

Take Charge of Your Retirement

By Tammy Flanagan

May 8, 2014

In 1985, I began a new position at FBI headquarters in Washington as a retirement counselor. This position laid the groundwork and provided the training for my future career as a retirement specialist that I continue today. My official title was Employee Relations Specialist-Employee Benefits, and my duties included communicating laws, policies and regulations regarding retirement matters to FBI employees and providing innovative planning and techniques to help guide them as they planned for retirement.

This week I received the following email that made me reflect on the role of a retirement counselor:

I plan to retire Jan. 3, 2015. The general question is where do I go to discuss retirement issues prior to putting in my retirement papers? I've heard that someone would be assigned as a counselor once they receive my paper work at HR, but I would like some info prior to submitting the papers.

Here's my response:

Your agency should provide you with retirement counseling both before and after you submit your retirement application. Prior to submitting your application, you should be able to contact your HR office with general questions and you should be provided with a retirement estimate for a single date or a comparison of more than one retirement date, upon request. After you submit your application, you will have a specific specialist assigned to your case and you will be able to discuss your retirement application and the decisions you will be making.

The only problem today is that it may be more difficult to get in touch with a retirement specialist. From 1991 (the year the number of specialists peaked) to 1998, agencies cut almost 30 percent of their employee relations specialist positions. There's been a small but noticeable shift in the HR profession away from specialists and toward generalists. Many employees who hold generalist positions are limited to lower grades.

In the end, getting through the retirement process is a shared responsibility between you, your agency and the Office of Personnel Management. Here's how those responsibilities break down.

Your Responsibilities

The retirement process starts with you. You should:

Be sure that your electronic Official Personnel Folder (known as your eOPF) contains a complete history of your federal career documented on SF-50 (Notification of Personnel Action) statements as well as other documents.

Ask for a retirement estimate from your agency retirement specialist. Be sure to look at the information used to compute the estimate. If any of your personal information is incorrect, then the estimate will not be accurate. It's best to request your first estimate five years prior to becoming eligible for retirement. You may request additional estimates in future years as you adjust your plans. These individually prepared estimates are not the same as the automatically generated estimates that you may find on systems such as Employee Express or MyPay. The automated systems do not take into

account some of the important factors that may affect your retirement, such as whether or not the service used to compute the estimate is properly documented and whether or not it is even creditable for retirement.

Keep your HR office informed throughout your career when you experience a life event such as a marriage, death of a family member or birth of child. On such occasions, you can make changes to your life and health insurance benefits, and you may wish to update your beneficiary designations.

Ask questions regarding anything about your retirement that you don't understand. Common questions include: Is all of my service properly documented? Do I owe a deposit to the retirement system for any of my past federal service? What are my choices survivor benefits? What are the choices regarding continuation of my government life insurance?

Remember, there are some questions your retirement specialist should not answer because they involve tax or financial planning decisions or are outside of the scope of their expertise. These include: Can I afford to retire? Should I pay my service credit deposit? Should I choose a survivor benefit? Should I apply for Social Security at age 62 or wait until I'm older?

Your Agency's Responsibilities

According to OPM, it is your agency's responsibility to guide you through the retirement process, supplying all the information you might need. This includes the following:

Providing accurate and reliable responses to your retirement benefits questions and concerns, including retirement estimates.

Providing additional resources to further assist in explaining complicated retirement issues and decisions.

Identifying employees who are within five years of retirement and encouraging them to attend a pre-retirement seminar.

I would add that employees at every stage of their career, beginning with new hires, should be provided information to help them set and adjust their future retirement goals. Because of the intertwined relationship between the Federal Employees Retirement System basic benefit, Social Security retirement and the Thrift Savings Plan, employees cannot wait until five years before they retire to plan their retirement.

Communicating new rules and laws that affect employee benefits.

Compiling the necessary information to provide OPM with a "clean case" for processing your retirement benefit.

Office of Personnel Management

OPM's job is to process your formal retirement application once it has been filed by your agency.

Once OPM's Retirement Operations Center in Boyers, Pa., receives your retirement application from your agency, OPM will send an acknowledgement letter that provides you with a retirement claim number. The number will begin with the letters "CSA."

If you're interested in all the details of how OPM's retirement processing operation works, read this detailed and informative *Washington Post* article from earlier this year.

(Image via mstanley/Shutterstock.com)

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<http://www.govexec.com/pay-benefits/retirement-planning/2014/05/take-charge-your-retirement/84064/>