



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 getting a job in a more niche area. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are 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 excited to have ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones here with us to talk about getting a job in a more niche area. So welcome, Sadie.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me back.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. Well, when we were thinking about this, we actually found it kind of hard to define what is niche and what is not niche in different areas of the law. What are we even talking about here?

Sadie Jones: I guess I think 100% not niche is just like, I want to do general litigation, or general corporate work. I can kind of fit into lots of different things, and it may be kind of a spectrum. And so, that on one end is really general, and then I think you can start to get more niche within those areas. Like in corporate, you could specialize in M&A or startups or something like that, you could do patent work. So, you could kind of be an IP lawyer within general litigation, but you kind of do different things. And then I think you could specialize even more with federal public defender, or data privacy, or a family lawyer, or specifically a divorce lawyer, or trust and estates is a really specific specialty. Appellate work is usually really specialized. So I think you can go from one end to the other and also be somewhere in the middle.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's right. If I think about the work that I did, I kind of went in as a summer saying, "I just want to do litigation." And then when I came out and got an actual job, I'd had some more work experience, I'd been a clerk, I'd sort of seen what was interesting to me, and so I ended up doing patent litigation, which in some ways seems like it's really specific, and I think it can be, but it also at the time was something that all the people who were kind of general litigators were doing, because that's where the cases were. Those were the cases that we're actually going to trial. So, in some cases, you had people who were electrical engineers who went to law school, and they clearly had gone in with this idea that they were going to do specifically IP and patent and that kind



of thing. And then you had these other people who'd been general litigators and suddenly were like, "Oh, now I'm a patent litigator." And they knew nothing about science, they knew nothing really about the technology, and so they were kind of winging it. But they could apply their skills as a trial lawyer, to be a trial lawyer for a patent case. And often those people actually work together. So, you might have the partner who was the technical partner who had the Electrical Engineering degree, and then you had the person who actually presented in court. And it was kind of an interesting mix, actually.

Sadie Jones: That's always my example of specialties. If someone says they want to get into patent litigation, it does seem like... So if you have that engineering, or computer science is really big degree, I do think you're sort of guaranteed you can get one of those jobs. It's the one area where you're going to get a job in that area, assuming you did okay in law school. You could get hired there anyway, but you can specialize in patent. And then I think on the other side, like you're saying, the people who don't necessarily have the science background. And a lot of times they can learn the basics of what's going on. Generally, I think they're looking for good writers, just strong students who did well and that kind of thing, and really have an interest in it. But you can't really fake the technical part of it, so you're going to come in as a different person in the IP group.

Alison Monahan: Right. And then I was kind of in the middle because I'd been a programmer, but I didn't have a computer science background or a degree. And so, in that case, I wasn't the super technical person on the team necessarily, but I knew enough that I could talk to the engineers in their language, I could do research on prior art and things like that, and I understood it. So, I think there's always kind of a range of people, even when you're talking about these more niche areas.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I think there's always a way to express your interest and make it clear that you've sort of done your homework on it, you're not just like, "Oh, that sounds cool", because I think that is a lot of law students. They might not say it that way to the employer, but that's basically what they're saying, like, "I heard this is a good area that people like to do."

Alison Monahan: Right, or "This sounds cool."

Sadie Jones: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I remember I was in an interview once at a law firm in New York, and I was pitching... They of course asked me what I thought I wanted to do, and I said, "I'm really thinking of international commercial arbitration. I'm taking this Commercial Arbitration class, it seems really cool." And he just kind of looked at me and he was like, "Didn't you tell me that Contracts was your least favorite area of the law?" And I'm like, "Yeah, why?" He's like, "You realize all these cases are contract cases." And I was like, "Huh." He's like, "Yeah, people think



this sounds cool, but it's basically just arguing about contracts." And I was like, "Oh, okay."

Sadie Jones: Well, it was good he told you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I was just envisioning myself gallivanting around The Hague or whatever, or whatever these courts are at this point, I don't even know. But it's just one of those moments where I'm like, "Oh, maybe I should think about this a little more."

Sadie Jones: And actually, my two examples that law students constantly talk about, and you kind of roll your eyes a little bit about, is international arbitration and appellate work.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I said that too. I was going to be an appellate litigator.

