



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones here with us to talk about behavioral interviews. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm 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 about what behavioral interviews are and how you can master this technique for your next job interview, because you just never know when you're going to run into this one. So, welcome, Sadie.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me back.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure, thanks for joining us. Well, to start off with, what is a behavioral interview anyway?

Sadie Jones: So, it's basically a type of interview where they sort of ask you open-ended questions to figure out how your past behaviors were in different employment situations – or it could even be a life situation – and how that sort of reflects on qualities you have, sort of based on experiences specifically. And you've probably been asked these questions before. You may not have realized that it was a certain type of interview, but you've probably responded before to these questions.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I remember one time I was in an interview, and I guess they had just started doing this technique. The partner I was talking to didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about it, but he sort of told me, "Well, normally I would just talk to you, but now they've told me I have to do this structured interview and ask you specific questions, so I guess we're going to do that." And I'm like, "Okay."

Sadie Jones: I worked somewhere where we had something similar, and I think a lot of people did do it like that when they were new. And I think it just might have been a little more awkward or sort of stilted.

Alison Monahan: It was just a little weird, because I'm like, "I don't really care what you ask me, just ask me the questions."

Sadie Jones: Right.



- Alison Monahan: Well, I guess, what are some examples that people might get of common behavioral interview questions?
- Sadie Jones: So, some common ones are, let's say, an example of a time you took a leadership role and how did it work out? A time that you had to make a difficult decision – how did you come to this decision, what were the results? Describe a situation where you received criticism, how did you respond to the criticism? Again, what was the result? A time that you had conflict, let's say with a co-worker, or a boss – how did you deal with it, how did you resolve it? There are some examples, and you can see a lot of them might seem sort of like negative situations. I think there's sort of a tendency towards that and seeing how you respond to that.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think in this case the next question he asked me was something about, "Tell me a time you failed and how you dealt with it." I'm like, "Okay. Well, let's see." But yeah, I think they are sort of looking for more than just a standard sort of answer of you speculating about what you would do. Typically, they're asking more or less for an actual situation and some story, right?
- Sadie Jones: Exactly. So, you kind of want to have that in mind going into it, because a lot of these questions, the actual question will be different, but a lot of different answers can fit into the same questions if you can kind of hear the theme of these type of questions. So really, you're going to slot it in to a spot depending on what the actual question is, when you get there.
- Alison Monahan: Right. And I think some of this is to see, can you handle being under pressure in an interview? And also, can you be self-reflective about your own behavior, right?
- Sadie Jones: Exactly. That's what I think is one of the two parts. One, how do you deal with the actual interview and being asked the behavioral question, or the structured interview, like you said? What's your reaction to being sort of put on the spot about something, and something that might seem difficult to talk about? And then also, what did you do in a past scenario, how did you learn something from it? How do you describe it? And it can be a little bit tricky, for sure.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. So what's the goal here? Why are people asking these types of questions?
- Sadie Jones: I think that you can figure out a lot from people based on what they've done in the past, in different, difficult scenarios – how they made decisions, how they learned from things, how they dealt with difficult situations, kind of seeing if you're a fit for their organization, if they're looking for certain qualities in you. You can use these situations to explain those qualities that you have. I think there's a reason, and it's just kind of telling to see how you handle just being



asked the question, in terms of what you're like when you're being put on the spot about something.

Alison Monahan: Right. Do you get defensive? Do you do any of these things that people sometimes do when they're feeling like they're being pressured? The reality is, in most legal work places, you're going to be in pressure-filled situations sometimes. So, I think it is a pretty valid thing to do. I mean, some of them are pretty stilted, let's be honest. But I think people should be prepared to talk about things that maybe didn't go so well in previous jobs or at school. I guess part of the issue too is, what about people who don't have a ton of job experience? Can they bring in other experiences?

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. I think it could just be a life situation. I think you should pick something that's fairly important and was impactful in your life. You could pick something that has to do with school, because we're talking about law students. So, a situation you had in a class, with a professor, on a journal, whatever it was. I think all of that can slot in. It could be something even in your personal life, where you were faced with a difficult situation. Most people are going to deal with direct employment answers, but I don't think that that's necessarily the only route to take. It's more trying to get at who you are and how you handle a situation. It doesn't need to be the exact situation that you're going to be in in this job.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think when you mentioned practice area and organizational fit, depending on what type of job you're walking into, I think this can be very important. If you're interviewing for a job as a public defender, for example – if I'm interviewing you, I think I would want to understand, "How do you handle having competing demands on your time? How do you handle pressure? How do you handle things that you don't know how to do?", because that's what you're going to be walking into, literally on day one.

