

**Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts
Court Services Office
Programs Division
Electronic Public Access Services Assessment**

**PACER User
Satisfaction
Report –
Executive
Summary**

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Introduction

In 2020, the Administrative Office of the United States Courts engaged Deloitte to conduct a survey of Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) users to measure user satisfaction and identify areas for improvement. Deloitte is an industry leader in survey research and program evaluation, serving over 15 U.S. cabinet level federal agencies in its Government and Public Sector Practice. Deloitte has designed and conducted thousands of user experience research studies worldwide and is composed of subject matter experts from a diverse array of specialized research disciplines. Deloitte partners with public and private organizations to deliver scientific, quantifiable, research-based insights to support strategic decision-making and action-planning.

This report communicates the results of the follow-up PACER User Satisfaction survey conducted in June and July 2021 to update information from the previous surveys conducted in 2009 and 2012, as well as to better understand the experience and journey of PACER users, measure user satisfaction, and identify actionable ways to improve the PACER user experience.

Background

The mission of the federal Judiciary's Electronic Public Access (EPA) program is to facilitate and improve electronic public access to court information at a reasonable cost, in accordance with statute, Judiciary policies, security requirements, and user demands. Created in the early 2000s, the primary point of access to the court information and documents maintained in electronic format is through PACER, which provides access to court case files and reports residing in each court's Case Management/Electronic Case Files (CM/ECF) system. The CM/ECF system helps judges, clerks of court, attorneys, and public users electronically file, review, and download case information. Searching for case information across courts is accomplished through a tool called the PACER Case Locator, which allows users to search for case records from a central location, rather than having to individually search each court's CM/ECF system. In 2020, the PACER Service Center provided support to more than 650,000 unique active PACER users, which include litigants, attorneys, and court staff, as well as commercial businesses, the media, academic researchers, students, and the general public.

Two similar surveys were conducted in 2009 and 2012. In 2009, the Judiciary undertook a comprehensive program assessment to better understand the different types of users of EPA services - including PACER - to measure user satisfaction and to identify priority areas for improvement. Many improvements were implemented by the Judiciary based on the 2009 research results, and a new report was commissioned in 2012 to continue tracking on the metrics collected in 2009.

Changes to PACER Since 2012

After the 2012 report, features were improved or added to the system to respond to user feedback and boost the user experience. These new services and improvements included:

- Ability for filers to use a central sign-on feature for their PACER account when searching and filing in NextGen CM/ECF courts, which is the next generation of CM/ECF to which the Judiciary is currently transitioning.
- Redesigned PACER Case Locator (PCL) with new functionalities that include: ability to save preferred cases, ability to save frequent searches, option of simplified or advanced search screens,

ability to set a preferred landing page, and a responsive page design that adjusts to the user's device based on window or screen size.

- New PACER website (pacer.uscourts.gov) that offers easier access to PACER and PACER-related applications.
- National PACER login page (pacer.login.uscourts.gov) where users select which site to visit at log in.
- Important site alerts published to all national PACER applications.
- Option to sign up to receive PACER announcements by email (GovDelivery bulletins).
- Increased PACER quarterly fee waiver from \$15 to \$30.
- Access to free PACER demonstration site, which includes real cases to enable users to learn how to use PACER without registering or incurring any fees so they can become familiar with the type of case data and documents available.
- Improved group billing, which allows groups to manage and pay for all charges associated with multiple PACER accounts. Any group, such as a law firm, financial organization, or educational or research institution, can use group billing to receive and pay bills for all user accounts in the group.

Changes to the User Satisfaction Survey Since 2012

To inform the updated 2021 User Satisfaction survey, an online, forum-style tool – Bulletin Boards – was used to facilitate an asynchronous discussion among target groups of PACER users. This discussion provided qualitative insight into the PACER user experience to inform the design and analysis of the quantitative survey of PACER users, as well as provide early insights on experience. Participants were recruited via a brief screening survey sent by e-mail to 1,000 randomly selected recent users of PACER. Additionally, all members of the EPA Public User Group – an advisory group established by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to provide a formal and interactive venue for engaging external PACER users – were invited to participate. The 40 participants were grouped by profession, including legal professionals, academics, journalists, creditors, and background screeners. Insights from this qualitative work were used to inform the design of the 2021 User Satisfaction survey.

