Episode 71: Soft Skills You Need to Develop to be a Successful Attorney

Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're going over the soft skills we think you need to be a successful lawyer. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess. That's me. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be.

We're the co-creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, and the Catapult Conference. Alison also runs the Girls Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the contact form at Law School Toolbox dot com, and we'd love to hear from you.

And with that, let's get started.

Alison Monahan: Welcome back. Today we're talking about some of the soft skills we think you need to develop to be a successful attorney. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that law school doesn't actually prepare you to really be like this wonderful, successful lawyer. Sure you learn skills like legal writing and legal analysis, but practicing law or even building a business, these take other soft skills and some law schools are getting better at offering opportunities for students to gain these skills, but it's really up to you to make sure that you are fully ready for practice.

So Lee, what are some of these skills we're talking about?

Lee Burgess: Well, the first kind of bundle of skills I think a lot of people think about are just general business skills. And by this, you know, we mean understanding basic finances of a business. You know, like money goes in, money goes out, some people even find it valuable to understand how to read a balance sheet.

I'll be honest,

Alison Monahan: I would say most corporate lawyers probably should be able to do that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I'll be honest, I didn't know how to do that when I exited law school, I'll be honest,.

Alison Monahan: But we're litigators is fine. No, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. You should still be able to read a balance sheet.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Your clients are businesses.

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Lee Burgess: Exactly. You know, just even a general understanding of how law firms, or other basic businesses work. You know, I mean law, the law firm model and the. The partner model is probably something that you should understand if you are entering that work environment.

Alison Monahan: Sure. I remember being shocked when I found out that a lot of firms, partners, new partners, have to pay to join the firm.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: A hundred thousand dollars or more, and it was just like, are you joking?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: No one told me this.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, I'm gonna work all these years and like, kill myself to become a partner and then I have to pay for the privilege?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Wow.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I like, Probably should have known that.

Lee Burgess: And then those, all those, ideas of shared liability as well.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah.

Lee Burgess: Can also be very interesting.

Alison Monahan: Yes, for sure. So whatever, I mean, I think any type of law that you're thinking of practicing, you should understand the basics of how that works as a business.

I mean, even if you wanna do, say nonprofit work or you wanna work, you know, in public interest stuff, you need to understand like how do these places bring in money?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

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Alison Monahan: And to what extent are you gonna be responsible for that?

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Let's talk about balance sheets. I mean, when I was on the board of a nonprofit, that's really where I learned how to get into the nitty gritty of. balance or accounting sheets, because let's talk about where money is the tightest. It's pretty much in the nonprofit world, and you have to look at every single line item super carefully and understand, you know, how money is tracked going in and going out.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely. I mean, it doesn't matter what sort of law you're, what sort of lawyer you think you're gonna be.

Like, somebody's gotta get paid.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: You know, there's, there's some way that you're gonna get paid for this and I think it would behoove you generally to understand. What that way is.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm. I think basic client facing skills are really important as well. You know, you can gain these by doing a lot of different activities.

It doesn't have to be in the legal environment, but you should know how to talk to a client. Maybe even sell them something.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. Like selling is a bad word for lawyers, but the reality is that's, you know, as we said, everybody's gotta get paid somehow.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And somebody's gotta sell someone on paying you.

Yeah. That's just the way it works. Whether it's a grant or, I mean, I guess the government lawyers, maybe not, but even then, I think, you know. Everybody's advocating for more people in their department or whatever it is. Like you've, you've gotta be able to make it the case for something.

Lee Burgess: For sure, for sure.

I think that sales, or rainmaking is oftentimes how the lawyers like to frame it is a huge part of being a successful lawyer, especially if you do want to eventually become a partner and-

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Alison Monahan: Or if you wanna have your own firm.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Or if you wanna have your own firm and you have to understand what that means.

And it's not just you going out and, you know, face-to-face selling. It's also just about building relationships and figuring out how to maintain those relationships. I mean, let's just talk about how a lot of people get their business from referrals.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah.

Lee Burgess: And, you know, and referrals come through networking, through maintaining the connections of the people that you have made that you've become friends with or known in law school or college.

I mean, how often do you and I talk to each other about lawyer referrals for friends?

Alison Monahan: All the time.

