Alternative Legal Research Tools for the Budget-Conscious Law Firm: How to Find the Right Fit

> *... CEB's research staff spend most of their waking lives ... turn[ing] our findings into a guide for evaluating alternative legal research tools.*

In a golden era of technology, with more advanced legal research tools and services available than ever before, attorneys are somewhat spoiled for choice. Yet, for many law firms with specific needs and limited budgets, this abundance can be a pathway to inefficiency.

An assortment of options often leads to overlapping subscriptions, underutilized tools and wasted time. Before you know it — just like that gym membership you haven't used since January and those five different streaming services you rarely watch — subscription overload is costing your firm more money and effort than necessary without meeting all your firm's needs.

If this sounds familiar, it's time to get ruthless with your legal research toolkit. As CEB's research staff spend most of their waking lives thinking about this very issue, it would be rude if we didn't turn our findings into a guide for evaluating alternative legal research tools. Here's what budget-conscious California law firms need to know, including when to use free resources and how to avoid subscription overload.

When to look beyond the Big Two

LexisNexis and Westlaw are legal research juggernauts for a reason: Their databases are comprehensive, wide-ranging and efficient. But for many — especially smaller firms — the so-called Big Two aren't necessarily cost-effective or practical. Not every firm requires access to every single service and nugget of information, and those focused on niche areas of law might end up paying for more than they actually use.

If the following scenarios apply to your firm, alternative legal research tools could be the answer.

Overlapping resources
You often end up paying for the same information across multiple platforms.

Underutilized tools
You subscribe to broad, expensive databases but only use a small portion of what's available.

Time wasting
Your productivity is often hindered by sorting through unnecessary information.

How to evaluate platforms

The only way to truly optimize your legal research tools is to — you guessed it — do some research. The ideal solution will vary depending on your firm's unique needs and priorities. For each resource you evaluate, ask yourself: What specific tasks will you use this tool for, and what features are unnecessary? When you customize your toolkit, you ensure the dollars you spend contribute directly to enhancing your legal practice.

Here are some factors to consider when evaluating legal research tools, either as your exclusive platform or to supplement another service.

Is the database relevant to your practice?

Your legal research is only as robust as the database you use to surface relevant cases, statutes and regulations. Before committing to a platform, consider what and who it was designed for and how effective it is at pulling out the information that matters to you and your clients. Ensure the database regularly updates its content so you're on top of the changes impacting your practice and clients.

Consider the breadth of coverage, too. While there are advantages to using databases such as LexisNexis and Westlaw that are sweeping and national in scope, a platform tailored to your state and area of focus can streamline your research with more targeted results and specialized tools. As a California lawyer, if new employment law guidelines in Vermont are irrelevant to you and your clients, why pay for that information? Look for a statement of coverage on the platform's help pages to help you determine the scope and whether it's a fit for what you need. As CEB was designed for California attorneys, it includes intricate, hyper-local analysis of statutes, court rules and case law.

How will you validate your cases?

A good citator is worth its weight in gold, as it will prevent you from relying on dubious cases and bolster your analysis with valuable context and history. However, no two citators are created equal. Different tools depend on various methodologies and databases, so their reliability varies wildly.

When mulling over a new platform, ensure you're happy with the citator it uses to verify whether cases are good law. If possible, test your prospective citator before committing to it and compare results across platforms. You could do this by picking a few cases you know are solid or have some potential problems, and check which citators consistently identify issues and provide reliable, up-to-date information. You might find that some platforms excel in certain areas of law but not others. And while most research tools might flag the same case, some could require you to investigate why instead of highlighting that upfront.

CEB's TrueCite® citator uses color codes to flag whether a case has a negative history, how frequently it's cited and which subsequent decision is responsible for the most critical treatment. A team of California attorneys also regularly reviews the information provided by TrueCite to capture nuances and ensure accuracy and reliability.

What's unique about your firm's needs?

Perhaps you've heard about a legal research provider that other lawyers in your network are thrilled with, but does it have all the tools you need? Before you delve in, identify which areas of law are most relevant to your practice and clients.

Consider how frequent and in-depth your research needs to be for each area and compare that with your current resources. Where are your needs being met, and where are gaps to fill? Most platforms have federal cases and statutes, but not all have state and county information baked in. Also, consider what administrative decisions, secondary sources, analysis and other content would be most beneficial to your firm, and check whether the platform has those resources in the area you need. You can typically find this on the page that describes the platform's coverage and also contact the helpdesk or ask a librarian for help.