Based on insights derived from this qualitative work and new topics of interest about PACER usage since the last assessment, the 2021 survey was updated to include additional questions about user satisfaction with PACER features. Additions included having users evaluate PACER features based on whether those features are “easy to use”, “always meet their needs”, and “are essential for doing [their] job”. New questions were also added to measure user needs and attitudes about the PACER Service Center and PACER pricing structure.

Methodology Overview

For the 2021 survey, respondents were asked 62 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions that inquired about their satisfaction with and use of PACER, demographics, and interest in new features. Invitations were sent to a randomly sampled group of active PACER users on June 22, 2021. Invitees were emailed three reminders to participate in the survey through the end of the fielding period (July 22, 2021). Overall, the survey garnered 6,315 respondents during the one-month survey administration period, up from 1,752 in 2012. The response rate was 11% out of a total sample of 59,133 (after subtracting undeliverable invitations from the 60,000 originally invited to participate) individuals who had used PACER at least once in the previous year (January 2020 to December 2020).

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to self-identify as the type of PACER user that best describes them, choosing one option from a list of 10 user types. These user types – which are described in the Demographics section – mirror those used in the previous surveys to facilitate trending over time. The user type selected by respondents may or may not match the user type associated with the account to which they are registered. However, the self-identified user type does represent the type of user respondents consider themselves to be for the purpose of evaluating their experiences using PACER.

The PACER Service Center fielded calls and emails for help from survey respondents and was also available to verify that the survey was authorized by the federal Judiciary.

Summary Results

Demographics

KEY TAKEAWAY

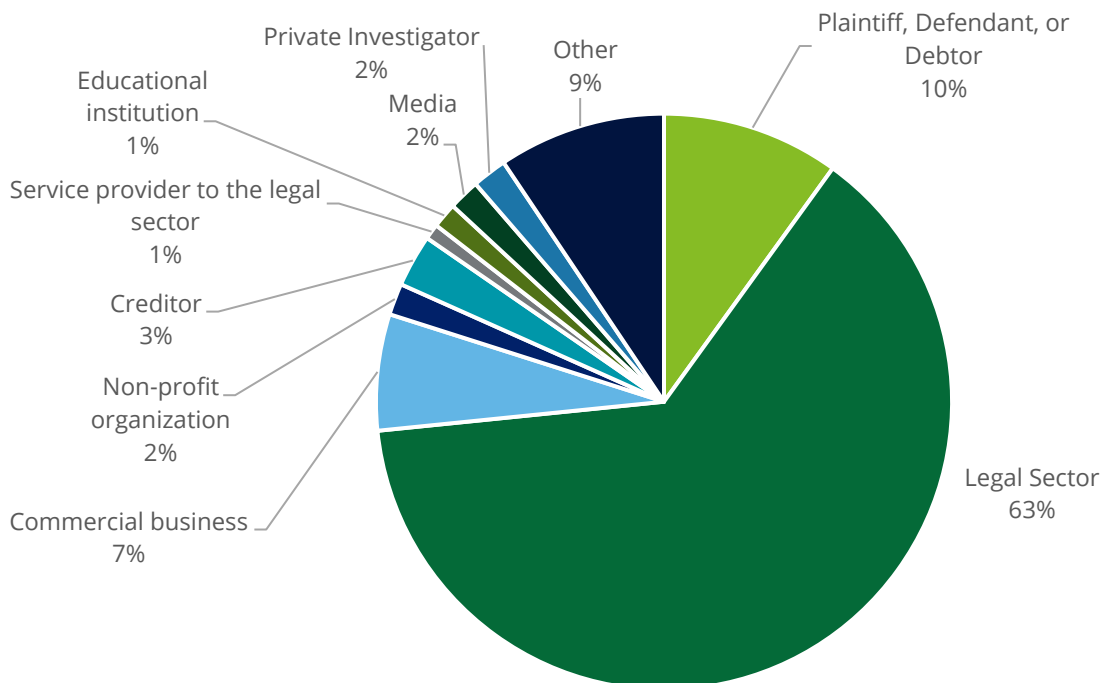
❖ **PACER user demographics and usage in 2021 survey remains similar to 2009 and 2012 surveys**