Sadie Jones: Those are the two things that law students always think is really cool and they want to do. And what I would usually say is, I can usually weed out the people who really know what it is and really have at least tried to have a basis for those two areas, versus they just think it sounds interesting or they've heard people talk about it. And there is work in those two areas, and it's not like you can't get there. I did once have a summer who ended up in international arbitration and told me from the very beginning it's what they wanted to do. But took such an active role in finding out about any cases that they could get involved in, and worked and traveled to different places. Just really knew their stuff, but it was a lot of work. And that's the only person in all my years that just ended up there and actually did it, and did go to The Hague.

Alison Monahan: Right, and probably loved it.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, and was totally meant to do it and really meant it. But I would say 95% of the people don't even know what it means. They're just like, "Travel, international. Cool."

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly.

Sadie Jones: So if it's all you want to do, you need to really show you know what it is and you're willing to sort of put in the work. And a lot of times pro bono stuff can be a good basis for that, getting involved in pro bono things. And then for appellate work, what I usually say is, they are looking for the cream of the crop, best of the best. So, if you do not have really excellent grades at an excellent law school, you're not going to get into the appellate group, at least at a BigLaw firm or someone who does these big cases. I'm not saying you can't do any appellate work. So, it really weeds out that the academics are so important, your writing is so important. It's definitely a personality thing too. I found that all the partners



in the appellate group seem to share common personality traits, and you need to connect with them. For lack of a better word, they're sort of nerdy and they're not necessarily strong socially, but really, really smart. So that's another thing – it's just like you can't just be an appellate lawyer; you really need to have the background.

Alison Monahan: Right, I think you probably need to clerk realistically on a federal appellate court. I actually could have positioned myself to do those things, but I remember having another interview which was a really weird interview with a partner in San Francisco who did appellate work. You talk about nerdy. This guy was super nerdy. Very, very nice, but his office was kind of a Zen temple, and the lights were turned down and the interview was... Everything was very slow and very soft and very measured, and I was just sort of sitting there crawling out of my skin.

Sadie Jones: And that would probably be the only person you would work with, right?

Alison Monahan: Right, yeah. And it was just one of those things. I was like, "Tell me about your day" type of situation. He's like, "Well, I think I have the perfect job for me. I just sit in my office and if I have a hard question that I need people to research, I write one of my associates and ask them to research this, and they come back and they give me the answer, and I just sit here and think all day long."

Sadie Jones: That's a lot of pondering.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I was kind of like, "Huh, okay. On the one hand, that does sound interesting, but I'm not sure I'd want to do that all day every day." And so, weirdly for me, what I ended up doing was not something that I went into law school thinking I would do, despite having a background for it, I didn't take any IP classes or anything, but it actually kind of worked because I was like, "Oh, I get to do research on what technology was like 10 years ago on the Internet. This is actually kind of interesting to me. I work with an expert, we're doing his report type thing." That to me ended up being more interesting than just sitting in an office thinking all day long.

Sadie Jones: And I've talked to law students where it can go the other way, where your background makes sense for a certain area, versus you've always been thinking about it. Sometimes it's good to have an outside person talk to them about what you're interested in doing and what you've done before and what you like doing, and sometimes the actual practice area is not something you've considered, but maybe you fit really well into that and your background speaks to, this might be an area to look at. So I think sometimes you can end up, you sort of were in a niche that you didn't even know about.



- Alison Monahan: Right. I think it's also fine to say, "Well, yeah, these things do line up, but this is not something I feel like doing." I have an architecture degree, so everyone's like, "Oh, you should do real estate law", and I was kind of like, "Eh, I don't really like property." I did a case or two my first summer, and again, that person, the partner I was working with, loved real estate law. He was all in on it, and he was just like, "This is the only reason I'm a lawyer. I almost flunked out after my first year, and then I got a job doing this and I loved it so much, and this is my life." And I was kind of like, "Hm, yeah, this is probably not for me." So I think sometimes people come in with this idea of, "I'm going to do X." And I think it's great to explore that, but at the same time, I think you have to be more flexible just in terms of what you actually like after you try some things, and also what jobs are available.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. A lot of people have to make a pivot because the economy is doing something, and just certain jobs are more available than others. General jobs and, like we said, corporate or litigation, I think that's pretty much fine. There might be less going on in litigation or less going on in corporate during certain times, but...
- Alison Monahan: They still exist.
- Sadie Jones: Lawyers always have some work, no matter what's going on. So I think that is sort of a good place to start if you're not really sure. But there are definitely times during what's going on in the world and the economy. It could be in the U.S. or internationally or whatever, where certain things are going to be bigger than other things, like bankruptcy was really big during 2009.
- Alison Monahan: That's true.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, and then a lot of people I know got into bankruptcy that didn't think that's what they were going to do, but that's where the jobs were. And a lot of them ended up liking it, and it wasn't something they would have considered.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. I also I worked with some bankruptcy lawyers earlier than that, when I was summering. And again, I was kind of like, "You seem to spend most of your time at an abandoned steel mill in Ohio, maybe this is not the perfect opportunity for me, because I'm not sure I want to be in, wherever you are, calling me and me being like, 'I'm stuck on-site for another day trying to find the steel that's still left.'" And it's like, this sounds awful.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. Sometimes you end up specializing in something because the firm you're at has a really big client that has a lot of work. For example, a lot of big firms have some asbestos litigation or something along those lines, and that's a big client. And so, if you're going to be in general litigation, you are going to do some of that work at some time, and sometimes law students think they don't



