

Seeing Justis being done: an interview with Masoud Gerami, Justis Publishing Managing Director

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Earlier this year I was contacted by a barrister on England's South Eastern Circuit. The editor of that region's Bar magazine, he invited me to interview my (boss's boss's) boss for his publication, following a sharp rise in awareness of such products as JustCite, the company's provider-neutral citator, which, along with material from all over the common law world, indexes much from Australia.

The piece that follows is reproduced pretty much word for word – Australia's Bar and its legal scene at large is, after all, not a million miles from England's, as I've discovered through three years of writing for it and interviewing antipodean librarians and practitioners. So Masoud's insights should be no less revealing to readers of the *Australian Law Librarian* than they were to readers here in England

You trained in engineering and are from Iran, a legally very different place from England. How did you become an expert in electronic common law publishing?

I've picked it up along the way purely as a result of starting my career at Eurolex. Though I initially studied electrical engineering, I graduated from Swansea University as a computer scientist. My Eurolex job followed graduation but the Thomson-owned company was soon sold to Lexis, which retained only its journals. So one of my old professors, another colleague at Eurolex and I got together and started Context, the original name of Justis Publishing. Within a few years we'd broadened its reach from European material to case law from England and beyond.

Tell us about those early years and your rise in the company.

It was the tail end of 1985. With a new hardware-based search engine that we wanted to showcase, the three of us approached some venture capitalists and, with their backing, set up shop in a small building in Maidenhead. By 1986 we'd launched the Justis full-text service, starting with Justis CELEX, and three years later we moved to London when the company was sold to its present owner. I was made technical director in 1990 and managing director in 2001 by the time our databases were on the internet. Like anything else, my success stems from hard work and enthusiasm. To some extent it's been luck because I started doing this by accident but the combination of law and technology has been very, very interesting.

Justis provided the ICLR's first electronic platform. What challenges did that present?

An issue we always had in the early years was persuading our data partners that electronic products wouldn't harm their print revenue but would contribute to an overall gain. Though we



Masoud at work.

had – and have – a strong relationship with the Incorporated Council of Law Reporting, which started very early, and we were determined to host the Law Reports, they needed a lot of convincing that the authoritative series should be digitised.

We made a successful case but because of the type of organisation the ICRLR is, they had to go out to tender. But our hard work paid off and we won. We then set to work on two goals: developing a sophisticated frontend, which was guided by a user interface study carried out by researchers at Warwick University; and creating a specific tagging structure for the content, for which we designed a markup language very similar to XML before XML was released

Were there other technical hurdles?

As this was nearly 20 years ago, PDFs didn't exist and scanning technology wasn't very advanced. So we had to capture the data from scratch. This meant 700 volumes of the Law Reports had to be keyed manually. And we insisted they were keyed twice to ensure accuracy, a process we project managed. But despite initial scepticism, the outcome was brilliant. We created a superb product and fostered an even better relationship with the Council, whose reports are now widely available electronically elsewhere

So what sets Justis Publishing apart, helping it attract new business and retain existing subscribers in this competitive market?

We've always offered choice and flexibility, as demonstrated by our planning, by our business models and by our promotions. People could and still can pick and choose what they need rather than being forced into taking whole packages, both here and overseas. Go to Australia, go to Canada and look at the big players in those domains

Westlaw and Lexis are available but Justis is also a prominent name because of the choice we offer, along with the sophistication of our technology. Our popular platform is quite different from the competition and is the result of very conscious decisions to make it so. If you look at our interfaces, what everyone comments on is how simple to use and intuitive they are without lacking any features. So very advanced users can use them as well as novices, whether they're librarians, academics, students, solicitors or indeed barristers, the group that our services were first aimed at

So what's the company's relationship with barristers like?

The barrister market has always been important to us. It comprises individuals who are their own bosses so, because of the small, friendly, proactive nature of our business, we enjoy close communication with this audience. We've learnt a lot from them over the years in terms of what they need and how they want to access it. So the benefit has been mutual, I think. Our having such a low staff turnover helps with this – the average length of service for our managers, for example, is eight or nine years, which is far higher than elsewhere. We're also very well represented in the sector – the majority of chambers not only have access to Justis, many have signed up to our provider-neutral JustCite citator. Released in 2002, it now has over 20,000 worldwide users, who use it to see how laws from the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and elsewhere in the common law world relate to each other

Are common law cases relevant to practitioners across different jurisdictions?

Absolutely. Now that decisions and journal articles from other countries are readily available –

not just on JustCite but increasingly on Justis too – they can be put to very effective use in case preparation. A judge I met at a conference in South Africa recently said she now follows journals and key rulings in the UK and Australia comprehensively to see what's going on, not necessarily to be cited but so she can get a feel for the persuasiveness of their arguments. And the same is true of users in this country.

So do you feel that barristers were crying out for this overseas precedent?

Yes, and JustCite plays an important part in its delivery. When we index a new set of law reports from, say, South Africa and link them to UK cases, which already have links to Australian cases, which already have links to Canadian cases and so on, you can see this wonderful map of relationships between legal information documents. It's not just case law, we offer journal commentaries and the like, which wasn't visible to practitioners before but is now just a click away. You can look at a case and it tells you exactly how it's been cited and mentioned in journals and other cases across the world, a facet of our services that has real appeal for certain subject areas like patent and intellectual property law.

Access to overseas material is one important part of the changing picture of legal research provision. What else is significant and what challenges do they present?

The competition is as strong as ever. But user sophistication and changing technology have also had a major effect. Though the raw data is almost identical to how it was 20 years ago, the way users access it is unbelievably different and more sophisticated. Because people use the

internet for so many aspects of their lives, any advancement influences them. So if a user sees a great new feature on Amazon, say, they'll subconsciously expect it on our services too. Speed of access is crucial too. Today you can get the text of a judgment in hours, then act on it and make a decision well before it's reported six months or a year later. There are now volumes of information available through secondary material – commentary, blogs, journals and so on – which users need ways of filtering. That's an issue that we and other providers are grappling with and which some of our services are beginning to provide a solution to.

Where's the company going?

We'll continue to innovate and offer high quality products and services. We've started to create and commission new data collections. We'll index more material from around the world on JustCite. And we'll work even more closely with other publishers and service providers to improve user experience.

Have you got any final words for readers?

One big ambition and aspiration is that in the future when a barrister wants to find the leading authority on a point of law or check the latest status of a case, rather than use a text book or other old fashioned method instead they will "JustCite it" and get their answers more quickly.

Representatives of Justis Publishing will be out in force at this year's ALLA conference in Melbourne at the end of September, where they will be happy to demonstrate what's new on Justis and JustCite, such as the Singapore Law Reports on both services. They will also set up delegates with no-obligation trials.