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BODY:

After chasing WestlawNext in the release of a new legal research interface, Lexis has created its own, Lexis Advance, which similarly claims it was designed to support the way practitioners conduct legal research in the modern world.

I've had the opportunity to review LA over the last few weeks, and I'm impressed with some of the changes. It uniquely blends the best of Lexis' resources with the look and feel of many popular Web-based programs.

It would take several columns to describe all the changes in the Lexis system, so I will review some of the best features I discovered.

Note that the changes are in the same category as the WestlawNext changes, namely, the "Googlization" of legal research. The product developers and engineers at both companies are very aware of the modern researcher's need to have Google-like ease of use and search result relevance.

I would argue, however, that some of LA's features are more akin to iTunes than Westlaw's Amazon.com-like look and feel.

First of all, just like WestlawNext, there is a simple one-box search on the main LA screen. I believe this will be the standard for all legal research engines from now on. Users do not have to use Boolean searching; they can just type in some keywords. Also, users do not have to choose a source before running a search. LA lets users choose to search by "Content Type" (cases, statutes, regulations, etc.), "Jurisdiction," "Practice Area/Topic" or any combination.

Below the one-box search is a space called "My Workspace." Here, you can scroll through folders (much like the album covers on iTunes) featuring your customized research folders, search history and Lexis support. This customized folder system allows the researcher to organize and manage research projects by saving documents, searches and custom notes.

Once you complete a search, the LA search results are displayed and organized differently than in classic Lexis. The initial results screen shows the first 10 documents, sorted by LA's relevancy ranking, in the default "Content Type" selected. If sources from more than one "Content Type" were searched, the others are accessible through a line of helpful tabs that appear just above the results. These tabs are critical for organization in your research and are featured prominently throughout the LA system.

Each research step opens up a separate tab, so it is easy to toggle to different steps in the research trail path without opening 34 windows and losing track. Users run an initial search with the results on a single tab. Open a document from that list and LA opens another tab. Open a Shepard's Report of that case, another tab opens. Users can easily bounce between research steps and still maintain the organized, clean look, without losing the information.

You can narrow your search results quickly with the faceted post-search filters provided in the left column. It displays relevant results organized into folders such as cases, statutes and regulations. This functionality allows the user to narrow the results by particular classifications.

There are quite a few different filters to choose from, including an incredible graphical timeline for helping decide how to restrict by date. Scroll over the case name and brief summaries pop up. The famous Shepard's citation service is incorporated into each case and even can be viewed graphically. Cases are plotted on a graph with axes for time and court level. Points on the graph relate to the central case as either relevant points of law or relevant legal issues.

LA has also made some cost-effective changes. Previously, the length of time to access a search was 30 days; LA has now expanded the history to 90, during which time no additional charges are incurred for revisiting the initial search. And, if you move some of those documents into the iTunes-like folders, you can have continual access to them.

Lastly, the famous Shepard's Reports have also been streamlined in the presentation. The appellate history, citing cases and citing law reviews, treatises, etc., appear on clearly marked tabs. These tabs identify how many entries are on each tab with a parenthetical number. Each tab also has various faceted search filters provided in the left column, similar to the search results filters, including the graphical timeline of citations.

There are many more useful features in LA, but it appears its goal has been achieved: the creation of a modern, competitive legal research engine featuring Google-like interfaces and Web 2.0 features, combined with the best of Lexis' research tools.

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