whatever reason. If you're a first year associate, you probably don't



wanna be emailing a question to the general counsel, for example, of an outside client cause they're gonna be like why am I being bothered with this? It's like who is controlling this person?

Sadie Jones: Also you could put yourself in a situation where like they ask you something and you don't know the answer. You know or you get into something you're not prepared for. So you know you don't wanna feel like you're ready for something you're not I would say.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You just wanna be I think sometimes people don't understand that they need to be fairly differential, probably more differential than they think they need to be particularly in the early years where you don't actually know what you're really doing.

Sadie Jones: Yes. And I think that at law firms because it is such a hierarchy, the people who are above you wanna make sure that you know where you fit.

Alison Monahan: Right. So basically, they're responsible for you essentially.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, because ultimately if you make a mistake, the partner is the one who's probably gonna have to take responsibility for it or they should.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Sadie Jones: So, you know or the senior associate or whoever. Like if a law firm works right, that is what should happen. So you have to think about it like they have a lot of responsibility.

Alison Monahan: Yeah I mean ideally, everyone up the chain should take their own portion of the blame. I mean that doesn't always happen but that's sort of the ideal. So you need to own whatever you did and then the person above you needs to say, well I probably should've supervised you better or whatever. I mean that's a productive work environment, these might not always be that but.

Sadie Jones: Ideally.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, ideally. So, we're about running out of time but any final thoughts on this?

Sadie Jones: I would say that I think law firms tend to have sort of unique personalities. You know unique personalities of individual people that work there and then the whole firm itself usually has a personality. And I would say, give yourself some time to figure what it is.

Alison Monahan: Right.



- Sadie Jones: Who the people are, talk to people you trust, try to figure out what the culture is. And you know there are some like we've talked about, shared things that all law firms sort of have in common like the goodbye emails.
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Sadie Jones: And then there's other things that can be different depending on where you're at and even when you move around to different firms. So I would just say you wanna really kind of get the lay of the land and figure out who you're talking to and what they expect of you and all of that before you you know, just like jump out and say something that you maybe shouldn't have said or send an email that you shouldn't have sent or something like that.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's a great point. I think there's absolutely no harm when you're starting out or if you're starting a new case or if you're working with somebody you haven't worked with before. I'm just kind of laying low for a little while and observing, I mean you can even ask questions like what's your style on this or whatever but yeah, you don't need to make noise right in the very beginning.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, I think you don't wanna be memorable.
- Alison Monahan: No, exactly. You wanna be the person who intuits what someone else is looking for or what you've done by carefully observing them for a few weeks and not just go to somebody who's a huge introvert and start yelling at them really loudly every morning and that kind of thing. It's probably not gonna go well.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely.
- Alison Monahan: Alright well Sadie thank you so much for joining us and sharing your insights of the secret life of law firms.
- Sadie Jones: Thank you for having me.
- Alison Monahan: Our pleasure. Well with that we are unfortunately out of time, for more career help and the opportunity to work one-on-one with us, check out [CareerDicta.com](https://www.careerdicta.com). If you enjoyed this episode of the [Law School Toolbox Podcast](#), please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app because we would 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 or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](#) at [lawschooltoolbox.com](https://www.lawschooltoolbox.com). Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon.



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