Remember to take into account the preferences and experience of your attorneys and staff to ensure any new tools will be user-friendly and helpful for them too. Gather feedback about which resources your team finds most and least useful, and use that to identify those that truly enhance productivity — and those that may be more of a burden than a benefit.

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Weigh the risks of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) is having a moment — and for good reason. Its capabilities are rapidly evolving and have the potential to transform legal research. AI can quickly sift through vast amounts of data, identify patterns and provide insights that can significantly streamline legal workflows and enhance decision-making processes. However, many legal research experts caution that relying too heavily on AI at this stage carries substantial risks. The algorithms powering AI systems are not infallible and can produce biased results or misinterpretations, especially when trained on incomplete or slanted datasets. What's more, a widespread lack of transparency around how AI tools make decisions poses can undermine the reliability and trustworthiness of AI-generated insights.

It is certainly fine to consider AI tools when doing legal research and evaluating platforms, but this should be done with a critical eye. Ensure that any use of AI complements rather than replaces human expertise and knowledge. Vet vendors carefully to assess how robust and ethical their use of AI is. Any information provided for a product should make it clear that everything produced using an AI tool is subject to hallucinations or bias and must be double-checked by the human user. You should be comfortable that you can trust the guardrails a provider has placed around AI.

A list of alternative legal research tools

If a Big Two legal research database isn't the one for your firm, several alternative tools are also known for excellence and efficiency. Here's a breakdown of some alternatives that could better align with your firm's needs and budget.

Bloomberg Law

Bloomberg Law has an extensive database with primary and secondary sources, advanced analytics and financial data for an all-inclusive price. The platform's combination of legal research with business intelligence can benefit corporate law firms with complex business and financial cases. However, it's still a premium tool, which can pose budgetary constraints.

Casetext

Part of Thomson Reuters, Casetext leverages AI to review briefs and power its search engine. The platform covers federal and state case law, statutes, regulations and secondary sources, and its AI tools can analyze legal documents and suggest relevant cases and authorities. Law firms often turn to Casetext for its affordability, citation tool and integrations. However, its secondary sources are limited, and it has no public records or open application programming interface (API), which can hinder software integration.

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There's a reason we're the oldest and most trusted legal research provider focused on California law. With 1,400 judges and attorneys contributing nuanced legal analysis to our content, CEB's insights come directly from leaders in the local legal community. Focusing solely on California allows us to get granular, providing county-specific detail throughout our extensive library of practice guides, law books, checklists, sample documents, on-demand webinars and other continuing legal education resources. This makes CEB a good option for firms aiming to balance cost and comprehensive research capabilities without compromising quality.

Fastcase

This database aims to streamline and simplify the research process using AI. It includes a vast legal library, an interactive visual map of search results, annotated statutes and a comprehensive database of primary sources. Fastcase has robust searching capabilities, integration with various bar associations, open API, and effective docket and public records searching. However, it does not provide secondary sources.

HeinOnline

This multidisciplinary research platform provides millions of pages of content from scholarly journals, government documents, case law and other materials spanning 1,500 subjects, including law, business, politics and science. Its fully searchable image-based PDFs provide authentic digital material without needing several databases. HeinOnline also leverages natural language processing and machine learning to aid research within its extensive content library. This tool can be useful for law firms with research needs spanning several disciplines, requiring tools to streamline case preparation and analysis.

Tracers

While not a case law database, this investigative legal research tool can help you find people, their associates and potential assets. It also allows lawyers to search public records databases such as utility records, inmate searches and vehicle registrations.

Mix and match for efficiency

Bear in mind that selecting a legal research service needn't be an all-or-nothing endeavor. Many firms use alternative, state-specific platforms for the bulk of their legal research and pieces of LexisNexis, Westlaw or other resources to plug gaps.

For example, some firms subscribe to Fastcase but use LexisNexis to determine if cases are valid and citable, allowing them to trace their history and track changes. Likewise, some firms use Casetext but buy relevant treatises elsewhere that aren't available on the platform. When considering whether to combine different legal research tools, evaluate whether they offer customization options and can integrate seamlessly with your firm's existing tools and software.

When to use free legal research tools

There are several ways to conduct free or low-cost legal research, but weighing the benefits against the potential drawbacks will determine the difference between bolstering and hindering your research strategy.

