

COURT KNOW-HOW

It pays to find out as much as you can about your job as a researcher and the jurisdiction(s) you are researching. It would be a mistake to assume that after a short period of training you know all you need to know about your job as a researcher. It would probably be more accurate to state that once you have been trained and apprenticed you know just enough to get a product on your own—notwithstanding significant complications or barriers. You can *always* know more and should continue to train yourself at every opportunity. I have covered the basics in this manual. But beyond that the court systems can be involved enough that you can still learn new things here and there after years of working in and around them.

Clerks can sometimes be your only ready source of know-how. Be sure however to take their data with a grain of salt. Clerks are mostly verbally trained as far as I can tell. They have their own misunderstood words, confusions and false data. This can become apparent when you ask several different clerks the same question and get several different answers.

Consequently I strongly suggest putting any given question you may have to more than one clerk. This way you can sort of verify their data.

Try to find out as much as you can about the ins and outs of court systems you research in. It is essential to know how far back the felony / misdemeanor indexes go; how far back the felony index goes; whether the indexes are county-wide or jurisdiction specific; how many different courts / branch courts there are and which files are stored where; whether the court purges its misdemeanor files after a certain file-age; what all the possible avenues are for verifying the ID of a defendant; the current cut off age and/or case number range for files that are sent to the court's archives; etc.

In a county or court where the clerks index the names, you should become as familiar as possible with how they do so. Do they use a wildcard? Do they key in the entire first name? How do they check hyphenated names—do they check both last names? You should also know how far back they check as a rule, and what age and type of case they generally consider unreportable.

All this would be pro-active to be sure; and it's understood that circumstances may not fully allow it. But in all reality you may have to train clerks on how to do an index check in order to have them effectively index your names. The alternative is to take the opportunity to "train" them a little more each time the client sends us back into the court to recheck the name for the records that were missed.

It is this intimate familiarization with your area that puts you at cause over your job. After all, you are dealing with government agencies. Faulty admin; variant fixed opinions about privacy; arbitrary limitations on record access; these and other factors can sometimes present barriers to getting your product, and in a timely way.

Be a professional. Know your job and your area inside out. Aside from the qualities of intention and persistence, the factor which differentiates the researcher who can walk into a court and get a timely product from the one who cannot is simply know-how.