Lee Burgess: All the time. All the time, and that's all comes out of, you know, our own personal networks and also the reputations of, of folks that we know around town.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I, I would say probably at least once every week or two, you know, somebody asks me like, oh, I need a referral for this really specific type of lawyer.

Do you know anyone?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: I mean. Almost never am I like, oh yeah, I've got the perfect person for you.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But they're asking because they know that I know other people who know other people who know other people, you know, and it just kind of gets passed down this chain until something comes back. Yes, actually I know the perfect person for you.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

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Alison Monahan: And that's the way that these things work. I mean, if, you know, if you're not comfortable putting yourself out there and meeting other people, whether that's, you know, in an email or a phone call, or in person. That's something that, that's a skillset you really need to develop.

Lee Burgess: And talking about what you do.

Having that elevator pitch, you know, even, you know, what we're talking about here is even how we give referrals. I mean, I have to know, you know, if my friend practices family law, which is a referral I'm frequently asked for, what sort of family law does she do? Does she do prenups? Does she, do you know, simple disillusions, does she do complicated child custody? Does she do large, complicated estates where there's a lot of money involved? You know, you can't send someone to a referral with a, who wants a very simple divorce to a divorce attorney who does very complicated estate division because one, they're gonna be way too expensive for that person.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: But that's just not in their wheelhouse.

It's not what they do. In the same way, you can't send someone, who has a very complicated, divorce coming up, or very contentious divorce to someone who just does simple, you know , we're just going to like, sell the cars and separate the house and whatever, and, you know, file it and be done with it.

That's, it's gotta be the right fit. And so you have to talk about what you do to your friends and your network so people even know how to give you business.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I think like learning how to frame what type of work you do, learning how to frame the type of work you're interested in. You know, these are skills that will serve you well in whatever type of law you end up doing.

You know, say you're at a cocktail party and you're a public interest attorney, and you meet someone and you explain to them the basics of like, oh, you know, we work with children who are facing deportation and they're like, oh, wow, that sounds really interesting. I'd love to help out with that because I happen to be super wealthy, you know?

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

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Alison Monahan: And suddenly it's like, oh. Wow, great. You know, we've just made this connection that might keep our, you know, keep this group alive for like another six months. Like, you just never know who you're gonna meet and who you're gonna talk to and just saying like, oh, I do public interest work doesn't really cut it.

Lee Burgess: It's true, and it's being comfortable just talking about what you do. It's not like in a pompous way, but in a, you know, a confident way because you don't know. I mean, I have been at playgroups with my son and met people in philanthropy who I said, oh, I have this great philanthropic organization I think you should know about.

Let's all go have lunch.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. Or, you know, you and I are having lunch and we sit next to someone, over hears this chatting about what we do and offers to work for us.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Like, you just never know.

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: And having, you know, developing that comfort level with sort of talking about yourself in a professional way I think is something that's gonna pay dividends regardless of what type of law you end up doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And again, this doesn't come easily for everybody. You have to work on it. I mean, I will be honest, when I first started tutoring my husband who had worked in corporate America much longer than I had would laugh at how bad my sales pitch was on the phone.

Like he really would, like, I don't know Alison if I've told you this, but he would just be like, that wasn't very good. You didn't sound confident. You didn't, you know, you sounded too needy. Like, you know, all of these mistakes did you make when you not really sure.

Alison Monahan: You didn't make the ask.

Lee Burgess: You didn't make an ask, you know, you acted like, you know, they were doing you a favor by talking to you, whatever it might be. It there was, there was a lot of feedback that I'm just glad he gave me, although it can be tough to hear that

feedback at the time, but like, you're not that good at this. You need to work on your, your sales pitch. And, and you know, recently he was, listening to me make another one and he's like, wow, you are so much better.

I'm like, well, I'd like to think I have been since I've been doing this now since, you know. 2009, but it's something you have to work on. And if you can work on that stuff, even before you enter your legal career and then throughout your legal career, it's just gonna serve you well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, even, I think I've told you this before, but the judge that I worked for, when he was appointed, he was very young. I think he was barely 40. I think he was the youngest judge on the bench at the time. And so, you know, the judge persona is usually this old white-haired man. And that was not him, but he was quite lucky because his mother was an actress.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And for his first like year on the bench, whenever he came and did something, you know, whether it's like talking to the jury, giving jury instructions or whatever it was, she would actually come to court and later critique him.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And exactly like your husband did, to say, look, look, that was not very good. You know, your pitch was off. You, you, you rushed through this part. It sounded like you weren't confident. Here's what you need to do instead.

