

Research Resources for Michigan Paralegals

By Barbara H. Goldman

Paraprofessionals play an increasingly important part in the modern law office. A paralegal who can locate information quickly and cost-effectively will be a valuable asset to any firm.

Your first step should be to ensure that you are getting the most out of what you are already paying for. Whether the firm has Westlaw, Lexis, or another computerized legal research service, and whether you're a new user or an old-timer, check out what updates are available. In addition to taking advantage of web-based training,¹ ask your firm's account manager about other options, including an on-site session for the entire legal staff. Try to turn yourself into the "go-to" person for electronic legal research—your colleagues will appreciate it!

Using paid legal research databases, however, should be only a small part of your repertoire of skills. Your keyboard and an Internet connection will take you to a host of important websites for no charge at all.

Almost every court has at least some sort of web presence these days. All the federal courts are online, although the firm will need a PACER² account to view actual docket entries. You can search for an individual federal court or locate it through www.uscourts.gov. With a bit of clicking, you'll get to vital information such as local rules for the district courts, oral argument calendars for the courts of appeal, and slip opinions from the Supreme Court. If you're filing a document in an unfamiliar court, be sure to check its website for pleading formats, the address of the clerk's office, and other court-specific data. For biographical information about the judges, go to the Federal Judicial Center at www.fjc.gov.

For Michigan courts, start with www.courts.mi.gov. The home page will lead you directly to case-type codes, current court

rules and proposed amendments, the Michigan model jury instructions, administrative orders, SCAO-approved forms, and more. You can also view the argument calendar for the Supreme Court, which includes case summaries and links to the parties' briefs, or access it directly at www.courts.michigan.gov/supremecourt. Under "Court and Public Resources," look for "Trial Court Links" to view a list of district, circuit, and probate courts, plus Friend of the Court offices, around the state; the courts that offer online docket or record access are indicated. The Michigan Court of Appeals website at www.courtsofappeals.mijud.net provides complete docket information for Michigan Court of Appeals and Supreme Court cases (select "Resources" and "Docket Inquiry"), with links to opinions and orders from both appellate courts.

Sometimes the law you need is still in the process of enactment. For federal legislation, it's best to begin at thomas.loc.gov, although you can go directly to www.senate.gov or www.house.gov if your focus is on activity in the House or Senate. Be prepared, however, to invest a bit of time, especially if you don't know the number of a specific bill. The Michigan legislature's website, www.legislature.mi.gov, is less challenging to navigate. Although it's relatively

easy to track the history of a bill—you can also obtain the Senate and House Fiscal Agencies' analyses, if there are any—amendments to pending legislation are not posted. For up-to-the-minute Michigan legislative news, you'll need Gongwer News Service (www.gongwer.com) or Michigan Information & Research Service Inc. (www.mirsnews.com); both are subscription services, but do offer headline news on their front pages. If your interest is the past rather than the future, you may be able to do some legislative history research, at least for recent acts, by using www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html or the Michigan legislature's website, but it can be quite a challenge.

If your firm's clients operate in a regulated industry, you'll want to know your way to sources of administrative law. The Code of Federal Regulations is online at www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr/index.html, although searching by topic can be tedious. For proposed regulations—those the agency is soliciting comments on before putting them into effect—use www.regulations.gov or go directly to the Federal Register at www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html. Some Michigan agencies' rules are accessible directly from the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) at www.michigan.gov/cis; the entire Michigan Administrative Code

In addition to taking advantage of web-based training, ask your firm's account manager about including an on-site session for the entire legal staff. Try to turn yourself into the "go-to" person for electronic legal research—your colleagues will appreciate it!

appears under “Hearings, Appeals, Mediations & Rules,” “SOAHR Administrative Code.” The DLEG website will also take you to selected decisions from the Workers’ Compensation Appellate Commission, Michigan Employment Relations Commission, and the Michigan Employment Security Board of Review, but they are not complete databases of opinions.

The biggest parts of your job, however, may require no legal information at all. To decipher a set of medical abbreviations, try www.pharma-lexicon.com; it also has a medical dictionary, although the one at www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html is more complete. For anatomical information, the classic *Gray’s Anatomy*, www.bartleby.com/107, is searchable and provides detailed information about every part of the human body. Or use a general-purpose search engine to look for the organ you want to explore.

If you need to find a medical expert or check out one who’s been named by someone else, there are several ways to do it. For a Michigan professional, first use the license verification function of the DLEG at www.cis.state.mi.us/verify.htm. For any physician, start by going to the American Medical Association’s website at www.ama-assn.org and look for the small link to “DoctorFinder.” Follow the instructions and you’ll reach a screen that lets you search for doctors by name or specialty, although only one state at a time. You can track an expert’s publication record through databases in Michigan’s e-library at www.mel.org. Go to “Health and Wellness,” then select a database. Your Michigan driver’s license number or state ID will let you into MEDLINE, one of the top sources for professional research. If you need more, go to www.pubmed.gov, the vast online library of the National Institutes of Health. You will, however, need to invest some time in learning to use it.

Sometimes what you need isn’t available online. The Internet can still help you get what you need. If you’re looking for a book, the Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov will provide you with the LOC call number and the publisher’s name and ISBN number. You can use the latter to order the book and the former to find it in the library.

The Internet can also help you find people and businesses. You’ll want to create a bookmark just for the State Bar of Michigan’s directory (www.michbar.org, then “member directory”), which lets you search by first or last name, P number, or geographical location. Listed telephone numbers are available at many sites, like www.infospace.com, which also offer the ability to find the address that corresponds to a number. Information on incorporated Michigan businesses appears on the DLEG’s Business Entities Search site (www.dleg.state.mi.us/bcs_corp/sr_corp.asp), with links to annual reports and other documents.

The list of things you can find online is virtually endless. Want weather data? Try www.wunderground.com. The correct time in another state? Go to www.time.gov. A ZIP code? See zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp. Do you have metric data you need to convert? www.sciencemadesimple.com/conversions.html is one site that will do it for you.

Need help sorting through the possibilities? Ask your local librarian—he or she will be glad to assist you. ■

Barbara H. Goldman is a research and appellate attorney with a solo practice in Southfield. She teaches legal research and writing in the paralegal education programs at Baker College and the Academy of Court Reporting. This article was submitted on behalf of the Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications of the State Bar of Michigan.

FOOTNOTES

1. West offers a program specifically for paralegals, with the option of earning a certificate at the end. See <http://www.west.thomson.com/westlaw/training/paralegal> (accessed June 10, 2007). Lexis has a set of “Paralegal School” training modules at <http://www.lexisnexis.com/customertraining/firms.asp> (accessed June 10, 2007).
2. Public Access to Court Electronic Records <http://www.pacer.psc.uscourts.gov> (accessed June 10, 2007).