

Internet Newsletter for Lawyers - Irish Extra

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A Review of Westlaw IE

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(This article is also available as a Microsoft Word document - see www.venables.co.uk/n0305westlawie.htm.)

Westlaw IE (www.westlaw.ie) is Thomson Round Hall's latest offering to the Irish legal market. It is a web-based, legal research tool tailored to meet the needs of the Irish legal profession. Thomson Round Hall offer subscriptions to the service on a full or modular basis, which means it is possible to subscribe to all or part of Westlaw IE's contents.

Westlaw IE contains the following resources:

*** Irish Law Reports Monthly**

(full archive dating back to 1976)

*** Employment Law Reports**

(full archive dating back to 1990)

*** Irish Law Times**

(full archive dating back to 1983)

*** Irish Current Law Monthly Digest**

(full archive dating back to 1995)

*** Unreported Judgments**

(full transcripts of unreported judgments from Oct. 2002)

*** The Irish Current Law Statutes Annotated**

(dating back to 1984)

*** Irish Current Awareness service** (updated daily).

Westlaw IE gives comprehensive access to some of Thomson Round Hall's key Irish legal resources. What is available is extremely useful to the Irish Legal profession but Westlaw IE has the potential to include much more. Even if content is limited to Thomson Round Hall's offerings, access to more of their journals and also their looseleaf services would enhance the product greatly.

Case Law

The case material allows access to over 2,000 reported judgments from Irish Law Reports Monthly, over 550 case reports from the Employment Law Reports, over 3000 case digests from Irish Current Law Monthly Digest and the Irish Law Times and the full texts of unreported judgments from October 2002. The service as offered is ideal for an individual or organisation wishing to gain access to this range of material in a short space of time. For the established office or individual the advantages of electronic access are provided and these include: a wide scope of

material available in one place, quick and comprehensive searching, multiple access, a complete archive, no material missing. It would be invaluable to have access to both the Irish Reports and the Irish Law Reports Monthly in one place but perhaps this will not be possible due to licensing agreements.

The unreported judgments play an extremely important part in researching Irish case law. Unfortunately the archive only includes 2002 in full and 2003 to date. Only a limited number of cases are available for 2000 and 2001. The service would be much more useful if an extensive archive was available. There is also the difficulty of the judgments being recognised as approved judgments. It may not be possible to use them in court but for research purposes, they are ideal.

Annotated Legislation and Journals

Having online access to Irish Current Law Statutes Annotated (ICLSA) is beneficial not least because it avoids the constant updating required of a looseleaf service but it only allows access to the legislation and the annotation. The preliminary tables of the service are not included.

Westlaw IE should consider including a range of the Thomson Round Hall looseleaf services as well as a wider range of journals. Currently The Irish Law Times is the only journal available through Westlaw IE.

Current Awareness

The current awareness service provides information on a range of material including, case law, legislation, legal newspaper articles, press releases, EU information. An abstract of the material is provided and where access to the full text of the document is available, hypertext links are given. The current awareness service is updated daily. On occasion however, updating of the newspapers can be late. Checking the database on the afternoon of Monday 24th March the articles available were up to and including Friday 21st March. This was not rectified until Wednesday 26th March. The newspaper references refer to the online edition of the newspaper. Page references to the printed newspaper article are not given thus making it difficult to find the article in the printed newspaper.

User-friendliness

Westlaw IE is easy to use. It is intuitive and does not require a large amount of training. The screen layout is clear, providing multiple access points to the different options. The display at the top of the screen remains the same regardless of where one is in the database. I also think that the terminology used is clear for anyone with a passing familiarity with legal terms.

Online help is provided although I feel this is fairly basic. It is enough to get one started and explain the purpose of

each option but it is not context specific. Regardless of where one is in the database, choosing help brings one to the top of the same help screen. The user must then go to the appropriate point. A help desk is provided Monday - Friday from 8.00 am – 6.00 pm which is very useful.

Search Capabilities

From the Welcome screen, one can perform a search across all modules or specified modules. This may be the screen preferred by the professional searcher as all the search capabilities, described below, can be incorporated into this screen as well as narrowing by module.

