# The Blind Spot: Episode 10

# Has assistive technology replaced Braille?

# Intro to the podcast

My name is Penny Wilkinson, and welcome to another episode of the podcast. In October, we had a panel talking about Braille in the modern age. Today, we're talking about how assistive technology has meant that some people no longer use Braille at all. And I'm joined by Matthew Johnson, a lawyer, linguist, and musician. Welcome, Matthew.

**Matthew**

How you guys doing?

**Penny**

Good thanks. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Matthew**

Sure, So I am originally from the island of Bermuda, I came to England, half my life ago. So roughly 15 years ago, I completed my education here and got a job here. As a lawyer, I do it in data law at a national level. And aside from that, my first degree was in languages. So I'm comfortable in French, Spanish and German. And just to cover off your final point, I suppose. Yeah, I musician, as well, I play country and acoustic guitar.

**Penny**

Brilliant. And may I ask about your level of site and your site conditions?

**Matthew**

I've never had any.

Penny

So, you were blind from birth?

correct.

**Penny**

into the legal profession? And did you face any particular barriers or challenges to get into this career?

**Matthew**

I mean, that is a very wide range of questions. So the first thing about obviously, the legal profession is not easy to enter. It never has been, and now it's even more challenging, I would say in the last 10 or 15 years or so with the prevailing economic conditions and the up and down ups and downs that we've had. But in terms of access, so I did my first degree was in languages, as I said, and then what you would do is something called the GDL, the General Diploma in Law, and it's for people who already have a degree, and it compresses an entire three year law degree into the most intense one year period of your life. I think I broke a coffeemaker about three quarters of the way through that year. And then you choose your route your Barrister or Solicitor routes, and you do what's called the LPC in my case to become a Solicitor. That is changing, but that is historically the way it has worked. They're changing it in the next couple of years. But that's what I did.

**Penny**

As a blind person, did you face any additional barriers or challenges to get into that?

**Matthew**

I mean, there's always, you know, questions around is this text going to be accessible, is this online learning system going to be accessible things like I don't know, if they're still using Blackboard, you know, the online learning system that a lot of higher education institutions use, basically wasn't accessible at all. And you have to fight through that. There were situations where there were lectures and breakout workshops, where, you know, each group would present on a particular, for example, point of law or issue in a contract or, disputed area of a case, you'd have five or six different groups, and each one would have a whiteboard, and obviously would jot their points on the whiteboard, and then present them to the group. So of course, there were always issues following that, because what everyone would do is just take a picture of each whiteboard on their phone, and then suddenly, they had all the notes. Great if you can do it. I had, disabled students finance. I had a note taker who would make sure that I had the same access as everyone else, and that I was able to, to access the notes and things like that. So yeah, it takes some doing, and it takes a level of perseverance to do it. But thanks to, things like DSA and elbow grease, you can usually get there.

**Penny**

Right. Okay. And as a practicing lawyer, now, what does your daily job entail? And what assistive technology enables you to do your job daily

**Matthew**

My daily job mostly consists of swearing and pulling my hair out. So in terms of what I do, so I work on large IT contracts. That's one of the main things that I do think, you know, multiyear, half a million to a million plus or more on the table for large software development contracts and things like that. One of the main things that I would use for that is just, just use a Surface Pro with JAWS on it to access that. There's some special scripting that the firm has had to put in place to access things like the document management system. So obviously, where all of the contract files and emails and contract client information is stored, you know, that that would be that that's something that is specific, and often times is not accessible. That's a whole other topic of why these very, very popular management systems that are used by thousands and thousands of law firms and accountancy practices across the world aren't accessible, but that's a different problem. But we've often had to bring in you know, special scripting work, scripters to do that work and to make those things accessible but at the heart of the system is a laptop and its JAWS. I also have the services of one of the paralegals in our team who were needed will make things accessible. And also make sure that, for example, in my contracts, you know, if the formatting breaks horribly, if there's some kind of really dramatic numbering issue or alignment issue, or suddenly my font changes colour, she'll point out those kinds of things, you have to be good with word already. In order to do this, you have to be very, very good JAWS word and web research skills to begin with, right, but you needed them to the degree anyway. But the final check, you know, is often done by my assistant.

**Penny**

Maybe I've watched too many terrible legal dramas on TV. But doesn't the job involve lots of streams of case law to read through or have these or now been digitised?

**Matthew**

Well, you know, you say this, there was actually a session when I was a trainee. And the session was with all the trainees of the firm. And it was something along the lines of how to reference case law manually, because in our degree, we almost never had to do it. Now, we almost never have to do it. There was one notable exception when I was in the Wills and Estates team when I had to reference 1940 tax law, and that I needed a book for and obviously, then I needed a paralegal to help. But there's so much online. Now. I you know, obviously we're all working from home now, pretty much all of us because of COVID. And I can certainly say that no one's missed access to a law library. It may differ with barristers who need to conduct sort of complex legal research, but even then the blind Barristers that I know, don't need to have recourse to print.

