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Lawyers benefit from legal research competition

There is a grand scale transformation of legal research platforms occurring right now, which is a good thing for the legal profession as a whole.

While none of the existing services are necessarily ugly or bad, some of the most prominent platforms — ones with which we lawyers have always had a love/hate relationship — are antiquated and have been in desperate need of a re-haul for years now.

New entrants into the legal research space have caused fierce competition for customers. The increased competition has resulted in a rich variety of legal research options for lawyers. Some services provide more in-depth results than others, some have very user-friendly interfaces and some are inexpensive, or even free.

At LegalTech New York in February, the two largest, most familiar and most costly legal research platforms in the industry rolled out new products as part of an attempt to keep their offerings fresh and current.

Westlaw introduced WestlawNext, the next generation of Westlaw, a platform that had not changed substantially since its last revamp in 1998. An online brochure describes the platform: “Legal research that’s more human gives you an easier way to search, yet delivers all of what you’re looking for. ... [Y]ou can apply intelligent tools to help you work smarter and faster with total confidence you have the information you need. All of which makes life easier.”

There has been some criticism expressed in the legal blogosphere regarding the added “premium” users must pay in order to access the new platform, and some have decried West’s apparent lack of transparency in that regard.

LexisNexis also announced plans to roll out a new version of its platform, tentatively called “Lexis New,” later this year.

In the meantime, Lexis introduced Lexis/Microsoft Office integration, also during LegalTech. The company’s Web site states the new product allows lawyers “reviewing a Word document or an Outlook e-mail message ... [to] seamlessly access content and resources from LexisNexis, the open Web, or their law firm or corporate files.”

LexisNexis also offers an iPhone app that allows subscribers to check case citations on the fly.

Two cheaper platforms have been around for at least a decade,

Fastcase (www.fastcase.com) and LoisLaw (www.loislaw.com). Both offer subscribers the ability to access case law and statutes via user-friendly Web interfaces.

Fastcase, a 10-year-old legal research company, already serves more than 380,000 lawyers nationwide and has 17 state and local bar associations as its clients. One new notable feature from Fastcase is a free iPhone app. I downloaded the app when it was first released and, in my opinion, it’s a must-have for any lawyer who owns an iPhone. It allows users to quickly and easily search Fastcase’s entire case law database using the intuitive iPhone interface. And, you certainly can’t beat the price.

Another free legal research alternative is Google Legal Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>), which debuted at the end of 2009 and offers a free searchable database of U.S. case law from federal and state courts dating back 80 years, as well as U.S. Supreme Court decisions dating back to 1791 and law review articles. Google Legal Scholar is a great resource and, for some

lawyers, may offer a good alternative to the traditional legal research platforms.

Finally, a new contender is Bloomberg Law, which will be released later this year. The product has been in beta testing for the last year and is offered by the well-established and well known financial news and information services media company, Bloomberg LLC. As described at its Web site, Bloomberg Law will provide an “the all-in-one legal research platform that integrates legal content with proprietary news and business intelligence.”

Many predict that the platform will appeal mostly to larger law firms as a feasible alternative to LexisNexis and Westlaw.

There is no doubt 2010 will be an interesting, and tumultuous, year for legal research providers and the lawyers who use their services. Only time will tell which platforms will win the battle for user loyalty. In the meantime, at least lawyers have far more choices than ever before.

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