LEGISINFO: A Single Window on Legislation Before Parliament

by Peter Niemczak and Katie Hobbins

As more parliamentary information, including Hansard and the full text of bills, went onto the internet during the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult to find basic information about what was happening in Parliament. To meet this problem the Library of Parliament has developed a web based tool that is now available to everyone on the Parliamentary Internet Site. The development and implementation of this tool, known as LEGISINFO, is described in the following article.

Before LEGISINFO, research on legislation before Parliament was a frustrating and time-consuming process. The problem was not a lack of data; on the contrary, much relevant information could be identified. The text of bills, government news releases and backgrounders, legislative summaries and histories, and important speeches on bills – all these existed, in print or electronic formats or both. The problem was that they were dispersed across a large number of locations. There was no single, user-friendly directory or compilation that brought together all the data relating to a particular bill.

For example, a simple inquiry about a bill's status, might be of interest to a lawyer, academic, politician, public interest group, policy maker, and many others. People wishing to obtain up-to-date information could pay a private legal enterprise to research the matter; or they could visit the Parliamentary Internet site and read the *Status of House Business* to track the bill's progress in the House of Commons, following this with a review of the *Progress of Legislation* to determine the status of the bill as it passed through the Senate. If they found that the bill had received Royal Assent, further research would be required in the *Canada Gazette*, Part II, to determine whether the Act had yet come into force.

Several groups, including the Library of Parliament, the Law Clerk of the Senate and various private enterprises, had tried at one time or another to create products or services that would provide a single point of access to information about federal legislation. While many of these had merit, none was entirely satisfactory. Some were not comprehensive enough to support detailed research; others involved a fee-for-service arrangement or had been discontinued.

The Proposal

By early 2000, the requirement for a single window on federal legislation currently before Parliament was widely recognized. One of the organizations that stood to benefit most from such a product was the Library of Parliament, which provides information and research services to federal politicians responsible for creating, reviewing, amending and approving that legislation. It was evident to Library staff that the creation of a unified point of access to various sources of available information would enable the Library to provide better service to its parliamentary clients and would also reduce staff time spent on researching and retrieving documentation.

Peter Niemczak, from the Parliamentary Research Branch, and Katie Hobbins, from the Information and Documentation Branch, were members of the team that developed LEGISINFO. The team currently includes Peter Niemczak, Karen Nordrum, Janet Brooks, Denis Fournier, Megan Furi, Catherine Green, Robert LeRiche, Hélène Platt and Gilles Villeneuve.

In late 2000, discussions between two areas of the Library – the Parliamentary Research Branch and the Information and Documentation Branch – led to the development of a proposal for the future LEGISINFO. Based on consultations among staff and input from the Library's clients, as well as research into other systems and feedback from technical advisors, the proposal outlined a Web-based application that would meet key criteria. It had to be user-friendly, bilingual, cost-effective, and capable of being easily updated on a day-to-day basis. The proposal called for a multi-phased release of the application, beginning with Library personnel and later expanding to parliamentarians and eventually to the general public. Senior management at the Library approved the concept in early 2001, and work began on developing a test version.

From Concept to Test Version

To make the application as user-friendly as possible, the development team decided to model the new application on the design of the existing "Bills" page of the Parliamentary Internet site. This would give the Library's current clients a familiar and simple navigation menu, and would not require them to learn new terminology or a different system of categorization.

The Bills menu allows users directly to choose the category of bill they are looking for: a bill introduced in the Senate, or in the House of Commons; by a member of the Government, or by a private Member; in the current session of Parliament, or a previous session. Once the user makes that initial choice, he or she is presented with a list of bills within the chosen category. When the user selects a particular bill, LEGISINFO shows a list of links to all the available and relevant information, including:

- the text of the bill, as originally introduced and as amended during its progress through both Houses;
- its current status; major speeches in Parliament about the bill;
- the actual or expected date of its coming into force;
- departmental material (news releases and backgrounders);
- the legislative summary prepared by the Library of Parliament;
- suggestions for related reading; and more.

