Lawyers

Strictly Legal

Moses received
Ten Commandments that
laid the ethical and
moral framework for
Jews. Babylonian king
Hammurabi had
291 laws engraved
on stone.
But what do you do
when the laws
run into thousands?

The Indian Penal Code is one of the most exhaustive in the world, with umpteen laws and an equally large number of amendments. Lawyers and judges often have to sift through a mountain of documents to unearth the facts needed to support a case. It is not surprising that lawyers' offices are full of typists, clerks and research assistants. However, the spread of Information Technology has made things easier and eliminated time crunches and frequent headaches.

Justice for all

In India, Spectrum Business Support of Mumbai pioneered an online law database in 1993 called Grand Jurix. In 1996, it began marketing India's first judicial database on a CD-ROM—a database that covered Direct Taxes, Excise and Customs, Company Law, Foreign Exchange Regulation, Banking, Insurance, Consumer Protection, Environmental Protection, Securities and Contracts.

The CD is helpful in a variety of ways. For a particular case, you can see the judgements, dates, citations and references made to statutes. Notifications, circulars and trade notices are also included, and hyperlinks enable you to navigate smoothly through related documents. The CD also contains the decisions of the Supreme Court of India since 1933. A well-indexed database helps you to quickly dig up the case you are looking for. You can also search for a word appearing anywhere in the text or the title or a citation. You will never again have to thumb through a single dusty book.

case on virtually any subject that is handled by the Supreme Court.

In addition to the full text of the judgement, JUDIS also provides you with citator information relevant to a case–Case Number, Title, Judgement Period, Act Keywords and Headnote/Judgement Keywords. You can retrieve any case based on a group of words which form part of the text of the judgement. Search methods are simple and intuitive.

SCC Online

Yet another useful information database and search program available on CD is SCC Online–a database that can be installed on a personal computer for instantaneous retrieval of case law precedents of the Supreme Court of India.

The accompanying instruction manual contains step-by-step instructions and examples for easy understanding of the features of the program, which has been designed for those familiar with the Windows operating system.

SCC Online is based on material from all leading law reports. Cross-citations of other selected provincial and specialised journals are provided. The information database has been prepared by the experienced staff of the well-known law report *Supreme Court Cases* (SCC) and SCC Digests. You can subscribe for updates, so your database is never obsolete.

Search options include Random Search, Topic-wise search and Case-name search. Results are arranged alphabetically in one-line format, and include reference details such as statute/topic, sub-topic or section or the issue involved. The user can then select and read the case-notes most relevant to him. **Lexis Nexis**

If you specialise in International Law, you would certainly be familiar with this online database that contains full-text legal, news, government, finance and business sources–including newspapers, journals, reports, cases and patents–from 1973 (Lexis) and 1979 (Nexis) to date. Content is strongly American with significant Canadian and international coverage.

Lexis Nexis is updated daily with almost two million documents added weekly. The database is in main categories called Libraries and sub-categories called Files. Documents are found within Files.

A major competitor to Lexis Nexis is

Westlaw, which is similar in content but does not cover Commonwealth, European Community, and International Law in detail. Further, Lexis Nexis is one up on Westlaw because it also includes a substantial number of non-legal newspapers, magazines and journals.

Law students in particular will find these sites immensely useful. The services are not free, but most legal schools in the US subscribe to either of them (or both). So, accessing the databases is not difficult if you are a law student in the US.

One for the millennium

A recently launched product that will be

Keyword-based search is another feature that allows you instant access to records. You can add comments or keywords to identify a case for later reference. The database has been recently updated.

JUDIS

Another landmark product is JUDIS, a comprehensive online case-law library extensively used by lawyers, judges, legal experts—even ordinary litigants. It contains all reportable judgements of the Supreme Court of India from 1950 and lets you dig up relevant precedents to a

THE E-LAWYER

There is a feeling that lawyers are not (or don t need to be) as techno-savvy as, say, engineers or architects, and this is quite unfortunate. In these times, ignorance of technology, like ignorance of the law, is no excuse! If you balk at the thought of attending any professional course in computing or simply do not have the time, you can consider online education. Zee Education (ZED) and Spectrum have jointly advertised a basic course in Windows, MS-Office and Jurix. This technical education comes at a price, but you can learn at your own pace from the comfort of your home or office.

