

SURVIVE AND THRIVE IN THE AGE OF TURMOIL

How to unleash the full power of your retirement account



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CONTENTS

| A brief word from our bankrupt sponsors at Social Insecurity | 5 |
|--|-----|
| The power of Self-Directed retirement plans | . 7 |
| What people generally do with their retirement accounts | 8 |
| Compelling, powerful options for your retirement account | 9 |
| Conclusion: Scratching the surface2 | 20 |

Right now, about \$17 *trillion* is sitting around in US retirement accounts such as IRAs and 401(k)s. And the most of that money is invested in some of the most generic, overpriced assets imaginable: index funds or mutual funds investing in a bloated stock market and charging investors up to 2 percent in ridiculous fees every single year.

It's great that some people are actually setting aside money for retirement. Many people are not. In fact, more than one in five Americans don't save anything at all out of their annual income. So at least that \$17 trillion comes from people who are thinking about their long game.

But by and large, throwing most of your retirement money into funds that provide little value, charge too much overhead, and keep your assets largely in equities is folly. It limits your choices... and thus your earning potential.

That's why we like qualified retirement structures that let *you* do the investing. They're what's known as "self-directed" plans because you, yourself, direct where your money goes. They're available for small business owners through SEP IRAs and **Solo 401(k)s**, or to others through what's commonly referred to as Self-Directed IRAs, which require the establishment of an LLC through your IRA.

(For more details on Self-Directed IRAs, see <u>this Black Paper</u>.)

These plans offer incredible flexibility, as well as potentially far greater returns, than custodial plans that limit you to stocks, bonds, and the like. Mutual funds are fine,





but if you really want to unleash the full potential of a retirement plan, we believe a self-directed one is the way to go.

For example, there's a guy we know of who buys used equipment from the federal government at Defense Department auctions — things like used computers, backhoes and tractors. He then turns around and re-sells those items for a huge profit, consistently seeing returns that veer deeply into the double-digits.

And he does it all with his IRA, so he's not paying a dime in taxes on the gains.

And another example - A few years ago, a woman we know used her 401(k) to invest in an olive grove in Italy's Puglia region; she rents the land to an olive oil business. Her retirement account has already recouped her original investment and is making approximately 8% per year on it.

That same woman also used her retirement account to buy a small seaside apartment in a popular Mediterranean vacation resort. She got a steep discount on it through a structure called **Bare Ownership**. In exchange for the low price, she's letting the owner - an elderly man - live in the apartment until he passes on. When she takes full ownership of the property, she'll rent the place out, and her retirement account will conservatively bring in a few thousand dollars a month in income... tax-free.





Gains and tax savings aren't the only advantage of having a robust retirement structure. For example, founding members of an Austin startup took personal loans from their own 401(k)s to provide ten percent of the company's pre-seed money. The irony? The company focuses on retirement accounts.

And several people we know are wielding their retirement accounts to do peer-to-peer loans. Some use the system at <u>Silver Bullion</u>, where precious metals act as the collateral, and they're making three and four percent off of six-month loans, or 2.5 percent or more on one-month loans.

That's all just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much you can do with a robust, self-directed, flexible retirement account.

Yes, you can stick with a milquetoast retirement account, but realize that you're being herded, like cattle, into a narrow band of options. And that you're being milked by the financial system, which doesn't have your best interest at heart. There is a better way.

Independent-minded people who take the time to set up a more robust retirement structure have a universe of options at their disposal. Some can make killer returns — largely tax-free — on investments that you're simply not going to hear about on CNBC.

Today we're going to talk about how you can make interesting, lucrative investments with





your self-directed IRA or 401(k). By getting creative, you can find myriad ways to subvert the stock market and make some potentially lucrative returns.

But first:

A brief word from our bankrupt sponsors at Social Insecurity

We've beaten this drum before, but it bears repeating: If you're under 50 and you think that Social Security is going to pick up the tab for you in your dotage, then you're fooling yourself.



The US government itself predicts insolvency for the program by 2034... meaning you'll be up a certain foul creek if Social Security is your fundamental path to retirement.

And the average Social Security payout is only about \$1,400/month, anyway. That's not much to live on when rents in cities such as Denver (\$1,673), Dallas (\$1,239), Jacksonville (\$1,063), Phoenix (\$1,096) and Charlotte (\$1,273) would basically eat that check for breakfast.