You know, you need to take a breath here and you, and these are things that everybody has to work on. And I mean, the funny thing is, I clerked for him after we've been on the judge bench for 20 plus years, and the first time you heard his jury colloquial or whatever they call it, it was like, wow, that was so amazing.

By like the seventh time you'd heard it with exactly the same intonation, exactly the same pauses, and exactly the same joke, and exactly the same time. Like we could basically say it with him.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: But I mean, the first time you saw it and for everybody else it was their first time, it was amazing.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

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Alison Monahan: And you know, and he wasn't ashamed of this. He's like, yeah, like I wasn't very good at this when I started out, and now I'm really good at it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I mean, I used to do a lot of singing and performing and theater, and boy, that was some solid practice for doing so much of what I've done in my corporate life, because you're used to playing a role, you know, memorizing something, delivering it, and, and that's a lot of, of what sometimes being in business can be.

Alison Monahan: Or, yeah, I think sometimes, yeah. I think sometimes law students feel sort of self conf or self,

Lee Burgess: Self-conscious.

Alison Monahan: Conscious. Thank you. Yes. They feel self-conscious if this is not something they're immediately comfortable doing and they think like, oh, well, you know, I'm just gonna have to find some way of being a lawyer that doesn't involve speaking in front of people, because I really hate doing that.

It's like, A, that's probably not realistic. You're gonna have to talk in front of someone.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: But, also you can develop these skills and it's something worth working on, whether it's, you know, doing a Toastmasters that I can guarantee you is in your city.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, where you have to get in this, in a safe environment, you learn how to become more comfortable talking in front of a group, or something like improv classes or, you know, singing. I mean, that's fair. Fairly non-threatening because you don't actually have to make up what you're gonna say, but,

Lee Burgess: It's true.

Alison Monahan: You know, like improv, like again, like a pretty low stakes environment where you can become more comfortable with these things.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely. And have a little fun. You know, and I think that one of the things that's to take away from this discussion of some of these soft skills is gaining

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these soft skills doesn't always have to be miserable. It's not like an extension of your class. I mean, I have, friends who take improv classes, because they want to work on things like public speaking or being more comfortable in front of groups and they have a blast. Like they have a blast. It's like one of their favorite things to do on a Wednesday night or whenever they go.

And I think that's amazing. You know, I think that's really a way to, both give yourself a bit of an extracurricular activity, but also to blow off steam and work on scales at the same time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, though you have to know yourself. Like the idea of going to an improv class to me would be my absolute worst nightmare. But, you know, I might force myself to develop these skills in another way. Like maybe I volunteer to be on a panel or something.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Or I volunteer to give a talk. And that's something that, you know, I might be a little uncomfortable with, but not as, like, I wouldn't recoil from it in horror the way that I would like an improv class.

Lee Burgess: Fair point. Fair point. I'm, I don't think I'd be that funny in an improv class, so it's never been, I would always pick a singing thing to work on, but it's all about, you know, working on what's challenging for you. But even when I was doing a lot of theater, sometimes I would, you know, push myself outside of the box to try and do a type of theater I'd never done before.

So once when I was in my early twenties, I did mostly musical theater, but I, auditioned for the vagina monologues.

Alison Monahan: Oh wow.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, which was, an interesting experience to audition for. And then I got it, which was great. And then I had to give the vagina monologues in front of thousands of people, which was definitely a really challenging and unique experience to, if you've never seen or read the Vagina Monologues, they're very powerful, but they're on subject matters that most of us don't talk about in front of thousands of people.

So, you know,

Alison Monahan: Well, good for you for pushing yourself.

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Lee Burgess: No idea. I did push myself and luckily they had us dress up in these like bright red dresses and it was all a very kind of costumed event, but, you know, you can still learn something, or push yourself out of your comfort zone to get better at these things, even if you're already used to speaking in front of people.

Alison Monahan: It's never gonna be, I mean, there's no downside to developing even some other skills like in a different area of sort of the same broad topic. I mean say like going back to business skills, you know, okay, fine. Now you can read a balance sheet. Well, what else do you need to know? Like there's always something else that you need to know.

