Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have social impact expert and serial connector Susan McPherson here with us to talk about the lost art of connecting. 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 excited to have social impact expert and serial connector Susan McPherson here with us to talk about the lost art of connecting. Welcome, Susan!

Susan McPherson: Thank you, Alison. I am so excited to be here.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I'm so excited to have you. To start us off, can you just give our listeners a bit of information about your background, so they've got some context here?

Susan McPherson: Absolutely. I've had probably 10 lives at this point, as I'm pushing 60, but I'll give you just a few highlights. I had about 20 years of corporate marketing, public relations, business development experience, when in the mid-aughts, I decided to switch things up and focus on corporate responsibility, social impact, social good, really pushing the private sector to be better. But the one throughline all the way since I was a young child up until today was this massive love of making connections. Not networking, but building connections, and then watching the magic unfold.

Alison Monahan: Awesome.

Susan McPherson: In hindsight, looking back now, 30 plus years professionally, I would be nowhere without the connections that I made in my twenties and my thirties and my forties.

Alison Monahan: That is so interesting and I cannot wait to talk with you about it. If people want to learn more about you and reach out, how can they do that?

Susan McPherson: I'm on all the social channels, platforms – on LinkedIn, I hate to say X – what is formerly known as Twitter, Reddit, Instagram. The one kind of area I stay away from is TikTok, not because I have anything TikTok, but it's just, I don't have enough hands, feet, and legs, right? And then my company is McPherson Strategies. We are a social impact communications firm. McPStrategies is the website. So, reach out and say hello.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. We will link to all of that stuff in the show notes and people can reach out to you. Alright, well, you have already touched on one of the topics we're going to talk about – networking. So many, maybe most law students and young lawyers hate the idea of networking. But you have written a book called *The Lost Art of Connecting* that really, I think, aims to flip that narrative. What's your approach here?

Susan McPherson: First of all, let's do away with the terminology of networking for the remaining part of this conversation, for the very reason that it makes people feel icky, makes people want to take a shower, and there is no excitement to do it. And I like to think of connecting as less transactional, more meaningful, more listening than talking, which if you're an introvert can be a more comfortable place from which to be. And really going for the long haul, not an immediate "Thank you ma'am." I can't remember the funny "Thank you ma'am".

Alison Monahan: Slam, bam, thank you ma'am.

Susan McPherson: And just to give your listeners an example, I imagine many of them get requests to connect on LinkedIn. Networking is when somebody connects with you and then immediately responds with asking you to buy something.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I hate that so much.

Susan McPherson: You hate it, because then you regret your decision.

Alison Monahan: No, it's gotten to the point where if I think they're going to do that, now I just reject them.

Susan McPherson: Yeah. What about instead, when they reached out to you, that they offered a way to be helpful? What I'd like to do is, as mentioned, flip the switch on networking to leading with how we can be helpful to others. Now, again, that could send the fear of God in people, because people are like, "I'm too busy, I can't help you." But we can all be helpful. Not all the time, not every day, but if

we lead with how we can be helpful, we walk into rooms virtually or in-person and it gives us the confidence to be able to have conversations, because everyone can use a little help.

Alison Monahan: What do you say to people who are maybe thinking of this in a more hierarchical type of way? So they're thinking, "Oh, I'm trying to approach this person who, for whatever reason, I feel like is, above me in the hierarchy. What would I possibly have to help them with?" How do you help people feel comfortable thinking that they actually do have something of value here?

Susan McPherson: Well, before I go anywhere, even today, because I have imposter syndrome, just like everyone else, I think about what my superpowers are. And we all have superpowers, all of us, every single one of us, whether you're 18 or 75. And you think about how those superpowers can come into the fold. Now, I mentioned early on TikTok. Yes, there's a reason I don't use TikTok, because quote unquote, I don't have enough time. But I haven't figured out the algorithm. So, if I'm 25...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I'm with you. I'm like, "TikTok, no, can't do that one. Sorry."

