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Tony West, Uber's chief legal officer and a former Justice Department official, is navigating the ride-hailing giant's numerous legal issues.

By **Kate Conger**

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SAN FRANCISCO — Not long after Tony West joined Uber as chief legal officer in November 2017, he began a delicate task: crafting a transparency report to quantify how many people had been sexually assaulted during Uber rides.

The effort was part of Mr. West's mandate to help clean up Uber, which had been grappling with legal entanglements, safety issues and a problematic workplace culture.

So Mr. West directed Uber employees to work with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, a nonprofit, to review 212 instances of sexual misconduct that occurred during rides in 2017. He listened to customer service calls, including one in which an Uber driver said he had raped a passenger. And the company began auditing past complaints to determine whether it had evidence of old assaults.

Nearly 16 months later, the work is far from over. "This is a hugely underreported set of situations," Mr. West, 53, said. "Those numbers, as we continue to count them, they actually might go up."

Uber, which may go public at a \$120 billion valuation, would dwarf Lyft. But to pull off a successful offering, the company must reduce its legal exposure and show that it has revamped its culture and cares about the safety of passengers.

Mr. West, a former Justice Department official and the brother-in-law of Senator Kamala Harris, the California Democrat who is running for president, said he was hitching his reputation to Uber and its changes.

"I had a reputation that I was also putting on the table, right?" he said in a recent interview.

A native of the Bay Area, Mr. West graduated from Harvard University and Stanford Law School. He rose to prominence as an assistant attorney general in the Obama administration, during which he urged the Justice Department to stop defending the Defense of Marriage Act and worked to reduce the number of detainees in the military prison at Guantánamo Bay.

In 2014, he became general counsel of PepsiCo, where, he said, he learned how to operate in a Fortune 50 company. Then in 2017, Mr. Khosrowshahi came calling.

At the time, Uber was reeling from the ouster of Travis Kalanick as chief executive and the aftermath of an investigation into its workplace, amid other issues. Mr. Khosrowshahi was tapped to stabilize the company and eventually take it public. Over several dinners in New York, he pitched Mr. West on the idea of turning Uber into a more self-critical company.

Uber needed someone with “a great amount of negotiation prowess and relationships,” Mr. Khosrowshahi said. “He’s got both.”

Mr. West jumped ship. “There was nothing I was going to do that was going to fundamentally change the trajectory” of PepsiCo, he said.

At Uber, Mr. West began rebuilding the legal department with several former Justice Department colleagues. He also confronted some urgent legal problems. They included a trial in early 2018 to defend the company against allegations that it had stolen trade secrets from Waymo in the race to build self-driving cars.

Mr. West worked in the Justice Department with Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr., in front of the American flag, during the Obama administration.

Lauren Victoria Burke/Associated Press

Eric H. Holder Jr., the former attorney general, who led an inquiry into Uber’s workplace in 2017 and is friends with Mr. West, said of the company: “They still have work to do, but made really significant progress in a short period of time.”

Some of the work today revolves around the sexual assault transparency report. Uber is now training its customer service representatives to sort incidents into 21 categories. The process is complex; for instance, Uber considers a touch between a person’s thighs to be sexual, while a touch on other areas of the thigh is not.

Because the company operates in 64 countries, the training must also be localized. That is tricky because of varied cultural norms — a kiss on the cheek might be a common greeting in Europe but would be unexpected in the United States, Mr. West noted.

“There are these differing concepts and views about what can be considered intimate, or sexual, or appropriate or inappropriate,” he said.

How long Mr. West will stay at Uber is unclear; he has already faced questions internally about whether he will leave to join Ms. Harris’s presidential campaign. Mr. West is married to Maya Harris, Senator Harris’s sister and campaign chairwoman. He also co-led Ms. Harris’s transition team after she was elected to the Senate in 2016.

Ms. Harris’s office did not respond to requests for comment.

When asked if he would return to government, Mr. West demurred and said a presidential victory for Ms. Harris would most likely prevent him from working in the administration because he was a relative.

“It would depend on a lot of things, not the least of which is: What would I be going back for?” he said.

Correction: *March 4, 2019*

An earlier version of this article misstated the number and nature of 2017 incidents reviewed by Uber and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. The review involves 212 incidents, not 221. They involved different types of sexual misconduct; they did not all involve sexual assault.

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