Demographics of PACER users remains similar in 2021

- The overall percentage of each self-reported PACER user type remained similar to 2012, with the legal sector comprising the largest group of users (63%).
- Among those self-identifying as legal sector users, over two-thirds are attorneys, with paralegals and secretaries accounting for smaller proportions of legal sector user roles.
- Among those self-identifying as legal sector users, the vast majority work for a law firm (as opposed to a government entity).
- Users who selected 'Other' as the user type that best describes them increased markedly since the last survey.
- Banks are still the largest segment of users among those who self-identify as commercial business users.

Self-Reported PACER User Types

Figure 1



User Satisfaction with PACER

KEY TAKEAWAY

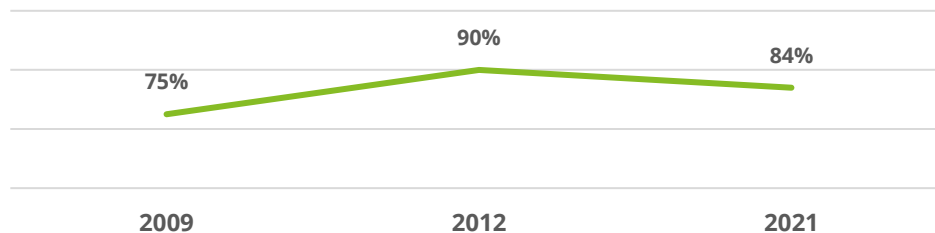
- ❖ **Satisfaction with PACER fell six percentage points between 2012 and 2021**

Overall satisfaction with PACER declined since 2012

- Overall satisfaction decreased from 90% in 2012 to 84% in 2021.
- Overall satisfaction is highest with creditors, commercial businesses, and private investigators. The only group that improved satisfaction since 2012 was creditors, driven by an increase in their satisfaction with PACER's search functionalities since 2012.
- Drop in satisfaction was driven in part by large drops in average satisfaction from the media (from average of 4.34 to 3.36 on 5-point satisfaction scale) and service providers to the legal sector (from average of 4.23 to 3.87 on 5-point satisfaction scale).

Overall Satisfaction with PACER

Figure 2



KEY TAKEAWAY

- ❖ **Satisfaction with PACER search capabilities fell in 2021 compared to attitudes in 2012**

Satisfaction with search capabilities fell

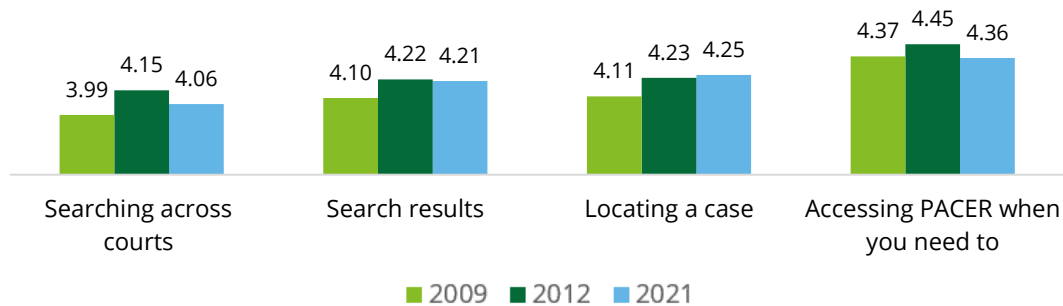
- Satisfaction with the search capabilities of PACER (i.e., accessing PACER, searching across courts, viewing search results, locating a case) decreased since 2012.
- “Accessing PACER when you need to” is the highest rated item (4.36 average on 5-point satisfaction scale), and 88% of respondents are satisfied with this feature.
- “Searching across courts” is the lowest rated item and continues a downward trend from the last two reports; satisfaction for this feature is 66%.