For example, leveraging free information sources such as official government websites for regulatory content can provide valuable insights and save on subscription fees. But relying solely on free tools for complex legal matters can hinder your access to comprehensive and authoritative resources, impacting the quality and accuracy of your research.

The pros

- First, we present the most obvious argument for using free legal research tools: They're free! What's not to like about having the flexibility to try out new tools without the commitment or financial hit?
- Free resources are usually easily accessible, so you can quickly search for information without special software or subscriptions.
- Complimentary tools are ideal for basic research needs such as preliminary research, general legal questions or dipping your toe in the pool of niche or one-off topics.

The cons

- It's one of life's most unfortunate lessons, but generally, you get what you pay for. Paid products or services usually offer better quality because they can afford better materials, superior craftsmanship and more advanced technology.
- Free tools often lack comprehensive coverage of all relevant legal areas and jurisdictions, leaving gaps in research and missed precedents.
- Free resources might not be updated as frequently as paid databases, potentially causing you to rely on outdated or superseded legal information.
- Premium tools offer advanced features like citation tracking, case history analysis and integrated legal analytics, typically absent in free tools.
- Conducting thorough legal research using free tools can be time-consuming, as it often requires cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure accuracy and completeness.

If you don't want to risk a free tool, consider what you are paying for in a platform. What is your money getting you? Because CEB is self-supporting, for example, fees are invested directly back into making it a better resource. What you're paying will directly impact the tool you use every day.

Free tools ripe for experimentation

The free tools below are ideal for filling the gaps in your research strategy while minimizing costs.

- **County law libraries:** Your local law library likely provides free access to legal research materials and resources for attorneys and the public. These libraries typically offer a range of legal publications, statutes, regulations and court opinions, making them valuable destinations for legal research at the local level.
- **Google Scholar:** Google Scholar is particularly popular among solo practitioners and small firms due to its wide-ranging database of scholarly articles and legal opinions. Discussion threads on platforms like Reddit often highlight its usefulness for legal research, showcasing its popularity and effectiveness within the legal community.
- **Harvard CaseLaw Access Project:** This collaborative project has digitized millions of pages of case law from the Harvard Law School Library, making them freely accessible to the public. The CAP database includes 6.7 million cases spanning 360 years of U.S. history throughout state and federal courts.
- **Law Review Commons:** This resource collates law reviews and legal journals in a search engine and has more than 100 years of archival content.
- **State bar associations:** State bar associations in all 50 states offer legal research tools and typically included in the cost of membership. The California Lawyers Association offers Fastcase at no extra cost, providing access to a comprehensive legal research platform without additional fees.
- **Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute (LII):** Cornell shares several legal resources online at no cost, including U.S. Supreme Court rulings, executive orders, federal rules, state laws and regulations, a legal encyclopedia and other content explaining various areas of law.
- **CourtListener:** Sponsored by the nonprofit Free Law Project, CourtListener is a free legal research website you can use to search millions of legal decisions by case name, topic or citation.
- **Government websites:** Government websites, including those of federal and state agencies, often provide free access to legal resources, including statutes, regulations, court opinions and administrative materials. These websites are valuable sources of primary legal authority and are useful for researching specific legal issues or areas of law.
- **Justia:** One of the world's largest databases of cases, codes and other legal resources, Justia's mission is to provide open and free access to the law. Beyond its extensive database, it's also an excellent platform for the legal community to share their knowledge and for the public to find pro bono services.
- **Nolo.com:** Nolo answers common legal questions with books and articles written in plain English. Though it charges for books, articles are free to access and often link to related tools and information. This content is geared toward nonattorneys but can be useful for obtaining a basic understanding of unfamiliar areas of law.
- **State Legislative History Research Guide:** This guide provides an index of state legislatures and online legislative history research guides for all 50 states and Washington, D.C., compiled by Jennifer Bryan Morgan of the Indiana University Bloomington Maurer School of Law Library.

The CEB advantage

For small and midsize law firms across California, balancing budget constraints with the need for comprehensive legal research is an ongoing challenge — and one we constantly think about as we design and refine our tools. You might even say we're obsessed with solving it.

While the allure of free tools and the familiarity of the Big Two can be compelling, we aim to give firms tailored solutions that seek to elevate their research capabilities without breaking the bank or compromising quality and security. By thoroughly evaluating your research needs, you can make informed decisions that align with your firm's goals and budget, ultimately leading to more efficient and effective legal research.

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Ready to eliminate subscription overload?

Discover how you can optimize your legal research toolkit by scheduling a demo.