Lee Burgess: And you can get these skills in a lot of different ways. You can take classes, you know, or online classes now are great because you could even do them during the off season of school, over the summer or over, you know, some schools have really long holiday breaks.

You can even work on some of this stuff on the holiday break if you're twiddling your thumbs in the snow somewhere in your family's home. But you can learn a lot about that, about stuff just online. You can also just learn about law firms and read about them, read some business books on law firms, read books on starting businesses or running businesses, read accounting books, you know, all sorts of things like that are just going to, make anything else you learn more meaningful. You know, if you do some research on, or do some reading on accounting, and then you are, you know, at a volunteer meeting where they pull out balance sheets to talk about the budget, that's gonna mean more to you, you're gonna be able to be more engaged and it's gonna. You know, give you the ability to exercise those skills, which I think is important.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think at this point, pretty much any specific skill you would like to learn, there is probably a free online class that can teach it to you.

You know, the idea that you can't find like a fundamentals of business accounting class to take on Coursera or something is, I just don't believe that. Like, I believe that those are out there.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also think it's important that you consider, you know, we talked about maybe getting a job where you work in sales.

Sometimes you can get part-time jobs during the summer or things like that. And if you do get an internship or an externship in law school, really pay attention and try and learn and observe, you know, how is the organization run?

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Ask questions. I mean, don't ask so many questions that you're distracting, but, you know, try and really absorb what's going on around you because you might pick up valuable tidbits that you can take with you to your next job opportunity.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I remember one of the partners that, one of the firms I worked at said, you know, to the summer Associates, congratulations, you're now working in a law firm. You need to read to the Wall Street Journal every day.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, like this is just, this is a baseline of your job is you need to know what is in the business section of the Wall Street Journal.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: End of story.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I think that's right. You know, I mean, I think there's really. You know the people who really are like sponges and just soak up all of this stuff coming from all these different places, those are the people who really thrive in most legal environments because you do need to kind of know a little bit about a lot of things.

You know, basically if you're a business lawyer, particularly, like you're essentially being paid to like keep an eye on what's going on that might affect your client. In order to do that, you need to know what's going on in the world.

Lee Burgess: It's so true. You know, it's really interesting. When I worked in political PR when I was first out of college, one of my jobs every morning was to go online and read all of the major newspapers and look for any articles that either mentioned a client, mention something of the, like a product that the client did or a competitor, anything in the industry that was of note and send them to my bosses so they could basically get a digest of what they thought was important and then alert the clients of anything that they thought was important. And it was really interesting because it, it did really raise that issue for me that you're supposed to just be knowledgeable.

Now you're not gonna have like an assistant to go read newspapers every day, but now there are a lot of online ways to skim the news that wasn't available back in the dark ages of when I was doing this. Like Twitter, you know, or

following certain news feeds or you know, digest you can get in your email that can help you comb through information to feel somewhat educated.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And if you have clients or products or whatever that you know, you need to be aware of, set up a Google alert.

Lee Burgess: Yep, good point.

Alison Monahan: So, you know, if somebody writes an article about this product, you are alerted to the fact that that article exists.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think Twitter is a great way to say on top of things you know, maybe like whatever, if your Facebook feed is relevant, most people, it's not super businessy, but you know, you can basically have aggregators, for example, for different blogs. And so every morning when you get up, your RSS feed aggregator or whatever has gone out and collected all of this information.

And so you can spend 10 minutes sort of getting the pulse of what's going on so that you are that person where when somebody you know said, oh, did you hear about blah blah? Like, yeah, I did. I read an article about it, let me tell you.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Or you can go to the person like, Hey, did you see this thing, this major thing that happened that nobody's really talking about yet with our client?

Like, you wanna be that person.

Lee Burgess: Right. So true. So true. Going back to this communication, the communication skills, you know, we talked about needing to be able to be comfortable talking in front of people. I think it's also important if you're in law school to go ahead and take the opportunities to practice speaking in front of other people.

I mean, we talk about that. This is one of the things about the Socratic method that some people forget that adds value, but if you want to be really any type of attorney or a litigator, specifically where you think you might go into court, maybe you should try and sign up for advocacy competitions or, do moot court or do a competition or volunteer to even speak up for your group in a group project setting, whatever it might be.

