

Get Counseling

By Tammy Flanagan

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Some agencies provide their employees with top-notch [retirement counseling](#). Such agencies typically respond to requests for retirement estimates in a timely fashion. They allow employees to request estimates for several different retirement dates and offer to update those estimates as the employee gets closer to retirement. And they provide a variety of training opportunities for employees to learn how to take control of the retirement planning process.

Other agencies, unfortunately, do not put a high priority on retirement counseling these days. I know some federal employees who have been told they can't request a retirement estimate until they've already submitted their application to retire. What? How can you plan for retirement without knowing how much your Civil Service Retirement System or Federal Employees Retirement System benefit will provide as a replacement of your salary? That's like buying a car and not knowing what the payment will be until after you take it home.

Some agencies also fail to provide all of their employees with access to pre-retirement seminars or other training opportunities. With wait lists and restrictions on attending classes, it sometimes takes years to finally get enrolled. I've had retirees attend pre-retirement seminars after they had already left government.

I've also conducted classes for a dozen or so employees, only to find out during a lunch break that other interested employees who could've filled empty seats weren't even aware that the sessions were being held. (This could, of course, be partially due to the fact that some employees tend to ignore emails about such opportunities.)

Still, I see employees' frustration on a daily basis, and I understand it. If you see this at your agency and are in a position to do something about it, please step up. And by the same token, if human resources representatives at your agency are providing excellent service, they should be recognized and rewarded for it.

When I started my career as a federal retirement benefits expert in 1985, I thought that by 2015, my job would be obsolete. I thought that within 30 years, the whole process of retirement would be automated and seamless. That's almost the case with regard to the process of applying for Social Security benefits. And when it comes to providing information about saving for retirement and financial planning, the Thrift Savings Plan does a good job. The TSP has been working to improve the financial literacy of federal employees since it was created in 1987, and the effort continues to this day.

The only place where federal employees still need a fair amount of assistance in preparing for retirement is in getting an [accurate estimate of their CSRS or FERS benefit](#). That can depend on a host of factors, including work schedules, retirement coverage changes, divorce, or gaps in federal service. In some cases, employees are getting less in the way of help figuring out what they can expect to receive than before.

So what can you do? The best advice I can give is to take charge of the process to the extent you can by becoming as informed and knowledgeable about the potential pitfalls as possible. If your agency offers retirement training and benefits counseling, make sure you take advantage of those opportunities. Retirement is a major step, but with proper planning, you can have a smooth and even exciting transition to the next chapter of your life.

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