

Legal Research Tools that Won't Break the Budget

With today's technologies, legal research is quickly becoming accessible to many who could not previously afford the steep cost of access to services like Westlaw and LexisNexis. To a solo practitioner just hanging out a shingle, the need to access Westlaw is towards the bottom of their startup cost list underneath rent, supplies, telephone, malpractice insurance, furniture, computers, software and Internet access, just to name a few. In the name of saving a few dollars, the solo practitioner (or small firm, for that matter) will opt to either visit the local law library or pay a visit to a colleague's office with an onsite library. To that end, the following resources might prove helpful in your legal research efforts:

- Google Scholar: Thankfully, Google has implemented "Google Scholar" (www.scholar.google.com). While it certainly pales in comparison to the depth and breadth of Westlaw or LexisNexis, you certainly cannot beat the price (free). In addition to case law from across the United States, you can also search legal journals, articles, patents and other sources. To get a full understanding of what Google Scholar provides, visit "About Google Scholar" on the website. While this service will certainly not replace Westlaw or LexisNexis, it is definitely an economical resource for startups and established firms alike.
- Black's Law Dictionary: Another must-have in a law firm is Black's Law Dictionary, a reference book which most law school students will purchase as part of their class requirements. But did you know that Black's Law Dictionary is now online? Visit www.blackslawdictionary.com, where you will find the entire dictionary offered as a smartphone application. Currently offered as an iPhone application, BlackBerry and Android versions will launch soon. The best part about this offering? The smartphone applications are half the price of the printed book, a welcome alternative to purchasing the voluminous hard copy in our eco-friendly society. Moreover, with the smartphone application, you can have it with you at all times – in the courthouse, library, while meeting with a client, etc.
- Cornell University: Cornell University Law School does not immediately come to mind when thinking of legal research – but it should! For starters, you can find the entire US Federal Code on Cornell's website (www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/). This is a great way to quickly search through chapters/statutes/rules and receive up-to-the-minute information. And to find out at any time if the information supplied is current, simply click the "How Current is This?" feature on any page and it will tell you the version you are viewing.
- Fastcase: Fastcase is a great resource for case law research and, best of all, the cost of access is included with your MSBA bar dues! (Visit www.msba.org and you will see the link to "Fastcase" in the upper right corner of the screen.) For an additional fee, you can Shepherdize your case on the same screen as well as provide Keycite information via Westlaw. Fastcase comes highly recommended as a go-to legal research option, especially since there is no additional out-of-pocket cost to the practitioner.

In addition to these traditional websites, you also have a plethora of information available at your fingertips through the Maryland government agencies. Below is a listing of the most pertinent websites:

- Maryland Attorney Forums: Recently launched, this website allows attorneys to share ideas, discuss legal strategies and ask questions regarding procedure, etc. The greatest asset of this board is the fact that the postings stay in place and can be referenced easily without having to wade through archives. Visit www.mdattorneyforums.com and register for free access.
- Maryland Courts: Information regarding all Maryland courts, court forms and Maryland Rules and Statutes via LexisNexis (no charge) can be found at www.mdcourts.gov.
- MD Judiciary Case Search: Get up-to-date docket information on all of your Circuit and District Court cases at <http://casesearch.courts.state.md.us/inquiry/processDisclaimer.jis>.
- MD Estate Case Search: Find up-to-date docket information on all of your Orphans Court cases (as well as order copies and forms online) at <http://jportal.mdcourts.gov/willsandtrusts/index.jsf>.
- MD Land Records: You can view all recorded land records (provided as .PDFs) at www.mdlandrec.net. (Note: you must request a password and username to use this website.)
- MD SDAT: Obtain current business entity information as well as real property ownership information via www.dat.state.md.us/.
- COMAR: COMAR code is available in a searchable database (www.dsd.state.md.us/comar/comar.aspx), but you can also look under specific Codes.
- MD Workers' Compensation Commission: Obtain current claim information, retrieve docket assignments and stay up-to-date on all workers' compensation legislation through www.wcc.state.md.us/. You can also download forms and access the WCC system with a login and password (need approval).

These are just a few of the low-cost, efficient resources that enable solo and small firm practitioners to accomplish meaningful, thorough and current legal research while watching their bottom line.