



Things You Control

The Tax Man Cometh - Any Silver lining?

Professor BJ Fogg of Stanford University is a leading researcher of Habits. He says: one way to ingrain a new habit is to use an existing habit as a trigger. E.g. you habitually reach for your morning beverage of choice; link this ritual to do a new habit you wish to implement (regular exercise for example).

So, Tax time is here and you are getting reminders that your 1099 forms will be available for filing by the end of Feb; and Apr 15th is ingrained in all Americans as the tax filing deadline. Here are some ways to use this annual tax ritual for improving your investments and financial well-being. For example:

- Review your portfolio asset allocation and your dividends and capital gains to identify if changes are needed.
- Insure you make your IRA contributions for last year (by Apr 15th).
- For document hoarders (I am one, alas): This is a great time to cull documents you need for essential tax records and get rid of all the others that are simply cluttering your files.
- For document-light people: As you hustle to collect the documents needed for taxes, make a list of the essential ones. Then during the year as you get them – Keep them.
- Electronic documents – we all rely on various companies to generate and store them for us and it's easy to log-in and download them as needed. Except: If you close an account, you may lose all access to your stored statements. (I learned this the hard way when I was unable to take some deductions because I could not get to the statements).

Why Things You Control are Important

In Investing (as in Life) we can: hope, worry or plan.

I believe that when we hope or worry, we are largely looking at the future and are focused on things we do not control. We hope the markets will get higher and we will make money. Or we worry that markets will collapse and we may lose all our money. And yet, deep down in our hearts, we know that whether our thoughts are optimistic or pessimistic they simply do not influence future outcomes.

We can also look at the future plan-fully. When we do this we tend to focus on the things that we do control. And, by picking activities that are in our control and that are important to our future we have a far better chance of achieving our goals. Of course, life holds few guarantees! So, for example, while we all hope that our favorite stock pick will be a high performing stock, not implementing a properly diversified portfolio is plainly irresponsible to our financial well-being.

12 Feb 2022

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Our Financial Planning Principles

Without a Purpose, accumulating money can become a soul-less task. A financial plan gives your savings a purpose.

It's OK to be broke when you are young - not so when you are old: Studies show that people typically tolerate risk and uncertainty better when they are younger.

Getting down from Mount Everest is as important as getting up: Pay as much attention to accumulating money before you retire as you do to consuming it after you retire.

Planning is life-stage dependent: The principles of saving and investing money in your early years are very different from the techniques that you use in retirement to generate a reliable income stream.

Financial confidence comes from being on top of your taxes, protecting yourself from risks, having a clear picture of your investments and debt, and specific targets for saving and spending.

Achieving financial independence requires a careful balancing of Income, expenses, taxes, and savings. This balancing act (planning) is not intuitive, nor can it be done well on the back of an envelope, but effective plans do give more peace of mind.

Identify your true risks (in contrast to investment volatility, labelled as risk, or uncertainty) and take action to manage them using the correct risk management tools. Pick the right tools for the job - investments won't manage the risks you face, risk products (insurance) won't deliver the growth and flexibility you need.

Taxes remain important even after you retire. However, in retirement your investments become the principal source of your income and hence drive your taxes.

In matters of health: it's your body but your doctor knows better how your body works. So it is with your money: A partnership with an advisor will help you to reach your financial goals - you save, they help your savings grow. Together you can get there faster.