Each module has a customised search screen and a step-by-step layout to guide the user through the search process. I hesitate to call them advanced search screens, rather guided search screens. I like this approach as I feel it helps the inexperienced user to create more specific searches without the help of a professional. However, one could argue that it may also create confusion for the same inexperienced user as she/he may think that each step is compulsory rather than being optional. Only from the Current Awareness module is one given the option of an "Advanced Search" which again may be viewed more as a guided search.

Westlaw IE supports browsing where no search terms are required as well as quite detailed searching. The Boolean operators AND OR and NOT are supported. The ampersand "&" character can be used instead of the word AND but to exclude a term the percentage "%" character must be used rather than the word NOT or the minus symbol. I personally think NOT or the minus sign are more intuitive than "%".

Proximity searching is not supported, for example it is not possible to search for the word **rights** within three or more terms of the word **human**. Also it does not support forward and backward searching (e.g., searching for the words "lenient" and "sentence" such as "a lenient sentence" or "the sentence was lenient").

Phrase searching is supported by enclosing the search terms in double quotes "", e.g. "**human rights**".

Stemming of words is automatic. For example typing in **sentence** will also find **sentenced**, **sentencing** and so on.

Parentheses () may also be used to retrieve one set of search terms before another, e.g. ("Director of Public Prosecutions" or DPP) and appeal.

The search options may be used in combination with one another and searches may be restricted to a particular module thus narrowing the search further.

Search Results

In terms of the search accuracy, using both customised and non-customised screens, the results delivered match the search criteria. One important feature missing from the non-customised search screen is the ability to rank the results either by relevance or by date. This is possible from the customised screen. It would appear that the default is by relevance.

Some of the case material also contains a table of authorities. When this feature is available a button appears marked TOA on the bottom right of the pane in which the case is displayed. This is an important feature as it allows access to cases cited in the current case and also cases which refer to the current case.

On doing a Table of Contents (TOC) search of the Irish Law Times, which in effect is browsing the TOC, the list of results generated can be slightly confusing. The references refer to page numbers and each page number represents a new article. As an example (2002) 20 ILT 298 takes one to the article on page 298 of Volume 20, no. 19, the November 2002 issue of the Irish Law Times. On returning to the list of articles, previous ones visited are not displayed in a different colour, therefore it is difficult to track what has already been visited. This is important as a number of links displaying the same reference appear, although the results on clicking into the link may be different. Again an example, (2002) 20 ILT 289 will bring one into the introductory pages of Volume 20, no 19. There are 8 apparently identical links available from the TOC. The first 4 links give access to page 289 only. The last 4 give access to pages 290-293 inclusive. This is only apparent by trial and error.

Like most electronic databases this too has its quirks and by becoming familiar with it one knows what to expect. Overall however I would rate it as being reasonably straightforward to use and has an intuitive layout and display which should make it accessible to the non-professional searcher.

Conclusion

Westlaw IE is an extremely valuable addition to Irish legal resources. Being able to purchase the full service as well as particular modules makes it accessible to both individuals and organisations whether small or large. It is intuitive and easy to use and the customised search screens aid the inexperienced user in obtaining meaningful search results. However, I feel more powerful search capabilities could be included to facilitate the professional user.

The Westlaw service worldwide has a reputation for providing excellent content. As an initial offering the content is relevant and comprehensive. I do feel however that its content could be improved thus making it an even more worthwhile resource. Journal content could be greatly improved (currently only one journal is archived on the database) and there is great scope to include other looseleaf services in addition to the ICLSA service. This is possibly the area that has greatest potential for expansion. The inclusion of the Preliminary Tables with the ICLSA would also be worthwhile.

As mentioned above, the unreported judgments play an important role in the development of Irish case law. Providing a more comprehensive archive of these judgments would be a welcome addition.

Westlaw IE is a very worthwhile service and I expect it will improve in terms of its content and search capabilities. I certainly think it should be considered when deciding how to spend hard-pressed budgets. Anyone interested in a free trial of the service should contact Pauline Ward at pauline.ward@roundhall.ie.

Nuala Byrne has been the Law Librarian of the Director of Public Prosecutions in Dublin since 2001. The Library is on two sites, with 6 staff members. Before that, she was Business Librarian at Dublin City University. Email nbyrne@dppireland.ie.

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