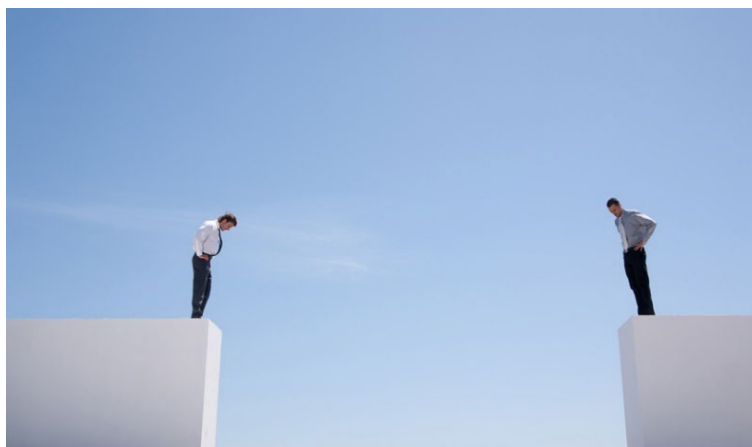


The Retirement Times

Closing the Financial Wellness Engagement Gap



A recent survey from market intelligence firm Cerulli Associates highlights a striking disparity in the financial wellness space. According to the report, U.S. Retirement End-Investor 2024, more than 90% of defined contribution recordkeepers provide financial wellness services and 71% of plan sponsors have adopted such programs. Yet at the same time actual engagement remains low, with usage rates for most resources below 20%. And while 41% of participants find their financial wellness resources “very helpful,” a

majority (57%) express neutral sentiments.

The gap between availability and engagement suggests the need for a more targeted and tactical approach. To help increase utilization rates, plan sponsors could consider implementing several strategic steps.

Tailor your offering. Gather input from employees through surveys, focus groups and other modes of data collection to understand their specific financial wellness needs, preferences and challenges. This feedback will help tailor programs to align with the organization’s culture and address the unique priorities of different employee segments.

Address immediate needs. According to Cerulli analyst Elizabeth Chiffer, around 40% of participants see contributing to their retirement savings as a “sacrifice.” Before building for the future, many employees may need to address short-term financial challenges. Providing resources such as debt management assistance, short-term financial planning workshops, access to financial advisors and flexible compensation options can help workers achieve stability and peace of mind, enabling them to focus more effectively on saving for retirement and other long-term financial goals.

Offer life-stage-specific resources. Provide resources tailored to different life stages and events such as buying a home, starting a family or planning for retirement. Customize these resources with detailed guides, checklists and calculators that help employees navigate each stage, ensuring the information is practical and actionable for their specific circumstances.

Spread the word. Use multiple channels — emails, newsletters, webinars, videos — to inform participants about available financial wellness resources. Clearly communicate the benefits of the tools you provide, explaining how they help with budgeting, debt reduction, managing investments and retirement planning.

Mobile-ize access. Provide mobile applications that offer financial wellness tools and resources. This allows participants to more effectively manage their finances on the go.

Integrate with onboarding. Incorporate financial wellness discussion into the onboarding process for new hires, ensuring they're aware of available resources. This could include introductory sessions on the value of the financial wellness tools provided by the company, setting the stage for long-term engagement.

Use visual aids. Use visual content to break down complex financial concepts and show the benefits in an easily digestible format. Infographics can illustrate statistics such as increased savings rates or reduced debt in a more accessible way, especially for participants with less developed financial literacy.

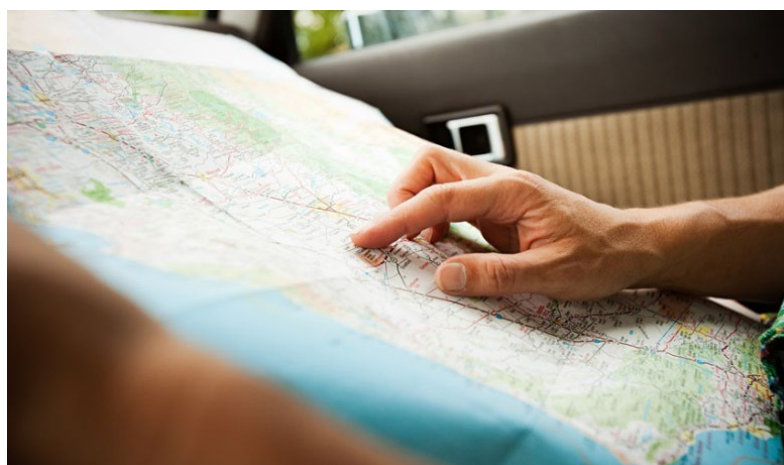
Incentivize participation. Use gamification and offer perks such as gift cards for completing financial wellness activities. Incorporate financial trivia or a companywide rewards system to encourage sustained involvement.