**Penny**

Turning to Braille, did you actually learn Braille at school?

**Matthew**

I did, I did. When I was younger, I think getting into a little bit of my background might be helpful here, because it very much informs my worldview. As I say, I was in Bermuda. You know, I was one of the first visually impaired people in Bermuda to receive more than a basic education. And part of that meant that we were always struggling to access materials in one way or another, right? You know, books had to be made accessible in one way or another. And, of course, this was the 90’s and early 2000’s, where, you know, electronic resources weren't half as prevalent as they are now. And so, we're constantly in negotiations with publishers in America or, you know, blind organisations in America and Canada to have these things sent across. And of course, Braille is heavy, Braille is bulky, that means Braille is expensive to make and ship. So, you know, there was always this, this push and pull with, well, we don't have that yet. And then the net effect of that was often times I had to get things electronically, because they were scanned, you know, hours before the class and typed up frantically by an assistant that I had, that I had to raise my own funds for, incidentally, to pay your salary. So, you know, it was very much do whatever you possibly can to make sure that I've got what I need to pass this class. And, you know, that just didn't include Braille off times. But I can read it, I haven't in about 16 years.

**Penny**

Okay, you don't use it, because of the assistive technology that's now available?

**Matthew**

It's a bit of both. So, I don't believe that it is a necessary, you know, necessary, but insufficient condition for people to pass a degree to catch up and to function. I don't think that it's needed. I'm not saying that people shouldn't learn it. You know, it's helpful when you're in an elevator, it's helpful when you're reading a medication box, provided the pharmacist hasn't put tape over the Braille. You know, it's helpful in some very, very specific situations, I'm not advocating at all for, you know, complete cessation of all Braille instruction. But what I think is important is that, you know, I used to resist it very strongly. Back in Bermuda, I said, no, this is too slow. I can do this much, much faster on a computer because I could, and I got a lot of resistance to that from the family who would always be well, you got to read Braille, everything has to be Braille, you know, etc. And who would, in some ways, in some situations, waste resources, acquiring things in Braille that otherwise could have been provided electronically at much less cost and in a much easier way. So, it's, yeah, it's a bit of my natural inclination. And it's also shaped by the fact that, you know, I didn't have Braille, and I didn't look for it.

**Penny**

I see. Okay. But in terms of teaching, and children, for example, literacy and spelling, do you think Braille still has a place in that in education?

**Matthew**

Well, this is coming from someone who's obviously learned three other languages without using it. So I think it's utility is limited. It does depend on the language and how the orthography works because obviously, a language like French is going to require a lot more aptitude for spelling than Spanish and German, the other languages that I know, by virtue of that, right, so it's hard to make a full judgment of that, because it depends on what you're doing. I do think its utilities is very limited mow. Again, I'm not saying don't teach it, I'm just saying that, you know, once you get past a basic level of competency, I'm not convinced that its use needs to be enforced half as rigorously as it is. And some of the sort of doctrinal issues that I have with it, for example, the narrative that, you know, knowing Braille is going to help you get a job, I would dispute wholeheartedly.

**Penny**

In terms of your role. Does your role involve any public speaking?

**Matthew**

Yes.

**Penny**

So do you use any technology? Or how do you manage doing your public speaking and remembering your, you know, all of the elements that you've got to talk about.

**Matthew**

I will use something like, either a laptop to, to queue it, or an Air Pod.

**Penny**

Okay, okay. And you'd have JAWS running in your ear?

**Matthew**

or Voice Dream, or whatever I was using.

**Penny**

I know that I can't listen and talk at the same time. It’s a skill.

**Matthew**

It is a skill. I mean, for me, it comes from when I was younger, and you know, they, they do the thing when you go around the class, and everyone has to read, you know, I had all my stuff electronically. I had the stories and whatever that we were doing, electronically. So, I was like, well, I'm not, going to let them pass me. I'm just going to learn how to read from voice.

**Penny**

Right. Okay. And in terms of learning assistive technology, did you have any challenges with learning or using assistive technologies? And have you got any views on how this could be better?

