TRANSFORM YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE IN JUST 2 HOURS

THE 2-HOUR 401(k) MAXIMIZER

TONY DOBLE

THE 2-HOUR
401(k)
MAXIMIZER

A simple guide to understanding your 401(k), making confident choices, and building the future you want

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First edition, 2026

Also by Tony Doble

Charlie's Money Choices · *Zella's Money Choices* · *Purpose, Mindset & Money*

A Note Before You Begin

This book is for educational and informational purposes only. It is not financial, investment, tax, or legal advice, and it is not a substitute for personalized guidance from a qualified professional.

Every financial situation is different. Before making decisions about your 401(k), retirement, taxes, or investments, please consult a licensed financial advisor, tax professional, or attorney who can account for your specific circumstances.

The author makes no guarantees regarding financial outcomes and disclaims any liability arising from the use of the information in this book. All investments carry risk; values can rise and fall, and past performance does not guarantee future results.

Contribution limits, tax figures, and rules cited in this book reflect 2026 and are subject to change. Always verify current figures with the IRS or your plan administrator.

Contents

Before We Begin

Take a moment and think back.

What's one recent purchase that brought you real joy?

Maybe it was dinner with people you love. A book that lit something up in you. Or finally saying yes to the extra guac — because sometimes the little things are worth it.

Moments like those tell us something. The way we use money reveals what matters to us and the kind of life we want to create.

After twenty years sitting across the table from people at every stage of their financial lives, I've seen what happens when money begins to reflect what they truly care about.

Choices become clearer.

Confidence grows.

And the future starts to feel more possible.

That's the shift this book is designed to help you make.

Over the next two hours, we'll walk through your 401(k) together — how it works, what choices you have, and how to make more of what you're already earning.

Your 401(k) is more than a number for someday. It's a tool you can use right now to support the life you're building — for yourself and the people you love.

Wherever you're beginning, I'm glad you're here.

The One Idea Worth Everything

I'm going to do something unusual and share the best tip in this entire book before we get into the steps.

Honestly, I'm not sure I'm supposed to lead with the best stuff. But here's the truth: if you only take one thing from these pages, I want it to be this.

You don't need to make drastic changes to build real retirement wealth.

Small shifts — specifically, 1% improvements in a few key areas — can create six-figure differences over a career. Not dramatic life overhauls. Not a higher-paying job (but more money wouldn't hurt). Just a 1% move in the right direction.

I tested this across 40 different scenarios. The pattern held every time.

A note on the numbers: the examples in this book are hypothetical, rounded, and assume consistent contributions and average returns. Real markets don't move in a straight line. Actual results will vary based on your salary, your match, your investment choices, and market performance.

Three 1% Shifts. One Big Difference.

Assume a $75,000 salary and a 30-year career.

Shift 1: Capture your full employer match
If your employer matches up to 5% but you're contributing 4%, you're leaving free money behind every paycheck. Close that 1% gap — on $75,000, it could add $150,000+ over 30 years.

Shift 2: Give yourself a 1% raise
Increase your contribution by just 1% — about $60 more per month on a $75,000 salary. Over 30 years at 7%, that one decision adds over $60,000.

Shift 3: Improve your investment return by 1%
Moving from a 7% to an 8% average return — through smarter fund choices or lower fees — can add $130,000+. Same contribution, one strategic shift.

Three 1% shifts, applied over a career — the difference between a retirement that worries you and one that gives you options.

This is what's possible — and you're about to learn exactly how.

WORKSHEET

Your 401(k) Snapshot

Ten minutes with your plan portal — before you start

Before you start the steps, take ten minutes with your 401(k) portal and fill this out. Some answers you'll know. Some you won't — that's the point. Whatever you can't answer today, you'll have answered by the time you finish this book.

Contribution rate *What percentage of your paycheck goes in?*	
Match formula *e.g., 50% up to 6%, dollar-for-dollar up to 5%*	
Getting the full match? *Yes / No / Not sure*	
Roth option available? *Yes / No / Not sure*	
Current investment(s) *Target-date fund? Index fund? Something else?*	

YOUR SNAPSHOT, PART 2

The Details

The specifics of your plan — the ones that quietly compound

These four take a little more digging. Some are in your plan documents, some in your investment fact sheets, some you'll get by asking HR. Fill them in as you find them.

Expense ratio *The annual fee on your main fund*	
Vesting schedule *Immediate, graded, or cliff — and over how many years?*	
Beneficiaries updated? *Yes / No / Not sure — see Step 9 for the audit*	
Old 401(k)s to find *Previous employers to track down*	

Whatever you don't know yet is exactly what the next fourteen steps are for.

STEP 1

The Big Picture

What a 401(k) actually is — and why it's one of the most powerful things you already have access to

If you've ever opened your 401(k) statement and felt more confused than confident — you're not alone. Most people feel that way. It's not a lack of intelligence. It's a lack of explanation.

Let me fix that right now.

What Is a 401(k)?

Your 401(k) is a retirement savings account offered through your employer. Every paycheck, a percentage of your income goes directly into the account — before you ever see it. It's invested, it grows over time, and when you retire, it's there waiting for you.

But here's what most people miss: it's not just a retirement account sitting somewhere collecting dust. It's a wealth-building machine with some remarkable built-in advantages.

The $5 Decision

Let me show you what happens when you contribute.

Imagine you have a five-dollar bill. You could spend it on a coffee — gone in minutes. Or you could put it in your 401(k). Here's what can happen when you invest it:

First, let's say your employer matches your contribution dollar for dollar — one common formula. Before your money has earned a single return, it's already worth $10. That's an instant 100% return — something no coffee can offer.

Match formulas vary. Some employers match 50 cents on the dollar. Some contribute a fixed percentage. Some don't match at all. Step 4 covers the details.

Then that $10 gets invested in the market. Say you earn 10% that year. You now have $11.

That $1 in earnings then earns more the following year. And the year after that.

That's compound interest. Your money earning returns on its returns. Like a snowball rolling downhill — it builds on itself, growing faster the longer it rolls.

> **Quick math worth knowing**
> A single $5,000 investment at 8% annual return:
>
> 5 years: $7,449 | 10 years: $11,098 | 20 years: $24,634
>
> That's not magic. That's just time doing its job. (Based on an 8% annual return, compounded monthly.)

Seven Things Your 401(k) Does That Most People Don't Know

1. **It invests automatically.** Your contributions come out of your paycheck before you see them. You never have to decide to invest — it just happens. This removes the single biggest obstacle most people face: talking themselves out of it.

2. **It grows without being taxed.** Your money compounds without Uncle Sam taking a cut each year. That's a significant advantage over regular investment accounts.
3. **Your employer often adds free money.** Many employers match a percentage of your contributions. This is part of your compensation — and leaving it unclaimed means you're taking a pay cut without knowing it.
4. **Time is your biggest advantage.** The earlier you start, the more years compound interest has to work. Someone who starts at 25 will typically end up with far more than someone who starts at 35 — even if they contribute the exact same amount over their career.
5. **It gives you investment choices.** From index funds to target-date funds, you have options for how your money grows.
6. **It can serve as a financial lifeline.** Most plans allow loans for emergencies or first home purchases. It's not just a retirement account — it's a resource.
7. **It travels with you.** Change jobs? Your 401(k) is yours. It goes wherever you go.

How to Calculate Your Contribution

Saving a percentage of income is more effective than a fixed dollar amount — it grows automatically as your pay grows. Here's how the math works:

Salary	5% Contribution (Bi-Weekly)
$40,000	$77 / paycheck
$55,000	$106 / paycheck
$75,000	$144 / paycheck
$100,000	$192 / paycheck

That number looks different for everyone. If it feels like too much right now — start smaller. What matters is that it's automated and consistent.

Your Next Move

1. Check your enrollment status. If you're not enrolled, contact HR today.
2. Find out your employer's match formula — and confirm you're contributing enough to get all of it.
3. Set your contribution as a percentage, not a dollar amount. That way it grows with your pay.

STEP 2

Getting Started

Eligibility, enrollment, and why automation is the best financial decision you'll ever make

I landed a job in my twenties that came with a 401(k) — but I couldn't have told you what it was or how it worked. Nobody had explained it to me. So when my employer's auto-enrollment feature signed me up automatically — before I could overthink it or talk myself out of it — that quiet, invisible enrollment changed my financial life.

I didn't understand what was happening at first. I didn't even realize money was coming out of every paycheck and getting invested on my behalf. Then my employer started matching my contribution — free money I didn't know I was earning.