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The more you get in front of people and the more you speak, the better you get at it. I mean, Alison, we can use this podcast as an example. The first couple of these we did, we were, we had a bit of a tough time, we'll be honest guys. There was a lot more editing. Maybe we felt it was clunkier, we weren't as comfortable, but, you know, I don't know what episode number this is gonna be, but we have done a lot at this point.

Alison Monahan: Right. But you know, they've been, let's admit the first ones, we basically scripted out like 80% of what we wanted to talk about. Because we didn't, we weren't sure how to do this. Yeah. And you know, now we can put together a script in five minutes probably, and,

Lee Burgess: And we like to think we're getting better. You know, hopefully you guys agree, but.

Alison Monahan: I know it's kind of embarrassing how many people listen to the original episodes, actually, I think they're some of the most popular ones. Sorry about that. Yeah, and I mean, also with communication, it's also writing, you know, it's not, I'm not talking about legal writing here, but I'm talking about other types of writing and communication, even things like writing reasonable emails. you know, how do you write a, a, a helpful email to someone or an email that's not gonna be annoying. these are things that ideally you spend some time thinking about or doing some reading about, you know, how do you follow up after a meeting?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: There are certain ways that are better or worse.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And, you know, ideally you want your emails to be read and you want them to be well received and you want someone to think, wow, that was really helpful. I'm glad that person sent me that email.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

And I think this is something where generation to generation in the workforce can also be something you need to be aware of.

I think the text messaging generation is a lot more comfortable with very short curt responses that I think the generation above them or multiple generations above them is, might take as rude.

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Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if you're used to, you know, being on Slack with your friends and suddenly you have to compose an email to a 50-year-old partner in a law firm, you gotta know your tone.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And this is one of the soft skills. It's like, know who you're talking to. By the same, you know, by the same sort of token, if you are out, you know, working in a firm and pitching business to a tech company, you should approach that differently than if you're pitching to an insurance company for example.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And that's part of one of the soft skills of like, essentially emotional intelligence is what's your audience? You know, what are you trying to present here? Not that you wanna be a different person or something, but you know, which aspect of your personality or which aspect of your background do you wanna emphasize?

These are the sort of skills that. Are great to try to develop.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm. And I would say. I don't know if you'll agree with me on this, but when it comes to that formal, informal, curt, non curt, that when you're in the workplace, you know, one, the best way to figure this out is to observe those around you, but to always err on a little more formal and then become more casual as you figure out where that casual nature is.

You're never gonna get in trouble for being too formal.

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's right. But by the same token, if someone writes me an email and, you know, calls me Miss Monahan and I tell them, oh, it's fine if you call me Allison. And then they keep calling me Miss Monahan. At some point I'd be like, just stop, you know?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: Like I told you what to do actually. Like I told you what my preference is. Please follow that.

Lee Burgess: Right. But, but you know, it's interesting. When I was teaching, when I first taught my very first class, I thought I wanted to be like the cool professor.

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Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: So I had them call me Lee. And it was a disaster.

It really was a terrible disaster because the formality of the professor student relationship actually has some value in checking how we talk to each other, checking, just checking the dynamic. I think it's a, it's a, that teacher student dynamic is a known dynamic. And it was interesting. The next year I said it would never do that again, and the dynamic changed.

When I would only go by Professor Burgess, which I thought sounded very stuffy, but it changed the relationship dynamic to become more of what it needed to be. I thought that was just kind of fascinating.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. No, it is very interesting I think. And I think, you know, learning to kind of suss out these social nuances is something that law schools do less than like a business school might do.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And, you know, I think one way people can kind of become more aware of this is either by doing some reading on their own or by possibly taking a class in a different area of the school.

Lee Burgess: That's a good idea.

Alison Monahan: You know, so if you know that maybe communication is not your forte or like being aware of other people's, you know, the signals they're sending, there may be other classes you can take in like a business school context, for example.

