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WestlawNext Status Update

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WestlawNext Status Update

Debbie Ginsberg, Educational Technology Librarian

November 1, 2010

What is WestlawNext?

In February 2010, Westlaw introduced a new interface which allowed users to search across Westlaw resources without choosing a database first. Instead, users can search all available resources at once, then use checkboxes to narrow down their results by jurisdiction, type of resource, or other criteria. This interface is cleaner and more user-friendly than the Westlaw Classic interface, but does it lead to better research results? The answer to that question isn't yet clear.

Who can use WestlawNext?

WestlawNext has been available to our faculty and students since October 18. Law schools have a choice of dates, and some have opted to delay access to WestlawNext until January 2011 or later.

What are the advantages of WestlawNext?

Smart searching Natural language searching has improved because Westlaw has programmed its search engine to return the results that are most commonly selected after a given search. For example, if previous researchers commonly read or printed the same three cases when they researched DWI in New Jersey, those same three cases will appear at the top of the list of results when future users research New Jersey DWI issues.

Great for case law and statutory research A post at the Legal Research Plus blog described a recent exercise in which several legal writing instructors tested WestlawNext. They started a research assignment by copying a relevant sentence from a secondary source into the general WestlawNext search box. The instructors were quite impressed with the results because they included the most relevant statute and more than 40 relevant cases. See <http://bit.ly/wlnhomerun>.

More options for saving and printing Users now can save their research documents into online folders designated for particular assignments. In addition, WestlawNext offers a "Send to Amazon Kindle" option; users pay a small fee to Amazon if they use this option.

Mobile interface Not only has West developed an iPad app for searching WestlawNext, but there is also a special mobile interface available that can be used with many mobile devices. See <http://m.next.westlaw.com>.

Blogger Dave Bilinsky created a Top 10 list of WestlawNext's best features which lists more advantages. See <http://bit.ly/wlntop10>.

What glitches have users found with WestlawNext?

As recently as a couple of months ago, users were reporting bugs in WestlawNext which should have been caught before the product was released. In August, for example, a user discovered that the box to search “All of these terms” did not work properly when users searched multiple phrases. Westlaw fixed the problem immediately, but phrase searches are fairly common and the problem should have been discovered earlier. See <http://bit.ly/wInglitch>.

Sources other than cases and statutes In the Legal Research Plus exercise described above, the instructors were far less impressed with the regulations WestlawNext returned in the same search. The first page of regulation results did not include the relevant regulation, but instead included many citations that were completely off-topic. Some users have reported similar problems with secondary sources (see <http://bit.ly/wInsecondary>). This situation should improve, however, as WestlawNext ‘learns’ which search results are most relevant.

Printing issues WestlawNext does not print to the Westlaw student printers, which means that law students cannot print for free from WestlawNext.

What questions remain about WestlawNext?

When will WestlawNext integrate all Westlaw resources? WestlawNext includes many primary and secondary resources, but not everything in Westlaw Classic is also available in WestlawNext.

When will Westlaw Classic disappear? The Classic interface may be discontinued within 3 years, if not sooner.

Will WestlawNext help or hinder teaching legal research? The general consensus about WestlawNext seems to be that it can work very well for experienced researchers, but may confuse novice searchers who are still struggling to understand legal research basics.

How are other online legal research providers planning to respond to WestlawNext?

Lexis Advanced Lexis is planning its own new interface which will be rolled out to most users in January. Librarians and legal research faculty are already using it. Will their new interface work as well as WestlawNext?

Bloomberg Law Long a staple for business research, Bloomberg is now getting into the legal research business. Will the new service effectively compete with the Big Two? The Library looked at it earlier, and it seemed pretty primitive, but perhaps it has improved.

Low priced legal research alternatives Companies like Fastcase and Loislaw have been upgrading their own interfaces and sources. Even so, none of the smaller companies offer the range of research tools and depth of resources found on Lexis and Westlaw. Will the smaller companies’ competitive pricing be enough to lure users?