



Retire On Time™

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Retire On Time
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In this issue:

Investing in Green Technology

In-Service Withdrawals from 401(k) Plans

Transferring Your Family Business to Your Children

Will the new health-care law affect my Medicare drug plan?

Investing in Green Technology



If you're considering investing in green technology hoping to make another kind of green--the folding kind--you'll need to deliberate carefully. Interest from governments, the public, and venture capital

enhances the attractiveness of green companies. Also, daydreaming about finding the equivalent of Microsoft, getting in early, and retiring on the proceeds is a popular pastime. But while technologies that can help clean up and preserve the planet may have enormous potential, potential isn't necessarily the same thing as profit.

What is green technology?

Generally, the concept (also known as "clean technology" or "cleantech") includes renewable energy (or technologies that can improve the environmental footprint of existing energy sources), clean water, and clean air, as well as technologies that can help reduce overall consumption, particularly of nonbiodegradable substances. Such a broad scope can make it difficult to choose among the myriad investment opportunities.

Individual stocks or funds?

One of the key questions for many investors is whether to invest broadly in the future of green technology as a whole, or focus on specific companies. If you have special knowledge of an industry, you may be able to rely on your understanding of the field, but don't let that blind you to fundamental considerations about a particular stock.

If you don't have expertise about a particular field, the time or energy to acquire that expertise, or the stomach for what can be a very bumpy road with an uncertain destination, an alternative strategy is to invest in larger companies that have made a significant commitment to green initiatives. Though behemoths typically don't have the rapid growth potential of their smaller cousins, they often have the resources to acquire green technologies, or manufacture and market them globally more efficiently than a smaller company might.

Some exchange-traded funds and mutual funds focus on green technology or specific segments of it, such as wind or solar energy. If you believe in the future of an industry but hesitate to commit to one company, a fund that concentrates on your area of interest might be the ticket. Be sure to investigate its investment objective, risks, fees, and expenses, which can be found in the prospectus available from the fund, and carefully consider them before investing.

Researching green

If you choose to focus on individual stocks, here are some considerations that are especially important for developing technologies:

What's the competitive landscape? An idea that seems promising can quickly be superseded by the latest innovation. While it's difficult to forecast technical turning points, it's helpful to know the major players in the field, their key development efforts, and roughly how they're positioned. Don't forget that cleantech is a global playing field; many other countries are making significant green investments, hoping for homegrown worldwide dominance of the industries of the future.

How dependent is a company on external support? Last year's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (aka "the stimulus bill") authorized billions of dollars for tax credits, loan guarantees, and pilot programs related to green technology. However, political support for such initiatives can come and go, as can investor enthusiasm for specific technologies.

How capital-intensive is the technology? Many green technology companies may have little or no profits yet but a substantial need for capital from a cash flow standpoint and/or as a result of the technology itself. That could make a company vulnerable to a potential credit crunch, which could have a significant impact on its ability to develop and market even the most promising technology.

In-Service Withdrawals from 401(k) Plans

You're probably familiar with the rules for putting money into a 401(k) plan. But are you familiar with the rules for taking your money out?

All 401(k) plans are not the same

Federal law specifies the withdrawal options that a 401(k) plan can offer. But your plan can be stricter than the law allows (i.e., offer fewer withdrawal options), and may even provide that you can't take any money out until you reach normal retirement age (usually 65). However, many plans are more flexible.

Withdrawing your own contributions

If your plan allows, you can withdraw your own pretax and Roth contributions (and in some cases, any investment earnings on them) for one of the following reasons:

- You terminate employment
- You attain age 59½
- You become disabled
- You incur a hardship

Hardship withdrawals are permitted only if you have an immediate and heavy financial need, and only in an amount necessary to meet that need. In most plans, you must need the money to (1) purchase a principal residence or repair a principal residence damaged by an unexpected event (e.g., a hurricane), (2) prevent eviction or foreclosure, (3) pay medical bills, (4) pay certain funeral expenses, (5) pay certain education expenses, and (6) pay income tax and/or penalties due on the hardship withdrawal itself. In addition, you generally must have already utilized all other available distributions and nontaxable loans under all plans maintained by your employer. But think carefully before making a hardship withdrawal--in most plans your employer must suspend your participation in the plan for at least six months after the withdrawal, and you could lose valuable employer matching contributions.

