



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones to get some interview tips for non-traditional law students. 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'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 you have 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. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones to get some interview tips for non-traditional law students. So welcome, Sadie.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me back.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. So, to start off with, who are we really talking about here? What do we mean when we say a "non-traditional law student"?

Sadie Jones: I think that could mean something different to different people. I generally would say it was maybe somebody who had a career between undergrad and law school, maybe an older law student, maybe somebody who had kind of gone a different route than just sort of straight through.

Alison Monahan: I think that's right. The traditional idea was just people who went from undergrad to law school, maybe worked a year or something like that, and then went to law school. But more and more that's not even really the case. I think more and more people are going back to law school after, say, three to five years, at least, of doing something different. That's more of the business school model anyway, where they don't take people without work experience typically. In my case I had studied architecture, I did a master's, and then I had a programming career for a couple of years. So, I would say I was arguably on the non-traditional side. I mean, at least I had something I had to explain to people.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, and I think sometimes it's not even just that you had work experience, but maybe like you, you had work experience in a totally different area. So maybe when they're reading your resume or your material, it doesn't naturally fit into, "Oh, why did you decide to go to law school now?"



- Alison Monahan: If work three years as a paralegal, that's not probably a non-traditional law student. If you work 20 years as a paralegal and then you decided that you wanted to go to law school, I think you would fall more into this category.
- Sadie Jones: Right. Exactly. But yeah, if you, let's say, worked in investment banking for a couple of years, I don't think that's non-traditional.
- Alison Monahan: That's pretty traditional in law schools.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. Exactly. There are lots of things where you could have some work experience, but it doesn't necessarily fit into this category. So, to me, your story needs to be explained a little bit more.
- Alison Monahan: Right, so let's talk about that. As you were talking about that, I was thinking even somebody who, say, was a fine art major, and then went into law school – even that, even though they're the standard mid-twenties, they might really need to explain that too.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely. So I think you should just be prepared.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. So let's talk about what kind of special challenges do you think students like this face, have you seen?
- Sadie Jones: Well, I think they basically face the challenge of having to explain their background, and having to explain how they ended up in law school, and what they want to do going forward, and how this is the path they want to take.
- Alison Monahan: Right. I think that's exactly right. Certainly with my background I definitely had to lay out for the average interviewer what value this had. I think that's a productive way of looking at it is, not so much, "Oh, I have to explain this weird thing" but, "What value is this adding? Yes, this is a different background than the average person you're going to talk to, but what does it help me bring to the table that you're not going to get with those other people?" So, when somebody looked at my resume, they basically looked at it and said, "Sociology to architecture, to programing, to law. Tell me about that." And I had to have an answer that was basically ready to go to explain to them why this made sense, and why it was valuable. So whatever your background is, I think you're going to get these questions. You know that you're going to get them, so you may as well be prepared with an answer that turns it in your favor.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. I think that all of these things can be positive. So I think you need to go into the interview feeling that they are positives yourself. Because I think that's a lot of the challenge, is that it sort of comes off if it's something that you're insecure about, or feel like is a negative, or it's going to be viewed negatively, I



think they know that also. So I think you want to go in explaining why all this stuff is helpful to your future career as a lawyer.

Alison Monahan: I agree. I think sometimes people can get very defensive about things, either because they've changed paths, and they feel like they wasted time or wasted money. Or because they feel like they took time off for family obligations or something like that, and they feel like that is going to be undervalued in the workplace. Sometimes people really want to make it about like, "Oh, but I was doing this volunteer work on the side." Often those people are like, "You don't really have to justify this."

Sadie Jones: Yeah, I think that's worse. I think that feels fake to me.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. It's like if you were basically at home with your family, and then you did some other stuff, but just own that.

Sadie Jones: And I think in today's world, people sort of understand that things happen. And I think if you're upfront about it, in a way that you've sort of crafted a story a little bit, I think they will understand. But I think if you sort of brush it under the rug and don't talk about it, or act like you're insecure or ashamed, I think they'll pick up on that too. And that's going to be way worse than just saying what it is. Some people have medical issues, they had to leave school for a certain amount of time, all sorts of things.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I was going to say, people may have been taking care of family members who have medical issues, or had issues themselves. I think with something like that, you just need to make it clear that you're ready to move forward, you're ready to take on this job, everything is sorted out, and just not make it a bigger deal than it has to be. So again, whatever your non-traditional aspect is, or aspects are, because often times these are overlapping – if you've had another career you may also have had family obligations and that kind of thing – just make it clear, "This is where I am, and this is where I'm ready to move forward from, and this is what I'm bringing to the table." If you are confident and you value those things, then I think other people will as well.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. I agree.