Sadie Jones: Exactly. So, if I were preparing for this, I would prepare individually for the interview and I would work a little bit backwards. So, I would say, "What are some qualities I think are most important in this job? What will they be looking for out of me?", and then work backwards and say, "Can I think of a scenario where I demonstrated that"? And then try to slide in a story that shows that. So, to me, you can even turn a non-behavioral interview into a behavioral one, by giving that kind of answer to any question. I think it's a positive for the interviewee to be able to offer that "This is who I am." It only bolsters you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I think a lot of people... We're humans. We respond to stories. So, if you can tell me a story about a situation that is relevant to the question I asked you, then I'm probably going to remember that more than if you just give me some generic answer. So, I think even if you don't necessarily know or expect that you're going to have this type of interview, I think it's always a good



opportunity to really mine your past. With some of the questions you brought up earlier, think about leadership roles – people want to talk about that. Think about challenging decisions, situations where maybe things didn't go well and you had to turn it around or you had to respond to criticism. I think that can be a big one for a lot of people, because people don't love criticism necessarily. But if you can think of a situation where even as you said, with a professor, or say in moot a court or a journal: "I screwed this up and somebody told me that I'd messed it up. And then I took these actions to get better." You could even have a grade situation fall into that category. Lee has a story about how she didn't do so well first year, first semester in legal writing, and people asked about that grade. And then her response was, "Yes, I took this to heart. I talked to my professor, I worked really hard. And as you can see, the next semester I had the highest grade in the class." Not that everyone has that story, but that's what you're looking for.

- Sadie Jones: No, but I think that's a great answer. And it doesn't have to be the end result that you had the highest grade. But you showed improvement, you took these steps, you learned from it. To me, a lot of these sound negative, but you always want to leave on a positive note and a learning lesson in the end, and what did you do going forward? So, I think it's great to end it with, "And then this happened" – a different situation, like the next step in it and, "This is how I handled that differently." That shows improvement.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. And even if you don't end up CALL'ing the class, I think you can also have a narrative about ongoing improvement.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely.
- Alison Monahan: So, "I got this grade. I wasn't super happy with it, and then I took these steps. I saw some improvement. Now, I'm also doing X, Y, and Z, and I'm hopeful that in the future that's going to result in X." Because people don't necessarily expect that you go from a D to an A, but they do want to hear about what you're doing, and also just how you're handling that situation. Because almost everyone's going to have situations in a job where maybe they make a mistake or something isn't going right, and do you have a process that you can use in order to make that better? That's, I think, what the end goal of a lot of this is.
- Sadie Jones: Exactly, because you're going to always be dealing with difficult situations, having to make hard choices, competing interests, time management. All of these things are always going to come up, and it's not always going to be perfect. But I think it's more, how do you look at a problem? How do you look at a difficult situation and handle it in the best way you can, and learn from it? Because a lot of these things are going to be repetitive, and the same type of thing might come up again. So, hopefully you learn from something that didn't go well before. And I think being proactive about things also. So, if when you're



starting law school your grades aren't great, but you really take steps so that doesn't continue and you have an upward trajectory and you're doing better, I think that's all positive. It doesn't have to be that you got to the ultimate point; it just has to be that you're improving.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think a lot of the aim of these questions is really to hear more about you as a real person versus just these standard interview questions about, "Well, what's your favorite law school class?" Okay, tune out for two minutes while they babble on about something. Like, "I don't really care."

Sadie Jones: Exactly. This is probably more interesting for everybody to be able to talk about. And that's why it doesn't necessarily have to be a different job situation; it can be something more about who you are.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think there's always a fine line of personal and professional. Nobody probably wants to hear about your divorce or whatever, in this interview.

Sadie Jones: But let's say you really excel in a sport or something like that – you can talk about something that happened in that situation, or something that's been really impactful to you.

Alison Monahan: When you were an Olympic rower and only got the silver medal.

Sadie Jones: Every once in a while I would see those sorts of...

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, I saw them for sure. You're like, "Oh wow, life woes you."

Sadie Jones: Yeah, but people remember.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, definitely. Alright, let's talk generally – what is your basic advice, if you run into this situation and you're kind of like, "Oh my gosh, what am I supposed to be talking about?" How can people best handle, sort of generally, this type of interview?