Searching Across Courts Continues to Frustrate Users

Lower overall satisfaction with PACER since 2012 **is driven by a decrease in satisfaction with search functionalities** – one of the most common PACER use cases.

Obtaining PACER Information (Avg. on 5-Point Satisfaction Scale)

Figure 3



💡 Recommendations

Continue to improve search functionality: Conduct an assessment of search functionalities in similar portals to understand what search capabilities they have that PACER could consider implementing.

Understanding How to Use PACER

KEY TAKEAWAY

❖ **Users are satisfied with learning how to use PACER, but less than half are familiar with all that PACER offers**

Many users unaware of all that PACER offers

- 65% of users are either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with learning how to use the PACER system, compared to only 42% who are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their familiarity with all that PACER has to offer.
- 11% of users are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their familiarity of PACER offerings, which is also reflected in other survey

data showing lower awareness of new PACER services (see, “PACER Enhancements” section).

- Some users expressed in open-ended comments that they are confused by aspects of the interface of CM/ECF and the PACER.gov website and indicated their satisfaction would improve if they learned where all the services are located.

💡 Recommendations

Provide targeted learning and development opportunities for users: Identify tools and strategies similar portals provide to their users to help them learn how to use their services effectively. These tools could include task-based tutorials that help users complete priority tasks using PACER.

User Experience with PACER

KEY TAKEAWAY

❖ **Daily and weekly usage of PACER has increased since 2012**

Most respondents use PACER at least once a month

- Most users use PACER very often — 74% say they access the system more than once a month, and 21% use it daily.
- The legal sector, media, and creditors use the system the most often, and educational institutions and plaintiff, defendant, or debtor users use it the least.

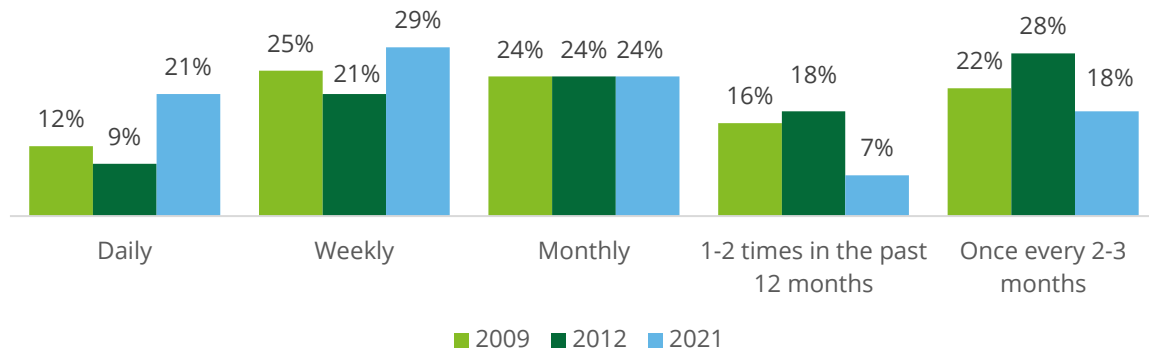
- Many users use PACER to follow a case (51%) or search for cases within a court (44%), while fewer use it to obtain reports (31%) or search for cases across courts (31%).
- The top reasons to use PACER are similar to 2009 and 2012, but the percentage of users who state they use PACER to follow a case or obtain reports decreased, and those who use PACER to search for cases within a court or search for cases across courts increased.
- The most common court type accessed is by far the district court, with 70% of users searching for district cases in the last year (similar to 2012). In the 2021 survey, 31% of PACER users say they had accessed appellate courts using PACER in the past year — similar to the 34% of users who reported doing so in 2012. A far smaller percentage of users searched for bankruptcy courts (42%) than they did in 2012 (60%).
- The legal sector has the widest user base, with over 40% accessing bankruptcy and appellate courts, and 80% accessing district courts.

