FIND-A-LAWYER

Background

The Find-A-Lawyer (FAL) project, which was launched in 2010, developed a prototype IT search engine to simplify and accelerate the process of searching for a lawyer in any European Union (EU) Member State through harmonised search criteria and a single point of entry. 18 national bars have already undertaken the necessary technical arrangements in order to integrate their national solutions into the FAL search engine, which is expected to go live on the European Commission's e-Justice portal later in 2013.

The Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) represents the bars and law societies of 31 member countries and 11 further associate and observer countries, and through them more than 1 million European lawyers. The CCBE has always considered it a priority to make access to justice in Europe easier, faster and more equal. Its project to create a European lawyers' directory is a novel EU-funded initiative, which will make it easier to find a suitable lawyer established in another EU Member State. With FAL, the CCBE puts itself at the heart of EU e-Justice projects.

The project

Once live on the e-Justice portal, FAL will be an online search facility providing EU citizens with a free one-stop-shop solution to cross-border searches for lawyers. The bars participating in the project have agreed on common search fields (such as name of the lawyer, country, language), as well as 20 common practice areas. Most importantly, while the citizens' interface will be hosted as one of the e-Justice portal applications, the data will remain located in the national lawyers' databases, which will stay under the exclusive control and ownership of the national bars concerned, who alone maintain updated information on all qualified lawyers. It will therefore be the only comprehensive European lawyers' database, making it qualitatively different from other self-selecting or commercial databases. Based on the success of FAL, the CCBE is now exploring new ways of using the project's search engine to help lawyers prove their identity in cross-border electronic legal proceedings – a new project called Find-A-Lawyer 2.

The benefits

FAL will allow European citizens, for the first time, to run real time searches for lawyers from a single online source. Moreover, due to the increased visibility of the European lawyers' directory hosted on the e-Justice portal, services offered by lawyers at national level will be exposed to a much larger, EU-wide audience. At the same time, two major difficulties of finding a lawyer elsewhere will gradually disappear. Firstly, the multilingual interface of the e-Justice portal will enable citizens to access the database in their native EU language. Secondly, the need to know the intricacies of the legal profession in a specific country will disappear through the common search terms and explanatory texts included in the search engine. This project, finally, constitutes an integral part of the European Commission's e-Justice initiative, and contributes to its visibility and promotion within national jurisdictions.

An example

If you are a Hungarian-speaking personal injury solicitor in Manchester, and a citizen of Hungary who does not speak English breaks a leg while on holiday in your town, that person will most probably not be able to find you for the purposes of making a claim. The unfortunate tourist will also have to know – for the purposes of the UK – in which jurisdiction the accident took place (England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland), and which of the legal professions (solicitor or barrister, or advocate for Scotland) is the appropriate lawyer. Through FAL, all relevant information will be displayed according to preselected and user-friendly criteria, making it much easier for the Hungarian visitor to find the most suitable lawyer for the case, namely you. With FAL, national boundaries, different languages, different legal systems, different legal terms and different databases should no longer impede a citizen's access to a lawyer.

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