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From Locating Missing Heirs to Investigating Expert Witnesses: Maximizing Free Investigation Tools on the Web

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Introduction

As a lawyer, it's not unusual to be called upon to help a client with personal investigation matters. Clients often seek advice on topics ranging from whether a business is legitimate to assisting with a search for missing heirs. Although these are not simple tasks, if you've got the time, you can usually find much useful investigative information on the web. However, you'll have to be thorough, patient and careful.

Hiring an Investigative Agency

Before you begin sleuthing on the web, you'll need to assess whether it's worth your time to try to find out the information yourself or it it's a better investment of your time and energy to hire an investigative agency. If you decide to hire an agency, don't just take the first one that you find on Google. A great many of the investigative services advertising on the web are primarily scams. It's likely that you'll pay $30 and all you'll receive is a list of links from publicly available records. Some of the more reputable investigative agencies include:

- Accurint - http://www.accurint.com

- BRB Publications – http://www.brbpub.com

- Choicepoint – http://www.choicepoint.com

If you decide not to use one of the above agencies and you'd rather use an investigative agency that you've located on the web via Google, you should keep in mind the following tips when evaluating which agency to hire:

- Before buying…learn exactly what information you will get. Read the fine print on the website and make sure you know what type of results you will receive.

- Make sure the investigative agency has a working telephone number for handling billing complaints

- Check the agency's reputation at consumer websites such as the http://www.ripoffreports.com or http://groups.google.com

- Read the company's privacy policy which should be readily available on their website.

- Don't hire an agency based on unsolicited e-mail. If it arrives in spam, it is most likely a scam.

When trying to decide whether to hire an investigative agency, keep in mind that one of major sources of information that investigative agencies will have access to that you will likely be unable to access is credit reports. Unfortunately you have to have an account with a major credit bureau to do a credit report search. Furthermore, credit bureaus will open accounts only for specific types of businesses. Note, however, that as more and more states require the purging of social security numbers from databases, personal investigation is likely to become more difficult for investigative agencies.

Using the Internet for Personal Investigation

So let's assume you've made the decision to investigate on your own using the internet. The first step is to identify what you know already about the individual or business and proceed from that point. Let's begin by examining helpful resources for locating people when you only know is the individual's name.

Locating People

1. Always begin by using a well-known search engine such as Google or Yahoo.

This might seem like an obvious starting point, but many people overlook it. You can begin by typing in the first name and last name of the individual you are seeking but you're likely to be overwhelmed by the results. A better way to begin might be to type the name of the individual you are seeking in quotation marks to ensure that Google searches for the name as a phrase rather than as key words (for example, "John B. Doe").

Another possibility is to search for the individual's name but include any additional information that you might know about the person. For example, if I were searching for my name in Google, I would receive many, many hits if I search simply for Carol Watson. But if I include the word law in my search, I immediately narrow my search results to more useful and relevant websites.

Google also includes a telephone directory of all publicly available phone numbers and street addresses. For instructions on searching the Google phone book, visit: http://www.google.com/help/features.html#wp

Don't forget to search Google images (http://images.google.com). You'd be surprised how many people include photos of themselves on various websites.

2. To locate addresses, emails or telephone numbers, try using a specialized people search engine.

Most of these search engines, provide information that is normally included in telephone white page directories. Some of the recommended specialized engines include:

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- http://people.yahoo.com

- http://www.switchboard.com

- http://www.infospace.com

- http://www.anywho.com

- http://www.bigfoot.com

When searching these directories, keep in mind the following techniques:

- If you're unsure of the individual's last name, use a shortened form of the name. You generally only need to include the first four letters of the last name in order for the search to run.

- Similarly, if you're unsure of an individual's first name, you usually only need to include the first initial.

- Omit thoroughfare designations such as St. , Rd., Ave, etc.

- Always use the zip code if you know it.

3. Determine whether the individual is possibly deceased.

Perhaps the individual you are seeking is decease and therefore would not appear in any of the online telephone directories. The following websites are helpful for determine whether an individual might be deceased:

- **NTIS' Social Security Death Master File** - http://ssdmf.com - Currently there is a $10 fee for one query and $40 for five queries. The SSDMA contains the following information: social security number, name, birth date, date of death, state (or country) of

last known residence and zip code of last lump sum payment.