Closing the engagement gap requires meeting employees where they are on their personal finance journey, while delivering customized support that addresses their specific challenges and reflects their unique lived experiences. By doing so, plan sponsors can foster a more financially secure, satisfied and successful workforce.

Sources

<https://www.cerulli.com/press-releases/only-24-of-active-401k-participants-feel-very-confident-in-maintaining-current-living-standard-in-retirement>

The Road to 15%: Helping Participants Navigate Toward Retirement Readiness



Many advisors recommend saving 15% of pre-tax earnings, including any employer match, to prepare for a secure retirement — but to accomplish this, timing is crucial. According to Forbes, savers need to begin by age 35 to retire comfortably by age 65; to retire by age 62, they'd need to get started by 25. Looking under the hood at participant data allows plan sponsors to better tailor strategies that help participants accelerate savings goals — and avoid financial speed bumps along the way.

Auto Enrollment: Taking the On-ramp

The first hurdle to reaching 15% is participation. Auto enrollment can help move the needle by countering inertia and offering a measure of social proof when employees realize many of their coworkers are participating in the

company plan. According to a 2022 Human Interest study, more than 8 in 10 savers would enroll or increase their retirement plan contributions if they learned most of their colleagues were also enrolled.

Moreover, research from T. Rowe Price shows that plans with auto-enrollment boast an adoption rate of 86% versus just 44% for those without it. However, the study also notes that among participants, those not auto-enrolled “deferred almost 3% more of their salary on average (9.3%) compared with those who were auto-enrolled (6.5%)” The firm notes that this could result from an endorsement effect, where employees may conclude the rate set on their behalf is sufficient, causing them to stall in their journey toward retirement readiness. To keep them moving forward, employers can do more.

Auto Escalation: Hitting the Gas

The initial deferral rate set by a plan sponsor can have a significant impact on how long it takes employees to reach 15%. With an enrollment default rate of 2% and an annual 1% auto-escalation, a 25-year-old employee would be 38 years old by the time they ramped up to the 15% target. Increasing the initial deferral rate to 6% or more — a trend that has increased over the last decade, according to Vanguard — gets them there at least four years sooner. Vanguard also reports that 60% of plans with auto-enrollment are defaulting participants in at a rate of 4% or higher.

Prepare to Merge

The best chance for helping participants fast track their retirement savings is by leveraging a variety of tools and resources that touch on both plan design and financial wellness offerings. Adding gas to the tank in the form of a generous employer match can further boost savings efforts.

Key takeaways:

- Getting employees to start saving early is critical.
- Auto-enrollment and auto-escalation both can make a measurable difference — and work better when implemented in concert.
- Communicating the percentage of employees enrolled in the plan to your workforce may enhance both participation and deferral rates.
- Education around adequate savings levels to reach retirement goals may help mitigate any endorsement effects.
- Increasing automatic enrollment default rates can help participants reach optimal savings rates more quickly in plans with auto-escalation.

Helping employees stay on track with savings goals can ensure a smoother ride to retirement for workers — and help drive success for the organization.

Sources

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When Markets Fall: Pullbacks and Drawdowns



Market declines come in all shapes and sizes. The below chart reflects the average frequency of various size market pullbacks and drawdowns. Pullbacks, or declines of 5-10% have occurred frequently in the markets, averaging about 3 times a year. Corrections are generally defined as declines of 10%, but less than 20%, and have happened as often as once a year. Market declines of 20% or more occur less frequently, averaging once every 6 years. A drawdown of this size typically denotes a “bear market”.

	-5% or more	-10% or more	-15% or more	-20% or more
Average frequency	About 3 times a year	About once a year	About once every 3.5 years	About once every 6.3 years
Length (days)	46 days	117 days	275 days	425 days

Bear markets can last for a while, but that is not always the case. The bear market in early 2020 lasted for only 33 days. For long-term investors, research has shown it is generally not wise to try and time the markets in times of market volatility and uncertainty. Even in bear markets it is wise to “stay the course” so not to miss out on the market’s eventual recovery.

It is important to keep in mind that current market conditions rarely provide a clear direction as to the future performance of the markets. While past results don’t guarantee future returns, markets often recover from past market pullbacks and drawdowns. Market declines should remind plan participants to focus on their long-term investment strategy and goals. If those remain intact, then in many cases staying the course (doing nothing) is often the best course of action.

Please contact your MCF Advisors Plan Consultant with any questions or to review your current plan and plan’s offerings.

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