

## REFERENCE

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### ***Family Law: CD-ROM or Paper?***

Over the last six months I have looked for ways to provide the most reliable, effective and cost efficient research our solicitors. CD-ROMs emerge as a viable option for many of our research needs. Currently I have been reviewing the electronic sources for family law

Andersons' family law department consists of six solicitors and four support staff. The main difficulty in providing resources to them is that while the majority of solicitors in this department work on site, the remainder work from two suburban offices. Our library operates from a centralised location, and it can be difficult to administer the resources going to and from the suburban offices.

We battled constant problems of 'misplaced' or 'wandering' looseleaf services, missing pages, no staff to file updates, and simple misuse and misunderstanding of the resources available. Upon discussion of these problems this department realised that a CD-ROM product may in fact save some research time, and provide a more reliable service. After all you can't lose a page on a CD!!

My recommendation to our family law department came in response to these continuing problems with resource sharing, and concern about the reliability of the information on hand. My recommendation was to create a centralised resource, with a CD-ROM to be used for research purposes and a print copy retained in the transitional period. Some potential advantages of

CD-ROM products, and key features of interest to our family law department, are as follows:

A centralised resource - unless someone walks off with my PC and CD-ROM drive! Information would be easily located. A CD-ROM would be accessible from the stand alone PC. The information would always be found in the same place, unlike the looseleaf alternative, which tends to move between solicitors' rooms and suburban offices.

- Timely and reliable information at hand, and a reliable method of updating information. Search capabilities of the electronic product save time, and make information retrieval much easier. Information would be reliable because updates on the services could be supervised properly. The CD-ROM is updated monthly, there is no messing around with waiting for looseleaf updates, time delays when ordering missing pages, and mistakes such as filing errors. The CD-ROM version ensures that every paragraph is there, and is up to date.
- Ability to down-load sections. You can select information from a CD-ROM and use it to create informative seminar papers and in house newsletters. This reduces paper handling substantially! Information can be printed out, or downloaded to a Word file and incorporated into documents. This function is a great time saver for solicitors preparing briefs or opinions for their clients.
- An additional bonus of these particular products is the capacity to download, manipulate and print off the Family Court Forms.
- Having a qualified librarian to provide assistance with complicated and time consuming legal research, especially someone who is familiar with CD-ROM technology, would be a major advantage for

solicitors when researching. It saves time and energy, and ensures that the information required is provided in a timely and comprehensive fashion.

- Increased solicitor awareness of electronic resources through training and consultation. It is important for both solicitors and librarians to keep up to date with the latest technology and legal resources. Librarians can provide training to help solicitors to understand and appreciate the use of such technology.
- Future networking possibilities, whereby solicitors could access the product from their own desk. This would be beneficial in our family law department as the department is not centralised. If in the future solicitors can log into a networked CD-ROM, they will be able to access information quickly and easily. Once comfortable with the CD-ROM product there should be a decreased need for consultation on research matters, and time would be saved by reducing the turn around time for information provision from the librarian to the solicitor.
- And of course, an added bonus for me, and for them.... no more filing!!! Which inevitably saves everyone's time and resources, and increases reliability of the information.

This proposal generated much interest. Everyone was keen to explore new ways to provide a better more reliable service to the family law department, which had for so long struggled with the resources available to them.

Since the library already uses CD-ROM products we were not dealing with the unfamiliar. What was needed was to look at the products available and assess their suitability to our firm's needs. The products we were interested in reviewing were the CCH and Butterworths Family Law Libraries on CD-ROM. It was important for our solicitors to keep in line with the requirements of the Family Court.

However it is early days for the courts too in this process of accepting CD-ROM resources. There is the additional problem of the Court's preferred service, and traditionally this has been the CCH looseleaf product, *Australian Family Law and Practice* and the *Australian Court Handbook*. However Butterworth's product *Australian Family Law Library* is coming into its own with greater acceptance in the legal community and in the Family Court.