Looking back, I'm grateful the decision was made for me. If it had been left up to the younger me, I might have put it off for years.

Who Can Join?

Every company does this a little differently. Some let you join right away. Others require a waiting period — typically one year of service and age 21. Your HR department or plan summary will tell you exactly what applies to your situation.

Charlie's Story
When Charlie started her new job at 22, she had to wait a year before her 401(k) kicked in. Instead of doing nothing, she opened an IRA and started contributing right away. By the time she became eligible for the 401(k), she wasn't starting from zero — she had already built the habit and the confidence that comes with it. The waiting period became an advantage.

Auto-Enrollment: The Feature That Works While You Sleep

Many companies now automatically enroll new employees in their 401(k) — usually within the first 30 days. Unless you opt out, contributions start coming out of your paycheck automatically.

More companies than ever before now auto-enroll at 6% or higher. That means more people are starting to build wealth before they've even had a chance to second-guess it.

If you're auto-enrolled, the most important thing to check is your default contribution rate. Most plans default to 3-5% — which is a start, but often isn't enough to capture your full employer match or hit your long-term savings goals. Look at what you're enrolled at, and consider increasing it.

Dollar-Cost Averaging: The Strategy You're Already Using

Here's an investment strategy that sounds complicated but you're already doing — probably without realizing it.

Dollar-cost averaging means you invest the same amount on a regular schedule. You don't wait for a "good time." You just keep going. Every paycheck, your 401(k) buys shares. When prices are low, you buy more shares. When prices are high, you buy fewer. It happens automatically.

Think about how you buy groceries. Every week, you go to the store and pay whatever the prices are that day. You don't wait until eggs are cheaper. You buy what you need, when you need it, and move on. Investing works the same way.

The result: you naturally avoid the trap of trying to time the market. You just keep investing — and over time, the average cost of your shares tends to work in your favor.

Your Next Move

1. Confirm your eligibility and enrollment status with HR.
2. If auto-enrolled, check your contribution rate and increase it if needed.
3. Review your default investment option — most plans default to a target-date fund, which is a reasonable starting point.

STEP 3

Contributions

How much can you save — and the Roth vs. Pre-Tax decision that follows you to retirement

There have been many times throughout my career where I've sat down with someone who thought they were saving one thing, and found out they were actually saving something else entirely.

One example that comes up more than you'd think: the difference between a percentage and a flat dollar amount. Someone means to save 5% of their paycheck, but when they filled out their enrollment form, they accidentally selected $5 instead. For most paychecks, $5 is a lot less than 5% of salary.

It sounds like a small mix-up. But these are exactly the kinds of things that show up when you actually take the time to dig into what someone thinks they set up versus what they actually did.

That's the kind of thing that's easy to miss — which is exactly why it's worth checking. So here's the number itself: how much you're actually allowed to contribute.

How Much Can You Contribute?

For 2026, you can put in up to $24,500 of your own money. That's the limit. Are you 50 or older? You can add $8,000 more. That's called a catch-up contribution. Your new total: $32,500.

Are you 60, 61, 62, or 63? Your catch-up is even bigger: $11,250. Your new total: $35,750.

Here's a new rule for 2026. If you earned more than $150,000 last year, your catch-up money must go into a Roth account. You no longer get to choose pre-tax for that part. Ask HR if your plan offers a Roth option — if it doesn't, you may not be able to make catch-up contributions at all until it does.

One more thing. These limits only cover what you put in. Your employer's match sits on top. So the real total going into your account each year can be a lot higher than $24,500.

Year	Employee Limit	Age 50+ Total With Catch-Up
2026	$24,500	$32,500 total
2025	$23,500	$31,000 total
2024	$23,000	$30,500 total
2023	$22,500	$30,000 total

Serita's Question

When Serita started a new job, she wanted to save as much as possible and asked HR a smart question: does her employer's match count toward her personal limit? The answer: no. Her contributions and her employer's are tracked separately. The $24,500 limit is hers alone — her employer's match is an addition on top, not a subtraction from her limit.

Pre-Tax or Roth: The Decision That Follows You to Retirement

When you contribute to your 401(k), you typically have two options. Not everyone realizes this — many people were defaulted into one without ever making a conscious choice.

Pre-Tax (Traditional)

Your contribution comes out of your paycheck before taxes. That means you pay less income tax this year — but when you withdraw the money in retirement, you'll owe income taxes then.

The appeal here is simple: you keep more of your paycheck today. The trade is that the taxes aren't gone — they're waiting until you withdraw the money later.

Roth

Your contribution comes out after taxes. You pay taxes now. But when you retire and start withdrawing, qualified withdrawals — including all the growth your money earned over the years — can come out tax-free. (Roth has its own rules, including a five-year holding period. Talk to your plan administrator or advisor about your specific situation.)

No required minimum distributions, either. The IRS doesn't force you to start taking money out at a certain age. Your money can keep growing for as long as you want.

Roth may appeal to you if you think your income — and your tax rate — could be higher later on. That's often worth considering early in a career, though everyone's path looks different.

A Way to Think About It

There's no formula here, because so much depends on a future none of us can see. The real question is whether you'd rather pay the taxes now or later. When it's hard to say, many people choose a mix of both.

You don't have to pick just one. Many people split their contributions between Pre-Tax and Roth — as long as the total stays within the annual limit. This gives you flexibility in retirement to choose which account to withdraw from based on your tax situation that year.

And here's something people don't often realize: your employer match applies no matter which option you choose.

Your Next Move

1. Check whether your plan offers both Pre-Tax and Roth options — many do.
2. Consider your current tax bracket and expected retirement income when deciding.
3. If you're under 40 or expect your income to grow significantly, Roth is worth serious consideration.
4. Talk to a financial advisor if you're unsure — this decision has decades of implications.

STEP 4

The Employer Match

The closest thing to free money there is — and how to make sure you get all of it

Most people know their employer offers a match. Very few know exactly how it works. And fewer still know if they're getting every dollar of it. By the end of this step, you will.

How Matching Works

An employer match is just what it sounds like. Your employer adds money to your 401(k) based on what you put in. Think of it as a bonus you unlock just by contributing. The formula varies from company to company. Let's walk through the most common ones:

One term worth knowing: Safe Harbor. That's a plan that follows special IRS rules. In return, the employer gives a set contribution that's yours right away.

Formula	Example (on $60,000 salary)	Your Total Going In
100% match up to 5%	You put in $3,000. They add $3,000.	$6,000 / year
50% match up to 6%	You put in $3,600. They add $1,800.	$5,400 / year
Safe Harbor: 100% of 3%, 50% of next 2%	You put in $3,000. They add $2,400.	$5,400 / year

> **Sarah's Story**
> Sarah earns $60,000. Her company matches 50% of contributions up to 6%. She contributes 6%. That gives her $3,600 from her own paycheck — plus $1,800 from her employer — for a total of $5,400 going into her account each year. Before a single investment return, she's already ahead.

Understanding Vesting

This is the one I wish someone had pulled me aside about early. Most people learn it the hard way. They find out the week they're handing in their notice. That's when they do the math on what they're about to walk away from. Let's make sure that's not you.

Vesting decides when your employer's money truly becomes yours to keep. Your own contributions are always 100% yours from day one. But your employer's contributions may have strings attached.

Immediate Vesting: Everything your employer puts in is yours the moment it lands in your account. This is common in Safe Harbor plans. It's the most employee-friendly setup.

Graded Vesting: You earn ownership bit by bit. A typical graded schedule: 20% per year over five years. Leave after three years? You own 60% of what your employer put in.

Cliff Vesting: You own nothing until a set date — then 100% all at once. The most common cliff period is three years. Leave after two years and eleven months? You walk away with zero employer contributions.

Know your vesting schedule. It should be in your plan documents, or ask HR. This matters most if you're thinking about a job change. The unvested amount is the real cost of leaving early.

Other Employer Contributions

Some plans offer more than just a match.

Profit Sharing: Your employer puts a share of company profits into your 401(k). This happens no matter what you put in. The amount changes year to year, based on how the company performs.

Safe Harbor Profit Sharing: Your employer puts in a fixed percentage of your salary every year. It does not depend on company performance. If your plan offers this, it shows up automatically — and it's usually vested right away.

Your Next Move

1. Find your exact employer match formula — it's in your plan documents or HR portal.
2. Confirm you're contributing at least enough to get the full match. If not, increase your rate today.
3. Check your vesting schedule — especially if you're thinking about changing jobs.
4. Ask HR whether your plan includes profit sharing or safe harbor contributions.