Susan McPherson: I bet there're a lot of people who are in your generation that may be able to. And when they walk into an event and they're talking to someone like me, that could be a way somebody could be helpful, okay? But another way to be helpful is just, give people information. Share with them a podcast that they might have interest in. Share a non-profit that you're passionate about, or a cause that you're passionate about. It doesn't always have to be that when we think of help, right? Giving people information that could be helpful to them is help, right? So I think it's important for folks... Law school students are smart, they're resourceful. When they are having this fear that someone is, quote unquote, higher than them or more accomplished, this is when it's really important to think about the superpowers they have.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think one of those, which we talk with people about is, you are actually closer in a lot of ways to the material and to the development of the law. So, even if you have an interaction with somebody who's a law firm partner, they might not know these cases that you're reading in law school. They might be happy for you to send them an article that's, "Hey, I thought of you when I saw this. It came across my radar in my Antitrust class." And they're like, "Oh, great. I have to research that."

Susan McPherson: Alison, that is such a good point. And I think about that could apply – and I know we're talking law school – but in med school, right? Think about this. You think that surgeon has been doing surgeries for 35 years. You're learning the cutting edge part of surgery. So it's very similar in law school. It's a great point.

Alison Monahan: Tell me a little bit more. I know you have a whole process here of "gather, ask, do". How do you help people operationalize this if they want to connect?

Susan McPherson: Yes, of course. The methodology that the book describes is called "gather, ask, do", but I want to remind listeners that the underlying notion below it all is leading with how you can be helpful. So just keep that in mind when you hear me describe these three stages. The "gather" phase you connect with the most important person in your life, and that is you. And you think about what your superpowers are, because again, you want to lead with how you can be helpful. You also think about what your goals are for the next one year, three years, when you finish law school and you have your first or second-year experience at a law firm or a corporate engagement. And then you think about how you're going to break that hermetically sealed bubble that all of us live in, myself included, where we tend to attract people who look like us, sound like us, the same age, race, and color as us. To give you the old, ancient proverb, "A fish can't see water unless it breaks out of its bowl." When I first heard that, it really resonated. Then you move to the "ask" phase, which is learning to ask the meaningful questions of others, so you can find out what their hopes and dreams are. It also helps when you go to – I'm going to use the word "networking" events and you're like, "What am I going to talk about?" But if you ask people questions, you'll find a large majority of people like to talk if you give them a platform. But when you're asking these questions, you listen for signals on what, again, their hopes and dreams are. And then you can move to the "do" phase if you listen carefully – which, again, is a skill. But when you get to the "do" phase, you become reliable, resourceful, responsible, responsive – all the things that are going to help make you a professional attorney and a good person.

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's so key. I think that transition into, "What does it mean to be a professional? What are the expectations of me?" – that's such a struggle for so many people. So, I think getting explicit about, what does that mean? It means that you should be responsive to things, it means that you follow up, it means you close the loop. You talk about this, I think, in the book, and we've talked about it before on the podcast – if somebody gives you help, you need to close the loop and follow up and let them know, how did that go? That's what builds these relationships.

Susan McPherson: And it's over the long term. So the relationships you are starting now could potentially have massive impact on your life 15, 20, 30 years down the road. If somebody had told me in my twenties that I was going to run a company when I turned 48, I would have told them that they were smoking you know what. It was so far from anything I would have ever imagined. And now 12 years, 11 and a half years later, I have 15 employees and have built a successful business.

Alison Monahan: Well, congratulations to you. And I feel the same way. If somebody had told me in law school I would run a business, I'd be like, "Are you crazy? I don't have any interest in that. I don't have any aptitude. I don't know anything about that. Why would I even want to do that?" And now it turns out it's great. Who knew? But yeah, I think that is part of this whole conversation, is you just don't know where things are going to lead. I met my business partner on the ex-Twitter when I was going to write a book, which never happened, and she had started a small business of her own and was like, "Yeah, I don't know where this is going." She reached out to me and it turned out we lived a mile apart. So we met for coffee and then the second time that we ever had lunch, we decided to start this business.

Susan McPherson: I love that.

Alison Monahan: It's like a shotgun marriage, but luckily she's great. It went well. We're very compatible.

Susan McPherson: Okay, good.

Alison Monahan: It's one of those things, if one of us hadn't reached out to just say, "Hey, here's an article." Literally, I think she sent me a blog post that she had done. It was like, "Oh, I see that you're in the same area. Here's something I'm thinking about." And at that point I would talk to anyone who would talk to me because I was just sitting alone at my kitchen table trying to write this book. And yeah, the rest is history. Here we are.

Susan McPherson: I love that. Thank you for sharing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I guess we've already a bit talked about this. Why specifically do you think these are important skills for people to hone?