Or even like, you know, maybe there's a communications department. You can probably get law school credit for taking, you know, if at least if you, I mean, I took an architecture school class and got credit just because I thought it'd be fun.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a really good idea. I mean, it's important to look at all your options and see what, what you can pull together to, you know, fill those gaps because all of our gaps are different, you know, we each have our own strengths and weaknesses.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And again, there are also tons of people online who, you know, basically have programs to sort of coach you through essentially, you know,

communication and emotional awareness and those kind of things so that you can be better at communicating with people and better at picking up on the cues they're sending and just generally better at, you know, being a human being essentially.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Exactly. What about, totally switching gears, what about technical skills, computer skills? I mean, I think it's pretty important that any student exiting law school has basic word processing and PowerPoint presentation or keynote presentation making skills, don't you think?

Alison Monahan: I would say beyond basic, I would say we should be at least at an intermediate level here.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: You know, like you can't, like, I mean, sure you can open up like a document and type in it, but can you do what I would consider pretty basic formatting things that are important, like, you know, do you know how to mark up a document so the table of contents get, gets automatically created? Things like that where yeah, of course you may have a secretary or whatever, but these are just like basic skills that you need to know.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Or like an Excel file. Do you know how to make a basic equation that can sum up things or something? I mean, like, you should know how to do this.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Track changes is also really important. Comparing documents. I've also heard a lot of legal professionals talk to me about the importance of being able to compare versions of Word and, and that you should know that word can do stuff like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. It's some people just seem to have no understanding of like, the capabilities of these programs.

It's not, it's like, look at all the stuff, like when you open up one of these programs, you know, they're menus, they're menu bar, like they can do more than just let you type in them.

Lee Burgess: Right. Yeah.

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Alison Monahan: You know, I mean, and I think the same thing outside of the word processing realm is just like their basic sort of things you should know, say about the internet, or like, you know, social media. Like how do you, say you're gonna be working at, you know, some sort of public interest organization and one of your jobs is gonna be to maintain their social media feed. I mean, you might think like, oh, that's not like a lawyer, but the reality is they may not have anyone else to do it.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And if you're the new person on the block, that might be your job. You know, you need to be generally aware of like, oh, should we be using buffer for this? Like, are there ways just, you know, there are things you need to know.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah. I think this is a really good point.

And this stuff isn't rocket science. You just need to go out and find out how to be educated about it. And luckily, the internet on one hand makes it very easy for us to be educated, but you can also get lost in it. So you need to, you know, find some resources and, and just try and get as much information as you can. and then move on to the next thing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And if you wanna learn something like Excel, sure there are like lots of ways you could do that independently online, but you could also take a class.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, and as possible that your workplace might even pay for this. It's possible you may have access to certain things through your school, you know, if you want like a more structured learning environment, you can definitely find that. But I think, you know, the onus is really on you to basically admit to yourself like, you know what, I actually really don't have any clue how to like use word beyond just typing into it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like maybe, maybe I should make myself aware of what the options are.

I mean, you probably saw the thing that circulated about some client who basically made his law firm submit their associates for a test of like their basic word processing skills.

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Lee Burgess: Oh my gosh.

Alison Monahan: And like all of them failed it.

Lee Burgess: Wow.

Alison Monahan: Because he is like, you know, and his point was like, look, I'm paying you. I'm paying these people by the hour.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: I should not be paying them to hand type a table of contents like that is literally insane.

Lee Burgess: Right. That's fascinating. I did not see that. That's fascinating.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And so lots of firms started taking it and basically they all failed it.

Lee Burgess: Wow.

Alison Monahan: And that doesn't look good.

Lee Burgess: Do you think that's like what we used to have to take to get our temp jobs back in the day when we were doing temp jobs?

Alison Monahan: No, I do. I think it's basically, I mean, yeah, I remember being tested on like how fast and accurately I could type.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And they're like, okay, you're pretty accurate. Like we can get you a job.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah. And how like I could use a PowerPoint presentation or something like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. But I remember I took a class like in typing when I was in high school or something, and I went to the community college in the summer and I took a typing class because my parents were like, you need to know how to type.

Lee Burgess: You know what's fascinating is my friends with say that they're not really teaching typing anymore, and that some of the kids, because they're using

computers from such an early age, don't know how to correctly type, and it's really slowing down and changing the accuracy of typing.

Alison Monahan: Isn't that kind of fascinating? It is. It is. I mean, I worked with someone who touch typed yeah. Appellate briefs to like,

Lee Burgess: Oh my gosh.

Alison Monahan: Very, I mean, it was painful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: It was painful to watch.

