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Time Flies! 2015 is almost half over and it's been a great year so far. As always feel free to contact me with any questions regarding your finances.
 Mike

Issue 14

- Reviewing Your Finances Mid-Year
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Reviewing Your Finances Mid-Year



You made it through tax season and now you're looking forward to your summer vacation. But before you go, take some time to review your finances. Mid-year is an ideal time to do so, because the demands on your time may be fewer, and the planning opportunities greater, than if you wait until the end of the year.

Think about your priorities

What are your priorities? Here are some questions that may help you identify the financial issues you want to address within the next few months.

- Are any life-changing events coming up soon, such as marriage, the birth of a child, retirement, or a career change?
- Will your income or expenses substantially increase or decrease this year?
- Have you managed to save as much as you expected this year?
- Are you comfortable with the amount of debt that you have?
- Are you concerned about the performance of your investment portfolio?
- Do you have any other specific needs or concerns that you would like to address?

Take another look at your taxes

Completing a mid-year estimate of your tax liability may reveal tax planning opportunities. You can use last year's tax return as a basis, then make any anticipated adjustments to your income and deductions for this year.

You'll want to check your withholding, especially if you owed taxes when you filed your most recent income tax return or you received a large refund. Doing that now, rather than waiting until the end of the year, may help you avoid a big tax bill or having too much of your money tied up with Uncle Sam. If necessary, adjust the amount of federal or state income tax withheld from your paycheck by filing a new Form W-4 with your employer.

To help avoid missed tax-saving opportunities for the year, one basic thing you can do right now is to set up a system for saving receipts and other tax-related documents. This can be as simple as dedicating a folder in your file cabinet to this year's tax return so that you can keep track of important paperwork.

Reconsider your retirement plan

If you're working and you received a pay increase this year, don't overlook the opportunity to increase your retirement plan contributions by asking your employer to set aside a higher percentage of your salary. In 2015, you may be able to contribute up to \$18,000 to your workplace retirement plan (\$24,000 if you're age 50 or older).

If you're already retired, take another look at your retirement income needs and whether your current investments and distribution strategy will continue to provide enough income.

Review your investments

Have you recently reviewed your portfolio to make sure that your asset allocation is still in line with your financial goals, time horizon, and tolerance for risk? Though it's common to rebalance a portfolio at the end of the year, you may need to rebalance more frequently if the market is volatile.

Note: Asset allocation is a method used to help manage investment risk; it does not guarantee a profit or protect against investment loss.

Identify your insurance needs

Do you know exactly how much life and disability insurance coverage you have? Are you familiar with the terms of your homeowners, renters, and auto insurance policies? If not, it's time to add your insurance policies to your summer reading list. Insurance needs frequently change, and it's possible that your coverage hasn't kept pace with your income or family circumstances.



Age-Based Tips for Making the Most of Your Retirement Savings Plan



1 This hypothetical example is for illustrative purposes only. Investment returns will fluctuate and cannot be guaranteed.

2 All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there can be no assurance that any investment strategy will be successful. Investments offering a higher potential rate of return also involve a higher level of risk.

3 Asset allocation is a method used to help manage investment risk; it does not guarantee a profit or protect against a loss.

4 There is no assurance that working with a financial professional will improve your investment results.

5 Withdrawals from your retirement plan prior to age 59½ (age 55 in the event you separate from service) may be subject to regular income taxes as well as a 10% penalty tax.

No matter what your age, your work-based retirement savings plan can be a key component of your overall financial strategy. Following are some age-based points to consider when determining how to put your plan to work for you.

Just starting out

Just starting your first job? Chances are you face a number of financial challenges. College loans, rent, and car payments all compete for your hard-earned paycheck. Can you even consider contributing to your retirement plan now? Before you answer, think about this: The time ahead of you could be your greatest advantage. Through the power of compounding--or the ability of investment returns to earn returns themselves--time can work for you.

Example: Say at age 20, you begin investing \$3,000 each year for retirement. At age 65, you would have invested \$135,000. If you assume a 6% average annual rate of return, you would have accumulated \$638,231 by that age. However, if you wait until age 45 to invest that \$3,000 each year, and earn the same 6% annual average, by age 65 you would have invested \$60,000 and accumulated \$110,357. By starting earlier, you would have invested \$75,000 more but would have accumulated more than half a million dollars more. That's compounding at work. Even if you can't afford \$3,000 a year right now, remember that even smaller amounts add up through compounding.¹

Finally, time offers an additional benefit to young adults: the ability to potentially withstand greater short-term losses in pursuit of long-term gains. You may be able to invest more aggressively than your older colleagues, placing a larger portion of your retirement portfolio in stocks to strive for higher long-term returns.²

Getting married and starting a family

At this life stage, even more obligations compete for your money--mortgages, college savings, higher grocery bills, home repairs, and child care, to name a few. Although it can be tempting to cut your retirement plan contributions to help make ends meet, try to avoid the temptation. Retirement needs to be a high priority throughout your life.

