

VENDOR VOICE

PowerNotes Is on a Mission to Make Legal Research More Efficient

The company's unique browser extension helps law students collect and categorize information they find online—a key step toward producing clear, effective writing.

More than a decade ago, when PowerNotes founder and CEO Wilson Tsu was in law school, he typically saved online research he planned to use in papers by copying and pasting it into a Microsoft Word document.

More than half of law school students still start the writing process that way, according to a survey Tsu conducted—a method he says isn't ideal. If source material gets misplaced, for instance, plagiarism issues can occur. Reorganizing items can also seem cumbersome because more copying and pasting is required.

Convinced there had to be a more efficient way to transition from the research phase to writing, Tsu, who previously worked as a process engineer, launched LearnLeo, a suite of free productivity tools for law school students, in 2012. In 2016, he added

a new element to the platform—LearnLeo Research, a proprietary note-taking technology that allowed users to save webpage text under different topic headings. As they added items, an outline was automatically created, which they could reorganize by dragging and dropping items into place.

After realizing students in a variety of academic programs might benefit from using LearnLeo Research's functionality, Tsu began offering it as a separate product called PowerNotes in 2017.

Today, in addition to selling PowerNotes directly to law schools, undergraduate institutions, and individual subscribers, the company is currently piloting the program to U.S. high schools. During a recent visit to PowerNotes' loft-style headquarters in Chicago's Greektown neighborhood, AALL spoke to Tsu about his inspiration for creating the product, how law students use it, and

The screenshot displays a legal document titled "Carroll v. Stryker Corp., 670 F. Supp. 2d 891" from the Wisconsin Western District Court, dated November 20, 2009. The document text includes sections on compensation, performance, and a contract. Annotations include a green highlight on a date and a red "OFFER" label. A sidebar on the right, titled "ADD CITATION INFO", shows a citation for "Carroll v. Stryker Corp., 670 F. Supp. 2d 891, 895 (W.D. Wis. 2009)" and buttons for "Cancel" and "Save to Sources". A "Feedback" button is also visible in the sidebar.

PowerNotes logs citation information from Westlaw, Lexis, Bloomberg Law, and HeinOnline.

the company's plans to eventually offer PowerNotes to a broader legal industry audience.

How does PowerNotes differ from LearnLeo, the initial solution you launched?

PowerNotes was originally part of LearnLeo, which had three other components: a case briefing app that allowed students to use our mark-up technology to take notes and highlight their case materials; another part that taught pre-law students how to read and brief a case before law school; and a piece intended to help students research law firms after their first year. They could also get summaries of the top 200 firms in the country to help them decide where to apply.

The LearnLeo case briefing app and PowerNotes have similar interfaces, except PowerNotes can be used on almost any digital content. LearnLeo's mark-up and annotation tools can only be used on content that's been saved to LearnLeo.

How would you describe PowerNotes' value proposition?

In law school, I found there were aspects of research and writing that weren't taught. A lot of law librarians mainly teach students how to use Lexis and Westlaw effectively, but what

are the next steps before you actually start writing? My feeling is educators assume you have a certain amount of paper-writing knowledge because you are in law school, but students aren't necessarily taught how to manage the writing process in undergrad.

If you look at how students approach it, and how I did, you find something on Westlaw or Lexis, copy and paste it into a Word document, and keep doing that until you think you have enough research to start writing. The process is distracting; every time you need to save something, you need to leave the source you are reading and paste it into another application—and the Word document looks like a disaster. Once you've copied and pasted things, how do you organize them?

We surveyed law students, and they actually like reading, learning, and formulating arguments. They see saving quotes and citation information, organizing research, and outlining as the tedious and cumbersome aspects of research and writing. The thing that's hardest for them is going from research to writing; they don't know how to make that transition from research to the first draft.

With PowerNotes, we set up a process to handle the mechanical aspects of research and organization. There is also citation support; you just

highlight something in Westlaw, Lexis, Bloomberg Law, and HeinOnline, and it will pull a citation automatically. We didn't create the process by ourselves; we had feedback from librarians and writing professors.

What type of input did law librarians provide?

Many aspects of PowerNotes have been influenced by librarians. For instance, librarians really wanted to add citation support, so we added that as part of our core functionality.

How is the product priced?

Individuals can buy it and set up an unlimited number of research projects, or they can set up one project for free to try it out. You pay a price—\$5 a month, or \$50 a year—for unlimited access.