Susan McPherson: Because everything happens because of connections, personally and professionally. And I think if you ask listeners to think back in their lives of all the

good things that happened to them, guess what? Because somebody you had met, somebody you had wanted to meet, somebody you accidentally met. And I think if we were more intentional when we made connections, more good could be happening.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I totally agree with that. And yeah, I just think you really never know.

Susan McPherson: You never know, ever.

Alison Monahan: I think back to people I've known for 30 years or whatever at this point. And sometimes those are just very random things, but we're still good friends.

Susan McPherson: Yeah. Or professionally, too. Again, I can hear back years ago, my mom saying, "Don't burn bridges", which sounded so ridiculous and antiquated, but oh my goodness, is it true? So true.

Alison Monahan: It's very true. I feel like if you don't have to leave on a bad note, just don't leave on a bad note. You never know.

Susan McPherson: Hold on to those negative emotions. I know. Look, if people are nasty – yes, you should never take irreprehensible behavior from anyone. But I just meant, in terms of professionally, if you can move on with grace, it will always be helpful to you.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. There're some situations where, okay, we get it. But generally speaking, if you just need to leave and be like, "Okay, this wasn't a great fit for me, I'm moving on. No hard feelings" – always the better option. Alright, well, let's talk through a few specific scenarios that I think people might be interested in. So, I'm going into my third year of law school, I don't have a post-graduation job offer. Very common scenario. I've been thinking about ways to meet people in my desired field, but I don't feel like there's any reason anybody would want to talk to me or help me out. Do you have ideas?

Susan McPherson: This is an important time to do a self-assessment, the "gather" phase, and think about not only what your superpowers are, but what do you like to do? And maybe what do you not like to do? And I have a lot of people say, "I don't know." Ask your friends. Ask your fellow students. Ask your professors. Ask your family. Ask your dog. People will give you honest feedback if they care about you, and people in your lives want to help and want to be helpful. To me, start with the people you know and ask them what your superpowers are, and then

lead with that. And if you're having difficulty in your own community making connections, and on all the different LinkedIn and various platforms, I always recommend, in this day and age, there're 1.7 million non-profits in the U.S. alone. Many of them could use legal counsel. Now, I know you can't, on paper, until you get past the bar, etcetera, but you could be helping and providing guidance to a non-profit organization of things they should be cautious about and things they should be thinking about. And again, just take San Francisco where you are based part of the time. Think of all the local non-profits that could use help. And that's a stellar way to meet people who may be different from yourself, but have similar values. And you also are able add new and innovative things to your resume, so that when it comes time to be applying for positions, you are that much more versatile and unique. So, that would be my answer to that question.

Alison Monahan: No, that's such a great point, I think. And law students and lawyers also have the pro bono option, which when I was looking to leave my BigLaw firm and wanted to completely transition and had a very brief moment of thinking maybe my path was to start a family law practice – ha! – that's what I did. I got a pro bono case; that case convinced me after three years of working on it that I did not want to do family law. But as part of that, they gave an entire spreadsheet of potential mentors. So, I took that, I looked at this list and then I said, "Oh, this person looks interesting. I'd like to speak with her." And she called, she is perfectly willing to have me come over and chat for 30 minutes, and by the end of it is giving me advice on how to start my firm and how I should do this and blah, blah, blah. I in the end luckily decided that was not the path for me, but that was so easy in a lot of ways. Alright, next question: I moved for law school and I feel lonely. I'm super busy, I don't really seem to have time to meet new people or even hang out with my classmates that maybe I know a little bit, even though I'd love to do that. Everybody just seems to have their own stuff going on. What can I do?

Susan McPherson: Be a host, okay? When we sit here and we expect others to do the inviting, we miss out, right? Now, before the introverts come wanting to club me to the reams, may I recommend you don't have to do this alone. Pick one or two others in your class and do it together, and ask each person to bring two or three others, and by then you're up to 10 or 12 people. And that way you are creating engagement, rather than depending on others.

Alison Monahan: I think that's such a great idea.

Susan McPherson: Yeah, and it doesn't have to be anything fancy. You can go for a walk, you can meet in a park. Depending on where you're in law school, if you're a listener, you could be doing this all year long.

Alison Monahan: Maybe not in New York City, where I was, but...

Susan McPherson: Where did you go to law school?

Alison Monahan: I was at Columbia.

Susan McPherson: Oh, okay.