want to do that. It's like, then don't be at a BigLaw firm – you're not going to necessarily love all of the clients or work you do. But I would think of it more like, "What practice am I getting? What skills am I getting? What client interaction am I getting? What am I getting out of this work?" Because you probably will have to do some of those types of things.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think most firms will actually be pretty open about the more controversial clients that they have. And a lot of it is like products liability type stuff. I remember someone talking to me about how he spent all of his time on tires that were blowing up and litigation around that, and I was like, "Oh, this doesn't really sound like something I want to be defending the company on." But I think it's important to be realistic about what you're signing up for. There's a reason that these firms are paying a lot of money, and it's not just because you get to things that necessarily are so great for the world.

Sadie Jones: Exactly. And maybe you offset that with some other work that is really great for the world that you can feel good about, with pro bono. Or employment is an area that I find that a lot of law students are interested in and think sounds great, and have not considered which side of the employment cases the big firm is going to be on. It's a really common thing – the big firm is going to be on the company side.

Alison Monahan: Right, the same with environmental cases. It's like, "I want to do environmental law." "You're at a large firm, have you thought about who you're going to be representing? This is not working for an environmental organization here."

Sadie Jones: Exactly, although sometimes I think you can make the switch if you learn about an area. You could end up being on the other side at some point, but you just need to consider which side you're going to be on then. The big firm is going to be on the defense side in these criminal cases, but a lot of people come from the prosecutor's office, and so they have experience on both sides, which I think is interesting. But yeah, there's another example – you're defending someone who's being accused of doing something really bad.

Alison Monahan: Right, although at least with that, usually it's white collar stuff and you can kind of be like, "Well, everyone deserves a defense, and it's not like they killed someone."

Sadie Jones: Exactly. And you get maybe trial experience. People really want to get on those.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And again, that's a kind of hot thing, usually. It's not that easy to become a white collar criminal defense attorney straight out of law school; you're probably going to have to do that through some other pathway.



Sadie Jones: Exactly. You can build up to these things for sure, but if you think that's a path you want to be on, that is something I would suggest, making sure you're starting in law school through your first job, you have an idea of how you build up to where you want to end up at. If you want to end up at the U.S. Attorney's office, you really need to plan out how you're going to get there.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. Alright, let's actually switch gears a little bit and talk about some of that. So, say that someone is very committed, at least in their own head, to doing a certain type of thing when they graduate. Some of the hot areas now are, data privacy is big, or even just one of these things like, "I want to be a divorce lawyer." Or I worked with a partner once who was really into ERISA, which if people have not even heard of that is incredibly specific, and he was dying to have people come and work for him and nobody wanted to, because it seemed really boring. But what do you think are some ideas people can kind of explore if they do think they want one of these niche jobs coming out of law school?

Sadie Jones: I'd really start with your classes. Make sure you're taking classes that makes sense for that area, because a lot of times they may be an elective. Or if they are a required class, kind of like what you were saying, make sure it's a class you like, if that's one that's most related to it. And if you're not really sure, I would do informational, try to even cold call people in those areas and ask them what they suggest. I think they will love talking about it. Find out how they got to where they are, so what is most related? Because you'll be able to sort of sell yourself in an interview later that you took these classes, especially electives that you went out of your way to take. A lot of times there'll be activities, like you said about environmental, let's say. You could be on a journal or other things that are related to it, different activities. There are even bar associations that are specific to those areas, maybe there're even classes or something you could take even out of your law school, or certification. So just figure out what you can do that solidly shows your interest. And some of these things don't even take that much time or effort, but to me it's sort of marketing. You're going to be able to sell the story later to somebody.