Alison Monahan: I think another challenge sometimes you'll even face in this scenario is that they frankly may have other obligations that are not compatible with working all the time. So, this might have impacted grades, it might have impacted your ability to take on different extracurricular activities that were very time intensive. How can people handle this type of thing?

Sadie Jones: One thing I would say, in this situation you also have to know where you're applying and what their expectations are. And there may be places where even



if there's a reason, if your grades aren't up to what they require, it doesn't really matter what your story is, that's just not going to be an option. So I think you should know that going into it. I also think that you can be upfront about something. So if you had something that sort of impacted things, let's say a semester, a year, and then you got back on track, I think there's a way to sort of tell the story about an upward trajectory. I think that's something you can explain, but you can't hide it and you can't change it from what it actually is. And I think in terms of extracurriculars, that you can also be upfront about it. I don't know that that's the most important thing anyway, but...

- Alison Monahan: Yeah, again, I just wouldn't get defensive about it: "I was accepted to Law Review, but I didn't join because of blah, blah, blah." It's like, no one really cares. You either did it or you didn't do it. I'm sorry.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, and if you didn't do it, you didn't do it. And then you move on to whatever other thing you did.
- Alison Monahan: If somebody asks you, "It looks like you have great grades. Why didn't you do Law Review?", then it's fair to say, "Well, I was accepted, but I had some other obligations." It doesn't look great, but it doesn't look horrible. Yeah, and I think your point, which we'll get to in a minute, about applying to the right places is really key, because some of these firms and organizations, it's probably just not really a great fit if you do have a lot of other obligations.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And you don't want to end up in the wrong place for you and your life.
- Alison Monahan: Why take a job at Wachtell, for example, if you have children? You might want to see them occasionally. I accidentally interviewed with Wachtell at OCI, and I have no idea how they ended up on my schedule. They guy asked me, "Why do you want to work at Wachtell?" And for no other reason I just decided to be completely honest and said, "Well, I'm not really sure that I do."
- Sadie Jones: That's good.
- Alison Monahan: And then he spent the whole rest of the interview basically probing me on why that was. We had a very interesting conversation, because I was like, "I think basically your hours are insane and I would like to have some semblance of a life." And he was trying to convince me they weren't really that much worse than any other firm. It was a very bizarre conversation.
- Sadie Jones: I think that's interesting, because I think places like that are not used to someone not being interested in them.



- Alison Monahan: Yeah. I was like, "I don't know, maybe they just sign up everybody in the Law Review for Wachtell without your permission. I have no idea how you got on my list." Suffice it to say I did not get a call back. But that would have been a terrible place for me, with no other obligations. So, someone who does have other obligations – probably not your best choice. Another thing that comes up a lot – often those people who are non-traditional are going part-time. So, how can people handle that, in terms of looking for jobs and that kind of thing?
- Sadie Jones: Well, I think in this case you definitely need to be realistic about what you can take on. I guess it depends on what the reasons are, but if you're part-time it's probably because you either are working somewhere else, or you do have family obligations or something that takes up a lot of your time. So I would say you need to be very clear on what you're able to take on, in terms of something else on top of that.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think this is definitely a situation where you want to have a well thought out plan. So if you're interviewing somewhere, they're probably going to be asking you, "When are you planning on finishing school, or how are you going to fit this in? What is your plan?" And you want to have an answer to that: "This is exactly what I've thought about, and this is why that would work." So again, just think through it ahead of time and have an answer to the questions that are pretty obviously going to come up.
- Sadie Jones: I think it's going to be really obvious to the employer, the person on the other side, if you're not going to be able to do all of these things, and you're just saying this to get a job offer. They're going to realize that.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, they've probably hired other people who said the same things, it didn't work out. So they're going to be a little skeptical when you say, "Oh well, I'm working part-time and I'm going to school, but I have 20 extra hours a week to devote to this." It's like, "Really, do you? That sounds unlikely."
- Sadie Jones: I feel like you need to give an example of, "I was able to juggle, blah, blah, blah last year." Or whatever.
- Alison Monahan: Exactly. And in the other reality – particularly somebody in the older student side of the non-traditional spectrum – the reality is you may face some age discrimination or bias, or family bias, if you have children. What do you think people can do about this?
- Sadie Jones: Obviously, it's unfortunate and no one should be asking you inappropriate/illegal questions, or any of these things, or probing where they shouldn't be. And none of it should be held against you. But I would give the same advice that we gave before about going in confident, how all of these things make you who you are, which is a capable person and a person who's