Sure, you could retire somewhere much cheaper, such as **Ecuador**, but even if you are debt-free and are in good health, getting older can be expensive. Estimated average medical expenses for the typical 65-year-old couple over the course of retirement range from \$220,000 to \$400,000.

And the money you have today won't go as far in, say, 20 years. Since the year 2000, food prices in the United States have increased by 2.27% per year, thanks to inflation. This translates into **food prices that are 53.30% higher today than two decades ago.**

And then there are taxes, always taxes. If you own your house, then you'll have property taxes to pay.

And there are always expenses. The average household run by someone 65 or older spends roughly \$3,800 per month, only about \$1,000 less than younger Americans. Again, the average social security payment, so long as it exists in its current, fully-funded state, averages out to about \$1,400 per month.

This doesn't mean you'll starve if a government pension is your only retirement plan. But you might have to tighten the belt, wait until 70 to start cashing out (if they increase the



official retirement age), and live on less.

You're going to need money, and Uncle Sam isn't going to be the answer, whether you're 60 or 16. You need a proper retirement account, such as an Individual Retirement Arrangement (IRA), or a 401(k) — usually offered by companies or, in the form of a Solo 401(k) — available to entrepreneurs and freelancers.

And again, due to the level of personal control and the wider varieties of investment opportunities, we are big fans of Self-Directed IRAs and 401(k)s.

What's a Solo 401(k)?

Conventional 401(k) retirement plans are sponsored by companies.

If you do any kind of freelance or contract work, though -- i.e. if you have, or try to have, self-employment income -- or if you have your own business, then instead of joining a group plan, you can create your own plan. You do this as an individual (and possibly with your spouse or business partners).

That plan is called a Solo 401(k) or Solo(k), and it gives you much more freedom in terms of the types of assets you can invest in. You can also sock away a large amount of income into it.

Whether you have a Solo 401(k) or a 401(k) through an outside employer, you can have a Traditional or Roth one. With a Traditional 401(k), you take a tax deduction on the income that you contribute to the plan... and then pay taxes on those contributions and their earnings when the money is withdrawn from the account. With a Roth 401(k), you do pay taxes on the income that you contribute to the plan, and then pay no further taxes on the contributions or their earnings later on. (IRAs can also be Traditional or Roth.)

Some companies offer a company match, up to a certain percentage. In other words, if you contribute 3% of your income to the 401(k), they'll contribute another 3%. You're usually limited to investing in mutual funds.

But with a Solo 401(k), you certainly don't have to limit yourself to mutual funds. And that's what we're talking about in this alert.

For a more detailed explanation of Solo 401(k)s, <u>click here</u> to listen to this podcast with expert



The power of Self-Directed retirement plans

In retirement plans, "self-directed" means that you yourself choose the investments (with very few limitations).

Most people don't do this; they either look at their company's 401(k) mutual fund options and pick the one they want, or they open an IRA or Solo(k) and put the money directly into a fund managed by Vanguard or Fidelity - large institutions that may not have your best interests in mind.

There's not necessarily anything wrong with this. People can and do make respectable returns on their money over time.

But there's no control over what the fund manager is doing. You've never met him or her. You just have to trust the process.

Moreover, the average return on stocks over a ten-year period is about 10% annually (as measured by the S&P 500 index, which comprises 500 of America's largest publicly traded companies.) War, booms, and busts can all change the 10-year average, but in the 42 years between 1973 and 2016, the average annualized return of the S&P 500 Index with dividends reinvested was about 10.45 percent.



This is much better than the current **0.1%** a Chase savings account is currently yielding, but inflation and management fees are eating up about a few percentage points of your purchasing power... so the return is actually about 6.3 percent annually.

Still decent. But the problem is, we believe that there is correction looming, potentially a severe one. (Markets are cyclical, and every bull market, such as the one we have now, is followed by a correction.) Stocks are enormously overvalued right now, meaning that people are paying more for them than they are worth.

For example, in 2018, by July, just three stocks (Amazon, Netflix and Microsoft) were responsible for 71% of the S&P 500's returns.

And through the third quarter of 2018, tech stocks were responsible for 95% of the S&P's gains that year.



And what are those companies doing? Most of them are burning through cash at unprecedented rates, of course...