STEP 5

Your Investment Options

How to choose where your money goes — without needing to become a stock expert

After I got married, my wife started a new job. She sat down to fill out her 401(k) enrollment forms. Simple enough — until she got to the investment section. Sixty options.

She's smart. She's good with money. And she still felt completely stuck. That's not a failure on her part. That's just too many choices.

Here's the good news: you don't need to know all sixty options. You really only need to understand a few.

The Simple Starting Point: Target-Date Funds

If you're not sure where to start, a target-date fund is often the right answer. That's true even if you are sure.

Here's how it works: you pick the fund closest to the year you expect to retire. Say you plan to retire around 2050. You choose the "Target Date 2050" fund. That's it.

The fund does everything else. Early on, it leans hard into stocks for growth. As you near retirement, it slowly shifts toward bonds for stability. The pros who run the fund handle the rebalancing for you.

You're not picking single stocks. You're not trying to time the market. You're letting time and a broad mix of investments do the work.

> **Finding your target-date fund**
> Look for a fund with a year in its name. Think "Vanguard Target Retirement 2055" or "Fidelity Freedom 2050." That year should be close to when you plan to retire. Are you 35 now, planning to retire at 65? Then look for a fund near 2055.

The Basics: What You're Actually Investing In

You don't need to memorize any of this. But learn a few basic building blocks in plain English. Then every choice in your plan gets a little less scary. Here's what you're working with:

Stocks: A small piece of ownership in a company. When the company grows, your investment grows. Prices can swing in the short term. But stocks are one of the best wealth-building tools when time is on your side.

Bonds: A loan to a company or government. It pays you steady interest. Bonds are more stable than stocks, but they grow less. They help protect what you've built as retirement gets close.

Index Funds: A fund that tracks a whole market index, like the S&P 500. It spreads your money widely and keeps costs low. Over long stretches, it beats most funds run by active managers. Often the best default choice.

Mutual Funds: A pool of investments run by professionals. Fees are higher than index funds. They can be useful — just watch the expense ratio.

The One Number Worth Checking: Your Expense Ratio

Every investment option has an expense ratio. That's a yearly fee, charged as a percentage of your balance. It comes out automatically, so most people never notice it.

But it compounds, just like your returns. A low-cost index fund typically charges around 0.07%. An actively managed fund often charges around 1.00%. That looks like a tiny gap. Now contribute $300/month for 30 years. That difference can grow past $80,000.

Here's where it gets tricky. Some funds have additional fees hidden in categories called "12b-1 fees" or "revenue sharing." Some plans charge separate administrative fees on top of the fund expense. If you have three or four funds in your account, the total fee load can be difficult to calculate without help.

You are not expected to decode all of this on your own. But you can watch for three signals that mean your fees are likely too high:

Signal 1: Your default fund's expense ratio is above 0.75%. The best target-date funds run around 0.10%. If yours is five to ten times higher, ask why.

Signal 2: There's no index fund option in your plan. In 2026, a plan without at least one low-cost S&P 500 or total market index fund is a plan that hasn't been reviewed recently.

Signal 3: You can't get a clear answer on total plan costs. Ask HR: "What are the total fees I'm paying — including recordkeeping and administration, not just fund expenses?" If they can't or won't tell you, that itself is the signal.

If your gut says your plan feels expensive, a one-time conversation with a fee-only advisor can give you a clear answer. Appendix C at the back of this book covers when that conversation makes sense.

Your Next Move

1. Log into your 401(k) portal and review your current investment selections.
2. If you haven't chosen, look for the target-date fund closest to your retirement year.
3. Find the expense ratio on your current funds — aim for under 0.50% when possible.
4. Set a reminder to review your investments once a year. You don't need to check constantly — just annually.

STEP 6

Withdrawals, Loans, and Rollovers

When you can access your money — and what it costs if you do it early

Years ago, after leaving a banking job in my twenties, my old employer asked what I wanted to do with my 401(k) balance. The HR rep mentioned I could take it as cash or roll it over.

I chose the cash. I went shopping.

Big mistake. Not just the 10% early withdrawal penalty. Not just the income taxes owed on the full amount. But also all the compound growth that money would have earned over the next thirty years. That decision cost me far more than I ever spent that day.

I'm telling you this so you don't do the same thing.

Your Withdrawal Options

Rollover: When you leave a job, you can move your 401(k). It can go to your new employer's plan or into an IRA. A direct rollover into an account of the same tax type generally avoids current taxes and penalties, and your money keeps growing as if nothing changed. (Converting from a Traditional to a Roth account is different — that creates taxable income in the year of the conversion. Talk to a tax professional before making that call.) For most people changing jobs, a direct rollover is the right starting point.

401(k) Loan: If your plan allows loans (many do, but not all), you can generally borrow up to 50% of your vested balance, or $50,000, whichever is less. You repay it over five years. The interest goes back into your own account. But leave the job before it's repaid, and the remaining balance often becomes taxable right away.

Hardship Withdrawal: For specific emergencies — medical bills, a first home purchase, certain urgent situations. You'll owe income taxes on the amount. Some situations also avoid the 10% penalty. This is a last resort, not a first response.

Early Withdrawal (under 59½): Available in a true crisis, but costly. You'll pay a 10% penalty plus income taxes on the full amount. Take out $10,000, and you may keep $6,000 or less after everything comes out.

> **Lisa's Story — and What Could Have Been Different**
> Lisa was a hard worker with no safety net. When a family emergency hit, she had no emergency savings and no 401(k) loan option available. She turned to a payday lender — nearly 400% interest. One loan became several. What started as a few hundred dollars spiraled into a debt that took years to escape.
>
> This is exactly why a small emergency fund matters so much — a cushion between you and the unexpected, so you're never forced into a desperate choice. Even a modest one changes everything.

Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs)

Here's a twist that catches people off guard. Traditional 401(k)s are subject to Required Minimum Distributions — the IRS eventually requires you to start taking money out each year. Under current law, RMDs generally start at age 73, though your specific age depends on your birth year and current tax law (verify with the IRS or a tax professional). That's true whether you need it that year or not. The amount is set by a formula, so there's no guesswork. Just don't ignore it. Missing a required withdrawal can trigger a significant penalty.

If you're nearing 73 — or within 10 years of it — start planning now. A financial advisor can help you map out a withdrawal plan that keeps your tax bill low.

Good to know: Roth 401(k)s have no RMDs. If your savings are in a Roth, this rule doesn't apply.

What to Do With an Old 401(k)

Do you have a 401(k) from an old job, sitting somewhere forgotten? It deserves your attention. It's still your money — and it should be working for you.

You have three options. Roll it into your current employer's plan. Roll it into an IRA. Or leave it where it is. What you don't want is to forget about it. Old 401(k)s can pile up fees and hold outdated investments. They can even get lost over time if your contact details change.

Your Next Move

1. Know your withdrawal options before you need them — not during a crisis.
2. If you're changing jobs, ask about a direct rollover before touching the balance.
3. If you're approaching 73, talk to a financial advisor about your RMD strategy.
4. Track down any old 401(k) accounts from previous employers and consolidate.

STEP 7

Retirement Planning and Goals

Getting honest about the number you're building toward

When I was young, I thought retirement came with a big payout. A prize for finishing the race. I pictured reaching some magic age one day and getting a giant check.

I've since learned that's not how it works.

Retirement doesn't come with an automatic paycheck. You build it. Contribution by contribution, year by year, decision by decision. The good news? Once you understand what you're building toward, the choices get much clearer.

The 80% Rule

Here's a simple way to cut through the "how much is enough?" worry. Aim to replace about 80% of the income you earn today. Some costs drop in retirement — commuting, work clothes, certain taxes. Others rise — healthcare, travel if that's your vision, and more time for things that cost money.

So if you earn $80,000 today, a good target is $64,000 per year in retirement income. Want that from savings alone, using the 4% withdrawal rule? You'd need roughly $1.6 million saved.

These are starting points, not guarantees. The 80% rule and the 4% rule are useful frames of reference, but your actual number depends on your lifestyle, health, taxes, inflation, and how markets behave over your specific years. Treat these as a map, not a promise.

That number might feel big. But watch how it breaks down over a career. It's more doable than it sounds.

> **Liam's Adjustment**
> At 35, Liam ran his numbers through a retirement calculator and discovered he'd fall $200,000 short of his goal if nothing changed. Instead of panicking, he made two adjustments: doubled his 401(k) contributions from 5% to 10%, and shifted toward growth-focused funds. When he re-ran the numbers, he was back on track. Two decisions. Done in an afternoon.