Sadie Jones: So, there's a specific technique that's sort of been talked about in relation to this, and I can kind of go through it. You don't have to follow this exactly, but I think it's a good blueprint for an answer. It's called the STAR technique. S stands for "situation", T stands for "task", A stands for "action", and R stands for "results". And so, you can kind of use this to map out your answers for different stories that you're going to use, and I can give you an example of going through one.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And also maybe just a little bit more about what each of those mean.



Sadie Jones: So, "situation" is defining the problem that we're talking about. "Task" is, what do you actually need to do? "Action" is the steps you took to get to the end. And the "result" is, what was the final outcome?

Alison Monahan: Okay. That seems like a reasonable way to walk through these. Do you have an example?

Sadie Jones: Yeah, I think it's a good map. So, let's say that our answer is going to be about... The question was something about a time where you had to make a difficult decision with managing your time. And so let's say your answer is that you were given two assignments around the same time, and you were really only going to be able to finish one on time, and the other one you maybe are going to have to turn in a little bit late. How do you make that decision?

Alison Monahan: I had this exact situation as a summer associate, and it was not a story I would tell in an interview.

Sadie Jones: I was going to say it's something that comes up a lot with summer associates. And I would say you don't have to tell all the details also – that's my other advice. You can kind of outline what happened without maybe going into every little step. So the situation is, we're going to define the problem, and the problem is, which do you turn in first? How do you prioritize, is what I would say. And the task – what do you need to do – is you need to figure out which one you're going to do first? Or are you going to work on them both a little bit, are they both going to be a little bit late? Is one going to be more late? How are you going to do it?

The action is, what did you do? So, I think there's different ways you could handle this. I would say some ideas that I would have maybe would be, you need to figure out, is there one that is more of a priority, like it is more time-sensitive, it's actually going to be turned in at a certain time? What's your relationship with the two people who gave you the assignments? Is one your supervisor? Is one your mentor? Is there someone you can kind of discuss it with more? There are a lot of different things I think that could impact how you decide this. Is there a way you can finish both? You're just going to pull an all-nighter. So, there are lots of different ways that you can handle it, and then you're going to go with one of them. And then the result is, did you turn one in on time, you turned one in late? How did you talk to the person that you turned it in late for? And then as part of that, I think it would also be, what would you do differently, let's say, when taking on both assignments next time? How are you sort of managing your workflow going forward? Hopefully you learned something from it, and you don't end up in that exact situation too much.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Well, in my case it was basically two people thought I was working full-time, which meant like 60 hours a week each for them. And this is not a story I



would ever tell at an interview, because it basically resulted in... Yeah, anyway, that's a different story. It was not a good situation and it did not end well. So, anyway.

Sadie Jones: So, I wouldn't use that one.

Alison Monahan: What?

Sadie Jones: I wouldn't use that one.

Alison Monahan: Right, because I think part of the point here is, you want to think about the qualities that you want to get across to the interviewer and try to have some narrative that fits with that. So, if I'm like, "Hey, basically I went and asked the summer coordinator what I should do and they told me to go tell one of the people I couldn't work for them. And I thought that was a bad idea but I did it anyway, and then basically didn't get an offer" – that's probably not the story I want to be telling to a new potential employer.

Sadie Jones: Exactly. And I think the situation comes up a lot, and definitely, there are vast differences in the end result. What happened, how did it happen in the first place? Like you said, was it the summer coordinator, all of this.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think part of it too is you always want to be careful about who you're blaming for the problem.

Sadie Jones: Yes.

Alison Monahan: So, it may be actually completely accurate what I just said, but that probably is not going to come off very well, because it sounds like I'm basically blaming someone else for the situation, which actually was their fault, but that's not what I want to be talking about.

Sadie Jones: Right. I would keep it more neutral. And obviously you want to take responsibility for any part of it that really was directly your issue. Let's say that the summer associate just didn't manage their time, didn't know how long something was going to take, that sort of thing. But I think, generally, you want to keep it neutral, to objectively "This is what happened. These were all of the things that led to this, and here's what I did."

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think if you can have it be an outside scenario that caused the problem, that's always great too – like, "I was chugging along and doing my work, and then suddenly we had this emergency motion pop up, and then I was called in to work on this motion, and then I had this problem." It's like, "Oh, everybody gets that. That happens. How did you deal with that?"