- **Internment.net** - http://internment.net - a free online database of cemetery records

- **National Obituary Archive** - http://www.arangeonline.com/ - Nearly 60 million entries make this database a rich repository of death records. Information is supplied by funeral directors, news organizations, and Social Security Administration files.

Locating People When You Know More Than Just Their Name

Let's say you know a little more information than just John Doe, what possible information resources exist?

1. Do you know anything about the individual's educational background?

Although transcripts, financial information and other personal details of an individual's educational experience are confidential, a school may release directory type information such as name, address and degrees earned unless a student has given notice otherwise.   The following tips might prove useful in locating more information about an individual based upon their educational record:

- If the individual is currently a student, you can visit their current educational institution and usually find a student's email address.

- Investigate alumni and reunion websites of any educational institution that an individual attended.

- Try http://classmates.com. Classmates.com provides contact information for more than 40 million individuals based on educational institution, military

background or workplace. You'll have to register to use the service but it is free.

- College students are very active on facebook.com and myspace.com. Facebook.com and myspace are online interactive networks however you can generally only view the profiles of your friends and the other people on their networks. If you don't have a personal connection to the individual that you are seeking, it can be difficult to use facebook and myspace to locate them.

2. Do you know where the person works?

The person may have an e-mail account through his or her job. Visit the company's Web site and use its directory. If the site has no directory, try sending an e-mail message to the person at firstname.lastname@company.com

3. Do you know the individual's occupation?

If the individual is in a professional occupation, you can try searching professional directories. Most professions have organizational directories. For example, I belong to the American Association of Law Libraries. Here are some common professional directories, but don't limit yourself just to this list.

- Realtors – http://realtor.com
- Physicians – http://webapps.ama-ssn.org/doctorfinder/home.html
- Lawyers - http://www.martindale.com
- Architects - http://www.aia.org/architect_finder
- CPAs - http://www.cpadirectory.com

- Dentists – http://www.ada.org

- Business Executives - http://www.hoovers.com/free

- Government Officials - http://www.findlaw.com/directories/government.html

Also BRB Publications provides links to various occupational licensing boards from each of the 50 states at the following address:

http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp?h=1

Most of these state websites include a search engine for locating licensed professionals.

4. Was the individual in the military?

Since 9/11, it's much more difficult to locate information about active military personnel online. Furthermore, under the federal Privacy Act, service records are confidential and can only be released under limited circumstances. Nevertheless a few options such as the following still exist:

- Gisearch.com - http://gisearch.com/ - Service members, veterans and their families can enter information about themselves.

- Military.com http://www.military.com/ has a buddy search feature. However, you must register to use the website.

- Next of kin of deceased relatives can order copies of military personnel records from the National Personnel Center at:

    http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/index.html

- Each military service has an office which deals with the world-wide location of active service personnel. Although military information is confidential,

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depending upon the circumstances for which you are seeking the individual, these offices might be able to assist you. Below are the telephone numbers for the branches of the Armed Forces:

- Air Force - 210 565-2660

- Army - 703 325-3732

- Navy - 901 874-3388

- Marine Corps - 703 784-3942

- Coast Guard - 202 267-2229

- Several military publications and websites regularly publish ads from veterans seeking to get in touch with others with whom they served. Examples include:

  - Navy - *Shift Colors* - a magazine for Navy retirees

    http://www.npc.navy.mil/ReferenceLibrary/Publications/ShiftColors/

  - Marine Corps - *Leatherneck Magazine*- *Leatherneck* runs a monthly column titled "Mail Call." to help locate former or active duty Marines.

    http://www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/

  - The Retired Enlisted Association which represents all of the armed forces maintains a "Looking for Buddies" website.

    http://www.trea.org/calendar/buddies.html

5. Do you know the individual's social security number?

The Social Security Administration "will forward letters under circumstances involving a matter of great importance, such as a death or serious illness in the missing person's immediate

family, or a sizeable amount of money that is due the missing person." For more information,

visit the Social Security Administration's website:

http://www.ssa.gov/foia/html/ltrfwding.htm

Researching Background Information about Individuals

Perhaps you know an individual's name and address or telephone number, but you or

your client would like to obtain more background information about the individual. A number of

resources exist for providing additional information about individuals.

