

Estate Planning: Should You Do It Yourself or Use a Professional?



"Assembly required." "It's so easy, you can do it yourself." These are phrases peddled by many of today's manufacturers. And Americans are eating it up. The more convenient (and inexpensive) the product, the better. While this may work to your advantage if you're putting together a dining room chair or a child's toy, do-it-yourself estate planning is another matter.

The Upside

There are many Web sites devoted to helping Americans prepare an estate plan quickly and cheaply. Like any endeavor, it's not right for everyone. However, the do-it-yourself approach does have its charms. Using an online tutorial or software program, you can request that certain accounts be transferred to your beneficiaries upon your death, allowing most of your funds to avoid probate – a potentially expensive and timeconsuming legal procedure that can tie up your money for months. Using the correct terminology, you can make sure investments, life insurance, retirement savings and other wealth pass directly to your designated beneficiaries.

The Downside

Online estate planning often works best for individuals who have a modest estate and are looking to create a simple will. However, the do-it-yourself method can cause problems even when crafting the most basic of wills. Estate planning is a process that requires precise language and legal proficiency. One slip-up – a wrong

word, muddled sentence or missing phrase – can drastically alter your financial intentions and perhaps even cost your beneficiaries their inheritance. For instance, older adults often forget to plan for disability or incapacity when creating a self-prepared will. "What if you can't care for yourself?" "Who will carry out your wishes?" Unfortunately, many downloadable estate plans contain flaws and don't represent the entire scope of a well-prepared estate plan. It's only when the document is presented to a professional that the errors are noticed and corrected.

Who Should Visit a Professional?

When planning for the financial futures of your loved ones, it's best not to take any chances. Seeking the expertise of a professional is recommended for everyone, but especially for anyone with a complex estate or a large degree of wealth. A professional can draft your will according to your specific objectives, explain estate-tax laws and exemptions, designate your beneficiaries and offer advice – all in your best interest. You'll have peace of mind knowing that your estate plan follows legal guidelines and that your wishes will be carried out according to plan.