Frequent Usage is Common

Over half of PACER users in the 2021 survey state that **PACER is essential for their job duties.**

PACER Usage in the Previous 12 Months

(Figure 5)



💡 Recommendations

Embed ongoing feedback mechanisms to monitor PACER features: Collect customer feedback through ongoing surveys and feedback mechanisms (e.g., digital “always-on” and post-transaction intercept surveys) to dynamically identify user pain points.

KEY TAKEAWAY

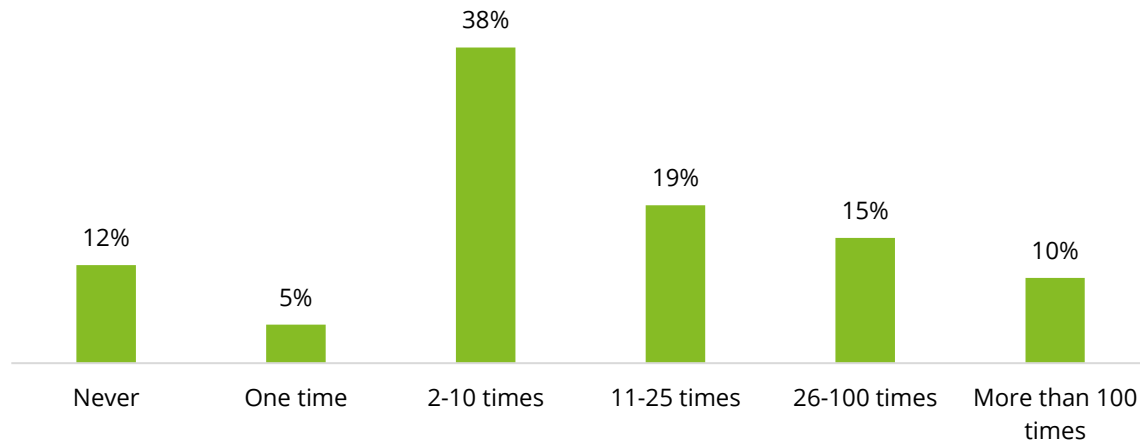
❖ **Usage of PACER Case Locator (PCL) continues to increase since first being measured in 2009**

High-frequency usage of PCL more than doubled

- The portion of users accessing the PCL over 100 times in the last year more than doubled, from 5% in the 2012 survey to 10% in the 2021 survey; creditors drove this increase, with over 25% of users accessing the PCL more than 100 times.
- Users accessing the system 26-100 times and 11-25 times also increased, from 11% to 15%, and 16% to 19%, respectively.

Use of PACER Case Locator in the Last Year

(Figure 6)



KEY TAKEAWAY

- ❖ PACER usage on mobile devices is **not common**

Low Mobile Use of PACER in 2021

- Most users (62%) still only access PACER on their desktops, with a further 24% accessing PACER on a mobile device only “rarely”.
- For those that have accessed PACER, their review of the mobile experience is relatively neutral, with 37% of users rating the experience as “average”.

PACER Customer Service

KEY TAKEAWAY

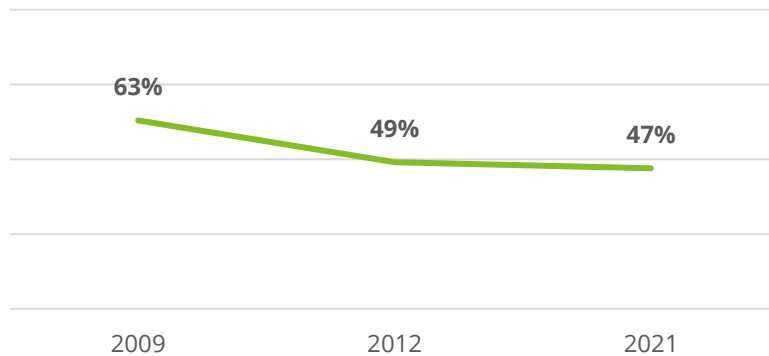
- ❖ **More than half of respondents say they are unaware that the PACER Service Center (PSC) is available**