We also have institutional subscriptions, depending on the size of the law school and the number of students. We have four tiers: the biggest is 900-plus, down to 300 or less students. We charge a different amount per tier.

How did you introduce PowerNotes to law schools?

We haven't spent any money on digital marketing; we push it through direct sales to schools. Our individual users typically find us through Google or word of mouth.

In the beginning, we just let librarians roll it out how they wanted; some did a good job, some did not. Some paid for PowerNotes without doing much with it. We try to meet with schools and say, “These are the things other schools have found are effective.” Ideally, we want to partner with law libraries and first-year writing programs to launch PowerNotes. When all students are presented with PowerNotes in class, we typically get a 95 percent adoption rate. That’s our preferred way of launching now, but not all law librarians have that relationship with writing professors, so we try to approach both. Once it gets going in a certain way, it just takes off.

One of our biggest ongoing issues has been trying to get at least a yearly call with our partner law libraries. Some are way more accessible; sometimes you get nothing. Even then, we keep sending usage data to them every year.

How have users reacted to PowerNotes since its introduction?

Professors and librarians like it because it forces students to be more organized early on in the writing process when they’re doing research. It makes you think about how the source relates to what you are writing about, biting off a little chunk at a time. We’ve received a lot of testimonials from students who didn’t realize the time they’d save not stopping to copy and paste.

Undergrad and online education users have also found other applications

for the product. We looked at the law school data and noticed that students were using PowerNotes with Canvas and Blackboard for general note-taking. They can highlight something in the syllabus, add information from links and attachments and the internet, and pull it all into a PowerNotes outline. We thought that was pretty awesome.

Do law firms use PowerNotes?

We know there are solo practitioners and small firms that use it. What people do or don’t use it for, we don’t know, but they’re out there. We’re cloud-based; all notes and highlights are stored in the cloud. That’s not a huge deal for students—in fact, most have come to expect it—but it is a big deal for big firms. A lot of it is comfort level. We’ve asked firms for their cloud security perspective; that’s where things stall. But it’s something we will be working on in the future.

Are there any international users?

There aren’t a lot, but we’ll get a law student in Australia or England who asks a question or two. Anyone can use it—even if they aren’t doing serious research.

A bunch of people use it at museums; we ended up providing it for free to nonprofits. There are a good number in Chicago that use it. We work with the Chicago Bar Foundation to get the word out about it locally.

In the beginning, in 2017, our user base was about 90 percent law school students; that’s shifted to probably half undergraduates because there are more colleges and universities than law schools, and the student populations are much larger.

Has anything else changed since PowerNotes launched?

I hear this from other startups, too—in the beginning, you don’t have the money or resources to hire the best people. You hire whomever you can. We started out with a couple of people right out of school and Big Law refugees willing to work at a start-up they believed in for less money. Those were our people up until the end of 2017;

2018 was a transition year for us. We were beginning to understand who we really needed from a personnel standpoint, and what we had wasn’t it.

We got into law schools pretty quickly because law librarians are pretty much the only people buying something like this. Reaching out to colleges and universities took a lot more time and energy. Their libraries are huge—they have IT, tech, education components; we knew we needed to hire professional salespeople who had experience selling to undergraduate institutions. We have three salespeople selling to undergraduate schools now. They’re not the same people we had when we were only selling to law schools.

What’s next for PowerNotes?

Law schools are asking when we will come out with a mobile app—some schools give an iPad to all students. I don’t think having dedicated terminals in a library is the future; students are going to use their own device, a tablet or phone. As younger students get older, there’ll be even more mobile device usage. That’s going to change research over the next 10 years.

Most people don’t do research on mobile devices now because of the bad user experience, but soon you’ll be able to enjoy research on tablets and phones with PowerNotes, if we get the interface where it needs to be. Everyone will have their own account that’s cloud-based and mobile-friendly. We plan to build a way to access all research engines from a mobile device, and everything would be saved in the cloud—you could go to a device or desktop computer, and it would all be there. Creating a basic mobile app for users is one of our top 2019 goals. ■

POWERNOTES BY THE NUMBERS

Year Founded: 2012

Headquarters: Chicago, Illinois

Number of employees: 6

Number of law libraries using PowerNotes: About 25

R-A Research + Analysis

T-T Teaching + Training