Alison Monahan: Very nice certain seasons of the year, and probably didn't want to leave the house certain other days.

Susan McPherson: Although with climate change, that's changing rapidly, unfortunately.

Alison Monahan: That is true. For some reason, I guess this just came naturally in some ways to me. My roommates and I were always the ones who would throw huge parties in our three-bedroom apartment. But we had one our second year and it was funny. It was a fun party, whatever. And I showed up my first day to be a TA for a class. And this guy I didn't recognize was – we were all standing around outside waiting for the room to open – says, "Oh yeah, I think I saw you at this party the other night." And I was like, "Huh. Yeah, that was my house. I don't know how you were there. And also, I'm your TA." So, you just never know who you're going to meet. I think he eventually switched sections so he didn't have to be in my section. But yeah, we definitely had a lot of fun and met a lot of interesting people, and people would bring their friends and obviously people we didn't even know were there. Next question: I'd like to keep in touch with people I met in my summer job. I've heard that's a good idea, but I feel really awkward just randomly emailing them to say hi or to get coffee. They're probably just going to forget about me anyway, as soon as I leave. What should I do?

Susan McPherson: Follow up. And don't follow up by just saying, "Oh, it was nice meeting you." Follow up and mention something that you actually conversed about, something that was memorable. But don't wait. Don't wait two weeks, don't wait a week. Try to do it the next day, while it's fresh.

Alison Monahan: These are people that you worked with over the summer, particularly if you were a summer associate or something at a law firm. Part of that experience was designed to help you connect with people. So, it's not going to be odd if you then follow up with somebody a month later. And again, "Hey, this article I saw reminded me of you." Even if it's a situation where people are going to be going back to that firm, it's great; they want you to stay in touch. How do you help people get over this idea that somehow... I feel like a lot of people think they're a burden if they are contacting people or trying to connect or stay in touch.

Susan McPherson: I hate to hear that. I absolutely hate to hear that, because think about what it means when you get a note that isn't asking you for anything, but more just letting you know that you're being thought of. There's nothing better, because most of the time when people reach out to you, they're asking for something, and it means it's something you have to add to your list. I have a running list right next to me here, that every time I get an email saying, "Can you introduce me to this person?", I have to add it to the list, because if not, I would lose track. Now, I just do that for a lot of people; it's part and parcel to my role as a connector. However, in this case, we need more good dopamine in the world. And the way to get more good dopamine is people, just unbeknownst, for no reason reaching out and sending articles, sending just good juju into the universe. I think it might help tip the scale, given we are living in the most vitriolic times, at least in my lifetime.

Alison Monahan: That is very true. I always love it when we get an unsolicited note from somebody through the contact form.

Susan McPherson: Or a voicemail, or a WhatsApp, or a DM.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And we get notes saying, "I listen to the podcast, it's so helpful." We have a bar one, and we do a lot of substantive law topics. We've literally had people write and say, "You know what? I listened to that podcast, I got this question on the bar exam, I was freaking out, I couldn't remember the law. And then I literally heard Lee" – my business partner – "I heard Lee's voice in my head, walking me through the question. And I calmed down enough to write it and I think that's why it passed." That makes my week.

Susan McPherson: Exactly. Exactly. Or just like in the morning when you first wake up, if there's a WhatsApp from a friend who lives overseas that just says, "You popped in my brain yesterday and I wanted to say hi."

Alison Monahan: I love that. I was actually thinking last night of a friend of mine who lives abroad and was like, "Oh, I should reach out to her and see if she can send me a cute baby picture." But then I didn't do it, because I thought it'd be too late. So, today I will reach out and I will send that WhatsApp. Alright, our last question: I feel like I forgot how to talk to people in the pandemic. How can I start to get better at small talk and about making connections in real life when it still seems a little weird?