First Computers, the computer training institute with centres all over India, has a special 10-week course tailored to meet the exact requirements of lawyers. First Office for Lawyers is a new addition to their First Office series of courses designed exclusively for professionals. The course has been targeted at practising lawyers, law students and secretarial staff in legal firms.

Although still in its infancy in India, distance learning via the Internet is slowly becoming popular. IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University) already enables students to study and submit assignments online. Acquiring legal diplomas and degrees via the Net may soon become a reality. It is heartening to note that many universities who offer

solutions

Lawyers

of immense benefit to those in the legal profession is Legal2000. This CD from Orbit Infocom (www.orbitinfo.com) covers Statutes of India (Central Acts from 1834-1998) in a logical, easily searchable format. The developers of the software say that no prior knowledge of computers is required.

The intuitive Windows-like Interface and menu-driven options make the package quite user-friendly. Search options easily let you find what you are looking for. An Act can be selected based on Title, Year or Number, or by using keywords. A global search is also possible. Biennial Updates are available on CD-ROM, so that your database is never obsolete.

Legal Maxims are included as guidance for interpretation of Statute law. Lists of Presidents and High Courts of India have been thoughtfully provided.

Other notable utilities include annotation and bookmark features, an on-board editor to create, edit and maintain user documents, and a useful hardware lock. At Rs 20,000 the CD does not come cheap, but those who need to access the information frequently will find that it is worth its price.

Building your e-library

Primary legal documents as well as law-related commentary abound on the Internet. Researchers will find statutes, pending legislation and regulations, current federal appellate-level case law, foreign and international laws and legal documents, as well as court opinions, legal news, articles and more.

With a modem and an Internet connection, you can scour the Internet for nuggets of information. Online legal databases are aplenty, and you could also subscribe to free legal e-zines or newsletters. You could even start your own mailing list where members can read and post messages.

If software costs seem too high but you are willing to venture into digital territory, you can build your own database. To

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NO MORE STENOGRAPHERS!

Voice recognition software (VRS) has become more dependable and accurate than ever before. This technology allows you to dictate text to the computer, eliminating the need for secretaries or short-hand writers. Working with VRS requires practice, and you have to train the software to recognise your speech patterns and accent by reading out sample texts before you start using it for professionally. If done well, the software helps you manage your time wisely.

Perhaps the most reliable of such software is the Dragon NaturallySpeaking Legal Suite, which was designed with the legal professional in mind. Dragon, which has a huge vocabulary including court names, case history, Latin and French phrases, litigation documents and abbreviations lets you dictate naturally and directly into your PC. Your words are immediately transcribed on to the screen and into your document. You can quickly create briefs, time and billing records and correspondence, and save on fees paid to outside services. There is

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begin with, you need a computer with multimedia extensions and a CD-ROM drive. All right, you have a sizeable practice—so make that four computers.

You can now begin to key in data manually if you have the required manpower. If you don't have the luxury of employing half a dozen data entry operators, and you are dealing with printed text, you can use a scanner and OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software such as OmniPage, TextBridge or FineReader to scan the text and store them as text files. Most OCR software come with features like auto-indexing, which help in easy classification and retrieval.

You could also invest in speech recognition software such as the Dragon NaturallySpeaking Legal Suite. (*See box 'No More Stenographers!'*)

Web of the Law
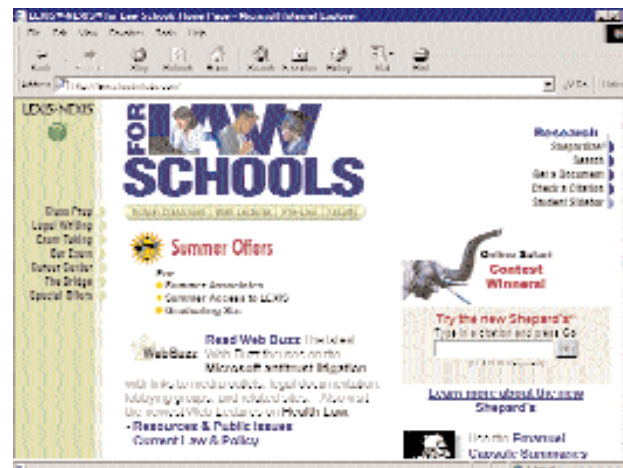
Most law schools in the US subscribe to Lexis Nexis

The legal profession has a prominent presence on the Net. Most of it, however, is American. One of the most comprehensive Web sites is Heiros Gamos (www.hg.org) which in Greek signifies the marriage of seemingly heterogeneous concepts or things—for instance, Earth and Sky, or, in the case of the Internet, electronic and written information. Heiros Gamos is a genuine portal that provides extensive links to all areas of interest to the legal profession.

