



What do you do when you  
have to do it all?

It's a complicated time to be a government attorney. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say: It's an *especially* complicated time.

As a government attorney, you know that the pandemic has stretched resources for governments further than ever. You've also had to deal with the challenge of working remotely. What's more, you've probably had to handle a broad and diverse range of legal issues, plus recently issues unique to this time. Unlike your peers in private practice, you often aren't in a position to turn down any legal issue that slides across your desk. Since you probably don't have the budget to send work to outside counsel, you've been forced to constantly switch gears to handle tasks outside your area of expertise.

True, the prevalence of COVID-19 may recede. But it's unclear how soon government operations will return to normal, or if there will be a "new normal," which could include continued remote work for many government employees, along with ongoing pressures to do more with less.

If you're navigating through these rocks and rapids, you are certainly far from alone. In this paper, we'll take a look at how extensive your challenges are, then offer a potential solution through the use of a great tool, Thomson Reuters® Practical Law.

## THE WEIGHT OF YOUR WORLD

Again, you're not alone. A Thomson Reuters Government Trends Survey reveals that the top challenges facing government legal professionals are:

- Too few resources—and too small of a budget
- Staying apprised of changes to existing law
- Adoption and implementation of technology

The top *future* challenges that government attorneys identified are:

- Staff retention
- Changes in laws and regulations

Budgetary caps have hit local governments hard. Caseload management has also increased significantly. At the same time, most survey respondents said that they expect the overall workload and complexity of issues that they handle to increase over the next two years.

One-third of government professionals work with outside counsel on a monthly basis. Overall, less than 10% of work is outsourced annually.

The main reasons agencies tap the help of outside counsel include matters that are considered "high-stakes," and in areas where agency attorneys don't possess the required experience.

With retirement rates increasing, another major challenge for government legal professionals is losing institutional knowledge and expertise as longtime colleagues retire. According to the Government Trends Survey, 41% of government legal professionals indicated that loss of institutional knowledge was a major challenge for their agency. And retirement rates have increased.

To be sure, there are knowledge management systems and other ways of organizing internal documents available, but these often don't work as well as government attorneys would like. These systems don't always make it easy to find and use a colleague's or predecessor's guidance and work product. If you need a template to get you started and you can't find one internally, you're forced to hunt around, ask colleagues or other agencies, or perhaps search on Google™ so that you don't have to start from scratch.

Like nearly all government attorneys, you've most likely turned to technology in order to be more productive. The Government Trends

Survey respondents nearly all use various digital tools, including online legal research, document management, Microsoft® Office 365®, and electronic signatures systems. Nearly two-fifths said that they introduced new or significantly improved methods or service innovations. The most common methods or innovations introduced included case/file management systems, electronic file management systems, and new or upgraded hardware.

But that does not mean that government agencies can adopt new or improved tech tools whenever they need them. The biggest constraints to adopting new technology are budgetary. These constraints include not only the cost of acquiring the technology, but also the time needed to become adept at using that technology's capabilities.

Budgets are almost always an issue for government entities. That's especially true when tax revenues are negatively impacted by events like COVID-19 or economic downturns. The ability to hire new lawyers is unpredictable, and spending on things like training might need to be scaled back. All this adds to the weight of your burden, especially since your agency or department probably doesn't have much in the way of a training budget to begin with.

The bottom line is that government attorneys are always expected to do more with less. Managing with limited resources is something you've probably grown accustomed to—though that resigned acceptance doesn't make the weight any lighter.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can try to manage all these challenges with a variety of technologies. But what might really be useful to you is not numerous discrete digital tools, but a single toolbox that brings together all of the capabilities you need. That's the idea behind Practical Law. It has been designed to provide the kind of help that can give you the ability and confidence to take on just about any legal project, even when that project isn't in your wheelhouse.

The Practical Law methodology is embodied in its name—*practical*. Practical Law task-based menus allow you to browse by topic or content type, then access practical guidance and tools relevant to your

project or task. Working with Practical Law means you're not working alone. The platform is managed by more than 300 seasoned attorneys who have expertise, practical knowledge, and resources you can tap into regardless of the legal topic. They understand what government attorneys need, how they operate, and the burdens and pressures that they're under.

So how might Practical Law help you keep all your various plates spinning? Start with the law itself. As you well know, government agencies and legal departments need to be aware of changes to existing law and emerging legal issues that may have an impact on their organization or work product. These challenges may mean lost time getting up to speed or seeking outside assistance.

