

# Technology



## Information overload

The widespread availability of information both helps - and hampers - lawyers' online research

**BEFORE THE** internet, finding the right source of information required mental and physical legwork, including multiple trips to the law library or volumes of looseleaf services.

Online search engines and service providers have permanently changed legal research, putting information at lawyers' fingertips. Today, when a simple online search can unlock a tidal wave of information, the challenge for lawyers is to avoid getting swamped.

### Flood of results

Increased access to information has changed expectations around lawyers' research, according to Joanne Wade, senior product manager from Lexis Advance Pacific.

"I think lawyers are expected to be able to run searches and always find something that's relevant to their specific facts and their specific matters," she said.

"There's pressure to always be able to hop online and give themselves half an hour and target that 'golden egg.'"

Yet the sheer volume of information can make pinpointing the right case challenging. For one, Ms Wade warns it may take longer to canvass all possible sources, from Google to free and paid service providers.

"The more platforms you have, the more channels you have, the harder it gets to navigate your way through to really target the answers you need to find quickly," she says.

For time-poor lawyers, a further challenge

can be knowing when enough is enough, Ms Wade believes.

"Especially if you can do a search and potentially get thousands of documents, it can be that nagging worry of 'have I looked through the right search results?'" she says.

Lawyers using multiple sources also need to be wary of currency, Ms Wade believes. Portals may have different processes for updating their databases and lawyers could be caught out with old information if one portal updates slower than another.

Coupled with these obstacles, firms are increasingly demanding lawyers deliver top-quality information in the most efficient way.

"A lot of firms are telling us that efficiency is their number one priority," Ms Wade says.

"Similarly, they are concerned about increasing their reputation and expertise in their field by so they are looking for specialist legal research content that can be trusted and is the most current."

### Fighting the fog

To help lawyers navigate online, Ms Wade encourages them to use a methodical process. LexisNexis has recently completed a white paper on legal searches, titled *5 Critical Steps to Legal Research*.

In this paper, the company encourages lawyers to do some groundwork before jumping into case law and legislation.

To start, it suggests identifying the materials and information that lawyers have available for that particular area of practice.

"Though it's tempting to just jump into search mode, pause instead. Conducting a high level review of the applicable practice area and preparing a concrete outline of the issues that need researching is time well spent," the paper urges.

As a next step, lawyers are encouraged to use a variety of sources to give them perspective on each point of law, including encyclopaedias. After this, lawyers should investigate any particular words or terms, looking at how they have been interpreted in the jurisprudence in the past.

Next, it's important to gain insight into the broader points of law in question, the paper states, urging lawyers to "cast their net wide." Only then should the lawyer begin the nitty gritty task of searching for relevant cases and legislation.

Ms Wade believes following a step-by-step process can keep lawyers on track.

"If you understand the steps you need to take, and you follow that discipline, you can stop yourself from going down rabbit holes," she says.

### Technological solutions

Data providers are also recognising the challenges facing lawyers in the internet age. In a bid to help lawyers streamline their search results, LexisNexis has recently launched a new research platform, Lexis Advance.

Ms Wade says the platform is targeted at "getting to the most relevant results faster", through new relevance rankings, pre- and post-filtering, search assist tools, quality and consistency of data structures and enriched content.

"The strength of it is you can use the filters in combination or add and remove them - you can slice and dice your search results quite quickly and easily," she says.

The platform also allows lawyers to record their past actions, which can be useful for backtracking through your work as well as coaching trainees, she says.

A new search function allows lawyers to find citations, legislation and commentary through a single search box, minimising time spent searching, according to Ms Wade.

Ultimately, she believes technology can be a "double-edged sword" but lawyers can learn to wield it in their favour.

"Technology has gone a long way to help lawyers be more effective," she says. ●

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