1. Search public records such as marriage records, UCC filings and property deeds.

Most information located through public records online is not as detailed as the original

source records that you can examine in the courthouse or relevant state agency. BRB

Publications estimates that only about 35% of public records are available online. Furthermore,

navigating public records online is a jumbled maze. Because the laws vary in each of the fifty

states as to what information is a matter of public record, public records are not consistent

between states.   However, if you are patient and persistent, you can still discover valuable

information searching through official public records.

To find out what free public records are available in each state I recommend visiting the

50 state listing at BRB Publications: http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsitesStates.asp

Public Records available in Georgia

Many public records are available in Georgia including marriage, incarceration, property

and incorporation records.   Visiting the BRB Publications website will list the various state

agencies from Georgia with free public records that you may search. Below are a few tips about

Georgia records that you might not know that could be useful in your investigation.

- The Georgia Division of Public Health's Georgia Vital Records will provide

    confirmation of a divorce decree, marriage application and license, or death certificate for

    $10 - For more information, visit:

    http://health.state.ga.us/programs/vitalrecords/index.asp

- The Georgia Superior Court Clerks Cooperative Authority website -

    http://www.gsccca.org/ - provides access to UCC filings, real estate records and notary

    public registrations. Four hour access to these databases is available for a fee of $5.00.

2. Check for criminal records.

You should keep in mind that there's no such thing as a nationwide criminal database.

The FBI has a central database known as the NCIC (National Crime Information Center), but it's

not public record and is only available to law enforcement agencies.   The availability of

criminal records, like so many of the records we're discussed above varies from state to state and

even at the federal or county level.

- The best listing of federal, state and even international criminal record search

    links can be found at The Virtual Chase's website:

    http://www.virtualchase.com/topics/criminal_records.shtml

- O.C.G.A. § 35-3-34 (a) (2) provides for an attorney to obtain criminal history

    records of a client, other defendant, or witness in a criminal action. In civil

actions, only felony conviction criminal history information is disseminated in compliance with public information law. This information may also be obtained from local law enforcement agencies; fees vary. Attorneys may submit requests via fax at (404) 270-8386. Questions may be directed to (404) 244-2639.

- The Federal Bureau of Prisons provides an inmate locator with records on all inmates incarcerated for any period of time since 1982:

  http://www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp

- The Georgia Department of Corrections provides a similar service that also include photos of inmates:

  http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/OffenderQuery/jsp/OffQryForm.jsp

3. Determine whether the individual has ever been involved in a lawsuit.

To determine whether an individual has been involved in a lawsuit in the past or has any pending litigation, you can try the following resources:

- The best place to search for federal litigants is PACER's US Party/Case Index. Access is relatively inexpensive, eight cents per page and it is easy to search across multiple federal jurisdictions with this search engine -

  http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/

- Try searching case law databases in Findlaw.com or LexisOne.com for the individual's name.

- If you're unable to find any information using free resources, a low-cost choice is Legal Dockets Online: http://www.legaldockets.com/. In addition to its low cost

(approximately $199 for one year), the service will allow you a free one week

trial with no strings attached.

4. Have there been any news articles or broadcasts about the individual?

Newslink.org - http://newslink.org/index.html - maintains a comprehensive list of links to

news sources such as newspapers, radio, tv, magazines and even blogs.

You can also try searching a search engine that aggregates news stories such as Google

News, http://news.google.com/ or Yahoo! News, http://news.yahoo.com/. Both of these services

search recent news stories.

Most news organizations provide archives of their older stories. If you can identify the

geographic location of the individual you are researching, you can search news archives of

various media outlets in the area.   If you do not know the geographic location of the individual

you are researching, you can search archives of older news stories with broad search engines

such as Google's News Archives, http://news.google.com/archivesearch/.