Susan McPherson: First of all, you're not the only person feeling that way who ever asked that question. But several things. One, try to remember to make it more about the other person and not about yourself. And think of questions to have in your back pocket, so that when you do meet with people, you have them at the ready. If anybody decides to read my book, I have 10 questions in one of the chapters to have in your pocket. And to give you an example, if you're talking to somebody, you just say to them, "What was the last series on Netflix that you saw that you loved?" or, "If you could solve any problem in the world and finances weren't an issue, what would that problem be?" And then just sit back and listen. And that means you don't feel awkward, because you're not sitting there trying to talk about yourself or what the latest and greatest is in your life. It's not hard to keep up to date with what's happening in the world, but my aunt, who's now 96 – crazily – years and years ago, told me that before she would go to an event, she would listen to, at the time, I don't know what the program was on NPR, but it would be like our All Things Considered or Morning Edition, just for a few minutes. And boy, that would give you everything, from sea otters to AI to a plethora of things to talk about. But honestly, make it more about listening rather than talking, and you'll find a wealth of things to learn and to follow up on.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think lawyers in general love to talk about themselves. Most of them probably don't have enough social interaction. I always found, when I was at these summer associate lunches or something at the law firm, where it's you and a couple of attorneys and a few other summers, and I was just sitting awkwardly around, "Oh gosh, what are we supposed to talk about?" And some of them went the direction of pop culture, whatever, what's on NPR. But then other ones... There was one partner who was in a very specific practice area. He was probably one of a handful of people in the entire world who did this, but he loved to talk about it. So you could literally just go to lunch with him and be like, "Oh, what kind of stuff are you working on now?" And he would just go and go, and he loved it. And he loved you. And he was like, "This person's the greatest. We should definitely make them an offer", because nobody wanted to listen to him. And I felt so bad for him. He just wanted to be listened to, even if it was on a really boring and really specific topic.

Susan McPherson: Right. Oh my goodness.

Alison Monahan: Oh man, I learned a lot about... I'm not going to say what the topic is, but I learned a lot about a very obscure and boring, frankly, topic that summer. But he just wanted people to hear him. And I think that's so much of it – people just want to be heard and they want to feel like you're listening to them. And if you can be that person who says, "Tell me about your day. Tell me about your life", people want to talk about it. Then you don't have to say anything.

Susan McPherson: Exactly. Bingo!

Alison Monahan: Then if you later follow up with an article, that's "Oh, this came across my desk on this really specific thing", they're going to be like, "This person is amazing. I want to hire them, absolutely."

Susan McPherson: I hate to use this term, but they're thinking outside of the box. They're thinking about things beyond law reviews and legalities, which I think law school students are thinking about a lot. I live next door to the Brooklyn Law School, so I see law students all the time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you see them scurrying around, looking nervous, looking stressed. But I think people do lose sight of that, because it's such an academic environment, but really, what you bring away from it are the connections. It's not so much what you learned, which is going to be changing anyway.

Susan McPherson: No, it's so true.

Alison Monahan: I remember I interviewed with a judge and she had a picture on her wall of her first-year study group – this was 30 years ago. And she told me that – she's like, "These are the things that actually matter in law school. It's not what you're learning. It's the people." And I thought that was so interesting.

Susan McPherson: I love that. Damn!

Alison Monahan: Yeah. No, she still had that photo, and everybody who came to interview with her, she made them look at it and said, "This is what you need to be taking away." Alright, we're about out of time here. Any final thoughts you would like to share?

Susan McPherson: No, actually, thank you. Just to reiterate, take the anxiety out of this and think of it over the long haul, rather than just collecting business cards, which is when we think of networking. And it doesn't all have to be done by tomorrow or by the time you graduate. It's more over your lifetime. But we have two ears and one mouth a reason, so it's a good reminder to listen more than we speak.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I love that. Yeah, I think just getting out of that transactional mindset is really the key, because it's not about, "Who am I going to meet who can give me a job right now?", because that's not going to happen. It's just not going to happen. It's not how things work. But you need to have this community of people you can call upon when you need something, and you can help them when they need something, because that's how the world operates.

Susan McPherson: So well said.

Alison Monahan: Alright, Susan, well, thank you so much for joining us. And remind me again how people can find out more about you and reach out.

Susan McPherson: On the social web, @susanmcp1 is my handle, and they can find more about my company at McPStrategies.com. And lastly, my book can be found anywhere – *The Lost Art of Connecting*.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. I hope people pick that up, read it, take it to heart. Thank you so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolBox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

**RESOURCES:**

McPherson Strategies
*The Lost Art of Connecting*, by Susan McPherson
Podcast Episode 114: Law School Networking 101
Podcast Episode 207: Navigating Networking Events as a Law Student
Strategies to Tackle a Law Firm Speed Networking Event

[How to Follow-up After Networking]
[Easy Networking Tips for Those of Us Who Hate It]
[Unconventional Networking Methods for Law Students]
[Why You Should Maintain Your Law School Connections]