If you plan to take time out of the workforce to raise children, consider temporarily increasing your plan contributions before leaving and after you return to help make up for the lost time and savings.

Also, while you're still decades away from retirement, you may have time to ride out market swings, so you may still be able to invest relatively aggressively in your plan. Be sure to fully reassess your risk tolerance before making any decisions.²

Reaching your peak earning years

This stage of your career brings both challenges and opportunities. College bills may be invading your mailbox. You may have to take time off unexpectedly to care for yourself or a family member. And those pesky home repairs never seem to go away.

On the other hand, with 20+ years of experience behind you, you could be earning the highest salary of your career. Now may be an ideal time to step up your retirement savings. If you're age 50 or older, you can contribute up to \$24,000 to your plan in 2015, versus a maximum of \$18,000 if you're under age 50. (Some plans impose lower limits.)

Preparing to retire

It's time to begin thinking about when and how to tap your plan assets. You might also want to adjust your allocation, striving to protect more of what you've accumulated while still aiming for a bit of growth.³

A financial professional can become a very important ally at this life stage. Your discussions may address health care and insurance, taxes, living expenses, income-producing investment vehicles, other sources of income, and estate planning.⁴

You'll also want to familiarize yourself with required minimum distributions (RMDs). The IRS requires you to begin taking RMDs from your plan by April 1 of the year following the year you reach age 70½, unless you continue working for your employer.⁵

Other considerations

Throughout your career, you may face other decisions involving your plan. Would Roth or traditional pretax contributions be better for you? Should you consider a loan or hardship withdrawal from your plan, if permitted, in an emergency? When should you alter your asset allocation? Along the way, a financial professional can provide an important third-party view, helping to temper the emotions that may cloud your decisions.





Millennials vs. Boomers: How Wide Is the Gap?



Can you tell the difference between the attitudes of baby boomers and millennials when it comes to finances? Take this quiz and see.

Texting versus email (or even snail mail). Angry Birds versus Monopoly. "The Theory of Everything" versus "The Sound of Music." "Dancing with the Stars" versus "American Bandstand."

It's no secret that there are a lot of differences between baby boomers, born between 1946-1964, and millennials, who were generally born after 1980 (though there is disagreement over the precise time frame for millennials). But when it comes to finances, there may not be as much difference in some areas as you might expect. See if you can guess which generation is more likely to have made the following statements.

Boomer or millennial?

- 1) I have enough money to lead the life I want, or believe I will in the future.
- 2) My high school degree has increased my potential earning power.
- 3) I rely on my checking account to pay for my day-to-day purchases.
- 4) I consider myself a conservative investor.
- 5) Generally speaking, most people can be trusted.
- 6) I'm worried that I won't be able to pay off the debts that I owe.

The answers

1) Millennials. According to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center, millennials were more optimistic about their finances than any other generational cohort, including baby boomers. Roughly 85% of millennials said they either currently had enough to meet their financial needs or expected to be able to live the lives they want in the future; that's substantially higher than the 60% of boomers who said the same thing. Although a higher percentage of boomers--45%--said they currently have enough to meet their needs, only 32% of millennials felt they had enough money right now, though another 53% were hopeful about their financial futures. Source: "Millennials in Adulthood," Pew Research Center, 2014

2) Boomers. The ability of a high school education to provide an income has dropped since the boomers' last senior prom, while a college education has never been more valuable. In 1979, the typical high school graduate's earnings were 77% of a college graduate's; in 2013, millennials with a high school diploma earned only 62% of what a college graduate did. And 22% of millennials with only a high school degree were living in

poverty in 2013; back in 1979, the figure for boomers at that age was 7%. Source: "The Rising Cost of Not Going to College," Pew Research Center, 2014

3) Boomers. Not surprisingly, millennials are far more likely than boomers to use alternative payment methods for day-to-day expenses. A study by the FINRA Investor Education Foundation found that millennials are almost twice as likely as boomers to use prepaid debit cards (31% compared to 16% of boomers). They're also more than six times as likely to use mobile payment methods such as Apple Pay or Google Wallet; 13% of millennials reported using mobile methods, while only 2% of boomers had done so. Source: "The Financial Capability of Young Adults--A Generational View," *FINRA Foundation Financial Capability Insights*, FINRA Investor Education Foundation, 2014

