

Electronic Investigations Cut Costs

BY JAMES B. MINTZ

Computer technology has taken a problem that confronts every litigator – locating witnesses – and placed the answers within easy, and relatively inexpensive, reach.

Tasks that until recently required teams of paralegals and investigators to visit courthouses and libraries can now be done from the office on one computer, thanks to a number of database services that are repackaging a startling amount of public information for sale to private subscribers.

Using one of these services, **Superior On-Line Data**, for example, **you can check to see if someone has been sued anywhere in a New York State court in the past 10 years. It takes 10 minutes and costs \$10.**

This is only one of the less well-known databases that corporate investigators turn to frequently. The following are some of the tricks of the trade, which can significantly reduce the cost of finding, and finding out about, whoever you want.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Through interviews or discovery, you have identified someone you need to contact, but you have no address or other information.

How do you proceed?

At the James Mintz Group, we often begin by turning to two sources: PhoneDisc, a compilation of all the white pages of telephone books in the country on CD-ROM; and CDB Infotek, a provider of public record information that offers 2.5 billion records in 1,400 databases nationwide.

Once you have purchased PhoneDisc's nine CD's (the price is \$159), searching will cost only your time. Each disc is organized by region and covers several states (in all, the discs include 91 million business and residential listings). When given a name the program will return an address and telephone number – several if the name is not too unusual, and an imposing number if you are in the unfortunate situation of looking for someone named, say, "Robert Johnson."

One delightful attribute of PhoneDisc is that it can easily accomplish reverse searches by address or

telephone number that would formerly have taken a wall of criss-cross directories and hours of an investigator's time at the public library. Type the address on the screen and in seconds you can see everyone with a telephone listing there.

If we are looking for someone named, say, "Santucci" in Pawtucket, R.I., and can't find the specific individual we want, we'll call all the Santuccis listed, hoping to find a relative. In one recent case in which our client wanted to know whether an employee was operating a side business, we ran a reverse search on the employee's home telephone number and found a company listed along with the employee.

We also rely on CDB Infotek, a public record provider in Santa Ana, Calif., that offers both current address information and address updates that can chart a subject's recent moves.

Start with nothing more than a name, and CDB's Surname Search will give you a printout of the latest reported addresses of everyone in the country with that name. It costs \$11.50.

If you have pinpointed an address for your subject, CDB can search a 12-year listing of sources such as magazine change-of-address forms and can return a history of former addresses where your subject has lived (and perhaps worked). More often than not this address update search (\$19) will also give you a Social Security number or year of birth.

We recently used this feature when trying to locate an embezzler who had disappeared. We could not find him at the address given by his employer, but CDB provided a previous address. Then PhoneDisc told us this was a family member, and we found our subject there.

SURPRISE, THE INTERNET HELPS, TOO

The Internet is a growing source of free information and can be useful in some quirky instances – though it is wise to remember that at this point in the information revolution, you still have to pay for most valuable information.

We surfed the 'Net in one recent case where we were trying to find someone our client thought

might be bootlegging a music video. His name did not turn up in CDB or PhoneDisc – he was not a U.S. resident – but one fan posted his address in a news group file and we found it using the DejaNews Research Service. As Internet use widens, we expect this will become an essential resource.

If none of these searches bear fruit, it may be that your subject will turn up in CDB's National Death Locator. It includes more than 40 million death records taken from Social Security payment files, and costs \$20 to search.

NOT A FAIL-SAFE MECHANISM

Is it really this easy? Well, no. There are, for instance, four people named "James Mintz" listed in New York State Department of Motor Vehicle records. For investigators using these huge databases, common names are like kryptonite.

In this, as in many cases, technology has greatly automated access to information, but it has by no means eliminated the need for investigators who can find out by other techniques which particular Mintz is the one you want.

We have also found our computers stymied when trying to develop information about 18-year-old college students; women who changed their names

when married; and, of course, the people like "Robert Johnson," whose names are so common that computer searches turn up too many possibilities.

We tell our clients that **database information should not be relied on alone – indeed, most information services post notices to that effect – but should be used as a lead for further research in courthouses and town halls.**

In these situations, there is no substitute for old-fashioned shoe leather.

MLC

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Where to Find These Gems

CDB Infotek	800-427-3747
Digital Directory Assistance (maker of PhoneDisc)	800-284-8353
Superior On-Line Data	800-848-0489

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Managing Litigation Costs is published monthly. The basic subscription rate is \$275 per year. Subscription orders should be mailed to Subscriptions, Managing Litigation Costs, 3 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Managing Litigation Costs, 3 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611.

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Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 654-3513