In other words, the user has access in two clicks to a single, comprehensive and up-to-date source of information. Users also have the option of using a simple search engine to search for a specific bill by number or title.

In terms of visual design, the development team wanted to ensure a simple and uniform "look and feel" throughout LEGISINFO. The layout of the pages and the organization of the data were made consistent, both within the application itself and with other pages of the Parliamentary Internet. This approach helps to streamline navigation so that users can quickly locate the information they require.

In order to be truly effective, LEGISINFO would require constant – even daily – updating, so that the information it provided would be current and reliable. At the same time, it was important to keep the ongoing workload to a minimum. For these reasons, LEGISINFO was designed around a database, as opposed to using HTML format. The database design allows the team to make changes to the information whenever required without having to manually update HTML and republish the revised documents. In addition, the team took advantage of as many opportunities as possible to automate functions in the application. This approach enables the Library to control not only the workload involved in maintaining LEGISINFO, but also the costs.

> *By April 2001, Library staff had modified and populated an existing database to create a test version of the application. LEGISINFO was ready for its first on-line evaluation.*

Launch and Expansion

LEGISINFO was officially launched internally by the Library on May 22, 2001. The response was very positive; both the Library's researchers and reference staff appreciated the fact that LEGISINFO was easy to use and regularly updated. As increasing numbers of staff began to use the application, the Library's parliamentary clients became aware of the product and began to request access to it. When the requests had grown from occasional queries to a sustained chorus, the development team decided it was time to offer LEGISINFO directly to all the Library's clients on Parliament Hill, via the wider Parliamentary Intranet.

In the fall of 2001, the LEGISINFO coordinators met with representatives of the Senate and the House of Commons to discuss the idea of making LEGISINFO available throughout the Parliamentary Precinct. To assist them in reviewing the product, they were given access to a test version for three weeks. The feedback from representatives of both Houses included suggestions for minor improvements, which the development team found very valuable.

One aspect of LEGISINFO that benefited notably from these suggestions was the section on Major Speeches. Originally, this section contained only the speeches of a

bill's sponsors and those of the opposition critic. In light of comments from parliamentary users, it was decided to extend this section by adding links to speeches made during second reading by representatives of the other political parties. This was a labour-intensive revision, but it added significantly to the usefulness of the product. At the same time, the development team added links to news releases posted on the Web sites of all five major political parties.

> *The most frequently asked question became, "When will this service be available to the public?"*

Once these changes had been implemented on a test server and approved by the Library, the Senate and the House of Commons, LEGISINFO was set to move to the Parliamentary Intranet. Its official launch at this wider level took place on February 18, 2002. New users were alerted and oriented through electronic mail, a printed brochure and drop-in training sessions. The product rapidly became a popular destination for parliamentary users, and with its success came new pressures for its wider accessibility.

Moving to the Internet

The next step in LEGISINFO's development thus became its move to the publicly accessible Parliamentary Internet site. After monitoring and reviewing the application's operation over a six-month period, the Library decided in late 2002 that the product had been sufficiently tested and fine-tuned and was suitable for public use.

Certain operational issues, however, needed to be addressed before LEGISINFO could move to the Internet. One of these concerned a media monitoring service that the Library provides to clients in the Parliamentary Precinct. On the Parliamentary Intranet, that service is accessible via a link from LEGISINFO. It could not be put on the public Parliamentary Internet site, however, because the newsfeeds are obtained from private-sector publishers and are licensed for distribution to a specified group of users. In order to continue providing parliamentarians and their staff with this service, the Library decided to create two versions of LEGISINFO: an enhanced version for users of the Parliamentary Intranet, and a modified version (without some options such as the media monitoring service) that would be made publicly available on the Internet.

Some aspects of LEGISINFO's content were also modified to make the product more useful to the general pub-

lic. Given that many of the application's new users would be unfamiliar with both LEGISINFO in particular and the legislative process in general, the development team believed it essential to add a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) component to the public version. The FAQ document was created to address the needs of the non-expert user and provides answers to questions such as "How do I use the Search function?" and "What are the *Journals*?" To ensure that the material would be accurate and informative without being too technical, the development team collaborated with procedural experts in the Senate and the House of Commons in preparing the questions and answers.