Practical Law includes straightforward how-to guides and clear explanations of current law and practice. Need a quick update on best practices for zoning regulations or housing issues? Practical Law contains overviews of legal topics so you can get up to speed faster. Practical Law Practice Notes are drafted by experts to ensure you understand the issue and can review the underlying laws and regulations dictating how state and local government matters are handled. These resources include:

- An overview of eminent domain
- An overview of comprehensive planning
- A review of affordable housing options
- An analysis of spot zoning issues and New Urbanism

Practical Law also can alert you to any changes made to a Practical Law resource by attorney-editors. This helps you save time searching for updates and provides you with the confidence that you understand current law while providing you the questions you should be asking and guiding you throughout the process.

Practical Law editors also work with local counsel to review federal law across multiple jurisdictions and practice areas. And for those departments and agencies needing this kind of resource, Practical Law offers international guidance through its Access Global Guides and its coverage of a variety of cross-border topics.



## EXTENDING YOUR REACH

As you find yourself being asked to take on new duties and take on new types of legal issues, Practical Law can help get you up to speed—quickly.

Like legal practitioners everywhere, attorneys who advise state agencies frequently need to get up to speed on new issues or matters. They need to provide timely, competent legal advice to agency clients and be responsive to other stakeholders. They also have the added pressure of being in the public eye as a part of a government entity that operates on taxpayer dollars. That means, of course, that public scrutiny is even higher.

According to the Government Trends Survey, government attorneys on average spend five hours a week familiarizing themselves with areas of law they are less or unfamiliar with, a result that's similar to previous years. And the percentage of issues they deal with in areas of the law they are unfamiliar or less familiar has increased slightly.

Practical Law tools allow you to familiarize yourself with practice areas in which you might not have extensive experience. By broadening your expertise, you can answer colleagues' questions and handle their various legal issues more quickly, regardless of what those issues entail.

Often, this capability isn't only essential for your colleagues—it's crucial to your unit of government's efficient operation. And efficiency, of course, can help your agency do more within the constraints of time and budgets. Helping you work smarter as well as faster is one of the reasons Practical Law was developed. The time taken up with research reduces the time you could be spending working on the various issues you need to handle during the course of a day. Practical Law offers a framework that helps you quickly understand what's important about an unfamiliar area of practice while providing guidance on how to proceed.

In addition, Practical Law can help you and your colleagues create stronger drafts of documents and do so more quickly. The platform has hundreds of templates for contracts, policies, and other key documents. This capability allows you to quickly and precisely draft or benchmark agreements, deals, filings, and other legal materials using precedents that feature expert guidance. These drafts and benchmarks can be downloaded and saved in Microsoft Word® for editing. Users can also access the Automated Documents feature, which allows them to auto-fill fields throughout a document and avoid spending time reentering the same information.

Practical Law also allows you to collaborate more efficiently with colleagues through its folder sharing tool. This capability is particularly helpful when a number of people have to sign off on a project that needs to be put into action quickly, such as a pandemic response plan.

Speaking of colleagues: Retirements and departures may mean that your department or agency will need to make a hire, or several hires. Saying goodbye to departing colleagues is rarely easy, and though having a budget that allows you to fill their positions is a good thing, going through resumes, scheduling and conducting interviews, and evaluating skill sets takes time away from the many pressing legal matters you have to handle. And once you've made an offer, you then have to spend many hours leading the new hire through the onboarding process.

Practical Law can help here, too. Its Company Policies Center contains sample policies for employment, benefits, compliance, and conduct. There are fillable template policies available covering hiring procedure, benefits distribution, data privacy compliance, face mask requirements, and other needs. The Employee Handbook Toolkit contains dozens of ready-to-use policies, which can provide you with a starting point or a benchmark to update your current policies and procedures.

And when you're close to wrapping up a project, Practical Law checklists, timelines, and flowcharts help ensure you've covered all your bases. The platform also offers 24/7/365 assistance and on-demand training materials, providing you with the help you need without slowing you down.

## CONCLUSION: SHOOTING THE RAPIDS, LIFTING THE WEIGHT

Though COVID-19 appears to be loosening its grip, the changes it has forced government agencies and departments to make may be with us for some time to come. For some government entities, many of the changes may be permanent.

Whatever happens, government attorneys will continue to be pressed to provide ever-increasing service, information, and expertise to the colleagues and communities they serve. With Practical Law, they can handle the weight of those added responsibilities efficiently and skillfully.