**5. Investigate whether the individual or business entity has had difficulties with any U.S.
government agencies.**

There are many resources for determining whether an individual has run afoul of a

government agency. Below are just a few of the federal government resources that might

provide useful information:

- The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency maintains a list of blocked or

sanctioned persons or entities.   For more information, see:

http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/export/persons_list/

- The General Service Administration's Excluded Parties List -

   http://www.epls.gov/ - is a list of individuals who have been excluded from

   receiving federal contracts.

- The U.S. Department of Labor's OSHA website - http://www.osha.gov/oshstats/

   maintains a database of safety inspections and accident investigations.

- The U.S. Department of Justice provides a National Sex Offender Registry -

   http://www.nsopr.gov/

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains a database of

   individuals and entities excluded from participating in federal healthcare

   programs due to fraud: http://oig.hhs.gov/fraud/exclusions/listofexcluded.html

Specialized Searching

In addition to the resources discussed above, perhaps you are trying to find investigate

information in special circumstances. If so, perhaps the resources below will be useful for your

search.

1. Are you searching for a missing or runaway child?

- Code Amber - http://www.codeamber.org/ - While law enforcement agencies are

   responsible for activating a Code Amber, at the Code Amber website you can

   search the named of children from previously issued alerts.

- Beyond Missing – http://www.beyondmissing.com/ - Search missing child flyers.

- Missing Kin – http://www.missingkin.com/ - Volunteers from various types of law enforcement agencies offer assistance in locating missing children.

- P.A.R.E.N.T. - http://www.parentinternational.com/ - Dedicated to assisting parents on international abducted children.

2. Are you searching for an adoptee or an adoptee's birth parent?

- ISRR: International Soundex Reunion Registry - http://www.plumsite.com/isrr/ - A system for matching persons who desire contact with their next of kin-by- birth

- Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Adoption Directory - http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/ - provides information on searching for birth relatives, reunion, obtaining birth and adoption records, support groups, and relevant laws and policies

3. Are you searching for information on a broker or investment adviser?

- http://www.sec.gov/investor/brokers.htm - The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission provides information on checking the background of brokers and investment advisors.

4. Are you searching for background information on an expert witness?

- Search Google to locate an expert's personal web pages, presentations, speaking engagements and even postings to discussion groups.

- Search WorldCat - http://www.worldcat.org/ - to determine if the expert witness has authored any books.

- Search Google Scholar - http://scholar.google.com/ - to determine if the expert witness has authored any scholarly articles.

- Search the news sources at Newslink.org - http://newslink.org/index.html to determine if there have been any news stories about the expert witness.

- Expert witness names often appear in reported cases. Try searching Findlaw.com or LexisOne for the expert witness' name.

- Read The Virtual Chase's article on finding and evaluating expert witnesses for additional suggestions: http://www.llrx.com/features/findingexperts.htm

5. Are you searching for information about a business entity?

- Company websites usually offer a wealth of information and should be your starting point. Start your search for the company's website by searching for the business' name in Google.

- Search the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commissions' EDGAR database - http://www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/webusers.htm - for company filings required by the S.E.C.

- Similarly, you can search the Secretary of State's website for most of the fifty states to find state corporation filings. For example, Georgia's Secretary of State's website provides for searching corporation records. http://corp.sos.state.ga.us/corp/soskb/CSearch.asp

- You can browse basic information about more than 16 million companies for free at Hoover's - http://www.hoovers.com/free/

- Search the Better Business Bureau's website to find out information on more than 2.5 million companies - http://www.bbb.org/

Conclusion

There are many, many free or almost free resources on the web that can assist you in investigating individuals or businesse. You must always keep in mind, however, the strengths and the limitations of this vast collection of resources. The final step in your investigation should be to evaluate the information that you have located and to assess where you obtained your information from. The information that you locate is only as good as the information provider who posted it. Be careful to determine that you have obtained your information from a reliable and reputable resource and that the information has been kept up to date. Maintain a healthy skepticism when evaluating your research.