Where Social Security Fits In

Social Security is part of the picture — but not the whole picture. It was built to add to your savings, not to replace them.

You can start collecting Social Security as early as 62. But claim early, and your monthly benefit shrinks for good. Full retirement age is 67 for most people born after 1960. Every year you wait past 67 — up to age 70 — raises your monthly benefit by about 8%.

My mom retired and started taking Social Security at 62. That made sense for her situation. For many people, waiting pays off in a big way. The right choice depends on your health, your savings, and your plans. Talk to an advisor before locking in that decision.

One thing worth knowing: Social Security benefits do not pass to your adult children. Your 401(k) does — through the beneficiaries you name.

Healthcare Is a Retirement Expense

Medicare covers a lot, but not everything. A real share of healthcare costs in retirement comes out of your own pocket, not Medicare's. That gap gets filled by savings.

A Health Savings Account (HSA) is one of the most powerful retirement tools around. Most people underuse it. You can open one if you have a high-deductible health plan. Money goes in pre-tax. It grows tax-free. And withdrawals for qualified medical costs are tax-free too. After 65, non-medical HSA withdrawals avoid the penalty but are generally taxed as ordinary income. If you have access to one, it's worth maxing out.

Your Next Move

1. Use a retirement calculator to see where you currently stand if nothing changes.
2. Know your Social Security full retirement age — and the benefit of delaying.
3. Factor healthcare into your retirement budget from the beginning.
4. If you have access to an HSA, contribute to it consistently.

STEP 8

Monitoring Your 401(k)

Staying connected to what you've built — without obsessing over every market move

Over the last twenty years, I've met a lot of people who thought their money was working when it wasn't.

From old 401(k)s to IRAs, they'd come into a one-on-one meeting assuming their money was invested appropriately and growing. Then, under a little review, we'd discover something they didn't expect. An old 401(k) somehow sitting entirely in cash. An IRA in a fund that was perfect for where they were twenty years ago, but didn't match the goals they had now. Or an investment strategy that didn't account for the other assets they'd accumulated since — a house, a business, other savings — leaving the whole picture out of alignment.

It happens. Life has so many moving parts.

So the question becomes: how do you keep an eye on it all?

How Often Should You Check?

Once a year is enough for most people. Check more often if your life changes in a big way. Check less often, and you risk drifting. You could end up far from where you want to be without realizing it.

You're not trying to time the market. You're making sure the plan you set up still fits the life you're living.

What to Look For

Are you actually invested? Confirm your contributions are going into the investments that make sense for you and your goals — not sitting in a default cash fund.

Does your allocation still fit? In plain terms: is your money in a mix that leans toward growth, toward safety, or somewhere in between — and does that mix still match where you are in life? If you're not sure, that's a conversation worth having with someone who can help you look at it.

Has your life changed? New job, marriage, kids, a home purchase, a health change — any of these calls for a portfolio review.

Are you on track? Use your plan's retirement calculator or forecast tool. It shows where you're headed if you stay the course.

Your 401(k) is a marathon. You trained for it, contribution by contribution. Don't sprint, don't quit, and don't try to run it in a day. Just keep your pace. Not sure if you're running at the right pace? This is where an experienced advisor or coach can help.

The Pull to Speed Things Up

Sometimes patience runs out. Or sometimes it's not about patience at all — some people just have a natural appetite for more risk. Either way, when that pull shows up, people go looking for a way to speed things up. The most common version I've seen is day trading.

Day trading means buying and selling investments frequently — sometimes multiple times a day — trying to profit from short-term price movements. Some people study it seriously and treat it like a business. Some of them win sometimes.

But over twenty years, I've watched a different pattern play out. People ask me if they can day trade inside their 401(k). Most plans don't allow it — 401(k)s are designed to hold funds, not individual stocks you can move in and out of. So they don't stop there. They open a brokerage account and fund it from their home equity line of credit, or from their savings, or from money they were setting aside for something else. Then they trade.

I know two people who lost nearly everything that way. The pain is real.

Here's the thing worth understanding: the fact that your 401(k) doesn't let you day trade isn't a limitation. It's protection. It's designed to be your steady, long-term investment vehicle — the one you contribute to for decades and let compound quietly in the background. If the urge to actively trade shows up, that's worth paying attention to. It doesn't automatically mean the answer is to find another account to do it from.

The people who won with their retirement savings weren't the ones who timed the market. They were the ones who stayed invested, kept contributing, and let time do the work.

Your Next Move

1. Log in once a year to review your investments and overall balance.
2. Confirm your money is actually invested — not sitting in cash.
3. Check that your investment mix still matches your goals and life stage.
4. If any of it feels unclear, bring in a second pair of eyes.

STEP 9

Beneficiaries

The five-minute update that protects everything you've built

We name beneficiaries so we can tell our money where to go. It takes two minutes, it's entirely your call, and you can update it anytime. That's worth keeping in mind — because here's what usually happens instead.

Someone starts a job, signs up for their 401(k), and a few years later takes a new job, leaving the old 401(k) behind. That's fine on its own. But they never think to go back and update the beneficiary on that old account.

That matters, because your beneficiary designation is a legal document. And here's the part that surprises most people: it overrides your will. If your will says one thing and your 401(k) beneficiary form says another, the 401(k) wins — every time.

A contingent beneficiary is your backup — whoever receives the money if your primary beneficiary isn't able to, or can't be located. Don't leave it blank.

The Spousal Rule

If you're married, your spouse is usually your default primary beneficiary. That's true even if you never named them yourself. Want to name someone else instead? Your spouse has to sign a notarized form agreeing to it.

This rule protects spouses. It stops someone from being cut out of a 401(k) without knowing it. Just know the rule is there.

When to Update

Consider reviewing it every year, or any time there's a major life event — that way you always feel up to date.

Also — I'm not saying you need to have all your money in one place, but this is one vote in favor of keeping your accounts consolidated where it makes sense. Fewer accounts means fewer forms to track, fewer logins to remember, and a much easier time keeping your beneficiaries current across the board.

Your Beneficiary Audit

Most people update the beneficiary on their current 401(k) and stop there. But you probably have more than one retirement account — old 401(k)s from previous jobs, maybe an IRA or two. Each one has its own beneficiary designation, and each one overrides your will.

That means whoever you named years ago — on an account from a job you left a decade back — is still the name on file. Not who's in your will. Not who you'd choose today. Just the person listed on that specific form.

This audit takes fifteen minutes per account. Do it once. Give yourself some peace of mind.

Account	Primary	Contingent	Done
Current 401(k)			☐
Old 401(k)			☐
Old 401(k)			☐
Traditional / Roth IRA			☐
Spouse / partner's plans			☐

Any row where you couldn't fill in a name is your action item this week. Call the plan administrator. Get on the website. Find out who's listed where. Update if needed.

Your Next Move

1. Log into your 401(k) portal right now and check who your beneficiaries are.
2. Update if anything has changed since you enrolled.
3. Add a contingent beneficiary if you haven't — don't leave it blank.
4. Check all accounts: current employer, former employers, IRAs.

STEP 10

Building Beyond the 401(k)

Seeing your 401(k) as a bridge, not a finish line

Most 401(k) books stop at retirement. This one won't.

You're allowed to think bigger than retirement. Most people don't — not because they can't, but because no one ever told them they could.

Your 401(k) is designed for retirement. That's still true. Nothing in this chapter changes that. But the same money that will one day fund your retirement can, in the right hands and at the right time, help fund something else along the way. A property that generates income. A business. A different kind of life.

This chapter isn't a how-to. It's an invitation to see your 401(k) differently.

What I've Watched Over Twenty Years

In twenty years of sitting across the table from people, I've watched the same story play out more times than I can count.

Someone starts with almost nothing. A few maxed-out credit cards. A small 401(k) balance. A job that barely covers the bills. Then later, that same person is running a business with multiple locations, or a real estate portfolio with a steady stream of rental income.

For a long time, I didn't understand how they got there. When they'd tell me they used a 401(k) loan as the down payment on their first rental property, or credit cards to buy the first piece of equipment for a business, I'd think — that seems risky. Because it is.

But then I'd watch what happened next. The rental property paid its own mortgage and eventually paid off the credit cards. The business grew from one truck to a fleet. The 401(k), even though it had lost some compound growth during the loan period, kept accumulating.

The dot I couldn't connect at first was this: some people don't see their 401(k) as a finish line. They see it as a bridge. And the bridge is what got them somewhere else.