Netflix has LOST \$13 billion since 2011. The company is currently trading at around 130x earnings. (A sane number is something like Ford's: 12x.) As investor David Trainer_recently put it, to justify \$350/share, Netflix needs approximately *half* the global population to sign up for its services at \$20/month.

As of this writing (early June 2019), the stock is trading at about \$340/share.

And that's just Netflix. Factor in trade wars, possible actual wars, election woes, housing market bubbles, and other macroeconomic factors... and we could see a volatile stock market.

What people generally do with their retirement accounts

Diversifying out of the stock market is one major reason why people get into self-directed retirement plans. And that's a good thing.

So what do they invest in? Usually in:

- 1) Real estate usually individual buildings or homes purchased for rental income;
- 2) Gold and silver bullion; and,
- 3) Individual businesses.

We'll talk about investing in individual businesses below, but there are other, outside-the-box investment options that you might wish to consider for your retirement plan.

Some of what we'll discuss is available to both IRAs and 401(k)s. Some are only available to 401(k)s, which — due to the original legislation that created them — tend to be more flexible than IRAs. For more on the differences between Solo(k)s and IRAs, and for details about what the IRS says you *can't* invest in, <u>listen to this podcast</u>.

As a legal note, please note that none of the following examples are given as recommendations. What you invest in is a decision between you and your financial advisors. In writing this piece, we simply want to show you some of the options out there... options that barely scratch the surface of what's possible.



Compelling, powerful options for your retirement account

1) Buy your Life Insurance through your 401(k)

Life insurance is not sexy, but purchasing yours through your 401(k) can be a highly efficient way to do part of your estate planning. (IRAs are not eligible for this option.)

You're not "investing" in anything, of course, when you purchase your own life insurance policy, so this technique is not about high returns.



It is, however, about saving money: If the point of buying life insurance is to provide for your beneficiaries, then doing so through your plan could make your life insurance policy much better, because it ends up largely **tax-free on both ends - the purchasing of it by you, and the payout to your heirs.** (The premium payment(s) still get taxed on the payout.)

And if you are someone who finds it hard to get life insurance — e.g. if you're Type 1 diabetic, or if you have a heart condition or have had cancer, etc. — then going through your plan might make it easier (and cheaper) to get a policy. More on that in a moment.

We spoke to specialist about this option, as we haven't seen it discussed much elsewhere. He has been working with lawyers and a few insurance companies to streamline and simplify this strategy, as it does have limitations and isn't right for everyone. *Still, as we always advise you, it's imperative to work with your qualified financial professional about this or any other strategy.*

It works like this: The 401k buys a policy on you, either purchasing a policy in one lump sum or by paying regular premiums. Later, your heirs receive the payout overwhelmingly tax-free - just paying tax on the amount spent on the premium, not on the death benefit past that.)

This is, in short, a rare play: You're using pre-tax money to get a gain that's largely tax-free.

The dollars are tax-free at the beginning because of the tax break you get on contributing



Traditional money to the plan. (If the money the plan uses is Roth you can do this still, but you'll have paid taxes on your principal.)

With life insurance, it comes out mostly tax-free due to death benefit legislation. The only part that becomes taxable is the premium that was paid for the policy if the plan is a traditional 401(k). If Roth money was used to buy the policy, then the whole distribution is tax-free.

Example: Let's say you have a Traditional account — where you deduct your contributions.

You buy a \$50,000 lump sum policy, meaning you give the insurance company \$50,000 all at once, straight from your retirement plan. Your policy's life benefit is \$150,000.

When the policy pays out, your heirs receive \$100,000, tax-free, even though you never paid taxes on the premiums. The IRS does not impose a federal estate tax, so that \$100,000 should go to them free and clear. [Six states — Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey and Pennsylvania — collect state inheritance taxes, but if you, the policy holder, live in any of the other 44 states, then your heir(s) can bypass paying state inheritance taxes as well.]

In the end, the IRS will only tax the \$50,000 you paid for the initial premium.

In short, buying your policy through your plan can be an efficient transfer mechanism to pass the money to your heirs largely tax-free, while lowering your tax bill as well.

But there's another benefit: If you don't qualify for life insurance, perhaps due to age or a preexisting condition, or if you would end up paying through the nose for it, then this technique can be a clever way to bypass some of the barriers you face.

For one thing, because you're using pre-tax dollars, you might be able to purchase more protection than would otherwise be affordable.

