

[title] How Technology Can Prepare Government Legal Departments for the Future

Welcome to the new normal. Will your department be ready for what's next?

There are very few lines of work that wouldn't distinguish the way they've operated between "pre-COVID" and "post-COVID." As a government attorney, you've likely experienced these changes as well. The biggest change, of course, has been hybrid work arrangements, with you and your colleagues spending most of your working time at home. Meanwhile, all levels of government are having to manage higher expectations from constituents and other governmental colleagues, and government attorneys often find themselves having to handle new and ever more complicated legal matters.

So how can you and your department or agency manage the new normal — and whatever forms "normal" might take in the future? By making use of the same toolbox that allowed you to work and collaborate during the pandemic: digital technology.

The right technology can enable you and your department to operate more efficiently, allowing you to focus on the more complex and challenging aspects of your work. These tools also can provide ancillary benefits. They can help you and department attract and keep talent at a time when such talent is in high demand and short supply. With experienced government attorneys retiring in droves, carefully chosen technology can help fill the gaps in your department's institutional knowledge. And just as importantly, it can give your department or agency the power to provide even better service to citizens or other governmental entities you collaborate with.

Yes, new technology comes with costs, which can be a challenge for departments with already stretched budgets. But if vetted with thorough due diligence, digital platforms that have been developed specifically with attorneys and legal departments in mind can lower expenses in the long run.

With all this in mind, let's take a closer look at the challenges that government legal departments like yours are facing, and how the latest technologies — some focused on the legal market, others with broader uses -- can help you address them.

New Tools, New Efficiencies

The number and variety of legal applications and platforms has exploded in the last five years. Software development companies have discovered the market's growth potential, and many have focused on ways to automate the routine and often tedious tasks that attorneys frequently need to handle. Automation tools can give legal professionals more time to focus on strategic, higher value work -- a boon to government departments that need to get by with a small staff. And since these tools are typically cloud-based, staff members who work partly or fully remote can also tap into their time-saving benefits.

The most powerful legal tech innovations use at least some elements of artificial intelligence (AI). Where technology 1.0 simply digitized manual tasks, tools informed by machine learning take best practices

learned via trial and error, then apply them to all types of government legal work. What's more, today's intuitive, user-friendly tools aspire to support a legal department's workflow. Government attorneys don't need to reinvent the wheel for each task or departmental change.

Developing detailed, documented processes for key issues and projects also helps when it comes to with succession planning. With the rate of retirement in the public sector has been steadily increasing, the adoption of tools to help capture institutional knowledge and train new staff has become more and more crucial.

Technology Can Help Attract and Keep Talent

We've all seen the articles: Finding skilled, talented employees is a major challenge for just about every workplace. Government agencies and departments are asking themselves how they can not only retain the experienced people they currently have, but also how they can attract top talent when needed.

It now appears likely that attracting and retaining a new generation of public sector professionals will require departments and agencies to offer more flexible working options. The post-COVID era will almost certainly see the continuation of hybrid and remote working models, which is important to younger professionals and also to more experienced colleagues seeking a healthier work-life balance.

Flexible work environments will require government legal departments to become more agile in order to improve the services provided to citizens and other government units. While this may require changing or updating long-established processes, it also gives government offices a chance to enhance their workflows and increase efficiency. These updates shouldn't make your work more complicated. Any tech and workflow updates you adopt should make your job and the jobs of your current and future colleagues easier, and make it easier for you to collaborate.

Building Knowledge, Keeping Wisdom

The post-Covid era also will accelerate changes in how government legal departments handle training and knowledge management. Traditionally, the focus has been on helping new colleagues learn a department's particular way of doing things. Some government entities have systematized matters so that everyone follows essentially the same process to efficiently deliver the same level and quality of service. In many fast-paced legal environments, attorneys may learn the prescribed way of approaching the department's work from one or two busy mentors who pass on this wisdom verbally, along with model documents that demonstrate the message.

Most formal training programs have migrated to online platforms, but informal coaching and mentoring has been harder to replicate. The move to hybrid work setups might create more opportunities for mentoring and coaching, but it's quite likely that most people will still be working mostly or even exclusively on their own. New government attorneys need to be able to quickly learn more about the work they're expected to handle. And even seasoned government attorneys need guidance on new issues from time to time.