4) Millennials. You might think that with thousands of baby boomers retiring every day, the boomers might be the cautious ones. But in one survey of U.S. investors, only 31% of boomers identified themselves as conservative investors. By contrast, 43% of millennials described themselves as conservative when it came to investing. The survey also found that millennials outscored boomers on whether they wanted to leave money to their children (40% vs. 25%) and in wanting to improve their understanding of investing (44% vs. 38%). Source: Accenture, "Generation D: An Emerging and Important Investor Segment," 2013

5) Boomers. Millennials may have been around the track fewer times than boomers have, but their experiences seem to have given them a more jaundiced view of human nature. In the Pew Research "Millennials in Adulthood" survey, only 19% of millennials said most people can be trusted; with boomers, that percentage was 31%. However, millennials were slightly more upbeat about the future of the country; 49% of millennials said the country's best years lie ahead, while only 44% of boomers agreed.

6) Millennials. However, the difference between the generations might not be as significant as you might think. In the FINRA Foundation financial capability study, 55% of millennials with student loans said they were concerned about being able to pay off their debt. That's not much higher than the 50% of boomers who were worried about debt repayment.



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Are stock dividends reliable as a source of income?

Dividends can be an important source of income. However, there are several factors you should take into consideration if you'll be relying on them to help pay the bills.

An increasing dividend is generally regarded as a sign of a company's health and stability, and most corporate boards are reluctant to cut them. However, dividends on common stock are by no means guaranteed; the board can decide to reduce or eliminate dividend payments. Investing in dividend-paying stocks isn't as simple as just picking the highest yield; consider whether the company's cash flow can sustain its dividend, and whether a high yield is simply a function of a drop in a stock's share price. (Because a stock's dividend yield is calculated by dividing the annual dividend by the current market price per share, a lower share value typically means a higher yield, assuming the dividend itself remains the same.)

Also, dividends aren't all alike. Dividends on preferred stock typically offer a fixed rate of return, and holders of preferred stock must be paid their promised dividend before holders of common stock are entitled to receive theirs.

However, because their dividends are predetermined, preferred stocks typically behave somewhat like fixed-income investments. For example, their market value is more likely to be affected by changing interest rates, and most preferred stocks have a provision allowing the company to call in its preferred shares at a set time or at a specified future date. If you have to surrender your preferred stock, you might have difficulty finding an equivalent income stream.

Finally, dividends from certain types of investments aren't eligible for the special tax treatment generally available for qualified dividends, and a portion may be taxed as ordinary income.

Note: All investing involves risk, including the potential loss of principal, and there can be no guarantee that any investing strategy will be successful. Investing in dividends is a long-term commitment. Investors should be prepared for periods when dividend payers drag down, not boost, an equity portfolio. A company's dividend can fluctuate with earnings, which are influenced by economic, market, and political events.



What is this new chip-card technology I've been hearing about in the news?

In recent years, data breaches at major retailers have increased across the United States. As a way to counteract

these data breaches, many U.S. credit-card companies have started implementing a more secure chip-card technology called EMV (which is short for Europay, Mastercard, and Visa).

Currently, most retailers use the magnetic strips on the back of your debit or credit card to access your account information. Unfortunately, the information contained in the magnetic strips is easily accessed by hackers. In addition, the magnetic strips use the same account information for every transaction. So once your card information is stolen, it can be used over and over again.

With the new EMV technology, debit cards and credit cards are embedded with a computer chip that generates a unique authentication code for each transaction. So if your card information is ever hacked, it can't be used again--it's a "one-and-done" scenario.

While many developed nations moved to EMV technology years ago, U.S. retailers have previously been unwilling to shoulder the costs.

Fortunately, there is good news for U.S. consumers on the horizon.

Beginning in 2015, many large retailers will switch to the new EMV technology by installing payment terminals designed to read the new chip-embedded payment cards. It may take additional time, however, for smaller retailers to adopt this latest technology.

Along with EMV, even more advanced encryption technology is being developed that will increase security for online transactions and payments made with smartphones. In fact, new mobile payment options like Apple Pay and Google Wallet could eventually make paying with plastic entirely obsolete.

In the meantime, in the wake of these data breaches, you should make it a priority to periodically review your credit-card and bank account activity for suspicious charges. If you typically wait for your monthly statements to arrive in the mail, consider signing up for online access to your accounts--that way you can monitor your accounts as often as needed.