able to juggle things and to handle all these things. So I would say, I think that if you go in with that confidence and positivity about it, that's the best you can do.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. You're going to face what you're going to face. Sometimes people try to avoid some of these issues by doing things like leaving dates off of their resume and things like that, but the reality is at some point you're probably going to show up for an interview and/or people are just going to be suspicious about why you've left things off of your resume anyway. So, I feel like you're a grown up, you're a person, you have a life history, you have a story. And the more that you just own that confidently, hopefully at least, the more people are going to respond to that. And if there are people who would discriminate against you based on these factors, they might not be the greatest place to work.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. I think that's the key to keep in mind too. Also, something for people to realize is, you're allowed to bring up whatever you want in the interview. So they can't ask you if you have children or probe about it, or anything like that, but if you want to bring it up, like it makes sense in whatever conversation you're having – you could bring it up and put it out there for you – again, if it makes sense. And I think kind of come at it from a positive place.

Alison Monahan: How do you think people should handle it if they are being asked these inappropriate/illegal questions about things like family status, age, whatever else it might be in an interview?

Sadie Jones: This is hard. This is a hard situation. Coming from the employer side, it would make me so upset to think that somebody I trained to interview was asking those questions, and I would want to know. And I do think it's something where if you're not comfortable saying it in the interview, you can tell the interviewer or maybe the person who interviewed you on campus, somebody you have a relationship – you can say after, "I was asked some things that were inappropriate and made me uncomfortable." That sort of thing. I also think it's completely fine to say in the interview you're not comfortable with that. And like you said, it probably isn't a place you're interested in working if that's what they're doing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think occasionally, maybe very occasionally, people just aren't thinking, and they don't mean it to be an illegal question. They might just be making conversation, like, "Oh, what ages are your kids?" or something like that. But that's not actually something they're allowed to ask you. Again, if you bring it up, sure. If you're like, "Oh, I have three kids." "Oh, how old are they?" That's fine. Probably even a little borderline there, but basically that's not something you can get that upset about. But if somebody brings this up to you, like, "What's your marital status? Are you planning to get married? Are you planning to get pregnant? Do you have children?" These are really not okay.



There are all sorts of other inappropriate questions people could be asking you, but I think bringing it up later with someone else is totally legitimate. I don't know, I assume you would not then ding the interviewee for that.

Sadie Jones: No, absolutely not. I know that the person who was doing the interview would get a talk from the hiring partner or somebody else, the employment partner about saying things. Also, I do agree with you that there are some times where people just don't realize, and it sounds innocent to them. I think the number one case of that is that people ask candidates all the time where they're from. And that's a legal question.

Alison Monahan: Right, like, "What's your last name from? Oh, Singh. Are you Sikh? Are you from Kashmir?" It's like, "Okay, just don't go there."

Sadie Jones: But a lot of times, they really do weave it that maybe you're from the state they're from. And they weren't even implying anything and whatnot, and that doesn't make it okay, they should know better. But I also think you have to feel out where the line is and what was meant by it, and whether you want to say something there, or later, whatever you're comfortable with. But I don't think anything of that will be held against you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's clearly on the person who's just basically being an idiot about the entire situation. Alright, let's back off of those types of questions for a little bit. So what can people who are non-traditional do? We've already talked a little bit about considering where you're applying. How can people find out what's family friendly, or what's work-life balance friendly? Or even just places that might be open to people who've had, say, a more creative type of background?