Alison Monahan: Right, because I think that's the key – you've got to sort of think about how this is all going to fit together. And I think there has to be also some type of balance, because sometimes you see people go really all in on one very, very, very specific thing, and then, what if this idea doesn't work out? What if it turns out that either you don't actually love this area that you've kind of decided you're going to love without really knowing anything about it? What if you do really like it, but it turns out that there just aren't jobs coming out of school for doing this specific thing? So I think people need to be a little bit flexible here and focus your classes and extracurricular stuff, and even clinics or internships. But you also have to make sure that it's going to lead you to the point that you want to be at, or this could be kind of a disastrous type of situation.



- Sadie Jones: Could not agree more. It's sort of like you want to put some effort into it, but don't put all your eggs in one basket. And in the end, you might need to take some stuff off your resume, because if you don't want it to look too specific, which I think is a way to go if you were really going for it and it didn't work out, so I totally agree. Especially for your first job out of school, you just never know. Even if you've made all this effort to get into an area, there's a chance that that area just isn't happening right now. And the exception of that, like I said, I do think if you have an Engineering degree and you want to do patent work, you're probably fine, but that's not most people. And so all these other things, don't make it too specific. In the same way that, even if you really, really think you want to do public interest work, I never like when people make everything 100% public interest work, because what if you end up not wanting to go in that direction? It becomes really hard to sell yourself to something different, because they're just going to say, "You look so public interest-y." So it's good to balance anything a little bit. You don't want it to be 100% anything.
- Alison Monahan: That being said, one of the happiest lawyers I know is someone who came in to law school knowing she wanted to be a federal public defender and everything was around that. And then she got that job and now she really likes it.
- Sadie Jones: Well, that's great. Yeah.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. It can work out, but also, given where she was coming from school and that kind of thing, that was actually an achievable goal. So, it did make sense that she could kind of commit to that and make that happen. Whereas I think some of these areas get a little more niche. It's just like, nobody's hiring right now in that area, and it doesn't really have anything to do with you or your credentials. It's just like, that area is not really hiring, so what are you going to do?
- Sadie Jones: Exactly, and you just kind of need to make a pivot. There also are the occasional people who are so committed to some area that if they don't get it, they don't even want to be a lawyer. That's the only reason they did it. And then I think, yeah, go all in, and if it doesn't work out, you'll do something different. So, there are those people, if that's how you feel, then yeah, there's no reason to balance it out at all, you only want that one thing. Also, if you have great credentials, you'll get a job. Even if it looks a certain way, you'll still find something. Some of it sort of depends on how everything looks, but generally, I'd say, have it a little bit once.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think people can also work their way into things over time. So, this is super common, and people want to do big firm, white collar criminal defense work. You might get that job out of school. I definitely summered at a firm where that was one of the big things they did, and my office mate was into that.



She could have gotten an offer and gone there and done that; I think she actually went to a public defender instead. But there are those possibilities, but the more likely choice is that you either start as a DA or start as a public defender, and then kind of eventually work your way into that, because you have real experience at that point. So often times I don't think of all of this is lost if you can't do exactly what you think you want to do straight out of law school.

**Sadie Jones:** Absolutely. I think you can build to it, but I think it's a good idea to kind of look at the big picture then and sort of have a strategy and a plan B: If this doesn't work out right away, maybe I'll look in this direction because that'll give me the skills to get there. In the same way that if you're at a school or you have grades that aren't going to get you into the firm you want to get into right away, it doesn't mean you can't get in there down the line once you have, like we said, more specialized skills, more experience. They stop even looking at the earlier stuff, so you can work your way there if that's your absolute goal. I think there's a way to do it, and there're different paths.

**Alison Monahan:** Right. A lot of people move from, say, government work into firms because now they have actual background. And we can argue over whether that's a good or bad public policy, but it is the reality. They have connections, they have background doing various administrative law type things and that sort of stuff that's actually valuable now to a firm. So, I think it's that flexibility and planning ahead. It's always this balance, because you want to sort of think ahead, like, "What do I want to be doing in a few years from now?" But you also realize that you don't control world events, you don't control the economy, so it may just not be possible for you to end up in the position you think you want to be in.

**Sadie Jones:** Totally. Also, a big thing with all of this is relationships, because a lot of these specialized groups are run by one person who's been the head of the group for a really long time and basically makes all the decisions. So, even if you don't get a job there, if you meet that person or are able to make a connection to someone else in the group, a lot of times they recruit from people they know or they've developed relationships with. So I think it's really invaluable to work on that early if it's something you're really committed to.