The site offers an e-mail notification service, listings of law schools, legal associations, prominent law firms (more than 70 Indian law firms were listed), links to online law journals, resource guides, publishers of law material, legal education, discussion groups, law libraries, legal Internet sites, as well as updates/news on legal matters on a global scale.

There are many resources on the Net for the would-be legal eagle. More people visit the Cornell Law School online (www.law.cornell.edu) in a single day than have enrolled in its degree programs over the past 110 years of its history. Other such sites are www.lawresearch.com and www.findlaw.com.

To know about technology tools for the legal professional, check out

solutions

Lawyers

www.lawyerware.com. This news-rich site is ideal for those who want to keep themselves informed about technological advances and trends. Brief Exchange (www.briefxchg.com) is a huge Internet repository of legal news, information, lawyer chats, downloadable software, even legal forms—but only for courts in the US, unfortunately.

The Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory is the most complete, trusted source for identifying qualified legal counsel, at least in the United States. You can access their site at www.lawyers.com to locate a lawyer in a town of your choice (*see screenshot*). Also worth a look is the Seamless Web site at www.seamless.com, which is full of things that lawyers use (or might be interested in). Also on this page are links to law practice management firms, legal software firms and consultants providing legal technology solutions.

Inspired by the idea of cultivating excellence in the area of legal research, consultation and advice, established lawyers in various disciplines of Indian law have joined hands to form LAW-INC—the online Law Information Centre (*see screenshot*). The site can be accessed at www.lawinc.com. Even the Indian Ministry of Law and Justice, Department of Legal Affairs, has a Web page which can be accessed at www.nic.in/lawmin.

The number of legal journals (and their digests) published in India is so large that very few lawyers can afford or have the time to consult them all. LawsIndia have prepared a digest of all the cases where the interpretation of various points of law has been pronounced. You can sign up for the free legal info through e-mail in the format Section / Article / Order / Rule / Synopsis of Section. You can also send them queries in the same format.

www.mylawfirm.com

One of the great benefits of the Internet is that you can set up your virtual office at negligible cost. But where do you host your site? Though it is tempting to go in for a free Web space provider such as Geocities or Xoom, resist the temptation—even if they offer you 11 MB and you don't need even half as much. Register your own domain. Space is cheaper on servers in the US, though you will have to pay in dollars.

Make sure you add some interactivity to your site, with enquiry forms, e-mail or even a search engine. The cost of incorporating these features varies, but even on a shoestring budget, one can design a very competent, informative Web site. If all this seems too big a hassle, you could simply opt for a 'package' deal—for services that include design, development, hosting and maintenance.

More people (regardless of where they are) will see your firm's Web site than will ever see your brochure, letterhead or business cards. Ninety percent of the people who drop by may be casual surfers who followed a link to your firm out of curiosity, or they could be competition trying to find out what other firms have done online. But remember, above anything else, that the nature of all such publicity should be in accordance with the rules and regulations laid down by the Bar Council or legal authority of the country you live in.

From e-commerce to e-fraud

The Internet has been growing at a tremendous pace and we now have e-commerce, e-mail, online auctions, online bookstores, online education, online advertising, online gaming, online news. We have also had to come face to face

with a nasty reality—online fraud.

Cyberspace laws are still in their infancy, and the situation on the Net today is rather like what America was in the days of cowboys and Indians. There is widespread cyber crime and cyber terrorism—not to speak of software piracy—and you need to be techno-savvy yourself.

