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401(k) Solutions

Fiduciary Standards for Corporate Retirement Plans

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10 Major Misconceptions Plan Sponsors Have About Their Retirement Plans



Throughout history, there have been misconceptions that people believe in (even to this day) despite the evidence to the contrary. Mrs. O’Leary’s cow didn’t start the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and Benito Mussolini didn’t make the trains run on time. Abner Doubleday didn’t invent baseball and John F. Kennedy didn’t say he was a jelly donut when he proclaimed “Ich bin ein Berliner”. Like everyone else, many retirement plan sponsors have misconceptions regarding their role, the role of their plans, and the role of the providers they select. Unlike being mistaken about Henry Ford inventing the automobile and the assembly line, the misconceptions held by retirement plan sponsors can cost them money if they breach their duty as fiduciaries. This article will debunk 10 major misconceptions that retirement plan sponsors have about their retirement plans.

10. There is nothing wrong with picking a provider that will benefit our business.

Plan sponsors need to have a process to pick retirement plan providers and must articulate a reason for the selection that will uphold their duty of prudence as a fiduciary. Selecting a plan provider just because they have an existing relationship with them that may benefit the plan sponsor in its business is not a good reason. Selecting a broker or third party administrator (TPA) just because they are affiliated to the bank you have a line of credit with isn’t prudent and may even be considered a prohibited transaction because the relationship on the plan level benefits the plan sponsor outside of the plan. A retirement plan is not a place for patronage and corruption.

9. It doesn’t matter who the TPA is.

One of the biggest problems in the retirement plan business is that many plan sponsors don’t fully understand the role of a TPA; they see them as glorified bookkeepers who just perform some recordkeeping and the filing of Form 5500. The fact is that TPAs are a lot more than bookkeepers because a good TPA will not only perform their duties competently, they also may maximize tax savings by increasing contributions for the plan sponsor’s highly compensated employees through sophisticated plan design. A bad TPA will be negligent in their duties, causing plan errors that will risk the plan’s qualifications under the Internal Revenue Code and expose the plan sponsor to liability. So it does matter who the TPA is, so it would be wise for them to find a good one.

CPS Investment Advisors
Retirement Plan Services
Bryan Mau & Nolen Bailey

1509 S. Florida Avenue
Lakeland, FL 33803
Telephone (863) 688-1725
Fax (863) 688-0692

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(863) 688-1725

8. Our Plan is fine, nothing is going wrong.

A retirement plan is like your health. Unless you take preventative measures to check on your health, you may be ill and not find out until it's too late. How many people do you know who were terminally ill and didn't know it until shortly before their death? Just because something isn't readily apparent, doesn't mean it's not there. A retirement plan that looks on the surface to be healthy may not be. That is why retirement plan sponsors are required to have an annual review and undergo routine maintenance much like a periodic wellness visit to ensure proper practices and detect problems before they become fatal to the plan's tax exempt sta-



7. Who is a fiduciary? Who cares?

Being a fiduciary is an extremely important job and it comes with an extraordinary amount of responsibilities. Fiduciary duty is the highest duty of care in equity and in law. Plan sponsors and plan trustees need to understand their liability risks. Any service provider that serves as a fiduciary does minimize a plan sponsor's liability in their role as fiduciaries. Plan sponsors should understand what role their financial advisors have decided to take. If they are brokers, current law exempts them as fiduciary. If they are registered investment advisors, are they a co-fiduciary, an ERISA 3(21) or an ERISA 3(38) fiduciary, because different fiduciary roles bring on different levels of fiduciary responsibility. Plan sponsors need to be aware of who, besides themselves, are serving in a fiduciary capacity.

6. A Corporate Trustee limits our fiduciary liability.

There are several reasons why a retirement plan sponsor would want to hire a trust company to serve as the trustee of their plan. A corporate trustee is often used when no one wants the headache or liability of serving as an individual trustee. It is also popular when a plan requires an audit (where it has more than 100 participants) because the trust company (as trustee) can certify the trust statements, so a limited scope audit is only required (which saves on the audit fees of a full scope audit). A corporate trustee does not limit a plan sponsor's fiduciary liability because corporate trustee serves in a non-discretionary role (they rarely serve in a discretionary role), which means they have no authority to take on that liability.