- Sadie Jones: Exactly. Those are for sure ideal, that can't really be blamed on anybody in particular.
- Alison Monahan: Right. Or, "This pandemic arose and then we had to deal with it." An act of God is always a good part to cause the problem.
- Sadie Jones: Right, natural disaster and everything like that, yeah.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, the blackout causes you not to be able to file on time. Whatever it is. I think those are the best type of stories, because nobody gets blamed, but I do think you have to walk a pretty fine line here of taking responsibility, but not too much responsibility, where it makes you look incompetent. And then not blaming other people, even if it really kind of was their fault. There's a fine line that we're walking here.
- Sadie Jones: And I think this type of story can be good, especially if it was something... Let's say that you're interviewing as a 2L, it was from your 1L summer, it was your first assignment. I think what I would like about it is you really learned something about managing assignments, talking to your supervisors, keeping everyone really informed about workflow and how much time you had. So that's what I like that the lesson, I think, can be good.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I think you also have to be careful about not telling stories that you're still slightly bitter about, because I think that also comes out.
- Sadie Jones: For sure.
- Alison Monahan: I'm just sitting here telling this and I'm like, "Wow, I'm still so angry about that, actually."
- Sadie Jones: Right, because you don't want any real emotion, I think, to come up. You want to keep it really even.
- Alison Monahan: Right. No sarcasm, none of that type of thing. So if you're thinking through situations and you're thinking about topics you might be able to talk about, I think you do want to kind of examine your current emotional reaction to some of these scenarios.
- Sadie Jones: Right. And I also think some of these, like we've talked about, are sort of negative, but you don't want anything that's going to reflect really poorly on you. Or you don't want to by accident say, "Well, I'm so bad at time management, I've always had trouble with this", or something like that. It's something that you might say to a friend about this scenario, but you don't want something like that to pop out of your mouth when you're telling the story. So,



you don't want to take anything that you think is just focusing on a quality you already feel uncomfortable about too much.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think it should always be something that you have a clear path, that you're working on, that doesn't sound too bad to start with. This is kind of going back to that stupid question of, "What's your greatest weakness?" "Oh, my greatest weakness is I'm just too prepared."

Sadie Jones: Right. "I'm such a perfectionist."

Alison Monahan: Yeah, "I'm just such a perfectionist." Like, "Okay." And this also, I think, gets into another question. How much do you think people really need to be prepared with examples and stories, versus just winging it and responding to what they're asked?

Sadie Jones: I think it's a fine line. I do think that you probably need four or five of these stories that you know in the back of your head. What I don't think is that you should have talked them out over and over again, because you don't want it to sound rehearsed. So I think you should just have the gist of, "I generally want to talk about these different stories." And I think if you have, like I said, four or five stories, they should be able to answer most of these behavioral interview questions, because there are just so many overlaps in terms of the lesson or the scenario. But I'm not really a fan of practicing too, too much, because I do think that can make it sound rehearsed. And also, sometimes you don't listen that carefully to what they're saying, and you try to slot something in in a place where it shouldn't be. And then it feels like you're not present in the interview, and that's something that I think is worse than anything else.

Alison Monahan: Right. Then you sound like a politician in a debate, where they ask you about taxes and you start talking about your plan for public transit, and everyone's like, "I'm not sure that's the question we asked."

Sadie Jones: Right, because you just wanted to get it in, and then no one really heard you. They just remember that you weren't really...

Alison Monahan: Basically, you didn't answer the question.

Sadie Jones: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's the most annoying thing. Alright, well, before we wrap up, what are some common concerns that you've seen helping people with these types of questions, that people can kind of work through?

Sadie Jones: Well, I think the biggest issue is what we mentioned about it being a negative. Like you said, that question about your... If they ask you about your biggest



failure, that kind of thing. I think it can be hard sometimes to flip these around into a positive, and I think people just get worried about what's an honest answer, but without reflecting poorly on you.

Alison Monahan: Right, yeah.