Sadie Jones: Well, I think you can do some research, and there are surveys, there are a lot of publications that talk about different law firms. A lot of this stuff is public. What their required billing is if people work part-time, that sort of thing. I think a lot of times you just hear stuff from other law students or people you know that have worked places, that keep that in mind. I will say that I am generally suspicious of BigLaw firms that describe themselves as a lifestyle firm, because I don't think that's true.

Alison Monahan: Because that doesn't exist?

Sadie Jones: Yes. So I think there are places that are better and worse for that, and there's degrees. But generally if you are someone who wants to go into BigLaw, you just have to assume that there's not going to be a great work-life balance, definitely not at the beginning, and maybe never, and that shouldn't necessarily be your consideration. I think it's sort of a marketing thing that certain firm portray themselves that way, and their websites look like that, and they'll tell you a lot of things that aren't necessarily true in reality, in practice. They might be their



policies, but it's like, how many people are really working those number of hours?

Alison Monahan: I think that's right. I think you just have to know what you're getting into. I think within the universe of large law firms there are definitely more and less intense places to work, but I would not describe to my knowledge a single large law firm I've ever experienced or heard about, as a lifestyle option for what the average person would think of as a reasonable work-life balance. That's just not what you're signing up for. So again, if you're listening to this and you're like, "I want to have a reasonable work-life balance", you might need to look somewhere else, and that's totally okay. You might want to look at smaller firms, mid-sized firms. You might want to look at different types of organizations that really actually do have a reasonable work-life balance, because those do exist; they just typically pay less.

Sadie Jones: That's what I was going to say. I think if you're prepared to take a pay cut... And some of these places pay decently. And there are also other advantages. Certain public interest jobs or government jobs, you can get some forgiveness on your student loans sometimes. So that's all things to keep in mind. And you do have to say to yourself, "How much do I need to make to live, and to do all those things?" But a lot of times the tradeoff might not be worth it, because when you're working all the time, you may say to yourself, "It doesn't matter how much they're paying me. I would rather get paid half of this salary to get to come home and see my loved ones."

Alison Monahan: Right. I think as a non-traditional student, you typically have a little more perspective. You've had a different career, or you've taken time and done other things. You're probably, hopefully, less likely to be led down this path of, "Oh, I'm going to make \$200,000 and I'm going to have a great life, and I'm going to go home at 6:00 every day." That's not what you're getting paid for. That's just not the way that works. So, I think being cognizant of that, and really maybe looking outside of the box about where you're thinking of working. And maybe there's a way to parlay your previous experience into a job in-house or something, where you can combine those interests, and then it's a really clear path. Say you were in technology or engineering or science or something, and now you want to go and do some sort of technology work as a lawyer – that totally makes sense, that's an easy sell. We're going to talk about having your story ready to go, but that's a pretty obvious story.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. I think that's all things that you should keep in mind as you're applying for things, because you don't want to apply in the wrong place that doesn't make sense for you, and either end up with nothing, or end up in a situation that's not going to be good for you. That's not going to be helpful, even if you're picking things based on prestige or things like that.



- Alison Monahan: And I think this is a situation where ideally you start in law school, repositioning yourself, if you're really doing a serious repositioning. So then when it comes time to do these interviews, they look at your resume and they say, "Okay, we know you were a computer science undergrad, you were a programmer for five years, and now you're telling me you want to do human rights work." And you say, "Yes, because as you can see, my first summer I did a human rights internship in wherever, and I took these classes, and I'm on this journal." And you've got to put that story together. So if you're making a really big shift, I think you have to think about all of your classes pointing in that direction, and your extra curriculars, and your summer jobs, and all that, so that your story actually makes sense.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely. I think that's really important.
- Alison Monahan: Another thing – you've got to practice telling this story, right? So that it actually seems easy.
- Sadie Jones: Yes. And you need to remember that this story is your responsibility.
- Alison Monahan: Right, it's on you to connect these pieces for someone.
- Sadie Jones: It's not on them to understand why this makes sense. And you might think that's not fair: Why don't they get it? This is just what you want to do. But you need to make the case for yourself, and I think that's absolutely right. They need to practice it, make sure it sounds coherent. Your story is what you're saying, and also your resume, your cover letter. So you might want to give it to someone who you haven't explained the story to before and see if it makes sense to them, and get their honest opinion about it.
- Alison Monahan: And I think you've got to be ready in an interview particularly for obviously questions. And sometimes they may even be aggressive questioning. Lawyers, some of them, tend to be fairly aggressive interviewers. So if they get a weird resume, they're like, "Oh, this is going to be fun." Like, "I can do this." But if you de-fang that by having answers ready to go, if the question is aggressive, it's really hard for somebody to keep being aggressive if you just come back with something that calmly makes sense and responds to the obvious issue that they've raised, of like, "Well, you haven't done this before." It's like, "Well, okay. But here's what I've done, and this is how this relates, and this is how it all fits together, and this is what I'm doing." I think having specific stories ready to go too, that relate really to what you've achieved in law school already can be great. Particularly if you've achieved these despite any type of obstacles, so that you have stories basically in your back pocket you can pull out, whether it's like, "I've really enjoyed my experience being a TA", or a research assistant or whatever, winning moot court, any of these things, so that when somebody