Withdrawing employer contributions

Getting employer dollars out of a 401(k) plan can be even more challenging. Many plans won't let you withdraw employer contributions at all before you terminate employment. But some plans are more flexible, and let you withdraw at least some vested employer contributions before then. "Vested" means that you own the contributions and they can't be forfeited for any reason. In general, a 401(k) plan can let you withdraw vested matching or profit-sharing contributions if:

- You become disabled
- You incur a hardship
- You attain a specified age
- You participate in the plan for at least five years, or
- The employer contribution has been in the account for a minimum of two years

Taxation

Your own pretax contributions, company contributions, and investment earnings are taxable when withdrawn from the plan. If you've made any after-tax contributions, they'll be nontaxable when withdrawn. Each withdrawal is deemed to carry out a pro-rata portion of taxable and nontaxable dollars. Any Roth contributions, and investment earnings on them, are treated separately: if your distribution is qualified, then your withdrawal will be entirely free from federal income taxes. If your withdrawal is nonqualified, then each withdrawal will be deemed to carry out a pro-rata amount of your nontaxable Roth contributions and taxable investment earnings. And keep in mind that taxable distributions made prior to age 59½ are generally subject to a 10% premature distribution tax in addition to any income tax due, unless an exception applies.

Plan loans

Many 401(k) plans allow you to borrow money from your own account. A loan may be attractive if you don't qualify for a withdrawal, or you don't want to incur the taxes and penalties that may apply to a withdrawal.

In general, you can borrow up to one half of your vested account balance (including your contributions, your employer's contributions, and earnings), but not more than \$50,000.

You can borrow the funds for up to five years (longer if the loan is to purchase your principal residence). In most cases you repay the loan through payroll deduction, with principal and interest flowing back into your account. But keep in mind that when you borrow, the unpaid principal of your loan is no longer in your 401(k) account working for you.

Be informed

You should become familiar with the terms of your employer's 401(k) plan to understand your particular withdrawal rights. A good place to start is the plan's summary plan description (SPD). Your employer will give you a copy of the SPD within 90 days after you join the plan.



Remember that your 401(k) account is there for your retirement. Using it before then should be a last resort only.

Transferring Your Family Business to Your Children

You've spent years building your family business. It's been a source of pride and income for both you and your family. But now you may be thinking about how to hand over the reins to your children. Because transferring your business interest to your children may have income, gift, and estate tax consequences, it can take careful planning to prevent some (or all) of the business assets from having to be sold to pay those taxes. Your business succession planning should include ways to ensure the continuity of your business with the smallest possible tax consequences.

Some common strategies for minimizing taxes are discussed briefly below, but remember, none of these strategies are without drawbacks. Before you act, consult a tax professional as well as your estate planning attorney.

Gifts or bequeathing your interest outright

If you don't need continued income from the business and you don't want to retain some control, you can simply give the business to your children outright. To minimize the gift tax consequences, you can first use your \$1 million lifetime exemption. Then, you can begin a systematic program of making annual gifts to your children in amounts that equal the annual gift tax exclusion (currently \$13,000 per year per recipient). By transferring your interest in this manner, you may be able to transfer all or a significant portion of the business free from federal gift tax (although these transfers may still be subject to state gift tax). The disadvantage here is the amount of time that may be needed to transfer your entire interest.

If you can wait and transfer your business at your death, Section 6166 of the Internal Revenue Code allows any estate taxes incurred because of the inclusion of your family business in your estate to be deferred for 5 years (with interest-only payments for the first 4 years and interest plus principal due in the fifth year), and then paid in annual installments over a period of up to 10 years. This will allow your beneficiaries more time to raise sufficient funds to pay the taxes or obtain more favorable interest rates if they need to borrow the money. Be aware that the business must exceed 35% of your gross estate and other requirements must be met.