**Alison Monahan:** Yeah, and I think you can also be strategic, depending on the practice area you want to get into, about using pro bono projects where maybe you get a mentor who is further along that path. I was thinking when I knew I wanted to leave the firm, like, "Oh, maybe I'll open a family law practice." And so I took a pro bono divorce case and I made an appointment with this mentor, and we actually ended up talking about this idea, and she was all for it. I quickly realized that divorce law was not for me. She was probably 20 years older than I was, and was like, "We're looking for the next generation of people. So, if you want to do this, there's a whole community of people that will mentor you, because we



need people to replace us when we retire." So, it wasn't like it was a competition for her, she's like, "You'll be taking totally different cases than what I'm doing. I'm doing the high-end stuff. You'll be doing the 'get your feet wet' stuff. I'm happy to send those cases to someone else." So, I think the networking in any niche area is so critical. You can look at the bar association groups, even in school, like a specialty group, and then there are other groups outside. Particularly if you're in a larger city, you may have something like the Inns of Court and they may specialize in IP or something. So I think just getting involved in those things and meeting people is really going to help the journey to getting that more specific job that you're looking for.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely, I think that's a lot of it with these really niche areas. When you start getting to the really niche, like the farthest end of the spectrum, there's usually a community of people that do that in whatever city you're in.

Alison Monahan: Right. And they all know each other.

Sadie Jones: Totally, which is why you want to keep on the good side of everyone.

Alison Monahan: Exactly, and I think that's critical. Even if you are, say, on the other side of a case or something, I think it's always really important that you are professional, respectful, not doing anything crazy, because it is a community and people do look and they even will hire. They'll try to hire somebody that was like, "Oh, I worked on a case with that person on the other side, and they seemed really great. We should try to poach them, basically."

Sadie Jones: Yeah, which is why keep an eye on your gossip and badmouthing someone. Even if they do something wrong or crazy or whatever, I'd keep it really kind of internal, because I think that stuff gets out. The community can be really small, so I totally agree.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely. No, I remember I was in trial in Delaware, and there was only one really good hotel in Wilmington, Delaware. So, usually only one side of the case will stay at a hotel, but in this case, both sides were staying there. And so it was always this really awkward moment at breakfast when you walk in and the other side is there talking strategy, and you just want to have your eggs. But it had to be like, "Oh hi, you guys have a great day! See you in court." Awkward.

Sadie Jones: And people get stuck for a really long time on these things, where they're in this little town forever.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, it was such a weird scene. I was like, "This is every morning really awkward, but I'm just going to go sit over there, so I don't overhear you guys talking strategy."



- Sadie Jones: Also, sometimes you could get into a niche area because you really like the people in the group. I've seen that with summer associates – they end up doing something they had never expected because they made a relationship and they sort of got recruited into the group and realized that the work was good, but also that they liked the feeling of whatever the group is. So, that's another reason, I think, to end up in a certain area sometimes.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I also summered a place where the first case that came in and they're like, "Oh, you said you want to do international stuff, this is kind of international." I'm like, "What do you mean?" They're like, "Do you know anything about Federal Indian Law?" And I'm like, "No." But it turned out to be actually really interesting, and I ended up taking a class in it the next year because I was like, "This is actually a really interesting area of the law."
- Sadie Jones: I think that's great. And also, if you end up not actually doing it, you learned something and you thought it was interesting. That's enough too.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. I was like, "That was an interesting case, I learned something about the area. Obviously I don't practice there, but hey, if I ever drive through the Southwest, I've got some more context for how it's laid out."
- Sadie Jones: Yeah.
- Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, we're running out of time here. Any final thoughts you have to offer on this topic?
- Sadie Jones: Basically, when someone says, "Should I specialize in something?", my answer would be, "It depends."
- Alison Monahan: Are you sure you didn't go to law school?
- Sadie Jones: No. I think I've been around lawyers long enough to know that's the answer to everything. So, it just depends on where the world is, how specific it is, how much you really care about that area. But my overall advice would be, go for it if it's something you really want to do, but also, it's a good idea to keep your options open.
- Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. I totally agree with that. Well, unfortunately, with that, we are out of time. Thank you so much for joining us.
- Sadie Jones: Thank you for having me.
- Alison Monahan: My pleasure. For more career help and the opportunity to work one-on-one with us, 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 or rating on



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