Mythbusting: Legal Research Top 10

Want to hear the truth behind the myths related to legal research and federated search technology? Then read on as Thomson Reuters explodes the top 10 legal technology myths.

MYTH 1: Search is easy! At least this is the perception of many lawyers and IT professionals within law firms and large legal departments.

FACT: A simple search that covers a single subject area is indeed easy and there are many great search solutions that address this problem. However, search becomes a real challenge when looking for very specific legal content that is up-to-date and comprehensive, using the appropriate resources. The result is that some users often struggle to find what they need, not because they can't search but because they are not sure where or indeed how to search the different services and systems available to them.

MYTH 2: Lawyers know where to go to get the right information so limited induction and training on search systems is required.

FACT: Most firms provide some level of induction for lawyers plus ongoing training (supported by different providers) to try and ensure that users know how to use the different research services available. Larger firms have information professionals in the form of professional support lawyers and librarians that are experts at search and can advise lawyers. However the current 'Google' generation of users are often turned off by training in this area, failing to attend sessions and fall back on using only a subset of the services available to them. The end result is different lawyers in the same organisation often use different sources for the same type of information. This introduces inconsistencies at best and potentially significant risk.

MYTH 3: Law firms and large legal departments are effectively managing and controlling what online legal research services are used and how these are used across the organisation.

FACT: Most law firms and legal departments struggle to manage how a mix of high value, high cost and free online information services are used. This is becoming an increasingly complex issue as more services become available and the overlap between them increases. Much time and resource is therefore spent organising links to the different services on intranets, delivering training and generally advising and helping users on what to use and when to use the different services. This linking approach does indeed provide a pathway that lawyers can follow to get to the resources that they need. However there are often no mechanisms within the firm to effectively audit which resources are actually being used and information professionals can waste a lot of time reviewing usage statistics provided by subscription services, often having to make assumptions about usage of free information services.

MYTH 4: Software tools that provide a single sign-on and audit capability across the different services are the solution.

FACT: Such software tools provide a step in the right direction as they can ensure that a single set of audit logs is available to the information management team. These audit logs operate across all services defined within such a system, however such tools do not address the fundamental problem which is what to search, when to search it and how to search it.

MYTH 5: The solution to the problem facing law firms is the implementation of a traditional Enterprise search solution.

FACT: The capabilities of the most commonly used Enterprise Search solutions overlap with the built in search capabilities of many existing internal systems. Take for example a law firm that might have the iManage document management system (DMS), a SharePoint Intranet and a proprietary Library or Know How solution. All of these systems have search built in as a commodity: iManage uses Autonomy IDOL, SharePoint uses Microsoft Search and proprietary systems will have their own finely tuned search systems. Looking beyond these internal systems services like Westlaw UK, Lexis Library and Practical Law all have their own unique indexing and search approaches and in some cases traditional Enterprise Search cannot extract or index such content. A further problem with the traditional Enterprise Search solution is that firms using such systems create a new comprehensive index for all systems and some (but not all) online services using a single approach.

The result is that searching that index will deliver different results to any direct search of the different systems. Whether the results are better or not is subjective, but it is guaranteed that they will be different and such inconsistencies are not something that most lawyers are comfortable with. The challenge therefore becomes the delivery of an integrated search so that lawyers can search all of their internal systems and all of their online services with a single search and in a way that ensures only the relevant parts of the different systems are searched.

MYTH 6: The problem is too big to solve, after all we have many different internal and online systems, in many different locations and even in different languages.

FACT: The scale of the challenge is indeed large, however by breaking it down and reviewing it based along jurisdiction, office, practice group and possibly sector lines, it is possible to deliver a solution that can evolve and flex over time. A flexible and evolutionary approach is critical to success, after all the systems you use will change, firms will merge and online content providers will enhance or change their platforms.

MYTH 7: Federated Search is the poor relation of Enterprise Search and does not deliver the same quality of search results.

FACT: Federated Search technology sits above the advanced indexing and search technology that is already built into the online information services that firms use, such as Westlaw UK, Practical Law, Lexis Library and many others. It can also sit above the advanced search and indexing technology that is built into solutions like the iManage DMS, Microsoft SharePoint and proprietary library, Know How and other systems used by law firms. Such technologies are actually Enterprise Search technologies and as a result the quality, speed and consistency of results delivered by federated search solutions can match that of the underlying systems to which they are connected.

MYTH 8: Federated Search does not have the flexibility to deliver the more advanced search requirements demanded by lawyers.

FACT: Federated Search technology has come a long way in recent years. Did you know that you can now do complex searches with field qualifiers, bracketing/nesting of search terms along with Boolean operators such as AND, OR, NOT, NEAR? The result is a standardised approach to searching all systems, (no matter what their individual search syntax) but the same speed of delivery and the same high quality and consistent results returned.

MYTH 9: Federated Search cannot be tuned to the specific needs of different sector or practice groups or different jurisdictions.

FACT: The advanced Solcara Legal Search solution enables information professionals (without the need to involve IT teams) to fine tune what resources they want to search, how they want them searched and who has access to search them. Furthermore it automates the login to each underlying service (internal or online) so that security of those services is maintained and users are directed to what is relevant to them. The result is the ability to issue a single, simple or complex search across all relevant materials in a given sector, practice or subject area.

MYTH 10: A Federated Search solution is too expensive and complex to implement and requires significant overhead to maintain long term.

FACT: This is true when firms look to embark on their own federated search development or engage with an organisation that implements such a solution on a consultancy basis. The costs can spiral as connections to different services and systems have to be developed, tested and proactively maintained. The approach adopted for the Solcara Legal Search solution is different in that all connectors to all supported systems (iManage, SharePoint, Westlaw UK, Practical Law, Lexis Library and many more) are maintained and tested regularly as part of the product. A typical implementation for Solcara Legal Search requires less than 10 days consultancy and once in place it can be enhanced or extended by information professionals and knowledge managers with minimal involvement from IT. When compared to traditional Enterprise Search solutions the software and implementation costs are a fraction of what those systems cost and as a result it is an appropriate solution for small, medium and even the very largest and most complex law firms and legal departments.

For more information about Solcara Legal Search and Know How:

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