After a four-week trial run on the Parliamentary Internet site, LEGISINFO had its public launch on February 11, 2003. The public reaction was gratifying: the number of users, along with the positive comments, far exceeded the team's expectations both during the first week and beyond. LEGISINFO is now one of the most popular pages on the Parliamentary Internet site.

Lessons Learned

Quite aside from LEGISINFO's value as a research tool to countless users across Canada and elsewhere, its creation and fine-tuning have been an education in product development at the Library of Parliament.

One key aspect of the product's development was the effective use of in-house resources. Given that the Library already had staff who could provide the skills required for the project – research capabilities; experience in Web creation and management; in-depth knowledge of relevant information resources; database expertise – the LEGISINFO team decided to use those resources rather than hiring or purchasing from outside. This approach resulted not only in reduced costs but also in a collaborative attitude that brought together employees from two different branches in a successful cross-disciplinary effort. The project's success has enabled the Library to strengthen its internal relations as well as serve a wider external public.

Another key aspect was the need to ensure that LEGISINFO would be a low-maintenance application. Although the Library planned to create and implement a significant new product, it did not wish to hire additional staff to provide ongoing maintenance. Thanks to its largely automated functions, LEGISINFO does not constitute the full-time job of any member of the coordinating team. It can be run smoothly with an average effort of no more than a few hours per week for any of the individuals involved.

The phased implementation process used to develop and launch LEGISINFO on the three progressively more accessible sites was another important contributor to the project's success. It allowed the development team, managers and stakeholders to assess the application thoroughly at each step, and to test each recommended modification prior to implementation. This incremental approach made for a higher-quality product and more satisfied users.

Looking Ahead

Success generates further enthusiasm and new goals. The project's future is still expanding. LEGISINFO can and will continue to evolve to meet the needs of its growing numbers of clients. Suggestions from users for new areas for development include the following:

- a list of bills due for debate in the House of Commons and the Senate;
- a single Web page showing where every bill stands in the legislative process;
- tables showing the number of days that each bill has been debated;
- statistical data on the number of bills approved by Parliament;
- statistical data on the coming into force of Acts;
- a list of committees of the House of Commons and the Senate, detailing the bills they have studied and the current status of those bills;
- lists of various categories of bills, organized by sponsor;
- information on the status of private Members' bills in the House of Commons and the Senate;
- a publicly accessible e-mail link to the LEGISINFO coordinators.

The LEGISINFO team also has ideas for expanding the application, when additional resources can be made available. These include:

- a list of bills organized by subject;
- a link to the explanatory notes provided in many bills;
- links to the time allocation and closure motions relating to a specific bill;
- a list of the Acts affected by a specific bill, with a further link to the Department of Justice Web site for each statute;
- a system for tracking and archiving information on motions (including report stage motions and special motions concerning the business of the Senate or House of Commons) related to specific bills;
- an automated e-mail notification system that would let subscribers know each time LEGISINFO is updated with respect to a specific bill in which they are interested.

If many of the new features outlined above were added to LEGISINFO, this application would be positioned as a comprehensive legislative information source similar to Thomas (http://thomas.loc.gov/) at the U.S. Library of Congress. Some of the proposed additions could be made fairly easily. Others, however, have significant resource implications. The suggested publicly accessible e-mail link to the LEGISINFO coordinators, for example, might result in a torrent of questions and comments that could divert resources away from other tasks. The LEGISINFO team will set priorities in light of input from the Library's management, users and stakeholders, and determine how the various additions would fit into the LEGISINFO framework.

Although LEGISINFO started out as a small project with limited resources, it has developed into a significant and popular research tool for a wide range of users.[1] At the same time, it is a model for successful cross-disciplinary cooperation and team-based action.

Notes

1. On November 3, 2003 LEGISINFO received an honorary mention for the 2003 Agatha Bystram Award for leadership in information management. This is an award presented annually by the Council of Federal Libraries.