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Lessons Learned from Retail

Why shopping for shoes can help your KM efforts.

By Oz Benamram

WITH growing access to information, how do you find the needle in the ever-expanding haystack? Or the perfect shoe in the shoe store? Unlikely as it may seem, lawyers can learn from retailers, who turn out to be pretty good at figuring out what shoppers want.

With minimal input, shoe clerks usually can suggest two or three pairs that hit the mark. When we shop online, a single word search often yields a short list of attractive possibilities. Retailers help customers select quickly by zeroing in on what is relevant.

A similar principle guides the development of Morrison & Foerster's knowledge management and systems development: our commitment to provide relevant search results in a fast and easy way, to present our attorneys with information they can act on. This is critical because the firm has 1,000 lawyers in 19 offices (including five in Asia and two in Europe).

In 2004, we created a committee to tackle the next upgrade of our KM system. It included myself, (the firm's practice resources attorney); Roisin Leahy, a project manager; Linda Omori, network manager, and technical support staff for systems we are using (Thomson Elite software, LexisNexis Interface Software's InterAction client relationship management system, and Hummingbird Ltd.'s DocOpen).

In looking toward the next step, the principle of "relevant, fast, and easy" emerged from studying how our attorneys tap existing information sources and processes. In particular, we focused on use of e-mail, mailing lists, our portal, and "Knowledge Exchange."

KE is our collection of best practice forms and exemplars created by our attorneys. Each practice group assigns an attorney on a rotating basis to identify, categorize, and designate selected documents as "high value precedents."

Although manually collecting and maintaining documents is inherently time-consuming and does miss some useful precedents, our KE project has largely succeeded. Attorneys can easily query it for precedents, organized by a taxonomy. Observing attorneys' use of KE generated three insights:

1. *Attorneys need context to use precedents:* Attorneys need to know the context in which a document was created to understand it fully and reuse it properly. It helps to know what the litigation was about, the type of deal, who had the bargaining power, etc.

Implication: Connect people to information. Improve attorneys' access to existing information by linking various information sources to provide context.

2. *Attorneys use precedents to identify expertise:* Attorneys find it valuable to talk to experienced colleagues. They ask attorneys they already know because they do not know who else to ask. They use documents in KE as "pointers" to lawyers with expertise. The guidance of a veteran attorney often is much more valuable than document contents alone.

Implication: Connect people to people. Help attorneys locate colleagues with relevant experience and then make collaboration easy.

3. *Attorneys prefer simple and relevant systems:* Too many sophisticated systems with too many ways to find information turn attorneys off. Yet even the most technophobic lawyer knows how to search via Google or Yahoo. Lawyers are much more likely to use internal systems that are as simple as what they already use on the web.

Implication: Make it simple. Keep the interface simple and offload tasks where possible from attorneys to automation or staff.

KM Showcase

SPECIFYING REQUIREMENTS

In 2004, we wanted to improve our KE system, and in particular, upgrade its search capabilities. We wanted our user interface to offer Google-like simplicity and power.

Behind-the-scenes, the search system needed to identify hidden and explicit contextual information from multiple sources and automatically make inferences to create non-obvious meaning for users.

We began by evaluating "federated search" engines to find those that would access multiple databases, including documents, e-mail, portal contents, matters databases, time and billing systems, contacts, conflicts databases, and ethical wall data.

But that was not enough. The software also had to make sense of the morass of data by applying logic and semantic analysis to suggest the most appropriate resources.

Unfortunately, few vendor systems met our requirements. The key differences among the vendors were their ability to:

- Identify experienced attorneys based on the documents they wrote and the clients they served.
- Order search results by likely relevance:

√ Give extra weight to more valuable documents, e.g., a legal memo is more relevant than a fax cover sheet.

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√ Adjust relevance ranking by cross-referencing information.

√ Personalize rankings by inferring a user's interests based on what we already know about that user from our internal systems.

• Scale to handle terabytes of data.

• Respect security from each of the underlying systems.

• Guide users quickly to narrow the results in a meaningful way.

LEVERAGING CONTEXT

We crystallized our new understanding in a formal "Knowledge MAP," a set of principles for our next-generation KM infrastructure:

• Matters provide context and connect information from multiple systems.

