



Photographer: Cole Burston/Bloomberg

Google Hired a Blind Lawyer. Here's His Story

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When Jack Chen walked into an interview with law firm Baker Botts in 2007, he knew he was at a disadvantage in the Big Law world: born blind, Chen has to use assistive technologies to complete his legal work.

“As a young associate at a law firm, you’re judged heavily on form as well as substance,” he said. “In other words, how you format your documents can often be as important as the content. Walking into an interview is really daunting.”

In spite of his apprehension, Chen got the job.

Three years later, when he was interviewing for an in-house spot at Google, he decided to change tactics: “I was kind of tired of hiding and downplaying my disability,” he said.

Chen showed up for the interview with a news article written about his recent completion of the New York City Triathlon. The message was simple enough: Chen could do things others could do, and then some.

“People with disabilities often bring unique aspects to projects, including outstanding problem solving skills,” he said. “They’ve been doing it their whole lives.”

Susan Lang, founding president and CEO of non-profit organization [Lime Connect](#), said companies and law firms often miss out on talent like Chen, who has degrees in computer science from Harvard and Berkeley, in addition to his law degree from Fordham.

Sometimes, Lang said, students with disabilities hide out in long-term graduate school programs, not knowing whether they belong in the workforce at all. Lang started Lime Connect in 2006 with the goal of helping close the gap between talented candidates with disabilities and employers.

The problem wasn’t a small one to tackle: according to a report by the Census Bureau, almost 57 million Americans, or nearly one in 5 people, had a disability in 2010.

“The majority of disabilities are non-visible,” Lang said. “If you’re thinking of someone who’s in a wheelchair, or blind, that’s only a small percentage. These are people who are dyslexic, or who have medical conditions, like rheumatoid arthritis, depression and anxiety, or any number of conditions.”

Central to Lime Connect’s business model are a fellowship program, which connects rising juniors for top corporate internships, and the Lime Network, which connects students and employees with disabilities all over the country.

“No existing organization was focused on high potential candidates at universities, and people who had graduated university,” Lang said. “Corporate America was missing out on some potential rock stars.”

“It’s important that we have laws in place protecting people — the ‘stick’ model — but what’s really going to drive lasting change is when people with disabilities are in the C-suite, running companies,” Chen said.

He added, “When people start seeing people with disabilities in those roles, it will break down all kinds of barriers that people might not even think they have. They’ll start viewing people with disabilities less as ‘people who can’t’ and start seeing them as ‘people who definitely can.’”

Last month, Big Law Business spoke with Chen about Lime Connect, his work at Google, and what the legal industry needs to know about people with disabilities.

Below is an edited transcript of the interview.

Big Law Business: *You were at Baker Botts before going to Google. What were the interview processes at the two places like?*

Chen: As a young associate at a law firm, you're judged heavily on form as well as substance. In other words, how you format your documents can often be as important as the content. Appearances are super critical.

Walking into an interview is really daunting. There are all these other people out there you know can do the job better than you. Even if you are well-matched on the substantive lawyering, you know they can spot paragraph alignment issues easier than you can.

Even when I use certain tools, it's still really hard to format a document correctly. They knew this was going to be an issue. How was I supposed to deal with that? At the time my strategy was to completely downplay it: to say, "I'm no different. I can do what everyone else can do." And also to work extra hard not to make any document formatting mistakes.

Going to Google, I took a completely different approach. I actually sent them an article that had been written about me in a local paper: I had just completed the New York City Triathlon. I was upfront with them. I was kind of tired of hiding and downplaying my disability. I made that decision consciously.



Jack Chen, a blind lawyer working in-house at Google

There's no question that throughout the interview process I had some challenges. Google's interview process is extremely rigorous. I felt like it was okay to talk about the things I could do and the things that I found challenging because of my blindness.

For example, one interview was all about a complex set of regulations, different ones of which were triggered depending on the timing of events. The interviewer drew diagrams on the board. I felt like it was ok to say that I was having a hard time following and to ask him to describe what he was drawing repeatedly rather than me guessing and possibly being wrong.

Big Law Business: *What are some of those tools that you use?*

Chen: My main technology platform is a computer with a screen reader. A screen reader is a software program that reads out whatever you see on the screen. As most of my current work involves online documents, I can use my computer to read out the text of those documents. Where I have trouble with diagrams or other more complex visual elements such as comments or slide presentations, I have access to a personal assistant who reads out the content to me.

Other than that, I pretty much use the same tools as others, including video conferencing, chat, web browser, et cetera. Not all software works well with my screen reader, so it takes some trial and error to find equivalent programs that I can use to replace some of these programs.

In my firm days, things were more challenging. Because of the high volume of paper documents, I continuously struggled to find a way to read these documents, which were not always formatted to allow optical character recognition (OCR) software to convert them to text.

I used a combination of a fellow employee to read documents to me and an assistant to type them up. In the past year or so, there have been good advances, including software on a mobile device that can take a picture of a paper document and read it out using a synthetic voice.

Big Law Business: *What are some of the big differences between working in-house and working at a firm?*

Chen: There's a stark contrast. Private firms are client and work product driven. If you make a mistake, including things like document formatting errors, the client may request that you not do their work. The same goes for firm folks who assign work. I felt such a pressure to be completely perfect in my document presentation.

I felt like it was really key that I was able to not show any weakness, if you will — not only in work product, but also in interaction. I never felt comfortable disclosing to my clients that I was blind. It was tough, really having to go the extra mile all the time to make sure my stuff was absolutely perfect and still fearing that I missed something.

At Google, you're an employee as opposed to a billable hour. You have an inherent value to the company. They're very careful in their hiring process. The goal is to develop you as a person. I feel like I get support in terms of helping me to find solutions to the challenges brought about by my blindness. I feel like people care more about my substantive work than whether the final work product is picture perfect. If there is a solution to my challenges, by and large, people try to accommodate me.

Big Law Business: *What do people in the legal industry need to understand about lawyers with disabilities?*

Chen: First, I'd like folks to know that people with disabilities can contribute as effectively as their non-disabled counterparts. In fact, people with disabilities often bring unique aspects to projects, including outstanding problem solving skills... they've been doing it their whole lives... and great tenacity to get things done since, again, they've been practicing that their whole lives.

Also, having been on the other side of the table, working in-house, excellence is much more about substance, creative problem solving, and relationship building than it is about form.