Westlaw's Great Leap Forward: WestlawNext

That most venerable of legal research services, Westlaw, just got a major makeover. This is no mere cosmetic redesign. The new Westlaw, called WestlawNext, is a complete reworking of the search interface and of the search engine that drives it. The result is a simpler and more intuitive research tool that delivers better results than ever before.

WestlawNext is the most significant overhaul of Westlaw since it made the leap from dedicated terminals to personal computers more than 20 years ago. Rumors had long been circulating of its development, under the code name Project Cobalt. Thomson Reuters, owner of Westlaw, formally unveiled the new product Feb. 1 at LegalTech in New York.

Upon first logging on to WestlawNext, the most striking change is the disappearance of the database directories. No longer need you select a specific database to search. Instead, the front page of WestlawNext is Zen-like in its simplicity – or, I should say, Google-like. Atop the page is a search bar that invites you to "enter search terms, citations, databases, anything."

Simple though it is on the surface, the engine driving it is much more powerful, Westlaw engineers say. In fact, the changes are so dramatic that West has given its new search engine its own name: WestSearch. The key to its power is that it does not just look at the terms you enter. Its algorithm incorporates West's Key Number system and other West enhancements to find documents on point, even if they contain not one of the search terms.

Search Everything at Once

A search – Boolean or plain language – will run across everything in the Westlaw database and return a page showing an overview of the most relevant results from each group – cases, statutes, secondary sources, briefs, whatever. If that sounds daunting, it is not. On the left of the screen is a menu for refining the search by group. Click to see only case law that matches the search or only statutes or whichever. After you select one of these filters – say, cases – a new submenu appears allowing you to filter the results further by any number of parameters, including court, judge, party, topic and Key Number.

This is much simpler and more intuitive than having to choose a database to search, if for no other reason that you do not always know which database is best suited to your search.

At the same time, WestlawNext makes it simple to limit your search by jurisdiction or to a particular library. Within the search box, a drop-down menu lets you choose as few or

as many jurisdictions to search as you want. You can also browse any of the various libraries by jurisdiction and topic.

The same search bar works to KeyCite a case. Just type "keycite" and the cite to bring up the subsequent history of a case. Whenever you view a case, the KeyCite information is displayed across the top of the page, in tabs for Negative Treatment, Citing References, History and Filings.

In "classic" Westlaw, the default ranking for search results is by date. In WestlawNext, the default ranking is by relevance. At any time, you can reset the default to whatever ranking you prefer.

Easier on the Eyes

WestlawNext makes a number of changes in how documents are displayed, including all new settings for fonts, margins and other styles. The user is able to customize these settings to their liking. A notable change is that headnotes no longer display automatically. Instead, the user can opt to display the full set of headnotes for any case by clicking on a button. This makes it easier to get right to the meat of a case.

Another change is that a case's most negative citing reference is shown right on the same page with the case. The previous version of Westlaw would show a yellow flag but provide no explanation.

As you view search results, a panel on the right of the screen shows relevant entries from treatises and other secondary materials. For example, a simple search, "Massachusetts open meeting law," revealed secondary sources such as relevant entries from the Massachusetts Practice series, briefs filed in open meeting appeals and pleadings from open meeting lawsuits.

There are many smaller enhancements that fall into the category of nice touches. For example, select a block of text and a pop-up menu appears allowing you to highlight it, add a note, copy it with its reference, or add it to your research. All of your research can be saved and organized in folders. WestlawNext will also keep a history back a year of every search you do and allow you to search within your history.

Pricing is Uncertain

By broadening search to its entire collection of data, Westlaw creates a bit of a quandary for the researcher. The results you obtain may include any number of documents that are outside your subscription plan. You will be able to see the list of results without additional cost, but click on a document your plan does not entitle you to see, and you will be invited to purchase it.

The charge will vary with the document, West says. But, more than in the past, the researcher will have to choose whether to err on the side of caution and view the

document or be cost-conscious and pass it by. In the long run, that could lead some subscribers to upgrade their subscriptions rather than pay by the piece.

Those per-document charges come on top of the premium firms will be required to pay just for the privilege of using WestlawNext. For the next few years, at least, West will operate both Westlaw and WestlawNext. Only firms that pay a premium will have access to WestlawNext. West has not publicly revealed details on pricing.

Research that is 'More Human'

At WestlawNext's Feb. 1 unveiling, Peter Warwick, CEO of Thomson Reuters, Legal, said, "We created WestlawNext to work the way our customers do … to be more human. To that end, WestlawNext is elegant, agile, easy to use, more precise, truly intelligent and intuitive. But behind the scenes, it has remarkably complex and powerful technology."

Even as West was taking the wraps off its next-generation research service, LexisNexis was engaged in a parallel initiative to broadly overhaul its core research product, with major changes in the works for its technology, design and functionality. The initial release of that is slated for later this year. A LexisNexis executive told me the company is in the midst of a "journey of reinvention."

As for WestlawNext, it is a win-win for the legal professionals who use it and for the company that developed it. For legal professionals, it at once simplifies and supercharges the task of legal research. For West, it shores up its core product at a time of increasing competition from free and lower-cost services – and may even drive up revenue to boot.

The bottom line is that WestlawNext brings the experience of searching the Westlaw database in line with what users today expect from a Web-based tool, making it simple and intuitive.

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