Low Awareness but increasing usage of Service Center

- More than half of respondents (53%) say they are unaware that the PSC is available to help them use the system — this continues the downward trend from the 2009 and 2012 reports.
- The media is the least aware of the PSC, with more than 70% of media users answering that they have not heard of it before; private investigators are the most aware, with only 46% of users not aware of the service.

Respondents Aware of the Service Center

(Figure 7)



Despite the decreasing number of users *aware* of the PSC, the percentage of **aware users who have contacted the PSC** in the last year **increased** from 23% in 2012 to 27% in 2021. This aligns with operational data collected by the PSC over that same period, which shows that the number of calls to the PSC increased 31% and the number of emails to the PSC increased 71% between 2012 and 2020.

💡 Recommendations

Formalize the analysis of existing inquiry data about PACER user issues: Create a formalized process to continuously identify user issues and pain points by analyzing user inquiries from the PACER Service Center and other sources.

❖ **Users are evenly split between preferring to call a call center, call a court, and email the PSC when resolving an issue**

Respondents are split among top 3 support channels

- Calling a call center, calling the court directly, and emailing the PSC are the three most preferred channels for resolving an issue with PACER, with a slightly smaller portion of users preferring to contact an experienced colleague.
- By far the least popular option is referring to guidance documents (only 12% of respondents marked this as preferable).

💡 Recommendations

Improve learning materials and documentation: Identify opportunities to improve knowledge sharing about PACER capabilities and usage, such as updating PACER guidance documentation and FAQs to clearly state what capabilities are and are not available using PACER features.

PACER Enhancements

KEY TAKEAWAYS

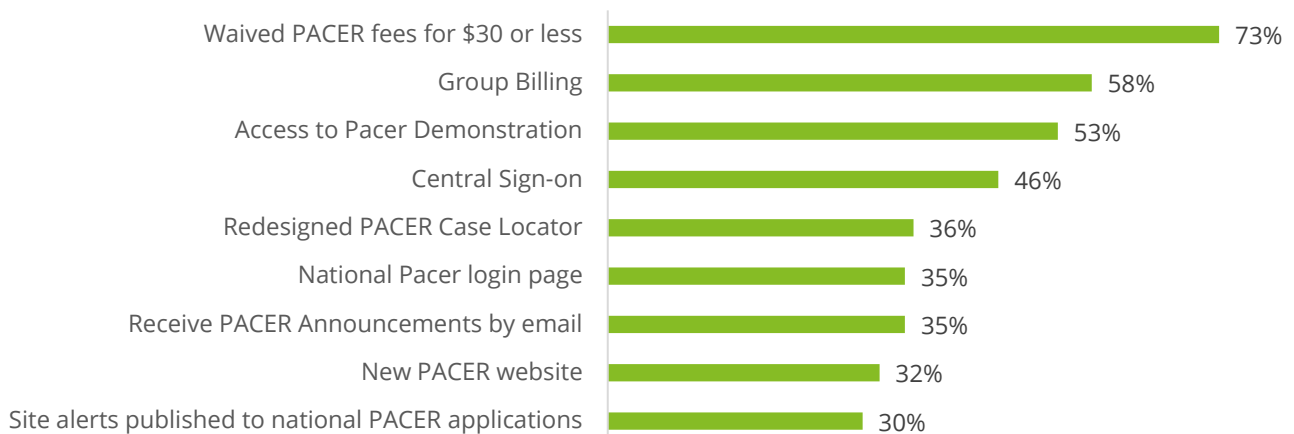
❖ **Many users are unaware of some valuable new features and enhancements**