Selling your interest outright

If you need income from your business, you can sell your business interest (for full fair market value) to your children. This will avoid gift and estate taxes, but you may owe capital gains taxes. Long-term capital gains tax rates,

however, are currently lower than gift and estate tax rates.

Using a buy-sell agreement

If you want to sell your business interest to your children but retain control over the business for a while, consider using a buy-sell agreement. This is a legal contract that prearranges the sale to happen when a specific event occurs, such as your retirement, disability, divorce, or death. When the triggering event occurs, the children will be obligated to buy your interest from you or your estate. The price and sale terms will have been predetermined.

Remember, however, that you will be bound under a buy-sell agreement: you won't be able to sell or give your business to anyone except the buyers named in the agreement (unless they consent).

Using a grantor retained annuity trust (GRAT)

A GRAT is a trust into which you would transfer your business interest. The value of the gift is determined using the IRS's current interest rate (published monthly by the IRS). The trust must terminate at a specified time (e.g., 10 years). You receive annuity payments during the term of the trust, and at the end, your children will receive the business. Hopefully, the business will have appreciated beyond the IRS's interest rate, allowing the excess to pass tax free. Be aware however, that if you die during the GRAT term, your entire business interest will be included in your gross estate for federal estate tax purposes. You will have failed to transfer your business interest and lost the tax advantages of the GRAT, and you will have incurred the costs of creating and maintaining the GRAT for nothing, so structure your GRAT carefully.

Creating a family limited partnership (FLP)

An FLP is a type of business entity. First, you establish a partnership with both general and limited partnership interests. Then, you transfer the business to this partnership. You retain the general partnership interest for yourself, allowing you to maintain control over the day-to-day operation of the business. Over time, you gift the limited partnership interests to your children, leveraging your lifetime gift tax exemption and the annual gift tax exclusion. You also save taxes because the value of the gifts may be eligible for valuation discounts, such as the minority interest and lack of marketability discounts.



With a GRAT, you receive a fixed dollar amount that does not change even if the value of the trust property (corpus) increases or decreases. You may, alternatively, retain the right to receive a fixed percentage of the trust corpus, determined annually. That type of trust is called a grantor retained unitrust (GRUT).

A rolling or cascading GRAT is a technique that involves creating a series of short-term GRATs (typically two or three years) with each successive GRAT being funded by the annuity payments from the previous ones. This technique can minimize the risk of the grantor dying during the GRAT term, and can also minimize interest rate risk.



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Ask the Experts



Will the new health-care law affect my Medicare drug plan?

Yes, it might. Many Medicare Part D beneficiaries have had to pay for prescriptions out-of-pocket after reaching a gap in their annual coverage, referred to as the "donut hole." Currently, if you're a Medicare Part D beneficiary, you may pay up to an additional \$3,610, out-of-pocket, for medicines after reaching an initial threshold of \$2,830 in total prescription drug costs (including Part D payments, beneficiary co-pays, and deductibles). But, in 2010, if you fall in the coverage gap, you will receive a \$250 rebate.

Starting in 2011, you will receive a 50% discount on the cost of brand-name drugs in the coverage gap. Additionally, a reduction in coinsurance for generic drugs in the coverage gap will be phased in, starting in 2011, and a similar reduction in coinsurance for brand-name drugs begins in 2013. By 2020, a combination of federal subsidies and a reduction in co-payments will reduce your total out-of-pocket costs for medications in the donut hole to 25%.

Another change affecting Medicare Part D beneficiaries relates to full-benefit dual-eligible beneficiaries (individuals eligible for both Medicaid and Medicare). Dual-eligible beneficiaries receiving institutional care, such as in a nursing home facility, do not owe any co-payments for prescriptions covered by Part D. However, dual-eligible beneficiaries receiving long-term care services at home or in a day-care community setting are subject to such co-payments. Beginning in 2012, the new legislation removes this imbalance; individuals receiving services at home or in a community setting will no longer be subject to co-payments.

Also, beginning in 2011, the time period during which Part D and Medicare Advantage beneficiaries can make changes to their coverage is extended and runs from October 15 through December 7. This extension should provide more time for beneficiaries to consider their options while ensuring that any benefit changes are properly incorporated into the plan for the following year.