Our Story

My family did this once. Around 2016, we used a loan from my 401(k) as part of the down payment on our first investment property. We used credit cards to rehab it. Then we refinanced, pulled equity out to pay off the credit card debt, and kept the asset. It worked.

But I want to tell you honestly what actually made it work.

We didn't figure this out alone. We had a mentor who owned 60 rental properties. She'd done this many times. She knew what to look for in a property, what could go wrong with a rehab, what a lender would want to see for the refinance. She wasn't a passive advisor — she was actively involved. Without her, I'm not sure we would have done it. And I'm not sure it would have worked if we had.

The market also helped. 2016 was a favorable time for this — rates were low, values were rising, and refinancing to pull equity out was straightforward. That same playbook might be a little more challenging today because of the interest rate environment. But that doesn't mean it's off the table.

I'm telling you the whole picture because most 401(k) books won't. The goal isn't to sell you on a tactic — it's to help you see what's possible. Big moves are possible, but almost nobody who succeeds at them does them alone.

Leverage Isn't Debt. It's a Different Animal.

Most people hear the word "debt" and freeze. That makes sense. The debt most of us grew up around — credit cards, car loans, personal loans — is the kind of debt that shrinks your life. You pay interest every month. The thing you bought is often worth less than when you bought it.

But there's another kind of debt that works the other way. It's used to buy something that earns money. And the money it earns pays the debt back.

That's leverage.

Here's a simple picture.

You have $30,000 in savings. You could invest all $30,000 in the stock market. If stocks go up 10%, you make $3,000.

Or you could use that same $30,000 as a down payment on a $300,000 rental property. The bank lends you the other $270,000. If the property goes up 10%, it's now worth $330,000. You made $30,000.

Same money in. Very different result.

That's what leverage can do.

Stocks: $30,000 Invested	**Real Estate: $30,000 as a Down Payment**
$30,000 × 10% return = $3,000 gain	$30,000 on a $300,000 property
Total value: $33,000	$300,000 × 10% appreciation = $30,000 gain
10% return on your money	Total value: $330,000
	100% return on your $30,000

The renter pays your mortgage every month. If there's money left after taxes, insurance, and repairs, that leftover is yours. Meanwhile, the property is slowly getting more valuable in the background.

That's why real estate has built so much wealth for so many families. It's not that real estate is magic. It's that leverage lets your money control something bigger than itself.

Same idea when someone borrows money to buy a business. The business earns money. That money pays the loan back. The owner doesn't have to work harder — the business is doing the work.

But leverage cuts both ways.

If the property goes down 10% instead of up, you don't lose $3,000. You lose the whole $30,000. Vacancies, broken furnaces, rising interest rates — any one of these can turn a good deal into a hard one fast.

Leverage isn't good or bad. It's a tool. Used carefully, it multiplies what your money can do. Used carelessly, it multiplies mistakes.

I'm not telling you to use leverage. I'm telling you it exists. And most people who build real wealth beyond their salary have used it, in some form, at some point.

Working for Money vs. Owning Assets

There's a limit to how much you can earn from working. There's not really a limit to how much you can earn from ownership.

A job pays you for your time. When you stop working, the paychecks stop.

An asset pays you whether you're working or not.

A rental property generates monthly income while you sleep. A well-run business generates profit whether the owner is on vacation or in the office. An investment portfolio compounds without anyone touching it.

This is why most people who build meaningful wealth over the long term eventually own something — a business, real estate, or investments significant enough to produce meaningful income on their own. Not because ownership is easy. Because ownership breaks the trade of time for money that keeps most people locked into their salary.

Your 401(k) is one form of ownership already. You own shares of the funds inside it. Over time, those shares are meant to grow and eventually pay you in retirement. That's real ownership.

The question this chapter is trying to plant is: could there be another form of ownership your 401(k) helps you build along the way?

How the 401(k) Fits In

There are a few real pathways for using retirement money to help fund ownership.

The most common is a 401(k) loan — borrowing against your own balance (up to the plan's limits), then paying yourself back over time. The mechanics matter, the tax risk if you leave your job matters, and the opportunity cost of the money not compounding while it's out matters. Appendix D at the back of this book walks through the specifics.

Another pathway is a structure called a ROBS — Rollovers as Business Startups — that lets you use qualified retirement funds to invest in a business you own. Done right, it doesn't trigger current taxes or the early-withdrawal penalty. Done wrong, it can create a disqualified plan, back taxes, and IRS scrutiny. This is not a DIY move. Appendix D covers when to consider it and who to work with.

And in some cases, having a growing 401(k) balance simply strengthens what lenders will approve for an SBA loan or an investment property mortgage — not because you're spending the balance, but because it strengthens your overall financial picture.

The mechanics are less important than the mindset. If any of this catches your imagination, the next step isn't action. It's education. Then it's mentorship.

The Real Seed

You don't have to do any of this. Most readers of this book won't. And if you never do — if your 401(k) simply grows quietly for thirty years and one day funds a comfortable retirement — that is a good life. It's what this book was designed to make possible.

But if some part of you reads this chapter and something starts to stretch, pay attention to that. It might mean nothing. It might mean something. Either way, that stretch is worth understanding.

There are many paths. Maybe today isn't the right moment for real estate — so it becomes a good moment to invest more into your 401(k) because other doors aren't opening yet. Or maybe now is exactly the right moment to buy a business. Or start one. Or make a different move altogether.

Either way, don't go at it alone. The people who make big moves and come out ahead are almost always the ones who found someone who had been there first.

Don't rush to cash out your 401(k) to chase the dream. Try to find other ways to fund the dream first. Let the asset grow while you work on yourself and pursue what matters. With counsel and wisdom, there may be a time and place where it makes sense to use some of your resources in one asset — to trade it for another. But either way, don't rush it.

Your Next Move

1. Think bigger than retirement. Ask what freedom you actually want to build — retirement, ownership, income streams, or a combination.
2. Learn the difference between saving, investing, leverage, and ownership. These are four different games, and knowing which one you're playing changes the strategy.
3. If real estate interests you, study the numbers — cash flow, vacancies, maintenance, exit strategy — before you study any specific property.
4. Explore rollover-based business funding (like ROBS) only with a specialized advisor. This is legal territory, not a weekend project.
5. Protect the foundation first. Don't risk your retirement to chase a next-level opportunity until the basics — match, contribution rate, beneficiaries — are solid.

STEP 11

Designing Your Ideal Plan

What a truly optimized 401(k) looks like — and how to get yours there

If I could go back and talk to my younger self, here's what I'd say:

Build something great. And while you're building, give yourself permission to invest along the way — in yourself and in your 401(k). Automate it. It grows with you and it's there when you need it — in retirement, or before.

The Ideal Setup

An ideal 401(k) isn't complicated. Here's what it looks like:

1. **Auto-enrolled,** so the decision is already made. You're contributing before you have a chance to talk yourself out of it.
2. **Contributing at least to the employer match threshold,** so you're never leaving free money behind.
3. **Invested in a target-date fund or thoughtfully diversified portfolio,** with low expense ratios.
4. **Both Pre-Tax and Roth contributions,** for tax flexibility in retirement.
5. **Reviewed once a year,** with contributions increased whenever income increases.

Your Investment Approach by Decade

Life Stage	Strategy
20s–40s	Growth-focused. Mostly stocks. Time absorbs the ups and downs.
50s	Balanced. Growth still matters, but protection starts to share the stage.
60s+	Preservation. Slowly shift toward stability. Protect what you've built.

Active vs. Passive Investing

You'll hear these two terms a lot, so let's make them simple. Active funds try to beat the market by picking winners. Passive funds (like index funds) simply track the whole market. Active funds usually charge higher fees. And over long periods, most of them fall behind their passive peers.

The data is steady on this. After fees, passive index funds beat most actively managed funds over 15-year periods — lower costs, broader diversification, and a steadier ride. For most 401(k) investors, that's the smarter choice.

Your Next Move

1. Set a contribution target of 15% of income — starting where you can and building toward it.
2. If you're under 40, seriously consider the Roth option for at least a portion of contributions.
3. Favor low-cost index funds when available in your plan.
4. Increase contributions by 1% every year you receive a raise.

STEP 12

Case Studies

Seeing the power of small decisions across three real scenarios

I've sat down with hundreds of people and shown them these same numbers on a whiteboard. Every time, I watch the moment it clicks. A few small choices, made early, beat almost anything you could do later. Numbers tell stories. Here are three that are worth understanding.