5. My plan provider is great and I don't have to consider a change.

Most plan sponsors are happy with their provider and will never consider a change. The problem is that many plan sponsors really aren't knowledgeable enough to determine whether their providers are actually great and competent. As plan fiduciaries, plan sponsors are required to evaluate their providers for competence. I had a client who thought their actuary was doing a great job for over 25 years until a Department of Labor (DOL) investigation proved otherwise. Loyalty is an admirable trait, but it has to be backed up by a provider's performance. A plan sponsor should consult with a retirement plan consultant and/or ERISA attorney to determine if their provider is doing their job effectively because, as plan fiduciary, the plan sponsor is liable for the incompetency of the providers they hire.

4. It's best to pick the most expensive provider.

When it comes to the retirement plan industry these days, 50% of the conversation is about plan expenses. Plan sponsors need to pay only reasonable expenses to their providers. Otherwise, it's a breach of their fiduciary duty. Reasonableness is open to interpretation, but it's all about paying a fair price for a fair service and the way to determine reasonableness is to check what is the going rate in the marketplace. Finding the most expensive .

provider doesn't guarantee the best level of service since there has never been a correlation between price and quality of service when it comes to plan services. Picking just the most expensive option can be a mistake, ask the folks who bought a Cadillac Cimarron and discovered it really was a Chevrolet Cavalier with a Cadillac nameplate

3. It's best to pick the cheapest provider.

The talk of the 401(k) fee disclosure regulations is about making sure that the administrative expenses of a retirement plan should not be excessive. On the flip-side, choosing a retirement plan provider just because they are the least expensive provider is a mistake. Hiring a service provider in and of itself is a fiduciary function. When considering prospective service providers, plan sponsors need to make sure of the capabilities of the service provider as well as the needs of the plan. Picking a plan provider just based on the lowest advertised fee is a fool's bargain because, many times, the cheapest provider is the most incompetent provider. Low fees should be a consideration, but not the sole consideration because, as they say, you get what you pay for.



2. We don't need to provide investment education and advice.

While it is true, there is nothing legally required for plan sponsors to provide investment education and advice to participants who direct their own investment under a 401(k) plan. However, for plan sponsors to get ERISA 404c protection, they need to make sure that plan participants have enough information to make informed investment decisions. Participant education and/or advice will provide participants the information they need. While plan sponsors see investment education and advice as a participant benefit, they should see it more as liability protection.

1. All we have to do with fee disclosure is receive it

With new fee disclosure regulations in 2012, both plan sponsors and participants will finally get disclosures as to the true cost of the administration of their plan. The problem is that just receiving disclosures isn't enough. Fee disclosure merely highlights the plan sponsor's requirement to fully evaluate its plan providers for competency and reasonable fees. The only way to determine whether their provider's fees are reasonable is for the plan sponsor to see what competing providers are charging in the marketplace. That could either be through the use of retaining a retirement plan consultant, an ERISA attorney, or handling the plan shopping on their own. Taking the fee disclosures and putting them in the back of the drawer will only increase the plan sponsor's liability, so a plan sponsor should never lose sight of their requirement to ensure that the fees the plan is charged are reasonable.

Why Your Savings Rate Matters More Than You Think

A question I get asked all the time: "What funds should I choose for my 401(k) or IRA?" A question I almost never get asked: "How much should I save per month?" For most people, the second question is, oh, ten times as important as the first one.

In words, here's the answer. Every month, some money is added to (or subtracted from) your account due to factors beyond your control. Your stocks go up or down. A bond fund pays interest. In short, market stuff happens. Also every month, you add some money to your account. If the amount of money you add is bigger than the effect of the market stuff, then your savings rate is more important than your investment performance.