Sadie Jones: I think the real focus is just, what did you learn from it, and what positive note are you going to leave it on? What's the lesson? And so, you need to be able to have that to have the story make sense and fit within this format. So, I wouldn't get so worried about that it's a negative. I would really just focus on the lesson, and I think that can open it up a little bit and make people a little less nervous about answering these questions. I would also just practice – even with a friend, with a professional, career services, anyone you that you want to. Just maybe practice doing these questions off the cuff and seeing how that goes, so you get a little bit more comfortable with the format. I also think that people sometimes get worried about getting the story exactly right, making sure all the pieces fit. Especially with the STAR technique – I think it's a good outline, but I also think that if you don't follow it exactly, that's okay. If you miss something, just keep going. I think sometimes with these very structured questions and answers, you can trip yourself up on the process and not be present. And so, don't worry so much about that. This is just an outline if you're nervous about the way to answer the question.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think too, people need to be sure they're paying attention to any follow-up questions or even just non-verbal cues that they're getting from someone. Sometimes with these, I think people can have their story prepared and be going on and on and on. I think if you know, for example, you have that tendency, I think a good situation can be to have a very condensed version that you tell, and then you can ask the person, "Would you like any more detail about that?" And let them tell you, "Oh yeah, I'd like to know more about this piece of it." Versus they ask one question and you start talking for 10 minutes, and they're kind of zoning out and looking around the room, and you're not paying attention to that. I think you need to be responding to the cues they're giving.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. I think some people when they're naturally telling stories, they want to get into every single detail without realizing that the listener didn't really need to hear every single detail to get the story. That's sort of how you remember it.

Alison Monahan: If someone's nervous, this can happen a lot, where they're just talking and talking and talking, and you're like, "I just asked you one thing, it's been 10 minutes. Could I get a word in?"



- Sadie Jones: Right. These should be stories that do not take more than a couple of minutes. That's why I wouldn't worry so much about practicing your exact story and making sure you get every word right. I would practice just answering the questions, and getting feedback from whoever you're practicing with, in terms of how long it's taking, did you get to the point, did they get what you were trying to say? And work on that.
- Alison Monahan: And I think too, people can focus so much on the negative, but also you want to have stories ready to go for things like, "Tell me about a time you had to take a leadership role." And sometimes people freeze about that, because they're just not thinking of themselves as a leader. But you want to have that kind of positive. "Tell me about a time that you turned a situation around and it was successful in the end", because they're not just looking for the bad stuff.
- Sadie Jones: Right. It could be a time you dealt with a client and they were really pleased with you.
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Sadie Jones: And I agree, that stuff actually can throw people off even more.
- Alison Monahan: Right, because they kind of freeze like, "Ah! Never."
- Sadie Jones: Right. And I think people have a tendency to not want to be braggish.
- Alison Monahan: Right, particularly women.
- Sadie Jones: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: I was just reading an article today about this.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. So I think that's something you should practice. And there's obviously a way to be positive and proud of what you did, also without overdoing it. I think if you tend to be a person who has trouble with those questions, you're definitely not going to overdo it.
- Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, I think a lot of this is being aware of your own kind of blind spots, and working on those. If you're a person who does not respond well to criticism, you probably want to have some things prepared about how you did respond to that. If you're someone who doesn't feel like you are a leader, you probably want to have something prepared that actually shows that you were, because I'm sure that you were at some point. So, knowing your own blind spots, I think is great. This whole interview I'm like, "Wow, this is why everyone should do therapy." You're just ready to talk about yourself, you're ready to talk about things you learned, you're ready to frame your stories. So, another plug for



going to therapy in law school is it's really going to help your behavioral interviewing.

Sadie Jones: And you've also processed things.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly.

Sadie Jones: So hopefully there won't be as much emotion tied in with all of this.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you can talk about things more objectively, you can put a positive spin on it. So, I think if you want to prepare for your behavioral interviews, start therapy right now.

Sadie Jones: I agree.

Alison Monahan: Well, we're basically out of time. Any final thoughts you have on this, now that mine's basically "Go to therapy"?

Sadie Jones: My final thought is that I think these questions can feel intimidating, and I do think people practice a lot for them. And recently, there's been a lot of articles and things written about this type of interviewing. But I would say, I would really just think about it as an opportunity for you to tell an employer more about yourself. And you don't need to overthink it so much. I think you prepare a few stories, and I think you're able to show them some qualities you want them to know about you, and why you would be a good hire. So, that's my final thought – use it as an opportunity.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think that goes back to really thinking through what type of characteristics you would need to succeed in this particular job, and then how do you have those characteristics? And then it's really just a question, as you said, of explaining to the person, "Hey, I understand what this job is about, and here's why I would be qualified, and here's some evidence to support that." We're lawyers, we like evidence.

Sadie Jones: Exactly. Yeah.

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

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. For more career help and the opportunity to work one-on-one with us, including doing some behavioral interviews, you can 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



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