

# Database Cost Searching as a Tool for Investigation

To paraphrase Aristotle, anyone can become a user of on-line databases, that is easy. To use the right database(s), with the right search parameters, to the needed degree, at exactly the right time needed, to achieve comprehensive desired results for the right reasons and for the needed purpose, at an efficient cost to result factor.....that is not so easy! Unlike Aristotle, you need to integrate the use of on-line commercial databases daily. The following might help control or at least provide a better understanding of your database use cost and how it can be a more effective initial investigative tool.

Commercially available on-line databases specifically designed for the legal industry have proliferated in the last several years. There is not a day when a law office, a paralegal, an independent insurance adjuster, investigator, researcher, legal librarian, legal MIS director does not receive a solicitation from a new database vendor promising enhanced, fast, factual and, in limited, clearly defined circumstance, free information. You need to have the knowledge and experience to quickly identify those databases which fail to provide the needed information, the courage to locate and continually support those that do as well as possess the knowledge and experienced search skills to tell the difference.

The information brokers understand what it costs if you obtain the information manually and their service is structured to capture a premium for the convenience provided. Further, your cost will be substantially increased if the vendor is simply using reloads, outdated or rehashed, redefined data and extracts from other competitive vendors from whom they have purchased large quantities of access at substantial discounts with a fixed cost thereafter redesigning search categories and potential results per search and reselling same to you. It is important to determine the originating source(s) of the information provided and how often the material is updated.

Depending upon your search skills, you may not know where you are within the global search of the database resources, nor which search is necessary to be done next. Recognizing you have developed no additional useful information than before you ran the additional search, plus you have incurred the additional search cost can be frustrating. An old on-line research and investigative adage; if you find something in a database, it means it exist. If you don't find it in the database, it doesn't mean it does not exist. Assume nothing. Skilled on-line investigation is doing more than that obviously required to ensure completeness and thoroughness. Investigators traditionally do far more searching on-line than they bill the client. Doing so is a form of professional self insurance.

There is not an accepted universal standard of what information fields must be included or how a digitized record or document is cross referenced. To my knowledge, most, vendors do not offer a "sound alike" or "by inference" search capability which is a very useful and productive tool. If available, even at a premium charge, I suggest you pay the additional cost, as it will be well worth the fee. No matter how pricey, it is the most cost effective search tool available today.

The more narrow the search parameters, the less likely it is you will locate the information you seek. If you fail to locate something that is there because of the scope of the search inquiry, the exposure to professional malfeasance allegations are exponentially increased. The number of entities that do not have even one public record (which is the source of the majority of these records) is minuscule.

There are some little known, rarely used, special interest databases. These are the most expensive on an inquiry or time on-line cost basis, however, immediate comprehensive results are illuminating and profound. Generally, what is not found in frequently used, heavily promoted, generic data sources can be found in these special interest databases.

It is not accurate to presume that all the knowledge of the world, about all subjects from the beginning of time,

has been digitized. Sometimes, depending on the issue or entity there is little or no alternative to going to the bowels of the involved area repository to hand search on site for information. Items which may not have been digitized or may have been misfiled or overlooked when the other documents were being digitized can not be found any other way.

It is accurate that less input results in more data when using databases. The volumes of data obtained from searching then needs to be drilled down , vetted, collated, analyzed, sorted and reworked before you can have any level of comfort that you have extracted as much information as is possible from these electronic sources.

In the past decade, before competition, the information brokers charged extraordinarily high on-line or per search fees in comparison to what they charge today. Little of the information in the early days was cross referenced. Most strings of information retrieved had to be collated by the individual searcher. Many additional hours had to be consumed in addition to the search cost. This has been remedied to some extent. On-line searching is not in-expensive, but is far more economical and comprehensive today than it was when you had to physically travel from repository to repository. As little as two, five years ago searches that cost \$50.00 have been reduced in rare and unique batch result circumstances to as little as \$1.00.

All information brokers provide either on-line, telephone or classroom instruction in the use of their database so you can derive as much information as is possible from their system. In these classes the vendors will claim using their particular database as they suggest will minimize the cost while maximizing the information retrieved. They are technically correct, but in the real world of litigation investigative support, technically correct is not comforting. Efficient locating all available potentially relevant data is the proper goal.

Each vendor has a different method of charging. Some will charge by the search(s) performed, the time on-line or a combination. In the case of those that offer preconfigured comprehensive searches for a fixed price, the fixed cost in most instances equal the cost for the same information on an individual search basis when the drill down process has been completed. The defined searches are good pointers at a fair and reasonable price. The caveat is the premium or surcharge made to obtain the details after it is determined there is information available. Understand, a database search and the information retrieved is only a beginning of the investigative journey.

In some instances, a limited number of referenced data hits will be shown depending on the scope of the request or the commonality of the named entities in the search. Additional displays are available at an additional cost. Avoid the potential for overlooking or failing to find potential critical information. Incur the additional cost and obtain all available potentially relevant information. It is far better to know more than you need to know, than to not know what you must or should know!

Be aware the on-line services that charge for connect time can regulate as they deem necessary to meet their corporate profit goals. The server loading response time to a search request of the multitude of available databases as well as the download time is easily governed by the provider. The complexity of the category search menus and what is included within are designed to maximize on-line time consumed. The inability to rapidly jump from menu to menu, escape a search or sign off from a service can enhance cost to a minor extent.

A few moments cumulative, depending on the number of times accessed per month will result in greatly increased cost with that provider. The speed of you modem connection, as well as the provider's interface lines, can also affect you search time and cost. You might have a cable modem, a T-1, or faster connection capability, but the time consumed is governed by the speed with which the receiving server can or is designed to accept, retrieve and distill the data.

When questioned, providers most often claim the electronic comparison of data through the purported billions of records maintained and cross referenced is what consumes the on-line time, not the provider's hardware con-

figurations. Additional delays are encountered depending on the time of the day in which you perform your search. It is argued this is not the case, however, my personal experience indicates searches are completed and the data retrieved far more rapidly at three in the morning than at three in the afternoon.

In those instances wherein a no-hit no fee is promoted, it has been my experience there is almost always a hit, but that depends on the skill of the searcher about the database being searched and the scope of information being sought. A no hit response is troublesome. You need to double, triple check the validity of such a response with additional searches through other vendors. No information being located on any entity or subject is very rare. It does happen and should set off alarm bells.

A thorough asset search, background inquiry or locate can not be accomplished for the minimal dollars frequently advertised. Such promoted cost are teasers and should be viewed with skepticism. Computer on-line search results will become very limited and the cost of access to same will be stratospheric compared to current visible and hidden cost if organizations such as the Individual Reference Service Group (IRSG) as well as the Alliance for Fair Information Practices (AFIP) along with the California Association of Licensed Investigators (CALI), The National Association of Legal Investigators (NALI) among others, are unsuccessful in keeping public records open and electronically accessible.

In the meantime, keep your eye on the ball, enhance your knowledge base...and hire a skilled legal investigator.