starts pushing you on, "Why are you not doing this, or why are you not doing that?" "Well, I have these other things I can talk about."

Sadie Jones: Yeah. I think it's just about kind of practicing and being prepared.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and trying not to come off as too defensive. Another thing I think people sometimes get tripped up by is you want to make sure it looks like you're humble and you're willing to learn, because these other experiences unfortunately don't necessarily put you at a level above an entry level legal job. That's just kind of the reality, right?

Sadie Jones: Yeah, and I think that this can be a bias that other people have. I think that sometimes comes from the reality, which is that people do sometimes feel like their work experience really matters, and like you said, a lot of times it doesn't. It matters for you being a mature person, but not necessarily for the actual work. So I would say, I think you should downplay where it puts you, in terms of the actual legal part of it, because I think some employers might just assume that you think that. So you want to dispel them of that right away.

Alison Monahan: My understanding is that it doesn't really matter for law firms. Even if you have 10 years of experience in some other role, they're not necessarily going to bring you in as anything other than a first-year associate.

Sadie Jones: Exactly. The only situation I can think of, and I don't know if this would matter for class year, is maybe if you're going into IP law, and you have an engineering degree, they will look at that as a bonus and kind of a big deal for them. And sometimes it might just be the only way you can get the job. But that's the only situation where I think it might be helpful.

Alison Monahan: I've very, very, very rarely heard of people negotiating extra signing bonuses or something like that, but you're still basically going in as a first year, because the thing is, you don't know anything about working in a firm. Okay, you've worked in a lab or you were an engineer – that's great, but you still don't know anything about being a litigator.

Sadie Jones: Yeah. It's good for you to not be given expectations that are above what you can do. You don't want that.

Alison Monahan: Right. You can't come into the third year, because you've never seen discovery responses, you've never taken a deposition. There will be steps along this path that you need to do before you can get to a level where you're equal to the other people who have had that experience. So, part of it is making clear you understand whatever the expectations are of this particular job that you're applying for, and that you're eager to do them. So you can't come in and say,



"Well, obviously I won't be doing document review, right?" That's not going to come off well.

Sadie Jones: It's terrible. Yeah.

Alison Monahan: It needs to be like, "Okay, I understand I'm taking a step down in terms of hierarchy, but I'm really excited because I'm pursuing this whole new career. And I just think it's going to be so fantastic, and it's just going to be great." Positive, positive, positive.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, we're close to out of time now. Any final thoughts on this?

Sadie Jones: My final thoughts are, we've talked mostly about students who have work experience, are kind of further out in their life. And I think the thing to remember is that personally, from the employer side, I always thought that was a positive. We really liked students with work experience, and it could be quite a bit of work experience. And so, go into it with a positive attitude that all of this stuff is a good thing, because I actually think that's what employers think.

Alison Monahan: I agree. Whenever I interviewed people who were a little less traditional, it was kind of like, "Okay, you're a grownup. I don't have to worry that you're not going to show up to work because you're hung over, because you were out partying all night long." I mean, maybe that happens, maybe that's unfair on my part to the younger people in the audience, but I think people just have an expectation that you're being probably more realistic about what you're getting into. You've worked previously, you understand how working works, that you actually have to go every day at a certain time, and that's kind of drag, in a way that somebody who's never had a professional job just doesn't really actually understand yet.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, Sadie, with that, we are unfortunately out of time. Thank you so much for joining us.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure.

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