Since we already subscribe to the CCH Family Law Library in hard copy format, I was keen to review their CD-ROM version and assess the advantages and disadvantages of both systems of information retrieval. I also reviewed the Butterworths Family Law Library on CD-ROM, in order to compare and contrast the services.

Butterworths Australian Family Law Library is a CD-ROM version of the looseleaf services they offer. The following 'infobases' are available on the one CD-ROM: *Australian Family Law* (the commentary), the *Australian Family Law State Legislation* with commentary and the *Family Law Reports*. Butterworths use the Folio Views retrieval software, which I find relatively user friendly once it has been mastered, and quite powerful in its search capability. The price of this service on CD-ROM is in line with the hard copy version.

CCH offer a similar product, their looseleaf service being available electronically on CD-ROM. The *Electronic Family Law Library* consists of the Australian Family Law, the legislation and commentary (taken from the combined *Australian Family Law and Practice* and the *Australian Family Law Court Handbook*), and the *Australian Family Law Cases*. *Australian De Facto Relationships Law* is an additional subscription, but is available on the same CD-ROM. CCH has chosen Dynatext retrieval software, which also has some good features, particularly the ability to search over all the different databases in one search. Unfortunately the price of the CD-ROM version is around 25% higher than the print version.

One feature of particular interest is the reproduction of Family Court Forms. These forms are a must for any family law solicitor attending court. Both services offer these forms, but they are substantially different in their reproduction. The ability to easily download selected forms to a word processing package and manipulate and incorporate the forms in relevant documentation to be used by the solicitor is an excellent feature, and has the potential to save the family law solicitor a great deal of time.

The Butterworths *Australian Family Law Library* Court Forms are graphics. I found that they were quite presentable and could be downloaded to a Word document fairly easily. Once in a document the forms can be manipulated and printed off. CCH's *Electronic Family Law Library* also has easy to read Court Forms, however their package is a little different. Forms are downloaded fairly easily with certain word processing packages; however not all packages enable the user to do so. Another disappointment is the lack of comprehensiveness. Unfortunately not all forms are supplied. I see this as quite a loss.

As far as I can see both the CCH and Butterworths service have their unique features, and I found it valuable to consider each on its own merits. I tend to believe that to choose between the two would be difficult, and something that would be quite personal, and organisation orientated. Neither is perfect, and both no doubt will improve in time. Let us not forget that these products are in their infancy when compared to the printed version!

If you are very fortunate you may be able to run both services, and that is something I would highly recommend. - the best of both worlds!! For our family law department I would like to see both products run alongside each other, and I hope that this option will be considered in the future. Since neither product is perfect one might consider the style of the commentary, the content, the software used and the ease of use, the cost or

even the product most familiar to your own solicitors and yourself. These are all factors that were a part of our decision making process.

The option to have Court Forms on the CD-ROM is a great feature, but only when all forms are available, up to date, readily manipulated, and accessible to the user, will either product rival the printed copy alternative. The same goes for the general commentary and legislation available on the CD-ROM. Both the CCH and Butterworths product require further work before either can be a reliable alternative to the printed version.

Until such time the printed version will be required as the authoritative, up to date service, and a CD-ROM will only complement that service. This is a great shame, because there are many benefits to be had from electronic products, as we are all aware. No doubt in the future there will be less and less to criticise and more to complement in both services, as both publishers work on their respective products. In the meantime I would recommend that if considering the CD-ROM version of either product, look closely at the information you require and ask the publishers what moves they are considering to bridge the gap between the printed copy and the CD-ROM version.

**Josephine Gaskell**  
Andersons

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## ***CaseBase on the Internet***

Pink Ribbon has recently set up an Internet site at:

**<http://pinkribbon.com.au>**

This site is free to anyone, and contains the two latest months of data. It is updated weekly, with new data being available every Monday morning. Searching is via Pink Ribbon's individual software - the same as their CD-ROM.