Then there is the possibility of computers playing a damning role in legal cases. The computer can reveal much more about the personality and preferences of a person than one may realise. It is certainly possible to find incriminating evidence from a PC. In addition, electronic commerce is finally here, and online stock trading and auctions are catching on. With the spread of such
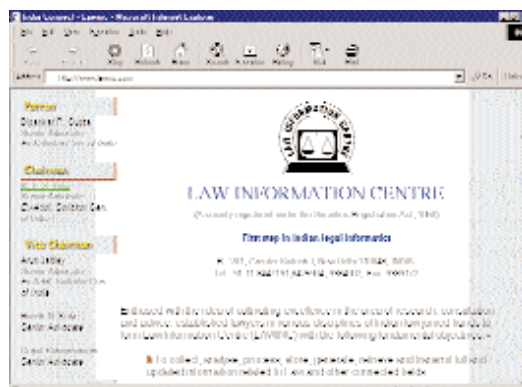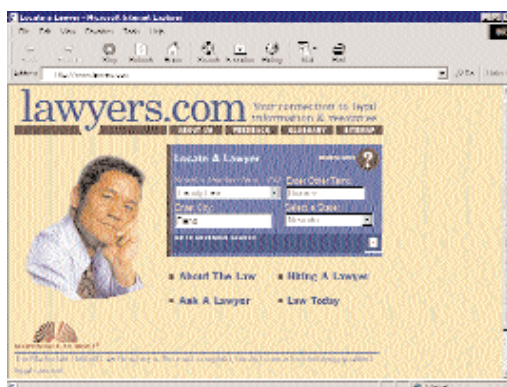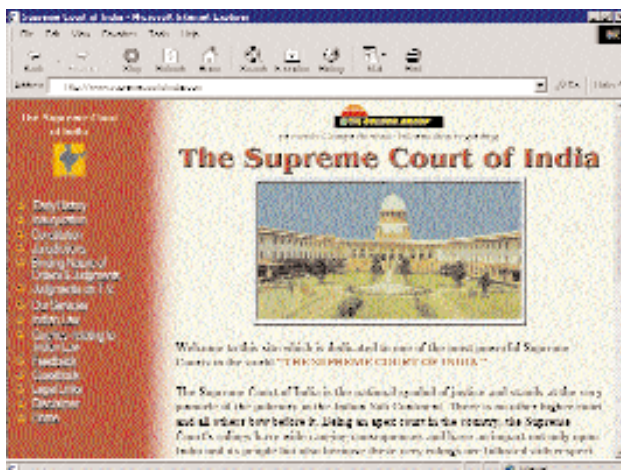
The venerable Supreme Court of India is online too!

technology comes the threat of electronic fraud. As a lawyer, you will need to understand the technology and be aware of possible laws against its abuse. Hence the need to be familiar with the Internet.

The move to the paperless world has thrown up more challenges than ever before. Paper documents offer a number of features which provide a degree of confidence in the security of the transmission process. These include the integrity of the envelope containing the document, the use of letterheads and watermarks and the use of recognised signatures. There is a legal consensus on what constitutes a 'contract' and forensic science can attempt to prove whether a paper document has been tampered with or a fraudulent signature applied.

Such things become a little difficult when it comes to, say, e-mail. We are now in the world where information is totally plastic. This means that electronic messages can be tampered with and the changes may go undetected. It is fairly easy, for instance, to fake a name in the 'From' field of your e-mail message. Indeed, there has been an occasion—probably apocryphal—when AOL considered changing its name from America Online to America Offline because someone claiming to be from InterNIC (the Internet domain names registering authority) politely requested them to do so.

The Future

The Internet will continue to be the largest single resource for those in the legal profession, and as more and more lawyers enter cyberspace, concrete laws regarding privacy and protection will gradually evolve.

Litigation often requires massive storage capacity; so efforts will be on to find a suitable medium for the archival and retrieval of information. Lawyers require the flexibility to be able to instantly access stored information and present it effectively at trial—floppies and even Zip drives often prove inadequate to the task.

As a step towards addressing these problems, litigation support companies in the US have begun to offer DVD (Digital Versatile Disk) services to the legal profession. Based on an internationally agreed-upon media standard, DVD disks allow you to store video, documents, images, photos and other media on the same disk. A single DVD disk can store as many as 250,000 documents and as much as 12 hours of deposition video.In many countries computers have entered the courtroom and are being used to recreate events, allowing lawyers to present their cases more effectively. What role will the computer play in the future? Will judges ultimately be replaced by computers programmed with legal doctrine and judicial discretion? (We certainly can't have any fuzzy logic here!) With videoconferencing becoming popular, will the lawyer of tomorrow argue cases at his keyboard, and will judges make pronouncements at the click of a mouse? Though it may seem a little unlikely now, we just might, in future, quite literally take the law into our hands.

HARIKRISHNAN MENON

SITES TO VISIT

w w w.hg.org
w w w.lawresearch.com
w w w.law.cornell.edu
w w w.lawinc.com
w w w.findlaw.com

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