And the way life insurance works inside retirement plans, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) has built in several non-discrimination mechanisms. Yes, the lowest premium will still go to the guy who inhales imported Himalayan air, sips kale juice and runs 5K every morning, but the woman who's been living well with an endocrine disorder for 15 years can still often get in... and get a decent rate.

Most insurance companies have a division devoted to qualified retirement plan policy

2) Buy Real Estate via "Bare Ownership"



issuance. When you are ready to purchase your life insurance through your retirement plan, call the insurance company and inform them you represent a 401(k) plan whose participant(s) want to purchase life insurance. (Most insurance companies have a division devoted to qualified retirement plan policy issuance.)

Again, this usually comes with a benefit. When you apply through John Smith's retirement 401(k), whose participants are John and Patty Smith -- as opposed to applying for life insurance as John Smith, individual -- there tend to be fewer medical exams/questions. And the insurance company must declare premiums based on what's called 'unisex' rules... to make sure men don't pay more than women and vice-versa.

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What about Opportunity Zones?

We've been writing a lot about the incredible tax advantages of Opportunity Zones. For the latest guidelines on them, and for full explanations of what they are and how to invest in them, **see this piece**.

Opportunity Zones, which are officially designated neighborhoods around the US needing some serious help, are great to invest in with non-tax-sheltered money (meaning outside your retirement accounts). People invest in them for the potentially huge tax advantages which were unleashed last year.

There's no harm using retirement account money to invest in Opportunity Zones, but it doesn't make much sense from a tax planning standpoint, as there's no magic double-stack. Save your retirement money for other options where you can't get a good tax break outside the qualified plan.

3) Buy Discount Mortgage Notes

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Setting up a Self-Directed Retirement Account

We do not accept fees, commissions or gifts from anyone. We only recommend service providers we believe can offer our readers the best service.

If you experience any issues with a recommended service provider, we want to know. Positive feedback is also valuable.

In addition, if you have had positive experiences with another service provider (in any country), please let us know. We are happy to interview them and potentially introduce them to the Sovereign Man community. Please contact us at **clients@sovereignman.com**.

| Whether you choose to go the Self-Directed IRA route or the 401(k) route, it helps to get some help. |
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Conclusion: Scratching the surface

This information is intended as a general guidance and should not be considered tax or financial advice. Before acting, please consult a qualified and trusted financial advisor familiar with your particular situation. If you don't have one, please write us at **clients@sovereignman.com**, and we will connect you with someone we trust.

Additionally, please note that all the information provided is current and correct at time of publication. However, tax rules change. Please contact a service provider for the most current information.

What we've listed above is, again, just a taste of what you can do to really empower your retirement account.

- You might go in on a commercial real estate property with other people (to whom you are not related in any way) through what's called a 'Tenant in Common' property deal. There are rules for what IRAs can do here vs. 401ks, but we know of people who didn't have the cash to purchase a property by themselves, and who either partnered with others, or went in on a group fund, and saw great returns. (To be clear, it's permissible to own the property and receive rents. You can't own an LLC that is actively managing the building the retirement account owns material interest in.)
- You might invest in cattle or other livestock and sell them for a profit; many raw milk sellers in the US, for example, are on the hunt for cows with special genetics that are supposed to make their milk more digestible and less inflammatory. Or, your 401(k) might buy land and receive rent from farmers. (Again, a 401(k) can't invest directly into a business or LLC. That would fall under UBTI. The 401(k) can receive rents or invest in a corporate entity.)
- You might invest in foreign property as both a currency play and a real estate one. It's risky, but if you know your currencies and play the market right, then your original investment could go up if both the property value -- and the value of the foreign currency -- go up as well. For example, a Self-Directed IRA invested in a Shanghai office building about 13 years ago. The yuan went up, which increased the return by more than 30% when the building was sold.

None of the options discussed here are recommendations, but we list them here to help you understand that you're not limited to what everyone is doing (investing in overpriced stocks).



Make sure to read more about Self-Directed IRAs and 401ks <u>here</u>, <u>here</u> and <u>here</u>. And remember that no matter what you decide to do, when choosing a less conventional (often more powerful) path, it is always best to consult professionals. Go one step at a time, research your options carefully, and only choose options that you've learned a lot about and feel very comfortable investing in.

And if you've found a unique way to unleash your retirement account's full potential, we'd love to hear about it.