Users value enhancements but unaware of some

- Of the nine new or improved services and features, users are most aware of the central sign-on feature (56% of users) and waived PACER fees for \$30 or less (55% of users).
- Of the nine new or improved services that PACER offers, users highlight three additions as particularly helpful: waived fees, group billing, and access to demonstration site.
- Users generally appreciate the new services, as no service received less than 65% “extremely” or “very” valuable responses.
- Waived PACER fees for \$30 or less (73% “extremely valuable”), improved group billing (58% “extremely valuable”), and access to the free PACER demonstration site (53% “extremely valuable”) are most valued enhancements.
- Educational institutions — some of which qualify for PACER fee exemptions — particularly appreciate the waived fees, with 97% rating this as ‘extremely valuable’.
- Although the majority of users who are aware of the PACER demonstration site rate it as “extremely valuable”, only 15% of respondents are aware of the feature. Similarly, 58% of users who are aware of the group billing feature rate it as “extremely valuable”, but only 17% of respondents overall are aware of the feature.

Percentage of Respondents Rating Feature as "Extremely Valuable"

(Figure 4)



💡 Recommendations

Increase awareness and uptake of the demonstration site: Promote the demonstration site to users and optimize its location on the website to make it easy for users to find. Addressing this will help a myriad of issues, from users’ challenges navigating PACER to confusion around search functionality.

KEY TAKEAWAY

❖ **Batch Downloading is the most popular proposed feature**

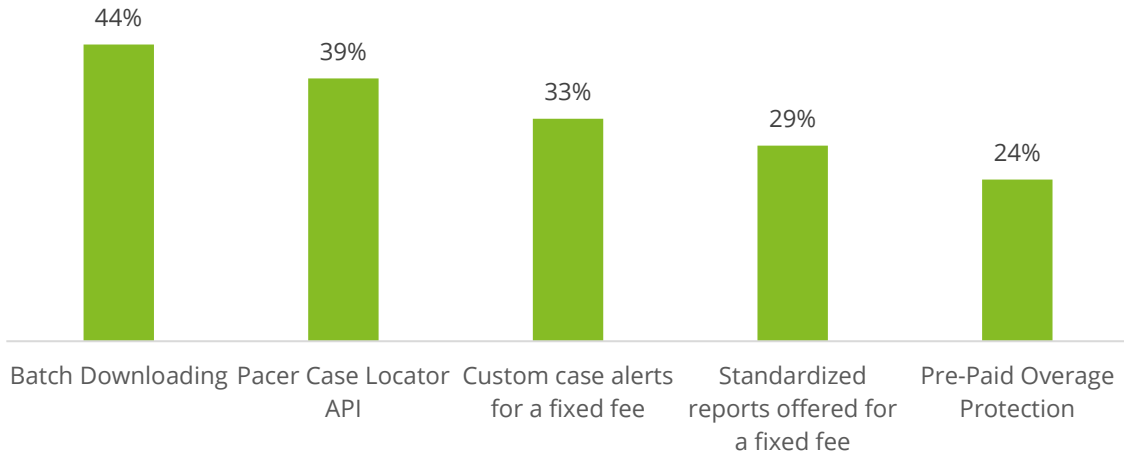
Many potential new features seen as useful

• Of the potential new features presented, batch downloading — which would allow users to request large data sets from PACER using certain criteria — is the most popular with almost 44% of respondents “very” or “somewhat” likely to utilize the feature.

- The PACER Case Locator API, which would allow users to programmatically search the PCL for federal cases or associated parties, follows closely behind with nearly 39% “very” or “somewhat” likely to use.
- The least popular potential feature is fixed-fee standardized reports, with 22% of respondents “very unlikely” to use the service (compared to only 10% who are “very likely” to use it).

Respondents Very or Somewhat Likely to Use Enhancement

(Figure 8)



Recommendations

Conduct additional research with PACER user types: Conduct additional in-depth qualitative (e.g., focus groups) and quantitative (e.g., targeted surveys) research focused on specific PACER user types to further understand evolving user needs and value of PACER.