Lee Burgess: I think it was Mavis Beacon teaches typing or something like that, that ran on my very, very old Mac when I was a kid. That taught you how to be accurate when you were typing.

But I think they also taught typing in my middle school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. But the point is like if you are listening to this and you actually don't know how to type, you should learn.

Lee Burgess: There's gotta be a modern version of Mavis Beacon teaches typing.

Alison Monahan: I'm pretty sure there's lots of options out there to help you learn how to type if you need to.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Maybe that's a future blog post. Ways to learn how to type.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Well that makes me think of another, because I was just thinking of like all the different options for learning things. I was like, oh, Duolingo, and you know, maybe you need language skills.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. That's true, that's true. And sometimes it's foreign language skills.

You know, there are a lot of jobs, that you need to have foreign language skills for and sometimes you might have conversational skills, but you have not had a lot of practice working on those skills in the workplace. And if so, you need to practice them in the workplace.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that, I think that's true for a lot of people to say you grew up in a household where the first or second language was not English, and so you may

be perfectly comfortable speaking and having a conversation, but maybe, you know, I'm thinking of Spanish.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: Like you might be able to speak Spanish, but when you start writing with accents and that kind of thing, like that's a whole different story.

Lee Burgess: Right. Or filling out forms or, you know, really doing those very detail-oriented things that oftentimes you have to do, in a legal environment. Or, or even learn the terminology, you know?

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: You know, law is a foreign language for those of us who speak English that go to law school. So if you are then starting to practice law in another foreign language, then that's a whole other set of, you know, legal terminology that you need to be comfortable with.

Alison Monahan: Sure. And also, I mean, if you do have language skills that you wanna practice in a legal context, often this can be really valuable because you could do volunteer work or pro bono work where you're actually translating for people, and, you know, it's a great way to get experience. It's a great way to have something interesting to put on your resume, it's a great way to make connections and also it's a great way to help people.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah. That's really true. So don't think that there is no way to work on these skills, there's so many opportunities.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. If you wanna work on your language skills, I guarantee you someone who is a native speaker would be very happy to talk to you on Skype for an hour, once a week.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, very, very good point.

Alison Monahan: Probably, probably at a very low price point.

Lee Burgess: Probably. Probably. Right. One of my favorite soft skills to talk about is leadership.

Because this is something that I also think, law students really don't get a lot of opportunity to work on because of how law school is set up. But oftentimes

they're on the younger side and they exit graduate school without really having many opportunities to manage people or be in a leadership role.

And if you think you're going to wanna manage people and someday be in a leadership role, you should work on these skills and you're probably not gonna get them at your law firm.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. And I mean, I think, you know, the cliche, and I think it's probably true, is that lawyers are terrible managers. And I think mostly that's correct. I think mostly they just don't, you know, most people are not that interested in being managers.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: But the reality is. All these organizations, largely for reasons that they can't really pay people who are not lawyers to, you know, be the CEO or whatever, they're managed by lawyers. And so if you are, if you have an interest in this area and you develop some skills in it, you know, potentially you're very valuable.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. And one of my favorite ways to gain leadership skills is through volunteer work. And I've written about this in the past, but I think that volunteer organizations are really an underutilized way to selfishly get leadership practice and work on a team with other people and to network with, you know, without having to do it in a fully professional setting.

Of course, you also get to do good in the world, and that's very important too. But just from a selfish perspective, you can gain a lot of valuable skills. So if you have a passion for, you know, educating young women you know, legal aid. I mean, anything, you know, running, you know, even putting together like a race to raise money for an AIDS foundation.

I mean, there are so many, possible organizations and volunteer efforts that you can be a part of that you can join and then choose to take on leadership roles. You can organize events, which gives you great practice for oftentimes budgeting, working with a team, running conference calls. You know, you can get used to having an agenda for a conference call.

I mean, I'll be honest, when I first had a job, I didn't know that you were supposed to start meetings with an agenda. You know? I mean, like, it's not like when I called my friends I had an agenda.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Why? Why would you know that?

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Lee Burgess: Right. So, you know, just even, you know, learning those things and then learning from the other people, when I was on a nonprofit board that I served on for a very long time, I was able to really learn from some mentors who were, really powerful and successful women high up in corporations, in industries that I would've never had contact with, and I learned a lot from them because they were kind enough to teach me things.