For many attorneys, the go-to resources for information and help have been search engines and colleagues. While search engines can provide access to possible answers, attorneys are forced to sift through the results, figuring out on their own which sources can be trusted and which approach is best.

Colleagues might be accessible virtually, but they are less likely to be available at the next desk or down the hall for an impromptu brainstorm session.

In sum, whatever point they are in their careers, most government attorneys need to continually add to their skill sets and tackle new issues and challenges. This is why many public legal departments have been striving to create a culture of continuous learning. Thomson Reuters Market Insights data shows that many attorneys have found that the pandemic has served as a needed reminder of the importance of a supportive community for lawyers and staff.

There are digital tools that can help build that supportive learning culture by providing information on a wide range of legal topics – tools that work as easily as asking a question of a colleague while providing more useful and reliable answers than a search engine. These tools can offer newer attorneys highly curated wisdom from practice area experts who can show them where to start. They also can give more experienced attorneys the confidence and knowledge to take on new types of matters. When attorneys have access to legal knowledge platforms that can quickly deliver trusted answers to complex questions, everyone benefits: the attorneys, the departments they work in, and their colleagues elsewhere in government.

Veteran attorneys themselves are fountains of wisdom for their younger colleagues. But what happens when those wise old heads retire? The “silver tsunami” of departing Baby Boomers has made it critical to preserve institutional knowledge along with the actual work they’ve produced so that others in the department can take over a retiree’s responsibilities. Government entities are recognizing the risk of having key knowledge and capabilities tied solely to individuals who may soon be out the door and permanently employed on their fishing boats.

In order to turn personal knowledge into institutional knowledge, many governmental legal departments have turned to document management systems that share work across the entire department -- and thus preserve material information and processes that colleagues can tap into as needed.

Doing Due Diligence, Making the Case

With so many tech tools to choose from, how do you determine which ones will truly help your department handle all the pain points in its processes and workflow, particularly in a hybrid work environment? Taking stock of those workflows is the first step to identifying where problems might exist -- and how a technology platform might make your processes easier and more efficient. Being intentional about continuous improvement and empowering your colleagues to identify outdated processes can also support your efforts to attract and retain talented employees.

New technology tools can significantly boost productivity, but for government legal staff to accept them in their work, these tools need to be easy to adopt. If a new application or platform is too disruptive or complicated, it’s easily dismissed. Many would rather stick with what they already know, even if they’re aware of its shortcomings, rather than invest too much time and effort into learning something new. As you look into the array of choices available to you, you should consider the ease of adoption and use.

You should also keep in mind something you already know very well – that serving stakeholders and constituents effectively often requires government attorneys to take on unfamiliar issues. Having

seamless access to know-how materials and the practical guidance of seasoned professionals can help you and your team feel confident taking on new or novel matters.

Legal software platforms can also provide you with capabilities that you might not have known you'd find useful, like data visualization. Until recently, getting a picture to tell a data-driven story about programs and policies has been time- and cost-prohibitive, and largely a manual job. New digital tools available to attorneys can quickly illustrate or display data to colleagues either inside or outside your department. An example of a legal technology platform that offers this capability (along with many others) is [Thomson Reuters' Practical Law](#). Practical Law provides actionable, data-driven insights that are presented in digestible visual formats to help government attorneys handle complicated matters or advise their colleagues on how to approach an issue or case.

As government legal departments recognize the need for greater efficiency, they seem to be more willing to invest in new technology. And while tech adoption can be intimidating to some, the experience of adjusting to new ways of working may actually create more openness to experimentation and growth.

New Normal, Next Normal

How long will the new normal be with us? It's likely that it will become *the* normal.

The pandemic has served as the catalyst for many anticipated changes in how we work. Those changes include everything from adjustments to hiring practices and cultural norms to a rethinking of processes, collaboration, and the strategies for attracting, guiding, and retaining new hires. Indeed, returning full-time to the office might feel like a huge step back for many departments and agencies.

When attorneys embrace change and start adopting modern tools and technology, they'll get more done more quickly, and with more confidence that they've covered all the angles. Organizations that invest in the right technology today will be prepared to attract talent, adjust to social changes, and better serve their communities.