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Beyond the Shelves: WestlawNext vs. Lexis Advance

Jodi L. Collova

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WestlawNext and Lexis Advance — the new generation of legal research systems from Thomson Reuters and LexisNexis — have a new interface with a single search box like Google, a new search engine and other new features. While they share many similar new attributes, the two systems differ in several ways.

NEW SEARCH ENGINES

Both WestlawNext and Lexis Advance offer new search engines that use algorithms to retrieve results differently than their classic counterparts. Theoretically, the new algorithms are designed to retrieve better, more relevant results. WestlawNext's search engine, "WestSearch," ranks results using relevance factors such as frequency of citation, appearance within secondary sources and consistency among key numbers. Between Next and Advance, the search engines are undoubtedly different; one can easily observe that running the same search on both will usually retrieve different results. An in-depth study of these differences would be useful to researchers, but lies outside the scope of this article.

SINGLE SEARCH BOX

Both research systems feature new Google-like interfaces with home screens containing a single search box. Unlike Westlaw Classic and Lexis.com, researchers do not have to select a specific database prior to conducting a search. Younger lawyers who have grown up with Google will feel especially comfortable with this new interface. Arguably, the single search box feature allows inexperienced researchers to retrieve higher-quality results. Not to fear, however, researchers who want to search a specific source for more precise results can still do so by using filters, browsing by source, and setting favorites, as discussed below.

FILTERS

Both research systems have pre- and post-search filters that allow users to narrow search results. On WestlawNext, a researcher can select a particular jurisdiction prior to searching. After running a search, filters on the left-side panel allow the researcher to select a content type (e.g., cases, statutes, secondary sources) and then narrow further by a specific source (e.g., Witkin).

Lexis Advance offers three options for pre-search filtering: jurisdiction, content type and practice area. Post-search filters appear across the top of the screen for content type and simultaneously down the left-side panel for specific sources within each content type. Thus, although Next and Advance have a similar capacity for narrowing searches, the filters are organized differently on each system.

BROWSING BY SOURCE AND FAVORITES

Currently, a major advantage of WestlawNext over Lexis Advance is that it offers access to a specific source or access to a source's table of contents without entering search terms. The WestlawNext home screen offers a list of content types the user can browse or even narrow further to a specific source prior to entering search terms. For example, a user could click on "Secondary Sources," narrow to "California," select "Miller and Starr California Real Estate," and then search the table of contents of that particular source, all before entering any search terms into the search engine.

Moreover, users can save a particular source to "Favorites" and quickly access it from the home screen in the future. The user also has the ability to customize the organization of Favorites, essentially creating a list of sources similar to the databases arranged in a tab on Westlaw Classic. In this respect, WestlawNext has the capacity to feel more comfortable to users who want to pre-select a source in a manner similar to what they have been accustomed on Westlaw Classic.

Lexis Advance does not currently offer the option to browse by source, but likely will in the future. At this time, the only way a user can access content from the homepage is by running a search in the single search box. Lexis Advance does have "Favorites," but they are limited to general content areas, not specific sources.

FOLDERS

Both systems offer a popular new feature: folders, which offer users the convenience of saving and organizing documents on the research system without having to download/print them first or switch screens to copy and paste into a word document. Additionally, documents saved to a folder can be accessed by the user in the future without an additional fee (be sure to check document expiration dates). Westlaw Next users can even share folders with other Westlaw Next users.

KEYCITE/SHEPARD'S

KeyCite and Shepard's remain similar to the previous generations on both WestlawNext and Lexis Advance, with some minor changes. For example, Lexis Advance offers a useful "Citing Decisions Grid," a graphical time line of decisions citing a particular case.

CONCLUSION

WestlawNext and Lexis Advance, both powerful new research systems, offer great benefits to legal researchers. Those currently subscribing to Westlaw Classic and Lexis.com will need to decide whether — or perhaps when — to switch over to the next generation. The legal field will inevitably transition entirely to the next generation of legal research systems, although the speed of this transition remains to be determined.

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