Alison Monahan: Yeah and you were probably very observant and actually paid attention to like, wow, this is a really great way to run a meeting. That was super productive.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. Or, you know, I also learned the importance of other things, like, I think it's really important to check in with people to have a personal connection before certain meetings.

So not if it's a hostile meeting. Then maybe not as much depending on the nature, but like if, if I'm on a board or if I'm in a committee meeting or if we're meeting with our team in the Law School Toolbox, I usually try and start having some sort of personal connection. Like, did anyone take a vacation for the holidays? Like, how's everybody doing? Because I think it's really nice to have that personal basis, and I learned that from watching other people and saying, wow, that was a really effective way to change the nature of this meeting. People may have been cranky to have to be at a meeting, but then everybody got to talk about something fun that's going on in their lives, or tell a cute story about their kid or show a picture, and then everybody became kind of happier.

Alison Monahan: Right, or that, you know, you always have food at your meetings.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: It makes people happy, you know, little things like this. Yeah. And to be clear, when you're talking about volunteering, you're not just talking about legally related stuff, right?

Lee Burgess: No, no. I mean, I think you can really do just about anything that you are passionate about. and the other benefit of working with an organization that you're passionate about is you talk about it. And you get experience talking about it. And going back to one of the things that we talked about in the beginning was getting comfortable with sales, getting comfortable about your elevator pitch.

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Oftentimes when you're volunteering for an organization, they'll teach you how to do that stuff for that organization, and they might even bring in speakers to teach you how to do an elevator pitch, how to ask for money, you know how to fundraise, how to do all of that kind of stuff. And, you filed those tips away, they will come back and serve you in your business life as well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, another one that occurs to me right now is like, you know, this is obviously not every year, but if you work, say on an election campaign. Like, those are gonna be great skills that you can take anywhere.

Lee Burgess: Yep. That's so true. And you know, I even had a friend who did a great post on Facebook about what she learned by calling at the Hillary Clinton Bank in San Francisco by do, they were doing, you know, what do you is-

Alison Monahan: Phone banking.

Lee Burgess: Phone banking. Thank you. And she said that it was something that was really outside of her comfort zone, that it's not something that she never really thought she wanted to do, but she wanted to get involved and they trained her to do it. And she said it became something she was, she really had a good time doing and that she thought it was a skill that she turned out to be pretty good at. Who knew? You know, but, you know, she probably learned a few lessons that she can take back into her other, the rest of her life.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, since we're almost out of time, if you've done things that you've worked on these soft skills, go ahead and include them in your resume or cover letter because this is the stuff that recruiters and hiring partners are really looking for. And you know, it could be a little bit subtle how you work them in, but I think, you know, trying to draw them out and make it clear that like you have had this training or you have had this experience can really work to your benefit

Lee Burgess: And it can give you great stories to tell in interviews as well.

Alison Monahan: Exactly

Lee Burgess: When they are asking, I mean, oftentimes they will not so subtly ask about some of these soft skills, especially things like leadership or communication skills. And if you can say, you know, that you, I'm going back to the improv class 'cause it just is on my mind, even though I have no intention of doing one myself, but, but

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if you wanna talk about what you learned from your improv class, that would be a pretty memorable interview.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And my understanding is, you know, the whole point of the improv class is that you never say no.

Lee Burgess: Mm-hmm.

Alison Monahan: And that's just a whole worldview that people who do a lot of improv, I think tell you, they definitely bring into the workplace of, rather than saying, no, we can't do that, it's, you always have to say, sort of continue the narrative.

Like, you know, somebody brings you an ice cream cone, you can't be like, no, it's winter time. I don't want ice cream. You're like, oh, ice cream in the winter. Let me see where I can take that.

Lee Burgess: Right. That's a really good point. So it's, it's just another way to change your thinking. That's a not very lawyerly way to think.

That's kind of interesting.

Alison Monahan: Not at all. Yeah, exactly.

Lee Burgess: Which could be a good thing.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: But that's probably a whole other podcast. Maybe we need an improv guest. Who knows. We can, we can work on that.

Alison Monahan: That interesting.

Lee Burgess: All right, well, with that, we are out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and ratings on iTunes.

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Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon.