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Can Hiring an Attorney Be a Data-Driven Choice? This Startup Thinks So

Justice Toolbox's analytics search engine provides clients analytics on potential attorneys based on case types and location.

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As the attorney referral market heats up, providers are looking for a competitive edge with more specialized and community-focused services. But one new entrant is betting on a technology that while regularly used by attorneys has of yet not been available to their clients—legal analytics.

On-demand attorney service startup Justice Toolbox, which operates as a case and location-specific attorney search engine that lists metrics such as cases won and clients served, recently launched in hopes of making the task of hiring an attorney a data-driven choice. The search engine is currently free to use but plans to sell advertising on its website in the future.

Bryant Lee, founder and CEO of Justice Toolbox, noted that the startup, differs from other on-demand and attorney referral services such as Avvo and Legal.io, in that it "can give quantifiable data and public records about how lawyers perform, whereas [competitors have] some client reviews, but they don't have actual data about past cases."

While Justice Toolbox's analytics are similar to those offered by Lex Machina and Bloomberg's Litigation Analytics, Lee's startup uses analytics toward making "consumers become more powerful in terms of understanding who they are hiring." The platform extracts its data from state case dockets rather than federal records.

Yet like other analytics platforms on the market, Justice Toolbox also employs artificial intelligence's machine learning capabilities to be able to understand to analyze its raw data on an almost human level,. Lee explained that the startup's technology "is doing everything—it pulls the information out and also reads it and interprets it and determines who won, and with all that information there is really no human involvement, [which] allows us to [scan] millions of documents."

Lee explained that the startup is able to discern when a case is won or lost by an attorney by using AI to search for specific phrases such as "judgement for defendant" or "settled and dismissed." He noted that "the exact phrases we're using are proprietary and developed via me reading many court records."

"It's actually very complex. The program has to treat 'motion for judgment for defendant' differently than 'judgment for defendant' and so forth," he said

It is through harnessing information in state dockets that Lee, who was previously an attorney at Covington & Burling, hopes to make attorney's track records more readily accessible to their clients, something he believes will be welcomed by Big Law attorneys and firms.

"I think Big Law is starting to embrace technology more, so I think that a lot of firms are going to be interested and accepting of it, and I think they'll look at it as something that can help" them market themselves accurately, he said.

Lee noted, however, that there "may be some firms that may dislike it in the sense that maybe they feel their results are not as good, but I think it's important for consumers to have the information."

But he also advised consumer to understand that "winning or losing isn't everything, because some cases can be harder and some cases can be easier," and noted that cases won by an attorney in a particular field are only one out of several metrics offered by the platform.

When asked whether such transparency will add to the competitive nature among law firms, he pointed out that the market "already has a lot of competition and it's difficult for lawyers to differentiate themselves. So I think with analytics it could become easier for lawyers who do well to differentiate themselves and get cases and rise to the top, because right now I think it's very hard for consumers to find lawyers, and a lot of times they just might go with the lawyer who advertises the most."

The goal, he added, is that such transparency makes the legal industry more efficient and allows "its clients to hold attorneys accountable in terms of getting the right results."