PACER Fee and Billing Perceptions

KEY TAKEAWAY

❖ **Around 70% of users are satisfied with PACER's billing process and value**

Users satisfied with PACER's value and fee management

- Most PACER users express satisfaction with managing their PACER fees, including 74% “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with being able to understand their PACER invoices and 69% being “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with understanding how PACER is priced.
- Overall, 71% of PACER users are “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied”

with the value of PACER for the money they pay.

- Commercial businesses and private investigators record the highest satisfaction with the value of PACER, while non-profits, the media, and educational institutions scored the lowest.

Recommendations

Assess the best way to communicate PACER fee structure to the public: Conduct additional research (e.g., focus groups) with PACER users to understand the optimal way to clearly communicate PACER fee structure to users, including how to effectively tailor information and messaging about the fee structure to different user types based on their varied PACER use cases.

KEY TAKEAWAY

❖ **Few PACER users would like to see a new PACER fee structure**

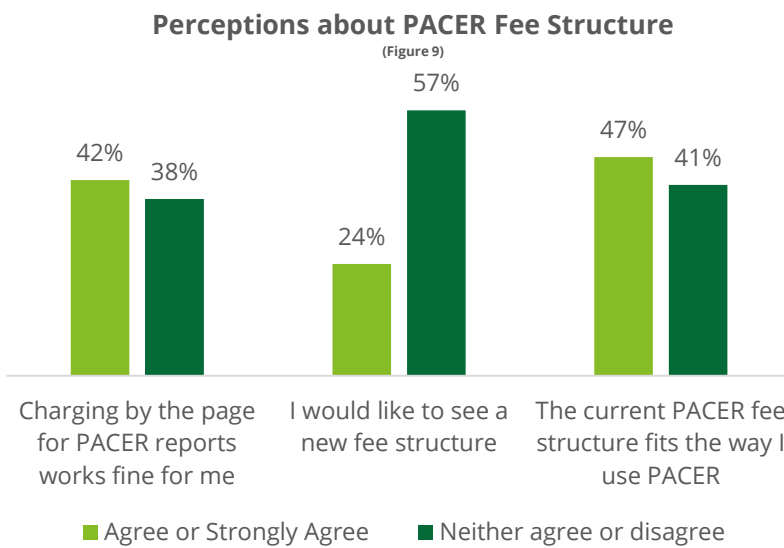
Users satisfied or indifferent about fee structure

- Less than a quarter (24%) of PACER users “agree” or “strongly agree” that they would like to see a new fee structure; most are indifferent about the PACER fee structure.
- When asked about aspects of billing — including monitoring costs, the benefit of predictable charges, and the necessity of the \$30 fee waiver — many users are indifferent. “Neither agree nor disagree” is the most common response to these statements.

Still, 44% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that they rely on the \$30 per quarter fee waiver to help control their costs (with higher percentages for educational institution and non-profit users).

- Still, 44% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that they rely on the \$30 per quarter fee waiver to help control their costs (with higher percentages for educational institution and non-profit users).

- 47% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that the current PACER fee structure fits with the way they use the system.
- 42% “agree” or “strongly agree” that charging by the page works for them (a similar percentage to the 2012 result).



Smaller User Groups Most Discontent with Fee Structure

The **media, educational institutions, and non-profits** are the groups **most discontent** with the current PACER fee structure; **50% of media users** — who represent 2% of PACER respondents in the 2021 survey — **would like to see a change to the fee structure.** Private investigators and commercial business users are the most supportive of the current structure.

💡 **Recommendations**

Conduct a formal fee assessment study: Complete a fee study to identify how alternative platforms – both in government and commercial settings - use different pricing models to account for the various ways that users use PACER (e.g., tiered pricing or alternative models such as subscription models).

Conclusion

A core goal of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts is to improve the experience and satisfaction of PACER users. The results of the 2021 PACER user satisfaction survey communicated in this report will be used by Administrative Office of the United States Courts to evaluate and prioritize future changes to PACER services and features based on the identified needs of PACER users.