



Softscape's QuickFind Search and Retrieval Software

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In the early 1990s, I headed up a team to research, evaluate, and select an enterprise-wide text retrieval system. Our search was restricted to a VAX file service available via dial-up character-based terminal emulations, and acceptable document types included two formats: ASCII text and WordPerfect version 5.1. Although you could search WordPerfect documents, if you wanted to view them correctly you needed to launch WordPerfect to do so. No document had pictures; we couldn't have viewed them in a terminal mode session anyway. Hardware and software cost over \$200,000 for 15 concurrent seats, and that did not include hefty consulting fees to tailor the product to our needs, nor did it include roughly 10 percent annual software maintenance fees.

Times have changed in the world of electronic document creation and retrieval. These days "document information" includes just about every kind of information object, drawn from locations ranging from the desktop to local LAN servers to the World Wide Web. And with today's cutting-edge retrieval systems you can search whenever you want, and the system can continuously update its index to reflect document additions and deletions.

But perhaps the most remarkable transformation of all is in the price. Instead of costing tens of thousands of dollars per seat, expensive consulting, and a highly trained staff to manage the document system, for just \$99 you can purchase a single product that will search virtually any document from any location at any time, based on Personal Library Software's widely used and commonly understood search engine. That all-in-one, do-it-yourself product is called QuickFind and it's the latest offering from Softscape, Inc., an Acton, Massachusetts-based company that has developed a varied line of retrieval tools.

The stated goal of Softscape's QuickFind is simple: Allow users to find and view virtually anything on a local PC, LAN, or the Internet, with a minimum of hassle and support. That simple promise is extraordinarily difficult to deliver, and its implications tremendous for both corporate and institutional professionals and power-users alike. And with its platform and format range, indexing speed and file-size efficiency, and sophisticated viewing and searching capabilities, QuickFind is powerful enough and versatile enough to satisfy them all.



MediaFORM's CD-4600 CD2CD Pro

Synopsis: QuickFind uses FTP filter, viewer, and conversion technology, along with Personal Library Software's search engine, to let users index and search dozens of document and email formats from Ami Professional to Wang OIS/VS Comm Format. Users of QuickFind can also view many graphic and other object formats, and search collections on their desktops, a LAN, or the Internet via popular Internet search engines.

Price: \$99 for version 1.0.

Minimum System Requirements: Windows 95 or NT 4.0, 486/75 processor or higher, 8MB RAM (12MB recommended) free hard drive space, Winsock 1.1 API-compliant networking package; account with an Internet Service Provider, 14.4bps or faster modem or a TCP/IP connection, VGA 640 X 480 monitor (256 colors or more recommended).

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SOLID DESIGN: THE KEY TO PRODUCT ACCEPTANCE

Selecting the right point on the function/ease-of-use continuum for content-based retrieval is difficult. QuickFind starts with a simple three-panel design and makes some reasonable design tradeoffs. The three-panel design has the Windows desktop at upper left, the search screen and results list located on the right, and the WYSIWYG view of individual hits on the bottom.

You may currently create only two indices, which can be any or all of a desktop storage medium, including ZIP drive or a LAN file service. Other LAN users can use the LAN index you create without having to manage or duplicate it themselves. You may update those indexes continuously, periodically, or only when you choose to do so. QuickFind also gives you the autonomy to decide how to trade off accuracy versus machine load.

Users of QuickFind may choose among a wide range of native Personal Library Software syntax for searching, including boolean, conceptual, and proximity operators. You can search for numbers, although only as strings; that is, you cannot search for a range of values between integers six and ten. You may recall, re-use, and modify previous queries, and you receive results in a relevancy-ranked order.

QuickFind's Power Search helps improve your searches. It does so by expanding terms based on knowledge categories. Thus a query for "Bond" within the "Movie" category would search for "spy," while the "Financial" category would refine the search with "Wall Street."

QuickFind also features built-in, high-quality document viewing and conversion software from a company called FTP Software, which--much like the better-known Inso Intellescope and QuickView Plus software--allows users to convert documents into the file formats of their choice or, conversely, view a file as it would appear in its native format, such as word processors, spreadsheets, and the like.

Softscape has also made it easy to get updates to its product; users may select "Update QuickFind" directly from the HELP menu.

TEST-DRIVING LOCALLY AND ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Testing of QuickFind consisted of indexing and searching a Zip drive containing HTML, various flavors of WordPerfect, email, and many ASCII text files. A total of about 26MB of documents indexed and searched yielded a resulting concordance (plus thesaurus) of approximately 8MB. On a 200Mhz Pentium with 48MB RAM, indexing required less than five minutes. Updating the index later after removing some files and adding others took only about ten seconds.

While many users find it preferable to index only when they have added or removed several files, QuickFind also offers users the option of indexing continuously, which slows the update process but guarantees that your index is always up-to-date. What's more, you can continue to use the search system while it is updating its index. While indexing would no doubt take longer with a smaller or slower PC, the speed QuickFind achieved in testing remains remarkable, and the resulting index impressively small, considering that some retrieval systems create indexes which rival the size of the documents they describe.

QuickFind also performed smoothly viewing some unusual object types, such as graphics, ZIP files, and DLLs. Why would you search for DLLs? Perhaps you have three DLLs in different locations with the same name; which is newer? Which may be redundant? QuickFind lets you find files by filename and content. Then, having found all DLLs bearing the same name, you can look inside them to see version numbers and other information.

Having found graphics or document objects of any supported type, you can convert them to other types (including HTML) using the built-in FTP conversion system. I found FTP conversion between Word and WordPerfect to be better at times than using these word processors themselves. Given its viewing versatility and fluidity with a vast range of file types, QuickFind is without equal among current search systems for viewing and converting nearly all my document formats, textual and otherwise.

In addition to its file viewing and converting capabilities and local searching features, QuickFind also takes local queries and optimizes them for Web searches. In a test search performed using AltaVista, QuickFind responded with a search panel that took advantage of AltaVista's search capabilities.

Using the separate QuickFind Developers toolkit, corporate users can even customize the screen by adding a new button to search corporate shared file services or pass transformed queries to other corporate search engines. This is a particularly important capability for corporations seeking a unified way to search all document collections--the corporate knowledge repository. Even in those few corporations that have standardized on a single search engine, new applications often bring their own search engines as part of the package.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A SEARCH SYSTEM NEAR-SUPREME: CURRENT QUICKFIND LIMITATIONS

Examining Softscape's QuickFind revealed three major weaknesses, all of which are planned to be fixed in the software's next partial-step upgrade. First, in spite of the extraordinary numbers and types of files that QuickFind can search and index, it cannot index Acrobat PDF. Also, although QuickFind has a slick integration with Microsoft's Internet Explorer, it doesn't offer the same integration with Netscape Navigator.

Lastly, QuickFind allows you to create only two indices and does not allow you to define where they will be stored. If, for example, you wanted to index removable media such as Zip drives, you could index only one. The good news is, upgrades to remedy these concerns are on the way, Softscape has provided a button on the toolbar to make updating this already extremely strong search and retrieval product as simple as a button-click.

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