Assumptions used across these case studies: consistent annual contributions, a 7% average annual return unless otherwise noted, all figures rounded, no salary increases or breaks in service. These are illustrative examples, not projections. Real markets and real careers rarely move in straight lines.

Case Study 1: The Cost of Starting Ten Years Late

	Stella (Starts at 25)	Alex (Starts at 35)
Annual Contribution	$3,000	$3,000
Years Contributing	40	30
Total Contributed	$120,000	$90,000
Balance at 65 (7% return)	$598,905	$283,382

Stella contributed $30,000 more over her career. But her balance is more than double Alex's. That gap is time — not money.

Ten years of compound growth is worth far more than the dollars that funded it.

Case Study 2: What 1% More in Returns Means

	Chris (10% Return)	Taylor (11% Return)
Salary	$100,000	$100,000
Savings Rate	10% per year	10% per year
Years Investing	35	35
Balance at 65	$2,710,244	$3,415,896

One percentage point in returns. Same contribution. Same career. A $700,000 difference. This is why your investment allocation and expense ratios deserve attention.

Case Study 3: The Employer Match Gap

	Rachel (3% Match)	James (5% Match)
Salary	$75,000	$75,000
Their Contribution	$7,500 / year	$7,500 / year
Employer Match	$2,250 / year	$3,750 / year
Total Annual	$9,750	$11,250
Balance at 65 (7% return)	$1,017,000	$1,174,000

Same salary. Same personal contribution. Same career. A $157,000 difference — just from the matching formula. This is why your employer's match formula matters when evaluating a job offer.

Your Next Move

1. Start contributing as early as possible — even a small amount.
2. Maximize your employer match before anything else.
3. Pay attention to your investment returns and fees — 1% matters over decades.

STEP 13

Common Mistakes

What to avoid — and how to fix it if you've already made one

One of the biggest financial mistakes I've seen isn't any single decision. It's the belief that you're supposed to figure all of this out alone. Nobody tells us about our 401(k). Nobody explains the vesting schedule when we're hired. Nobody walks us through the Roth vs. Pre-Tax decision.

A guest speaker at a financial wellness workshop I hosted once put it simply: "Never money alone." He didn't mean the money itself — he meant you don't have to make these decisions by yourself. We're not meant to figure out life alone, and money is no different. It's okay to ask questions, talk to someone you trust, or find an advisor who can sit down and look at it with you.

The mistakes below aren't signs of failure. They're signs that someone needed more information than they had. If any of these are yours — now you know.

The 10 Most Common 401(k) Mistakes

1. Not Enrolling

Every month you're not enrolled, compound interest works for everyone else in your building. Auto-enrollment helps. But even the best default rate often isn't enough. Enroll. Then increase.

2. Not Claiming the Full Employer Match

This is the most costly mistake on this list. Your employer match is part of your pay. Skipping it is like turning down part of your salary — every single paycheck. Know your formula. Contribute at least to the threshold.

3. Taking Early Withdrawals

Before 59½, early withdrawals cost you a 10% penalty plus income taxes on the full amount. On top of that, the money stops compounding the moment it leaves the account. Try every other option first: a 401(k) loan, a hardship withdrawal, or cutting back contributions for a while. An early withdrawal is usually the most costly fix for a money problem.

4. Not Increasing Contributions Over Time

Setting your contribution once and forgetting it is the slow way to fall behind. Give yourself a 1% raise every year — or every time you get a raise. You'll never feel it in your paycheck. Give it enough years, and you'll feel it in your account balance.

5. Ignoring Fees

Emma noticed her 401(k) wasn't growing as quickly as she expected. When she investigated, she found her investments carried expense ratios of 0.90% and higher. She switched a portion into lower-cost index funds. The math changed immediately — not in the returns, but in how much of those returns she kept.

Check your expense ratios. Ask HR what lower-cost options your plan offers. Even a 0.50% gap in fees compounds into real money over decades.

6. Not Reviewing Your Portfolio

Your 401(k) needs attention — not constant attention, but yearly attention. A portfolio that made sense at 30 may not be right at 45. Rebalance once a year. Make sure your mix still fits your timeline and your comfort with risk.

7. Outdated Beneficiary Designations

Your beneficiary form overrides your will. Plenty of people still have a name on file they chose years ago and never revisited. After any major life change — a marriage, a new child, a move, a new job — take five minutes and update it. Skipping it can create real complications for the people you care about.

8. Over-Concentrating in Company Stock

Your job already depends on your company doing well. Your retirement savings shouldn't depend on the same thing. Does your 401(k) hold more than 10-15% in your employer's stock? Then one bad stretch can hurt you twice at once — job loss and portfolio loss. Diversify.

9. Forgetting Old 401(k) Accounts

Every job with a 401(k) left an account behind. Forgotten accounts can pile up fees and hold outdated investments. Your contact details may no longer be current. Track them down. Roll them in. Your retirement savings should work as one plan.

10. Not Planning for Required Minimum Distributions

Traditional 401(k)s are subject to Required Minimum Distributions. Under current law, RMDs generally start at age 73, though your exact starting age may depend on your birth year, whether you're still working, and your plan's rules. Missing an RMD can trigger a significant penalty, so if you're within 10 years of RMD age, start planning now.

Your Next Move

1. Review this list against your current situation and identify any that apply.
2. Address each one — they're all fixable, and none of them are permanent.
3. You don't have to figure this out alone. That's what advisors, HR departments, and books like this one exist for.

STEP 14

Own Your Future

You showed up. That changes everything.

You've done something most people never do.

Most people have a 401(k). Very few have taken the time to understand it, optimize it, and connect it to the life they actually want to build.

You did that.

What's Actually Possible From Here

When you consistently manage the small things — saving, investing, reviewing, adjusting — bigger things become possible. Not overnight, and not because of any single decision. But the freedom to say yes to the right opportunity, and no to the wrong one, is built exactly this way — one contribution, one review, one adjustment at a time.

And something most people don't think about: legacy. Your 401(k) doesn't disappear when you're gone. Through your beneficiary designations, it continues. What you build now is the foundation of something that outlives you.

The Power of Writing It Down

A well-known study by Dr. Gail Matthews at Dominican University found that people who write down their goals are 42%

more likely to achieve them. Not because writing is magic. Because clarity is.

When you write something down, you're not just making a list. You're making a commitment — one you're more likely to keep because you can see it.

So before you close this book: write down your retirement vision. Write down your contribution goal. Write down the one thing you're going to do differently starting this week.

Put it somewhere you'll see it. Your phone. The bathroom mirror. A sticky note on your computer.

Not someday. This week.

Your 401(k) Action Plan

1. Enroll (or confirm enrollment)
2. Contribute at least to the full employer match
3. Review your Roth vs. Pre-Tax allocation
4. Confirm your investment selections and expense ratios
5. Update your beneficiary designations
6. Know your vesting schedule
7. Set a calendar reminder to review annually
8. Give yourself a 1% raise on your next birthday or pay raise

I'm not sure anyone can really master their money. I've spent twenty years sitting across the table from people talking about their money, and there are always more layers.

Money is a tool for the things that matter to us. What matters is deeply personal. And on top of that, we're emotional — we spend to celebrate, we spend to distract, we spend because we're human. That's why I try never to judge anyone about where they are on their journey with money.

But you can build a few habits that shape the direction you go. Start with automating your investments — that takes the decision out of your hands on the days you'd second-guess it. Then give yourself room to dream bigger. That takes real vulnerability. It doesn't come easily. But as you let yourself imagine, your imagination stretches. Opportunities become visible that weren't there before.

Do what you can with what you have. There's freedom in being present right where you are. But don't stop there. Dream along the way.

Because here's what I find fascinating: as we grow, the opportunities around us change — not because the world changed, but because we started seeing it through a new lens. Your identity grows with you. And you can only dream as far as the identity you accept as true.

So be mindful of the words you let in. The conversations you have. The labels you accept. Input shapes how you see yourself, and how you see yourself shapes what you think is possible.

The person you were yesterday couldn't see what you can see today.

THE COMMITMENT

I Did the Work

Complete this page after you've actually done the work — not just read about it

Come back to this page when you have. Sign it. Date it. Then keep this book somewhere you'll see it, so you remember what you did for yourself.