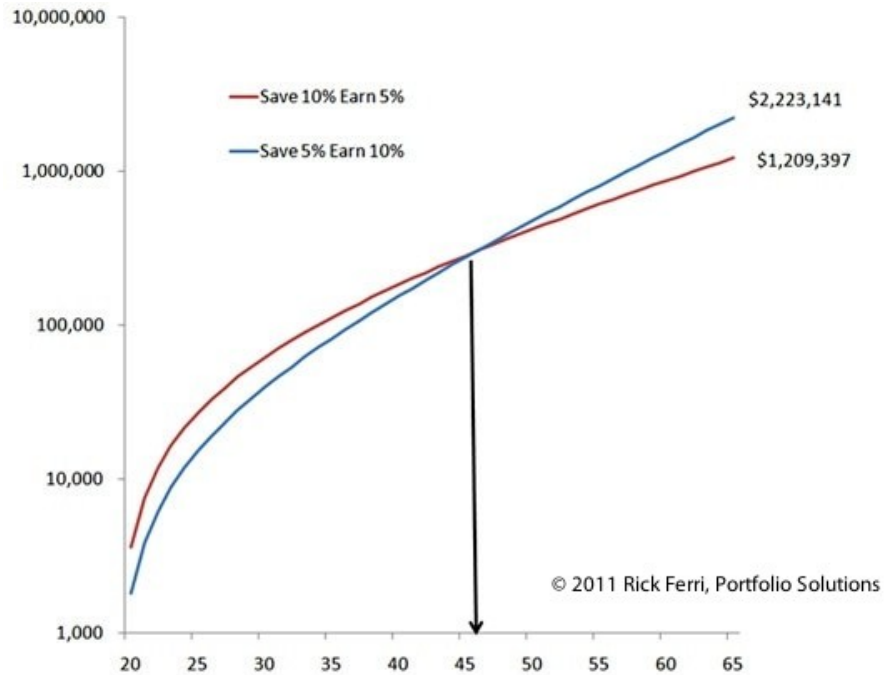
If the market drops and you lose \$200, but your monthly contribution is \$1000, then your balance at the end of the month is still \$800 higher than it had been.

At some point in life, if you're lucky and diligent, you get to the point where the monthly fluctuations in your investments dwarf the new money coming in. But it takes surprisingly long for this to happen, as demonstrated by a beautifully simple graph created by Chartered Financial Analyst, Rick Ferri of Portfolio Solutions.

This graph, as explained by Ferri, represents two people who work at the same steady job with exactly the same pay. One saves 5% and earns 10% annual returns. The other saves 10% and earns 5% annual returns. It takes over 25 years for the one with the awesome 10% return to come out ahead.

There are two key lessons here, says Ferri. One is: on your first day of work, save 10% of your gross pay and keep doing so forever. "Mathematically, if you work for 45 years starting at age 20 and you save 10%, then it gives you the number that you need to retire on comfortably," he says.

The second lesson: if you hit the middle of your career and are still making stupid investment mistakes like market timing, day trading, and performance chasing, cut it out. "Some time in your early 40s, you need to have gotten all the bad stuff out of your system," says Ferri. "You need to have learned how to diversify, how to keep your costs low."



But how many people do you know who started saving for retirement at age 20 and haven't been unemployed, or taken a 401(k) loan, or gone off to India in search of themselves, before they hit age 45? In their 2011 retirement confidence survey, the Employee Benefit Research Institute found that 70 percent of Americans believe they are "a little" or "a lot" behind schedule.

In other words, regardless of our age, most of us are more like the 20-year-old on Ferri's chart than the 45-year-old. The best thing we can do to increase our retirement nest egg is to (snooze alert) save more and spend less.

Don't get me wrong. Investment choices are important, especially once you've accumulated a sizable chunk of savings. I like helping people choose their investments, and I enjoy checking my own spreadsheet to see how close I am to my goals and whether I need to rebalance. Investing is fun, scary, and mysterious; saving more money, well, that's boring at best, and painful at worst.

Last question: is it better for your 401(k) balance to go up because you're saving more or because your investments are performing well? Or does it matter? It matters. Improving your balance by saving more is better. Once you retire, you'll be using your savings to pay expenses. The lower your expenses before retirement, the easier it will be to cover them from your nest egg. And when your savings rate goes up, your expenses (as a percentage of your pay) have to go down, right?

Maybe the secret of a comfortable retirement isn't about savings rate or investment performance: it's about redefining "comfortable."