**Matthew**

Oh, 100%. I mean, I, obviously I didn't have anyone back home who knew how to teach assistive tech. Right? They perhaps knew how to install it. But that's about as far as it went. So, there was like, well, here's the user guide, and a couple of tapes as it was back then. Let's, you know, just go, Good luck, go learn it, because you're going to need it. So I didn't have a trainer I had a bunch of tapes, and trial and error when I was like, 9, 10 11. And the fact that I had the computer itself, I was lucky. So, I, you know, I didn't have problem doing it. In terms of learning assistive tech, I don't, I find it incredible. You know, that obviously, we're, you know, we're in the UK, there are all of these trainers who, you know, who clearly know how to do this, and who have the skills and who can teach young people how to use technology. I don't know, you know, what the experiences of parents are now and what they're dealing with, or not dealing with. But I find it incredible that there is all of this resource and all of these people who know what they're doing and know how to teach, and that there are still young people whose, you know, knowledge of assistive tech is lacking, it shouldn't happen. I'll be honest, that's an easy thing to say, and a very hard thing to fix. I recognise that. But I know what it's like to be in a situation where you don't have any of those resources. And you're told we'll make it happen. Because you need this to read your history exam in a week. You know, and you do because you have to. And here where we have all of this abundant resource and knowledge. It needs to happen. It absolutely must.

**Penny**

You mentioned technology that you use currently in your work. What's the one piece of technology you couldn't do without?

**Matthew**

Well, it would be my main screen reader, for me It’s JAWS on Windows, I stay away from MAC. But yeah, I couldn't do anything without that in the workplace.

**Penny**

For other blind or partially sighted people looking to get into the legal profession what advice would you give?

**Matthew**

So one on a purely accessibility level and the other on a more professional legal level, the main advice I would give first on accessibility level is you must know, for example, as I said, before, you must know Office, you must know web researching techniques. And even some of the more advanced stuff like reading PDFs and accessing track changes and doing all of those kinds of things that you might not necessarily think you need. You must have them and you're better off learning them before you need them, rather than when there's a client on your tail with a deadline. So that's on a, you know, on a technical level, on a professional level, I would say the main thing that a law firm, because I can't speak to the barrister route as much, but the main thing that a law firm is going to say, well what have you done? You know, when have you had a situation where someone has effectively been your client, that's not necessarily you know, paid work. It could be volunteering, it could be helping out on Citizens Advice Bureau, or legal help lines or any of those things that you know, opportunities that come at university, you must do those things. Because as a blind person, it's harder, you know, because a lot of people have part time jobs that they can fall back on and say, well, when I was a waitress I've dealt with difficult clients, I know how to deal with people. I know how to how to act when I'm being depended on to perform in a specific way. You know, that's harder for us. Right, and experience is the killer. You know, anyone can get a first from a good university in law, but experience is the killer, and you've got to find something that you can parlay into experience in some way.

**Matthew**

Re the whole Braille issue. What I wanted to sort of address at in perhaps a little more depth is sort of this, this narrative that's being pushed nowadays, especially by sort of sight loss organisations. I detest the term sight loss, especially for me as I never had it. The main thing that a lot of these organisations push is this sort of necessity of Braille, and that you that it will actively help you to get a job and actively help you to get out of the number of people that I know who are working. And obviously, this is anecdotal. But out of the number of people that I know who are very much functioning professionally - some of them don't know Braille, no one uses it. That's my first point. My second point is to say that, so there were surveys that were done in the past couple of years. And, you know, they said that, out of the 25% of blind people that are actually gainfully employed, all of them have our survey data said that they, you know, knew Braille. Okay, that's a classic, you know, correlation versus causation problem. It's not to say that those 25%, who are who are, you know, employed are using Braille on a day to day basis, or that it in any way assists them in their professional capacity. And I think actually, if the survey is where to ask the question, what do you use? when was the last time that you used Braille professionally? I think you're the numbers would tell a far different story. And I was looking this morning on the RNIB's My Voice page about some of the statistics that were out there. And you know, I think it said that 7% of blind and partially sighted people use Braille that strikes me as a little bit low, but let's go with it. In that event, let's even double it, let's, be charitable, and double it and say, you know, 14% of people, okay, if 14% of blind and partially sighted people use Braille, you're telling me that 25 26% of us are employed. So at best, that is half the population of the employed blind population that use Braille, assuming that there's perfect overlap. So from my perspective, and I recognise this is subject to errors and statistical analysis, and I'm, I can see the limits of what I'm saying here. But the point is, this, this isn't a causation issue. This isn't causally related, there's perhaps a correlation at best, but I think it's, it's, it's disputed. And my concern is, you know, if parents, especially, are hearing this, and you know, they've got a 10 year old or 12 year old or whatever, who is resistant to learning Braille, who just wants to do what they need to do on the computer and find ways around things that are technical, rather than using Braille. And there's, you know, all they're hearing is note, you got to learn Braille, you must do, you must have absolutely impeccable Braille skills, because otherwise you won't get a job. I think that's incredibly damaging,

**Penny**

Thank you so much, Matthew, for sharing your thoughts today. It's been an interesting insight, to legal profession and assistive technology that you use and the way forward. If you have any views around technology or an issue affecting blind or partially sighted people that you would like us to feature on the next issue of blind spot. Please do get in touch.