- ☐ Confirmed my current contribution rate
- ☐ Confirmed my employer's match formula
- ☐ Adjusted my contribution to capture the full match
- ☐ Chosen or confirmed my investment allocation
- ☐ Checked the expense ratio on my default fund
- ☐ Updated the beneficiaries on my current 401(k)
- ☐ Located every other retirement account I have
- ☐ Confirmed the beneficiaries on those accounts
- ☐ Set a calendar reminder to review my 401(k) annually
- ☐ Decided whether Pre-Tax, Roth, or a mix is right for me
- ☐ Given myself a 1% raise — or scheduled one for my next birthday

Date completed:

Signed:

You are not the same person who opened this book. You are someone who took control of their retirement plan. That is the whole point.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between a 401(k) and a 403(b)?

They work almost identically. The main difference: 401(k)s are offered by for-profit companies, while 403(b)s are for non-profits, schools, hospitals, and certain government organizations. Everything in this book applies to both.

How much can I contribute in 2026?

Up to $24,500 from your own paycheck. If you're 50 or older, you can add $8,000 for a total of $32,500. Ages 60-63 get a higher catch-up of $11,250, for a total of $35,750. New for 2026: if you earned over $150,000 last year, your catch-up must go in as Roth, not pre-tax. Your employer's contributions are on top of this limit.

What happens to my 401(k) if I leave my job?

It's yours. You can roll it into your new employer's plan, roll it into an IRA, or leave it with your former employer. A direct rollover into an account of the same tax type is usually the best move — it generally avoids current taxes and penalties, and your money keeps growing. Roth conversions from Traditional accounts are different and can create taxable income; talk to a tax professional first.

How do I choose between Pre-Tax and Roth?

The main difference is when you pay income taxes.

With Pre-Tax, you may lower your taxable income today. You'll pay taxes on the money — and its growth — when you withdraw it in retirement.

With Roth, you pay income taxes today. Qualified withdrawals, including the growth, can be tax-free in retirement.

Which is better depends largely on your tax situation now and what it may look like later. Since the future is hard to predict, many people choose a mix of both.

This is one decision worth discussing with a financial advisor or tax professional. They can look at your income, tax rate, and goals — and help you choose the approach that fits your life.

What is a target-date fund?

A single fund that automatically manages your asset allocation based on when you plan to retire. It starts aggressive (mostly stocks) and gradually shifts conservative (more bonds) as the target date approaches. Pick the one closest to your retirement year and let it run.

What is vesting?

Vesting determines when your employer's contributions become permanently yours. Your own contributions are always 100% yours. Employer contributions may be subject to a schedule — immediate, graded over time, or cliff (all-or-nothing at a specific date). Know yours before changing jobs.

What's an expense ratio?

An annual fee charged by an investment fund, expressed as a percentage of your balance. A 0.07% expense ratio is low (typical for index funds). A 1.00% expense ratio is high. The difference compounds significantly over decades — favor lower-cost options when available.

When can I withdraw without penalty?

At 59½, you can withdraw from your 401(k) without the 10% early withdrawal penalty. You'll still owe income taxes on Traditional 401(k) withdrawals. Roth 401(k) qualified withdrawals can be tax-free if Roth rules (including a five-year holding period) are met.

Glossary of Key Terms

401(k) Loan: A loan against your own 401(k) balance, repaid with interest that goes back into your account. Borrow up to 50% of your vested balance or $50,000, whichever is less.

Auto-Enrollment: A plan feature that automatically enrolls new employees at a default contribution rate. You can opt out, but most people who are auto-enrolled stay enrolled — which is often the best outcome.

Beneficiary: The person (or people) designated to receive your 401(k) balance if something happens to you. Overrides your will. Always keep it current.

Catch-Up Contribution: An additional amount people aged 50+ can contribute beyond the standard annual limit. Ages 60-63 have an even higher catch-up amount. Starting in 2026, anyone who earned over $150,000 the prior year must make this contribution as Roth, not pre-tax.

Cliff Vesting: A vesting schedule where you own 0% of employer contributions until a specific date, then 100% all at once.

Compound Interest: Earnings on your earnings. Your returns are reinvested and then earn returns of their own. The longer it runs, the faster it accelerates.

Dollar-Cost Averaging: Investing a fixed amount at regular intervals regardless of market conditions. Your 401(k) does this automatically — it's one of its built-in advantages.

Employer Match: A contribution your employer makes to your 401(k) based on what you put in. One of the best compensation benefits available — and one of the most commonly under-utilized.

Expense Ratio: The annual fee charged by an investment fund, expressed as a percentage. Lower is almost always better over the long term.

Graded Vesting: A vesting schedule where you earn ownership of employer contributions gradually over time — typically 20% per year over five years.

Hardship Withdrawal: A withdrawal for specific urgent needs (medical bills, first home purchase). Subject to income taxes; may avoid the 10% early withdrawal penalty in qualifying situations.

Immediate Vesting: Your employer's contributions belong to you immediately — no waiting period.

Index Fund: A low-cost fund that tracks a market index (like the S&P 500) rather than trying to beat it. Consistently outperforms most actively managed funds over long periods after fees.

Pre-Tax Contribution: A contribution made before income taxes, reducing your taxable income this year. Taxes are paid when you withdraw in retirement.

Required Minimum Distribution (RMD): A mandatory annual withdrawal from a Traditional 401(k). Under current law, RMDs generally start at age 73, though your specific starting age depends on your birth year. Verify current rules with the IRS or a tax professional. The amount is calculated by formula. Missing one can trigger a significant penalty.

Rollover: Moving your 401(k) to an IRA or new employer's plan when you change jobs. A direct rollover into the same tax type generally avoids current taxes and penalties.

Roth Contribution: A contribution made after income taxes. Growth is tax-deferred, and qualified withdrawals in retirement can be tax-free (Roth rules apply, including a five-year holding period).

Safe Harbor Match: A specific type of employer match designed to meet IRS compliance requirements. Contributions under Safe Harbor are typically immediately vested.

Target-Date Fund: A diversified fund that automatically adjusts its asset allocation based on a target retirement year. Starts aggressive, gradually shifts conservative.

Vesting: The process by which employer contributions become permanently yours over time.

APPENDIX A

Questions to Ask Your HR

A checklist you can bring to any benefits meeting

You are allowed to ask these questions. Your HR team will not think less of you for asking. In fact, most of them wish more employees would.

Bring this list to your next benefits enrollment. Email it to your HR contact. Photograph the page. It's yours.

You don't need to know the answers before you ask. The answers are the point.

About your match

1. What is our match formula, exactly?
2. What percentage do I need to contribute to capture the full match?
3. Is the match applied every paycheck, or trued up at year end?
4. When does the match vest — immediate, graded, or cliff, and over how many years?

About your investments

5. What target-date fund is the plan default?
6. What's the expense ratio on the fund I'm currently invested in?
7. Does the plan offer index funds? What are their expense ratios?

8. Is a Roth 401(k) contribution option available?

About fees

9. What are the total plan fees, including recordkeeping and administrative costs?

10. Am I paying any individual account fees beyond fund expense ratios?

About beneficiaries and access

11. Where do I update my beneficiary designations?

12. Does the plan allow loans or hardship withdrawals? Under what conditions?

13. What happens to my account when I leave the company?

If HR can't answer some of these on the spot, that's normal. Ask them to find out. If a question keeps getting deferred with no real answer, that's information too.

APPENDIX B

For Plan Sponsors and HR Directors

A plain-language guide to what you're responsible for

If you're the person at your company who ended up responsible for the 401(k) plan — whether that's HR, finance, an office manager, or the owner — this appendix is for you.

You have real legal responsibilities as a plan fiduciary. Not scary responsibilities. Real ones. You're not expected to know everything. You're expected to ask the right questions — and to document that you did.

This appendix is not legal advice. It's a plain-language starting map.

What "Fiduciary Duty" Actually Means

If your plan is subject to ERISA — and most workplace 401(k)s are — the people making decisions about the plan are considered fiduciaries. That includes anyone with discretionary authority over the plan's administration or investments.

Fiduciary duty comes down to three things:

Loyalty. Every decision must be made in the best interest of the participants — not the company, not the vendor relationship, not what's convenient. If a fee is high, the fact that it's easier to leave it in place is not a defense.

Prudence. You must act with the care, skill, and diligence that a knowledgeable person would use. You don't have to be an expert. You do have to hire, consult, or defer to experts when appropriate.

Documentation. Fiduciary duty is about process, not outcome. You cannot be blamed for a bad market. You can be blamed for not documenting how you chose your funds, benchmarked your fees, and reviewed the plan. Write it down. Keep the records.

Two terms worth clarifying:

3(21) advisor: gives recommendations. You still make the final decision — and carry the fiduciary weight of that decision.