• Attorneys have knowledge and relationships that they can share.

• Precedents such as documents and e-mail can be re-used, especially when contextualized.

As we evaluated search engines, we decided to focus more on matters and less on documents. That paid off because:

• Matters unify information from all of the firm's discrete systems and thus are a useful way to present information.

• Capturing information about a matter overall is less costly and more practical than doing so for all of the individual documents that belong to it.

• Staff support for gathering detailed matter information is strong, because departments other than KM (e.g., marketing and finance) also need the information.

• Matters, when linked with attorneys and documents, provide a simple and elegant way to identify experienced attorneys.

AUTO PROFILING DOCUMENTS

Our analysis of e-commerce engines and recognition of the significance of context drove us to ask a new question. Could we, without manual intervention, provide more context about individual documents as well? If we knew more about each document — for example, party names, dates, jurisdictions, and terms describing deal types — we could improve retrieval and make valuable associations and cross-references.

Asking attorneys to enter this data into document management system profiles is simply unrealistic. Few firms can persuade attorneys to complete more than a minimum of profiling fields. Some attorneys do not even enter meaningful titles, and many document type choices are suspect. We decided not to try to change our lawyers, instead, we looked for software that could automatically identify hidden context. We found the answer in "entity extraction" software designed to strip documents of identifying information in order to address confidentiality issues.

Once we realized we could "auto-profile" documents, we expanded our evaluation to include specialized document retrieval systems that have the potential to populate profiles automatically. Either way, the goal is to recognize entities (e.g., party names and jurisdiction) or concepts (e.g., deal type) within documents and automatically populate the document profile. More detailed, accurate profiles are critical for "faceted" search.

ADDING FACETED SEARCH

Even with advances such as organizing hits around matters or taxonomies and ranking results with sophisticated inferences, search results were still too extensive. Our shoppers could not make good choices quickly enough. We needed even more "easier and faster."

We returned to the world of e-commerce where the technology to sort and select quickly already exists. To grow sales, e-retailers need to make it easy to rapidly review and choose products from large catalogs.

"Faceted search" helps consumers to "slice" search results by important attributes, such as brand, price range or product features. This dramatically reduces the time needed to find relevant items. In effect, the system makes good guesses about what consumers may want.

We added faceted search to our KM requirements because attorneys, like shoppers, need to choose one or two items from potentially long lists. Attorneys searching for specific matters, people or products can "slice" their results by attributes such as jurisdiction, industry, motion type, party names, governing law, effective date, or law firm on the other side of the deal.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Morrison & Foerster plans to roll out our updated KM system, which we call Answer Base, in April 2006.

For search, we selected Recommind Inc.'s MindServer Legal Matters & Expertise product, after considering numerous vendors, including Thomson's West km, LexisNexis Total Search, and Hummingbird Ltd. products.

We narrowed the field to two finalists for pilots, Recommind and Endeca Technologies Inc. As a development partner with Recommind, we are not permitted to disclose our contract financials. (See sidebar on costs.)

We are still evaluating the finalists for document profiling.

We believe that our automated approach, supported by some manual work to describe matters, will bring the firm closer to the holy grail of knowledge management — quick, easy, and reliable access to people and information without spending a fortune. We are giving our "shoppers" what they really want. LTN

Costs

Recommind Inc. provided the following pricing information for its MindServer Legal Enterprise Search and MindServer Legal Matters & Expertise products:

Recommind's pricing is based on a named user (a.k.a. per-seat) model, which works on a sliding scale basis. In most situations, customers pay a one time licensing fee and an annual maintenance cost (20 percent of the license fee.) Installation costs can vary depending on customer requirements.

For a firm with 2,000 users, with a complex project, using both products, the licensing can run $260 a seat, with maintenance of about $104,000. (Installation, done either by the firm, vendor, or third-party consultants, can run between $50K to $75K. Total, about $700,000.)

For a firm with a simple project and 1,000 users, and using only the search software, the cost typically would be $300 a seat, with maintenance running about $60K, installation $40K to $50K, for a total of about $400,000.