3(38) investment manager: takes discretion over investments. They make decisions on your behalf and carry the fiduciary responsibility for those specific choices. You still oversee them, but you offload the day-to-day investment fiduciary duty.

Neither is universally better. Which one fits depends on your team's capacity, your risk tolerance, and how involved you want to be. But you should know which one you have.

You are allowed to delegate the work — hire an advisor, a 3(38) investment manager, a TPA (Third Party Administrator). But you cannot delegate the responsibility for choosing them wisely and monitoring them.

Five Questions Every Plan Sponsor Should Be Able to Answer

1. When was the last time we benchmarked our plan fees against the market?

2. Do we have a written Investment Policy Statement, and when was it last reviewed?

3. What is our plan's fiduciary structure — 3(21) or 3(38)? Do we know the difference?

4. Who is our named plan fiduciary, and when was our last fiduciary training?

5. Are we running the plan in the best interest of participants — and can we document that we are?

If any of these makes you pause, that's useful information. It usually means the plan hasn't had a fresh look in a while.

Signals Your Plan Might Need a Fresh Look

Any of these are worth taking seriously:

- Your plan fees haven't been benchmarked in the last three years
- Your investment lineup was chosen more than five years ago and hasn't been reviewed
- Employees are asking you questions you can't answer
- Your recordkeeper or advisor rarely visits or reports
- Nobody at your company is sure who the named plan fiduciary is
- You inherited the plan from someone who left the company
- Participation rates are low and no targeted education campaign has run in years
- Your plan document is more than five years old

None of these alone are emergencies. Any three together usually means it's worth having a specialist take a look. Fresh eyes on a plan every few years is normal, healthy, and cheap insurance against fiduciary blind spots.

Managing a 401(k) plan is not something you're expected to figure out alone. The advisors, TPAs, recordkeepers, and consultants who exist in this industry exist for a reason — this work is genuinely complex.

If reading this appendix has raised more questions than answers, that's actually healthy. It means you're taking the responsibility seriously.

The right next step is usually a conversation with a specialist whose full-time job is thinking about plan design, fees, and fiduciary process. Ask for references. Talk to more than one. When you find someone who explains this in plain English rather than industry jargon, you'll know.

APPENDIX C

When It Might Be Time to Talk to an Advisor

A one-page decision guide

Most people can manage their 401(k) with the information in this book. That's the point. If you've captured your match, chosen a reasonable default fund, updated your beneficiaries, and increased your contribution over time — you're doing the work.

But there are moments when the decisions get bigger than a book can hold. Not because you can't understand them, but because the stakes are big enough that another set of eyes is worth the fee.

Consider talking to a fiduciary advisor if you're:

- Within five years of retirement. Sequence-of-returns risk, Social Security timing, tax planning, and healthcare bridge strategy interact in ways one book can't cover.
- Approaching your RMD age. Required Minimum Distribution planning starts before you actually have to take them.
- Consolidating multiple old 401(k)s from previous jobs. Which accounts move where — and whether to consider a Roth conversion — has real tax implications.
- A small business owner or self-employed. Solo 401(k), SEP-IRA, cash balance plan, or offering a plan to your employees — these choices deserve professional analysis.

- Going through a life change. A change in your family situation, an inheritance, a significant health event, a career pivot — all worth revisiting your plan.
- Considering a Roth conversion. Traditional-to-Roth conversions create taxable income. Getting the timing and amount wrong is expensive.
- Feeling stuck. If you've read this book and still feel uncertain, that's a completely valid reason to want a second opinion.

A few things worth knowing when you look:

Ask if the advisor is a fiduciary — meaning legally required to act in your best interest, not just to recommend "suitable" products. Ask how they're paid. Fee-only advisors don't earn commissions; they charge for advice. That structure removes a common conflict of interest.

You don't need a lifetime relationship. A one-time planning session is a valid engagement. Some of the best financial decisions come from a single well-designed conversation.

You are not naive for wanting help. You are being responsible with what took you a career to build.

APPENDIX D

If You Explore the Paths in Chapter 10

The mechanics, the risks, and who to bring with you

Chapter 10 talked about seeing your 401(k) as a bridge — a tool that can help fund something bigger than retirement, for the right person, in the right situation. This appendix is where the mechanics live. Not to talk you into anything. Just to make sure that if you do explore these paths, you go in with your eyes open.

401(k) Loans

Many 401(k) plans allow you to borrow against your own balance — typically up to 50% of your vested amount, or $50,000, whichever is less. Not every plan allows this, so check your plan document first.

- You repay yourself, with interest. The interest goes back into your own account, not to a bank.
- The money isn't compounding while it's out. That's the real cost — not the interest rate, but the growth you miss while the balance is smaller.
- If you leave your job before the loan is repaid, the outstanding balance often becomes taxable income right away — plus a 10% penalty if you're under 59½. This is the single most common way a 401(k) loan turns into a costly mistake.

- Most plans give you a limited window to repay the balance in full after you leave a job. Know that window before you borrow.

ROBS — Rollovers as Business Startups

A ROBS structure lets you roll money from a Traditional 401(k) or IRA into a new retirement plan sponsored by a business you own, which then invests that money into the business itself. Done correctly, it can move retirement dollars into a business without triggering current taxes or the 10% early-withdrawal penalty.

Done incorrectly, it can create a disqualified plan, back taxes, penalties, and IRS scrutiny.

- This is not a do-it-yourself move. Work with attorneys, CPAs, and providers who specialize in ROBS structures — not a general practitioner.
- Ask what ongoing compliance the structure requires. A ROBS isn't a one-time paperwork exercise — it comes with annual filing and plan administration obligations.
- Understand what happens to the retirement funds if the business fails. This is retirement money. Know the downside before you commit it.

Using Retirement Money to Support Real Estate

Some people use a 401(k) loan as part of a down payment on an investment property. This can work, but a few things are worth understanding before you do it.

- Lenders will look at your full financial picture, not just the down payment. A growing 401(k) balance can strengthen your approval odds even when you're not spending it directly.
- Interest rates and property values move. What worked well in one market can be much harder in another. Run the numbers for today's environment, not the environment you read about.
- Vacancies, repairs, and rising rates can turn a good deal into a hard one fast. Have a cash reserve beyond the down payment — not just enough to close, but enough to withstand a rough first year.
- A fee-only advisor or a CPA can help you pressure-test the numbers before you commit. This is worth the cost of one conversation.

Finding the Right People

Every path in this appendix comes with the same advice: don't do it alone. Here's what to look for in the people you bring with you.

- A CPA or tax professional who has handled these transactions before — not just heard of them.
- An attorney, if you're exploring a ROBS structure or any transaction with real legal complexity.
- A mentor with direct experience — someone who has done the specific thing you're considering, not just something adjacent to it.
- A fiduciary advisor who is legally required to act in your best interest, especially if you're making a decision that affects your long-term retirement security.

The mechanics in this appendix are real. So are the risks. Neither one is a reason to avoid thinking bigger — they're the reason to bring the right people with you when you do.

WITH GRATITUDE

Acknowledgments

This book exists because of the people who shaped it

To Karly, my wife — for the patience, honesty, and encouragement that made writing possible. Every good idea in these pages got better after you weighed in.

To Remington, Niyah, and Elias — you are why I care so much about getting money right. I hope one day it helps you talk to your friends about theirs.

To the hardworking people who sat across from me over 20 years — the doctors, teachers, tradespeople, and first-time earners who trusted me with their questions. You taught me that everyone has a different relationship with money, and that empathy and compassion are the only way to have these conversations. This book mirrors what you helped me understand.

To the HR directors, plan administrators, and small business owners who quietly carry their company's retirement plans — often without training, often alone — this book is also for you. Appendix B is a start. The rest of the conversation is worth having.

And to you, holding this book — thank you. You picked it up because you wanted to understand something important. That's the whole ballgame — and you're already ahead just for showing up.

About the Author

Tony Doble has spent his career doing one thing: making money make sense for people who were never taught how it works.

After years in retirement planning and financial education — sitting across the table from hardworking people who felt behind through no fault of their own — he made it his mission to give others the tools he once wished he had.

He is also the author of Charlie's Money Choices, a financial literacy story that gets kids actually thinking about money; Zella's Money Choices, which follows one teen from her first hard money choice to running her own business; and Purpose, Mindset & Money, a hands-on journal for anyone ready to get intentional about their financial life.

Tony lives in Orange County with his wife Karly and their kids. He believes that building wealth isn't about sacrificing your life for a number. It's about creating enough clarity and freedom that you can actually be present for the moments that matter most.