



The Inside View
on Finding the
Right Financial
Adviser

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When you are searching for a financial adviser, there are three main issues to overcome:

1. Working out who's good
2. Finding a firm (or adviser) that is knowledgeable about your specific issues
3. Dealing with points 1 & 2 quickly and easily

This guide gives you a simple but effective process for finding your adviser.

You Already Have Some Knowledge

Consider the professional or industry environment in which you work (or have worked). As someone familiar with that environment, you likely have a good understanding of who is who. However, when you discuss your industry or profession with friends and family, they often seem bewildered. Left to their own devices, they might undertake actions you would avoid at all costs. Here are some general principles you have likely noticed when observing others trying to navigate your industry:

- High-profile, well-known brands are not always considered “the best” (if such a concept exists). Some smaller companies are outstanding, while others are utterly dreadful (or even hazardous). Consequently, we often revert to the major brands, which appear safer.
- While industry qualifications may narrow the field, they do not provide an ironclad quality guarantee. Industry awards can highlight reputable firms and advisers; however, these days, awards are common. We can consider them useful, though not a perfect screening tool.
- If you can find small to medium-sized boutique businesses with strong teams, they often perform well beyond their means. The founders of these businesses typically leave larger organisations to “do it right.” This seems particularly relevant in professional services firms, though perhaps less so in businesses where scale is vital.
- If you were to select someone from your industry or profession, what percentage would you immediately rule out as not good enough? Often, that figure could reach as high as 90% or more (suggesting that only 5% to 10% of the market is considered acceptable).

All these principles remain valid when selecting a financial adviser. So, let us provide you with the insider's perspective on how to choose one adviser.

Pro Tip: One overriding principle that will hold in all situations is this: If anyone ever makes you feel stupid, they are likely a bad adviser. Good advisers can explain complex issues clearly and simply because they are experts and genuinely want you to understand what they are saying.

Step 1: Build A Shortlist of Possible Advisers

This initial research aims to produce a concise list of potential candidates to explore further. Here is where we suggest you look to discover some excellent financial planners:

A: Look Up Certified Financial Planners

We appreciate Certified Financial Planners for their knowledge and experience, but many other ratings lack thorough vetting. If you contact any advisers (after further research), ask if they work with individuals like you. Remember, many excellent advisers are not Certified Financial Planners. After your research, if you find a firm you admire that is not Certified, give them a chance. You can use this tool to find Certified Financial Planners near you:

<https://financialplanning.cisi.org/cisiweb2/wayfinder/home>

B: Look Up Chartered Financial Planners

We like Chartered Financial Planners for their qualifications. After completing your research, ask if they serve clients like you. There are excellent advisers who are not Chartered, so if you find someone you like who is not, do not rule them out list. You can use this tool to find Certified Financial Planners near you:

<https://www.thepfs.org/membership/find-an-adviser/>

Step 2: Ask Around (Friends, Family, Colleagues)

We acknowledge this is far from infallible, but friends, family, and colleagues are undoubtedly worth consulting. You can unlikely rely on the recommended firms without further investigation. Still, it may help you in compiling a shortlist of trustworthy advisers that might have been difficult to find or identify through other means.

Step 3: Ask Your Accountant (or other trusted advisers)

Most individuals trust their accountants. If this applies to you, requesting a shortlist of two or three firms can be a good starting point.

However, while accountants are generally well-connected within the local business community, very few truly understand financial planning (even if they might not acknowledge it). They may inadvertently refer you to a large, branded firm (which may or may not meet your needs) or a smaller firm that might not offer the highest standard of advice. This could lead to unnecessarily high costs or subpar advice. Therefore, consider these names as suggestions for the time being.

We will explain how to explore further shortly.

What Not to Do

Avoid beginning your search with Google. While reputable firms do appear on Google, larger brands and overly savvy SEO marketers have effectively monopolised the primary search terms. To test this assertion, carry out a quick Google search now using the terms you consider most relevant. I assure you, discovering a quality option will feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. Google can be particularly difficult to navigate when starting your search, and it is more likely to overwhelm and confuse you.

Step 4: Now It is Time to Google

Now that you have created your shortlist, it is time to put Google to work. Search for each firm and examine their website. This initial search aims to rule firms “in” or “out” based on what you discover. Some of this may rely on intuition, and that is perfectly fine for now. As you review each site, ask yourself:

- What is your first impression?
- Do they specify whom they specialise in or who they work best with?
- Have they received any awards? As previously mentioned, this is not always a definitive metric, but it can certainly influence the initial screening phase.
- What can you learn about the team? Are they well qualified? As mentioned earlier, the two important qualifications to consider are Certified Financial Planner (CFP) and Chartered Financial Planner. On their own, qualifications are not a reliable selection metric either; however, if you value other aspects of the firm, then a well-qualified team undoubtedly provides more supporting evidence.
- Do they offer services that you believe you might need
- Are there any valuable videos or blogs you could watch to understand better the people you may be dealing with? This type of material is immensely valuable. Engaging with it can provide you with more information in your evaluation process:
- Do they communicate in your language? Is it free of jargon?
- Are they exploring issues that make you think, “That’s me?”

As a result of your Google search and consideration of some of these questions, you would expect to refine your possible firms to a much tighter selection.

Step 5: Reach Out for An Initial Call

If you have narrowed your search to two or three candidates, it is time to contact them for an initial call or Zoom conversation. You can do this in whatever way suits you best, such as by email or phone.

Although you are initiating contact, this is still part of your initial evaluation and selection process. You have yet to decide to work with any of these firms. Be aware that they will likely want to arrange an initial telephone call or Zoom chat with you. Many firms will refer to this as a "coffee catch-up" or "coffee chat." It is much easier than exchanging lengthy emails back and forth.

This initial inquiry process also holds valuable information for you:

- How responsive was the firm?
- Were they polite and professional?
- Was it easy to arrange an initial call?
- During the call, did they ask you any thought-provoking questions that made you reconsider your situation?
- Were they able to share any insights or knowledge that showed their expertise?
- Did they respond to your questions and address any concerns you raised during the call?
- Did you come away with the impression that they could effectively carry out the job?

Step 6: Reflect - What Have You Learned?

By now, you have gathered a great deal of information, both formally and intuitively. Take a moment to reflect on what you have learned.

- How was your experience thus far?
- Who stacked up well? Why?
- Who was not as good as you had hoped? Why?

Step 7: Initial Meeting

It is important to remember that, in most cases, your next step will be to agree to a more formal initial meeting with any prospective firm. For most firms, this meeting will be free of charge, although you will be giving up your time (around an hour). Typically, it is held face-to-face in the firm's offices or via a video call (such as Zoom).

Go ahead and book a formal initial meeting with firms that you feel comfortable with. At the end of that initial meeting, you will typically be asked whether you would like to engage the firm for advice at a fee. The fees should be completely transparent and understandable. You will be under no obligation or pressure to make a decision on engaging immediately after the initial meeting (although if you are ready to make that commitment, then feel free to do so). If you need more time to decide or wish to have an initial meeting with any other firms on your shortlist, we encourage you to do so. Thus, even the initial meeting can be regarded as your next research phase.

You can find some questions to ask prospective advisers in the appendices. We recommend these questions be used at the formal initial meeting.

Pro Tip: Most quality firms will wish to dedicate time to genuinely understanding you and your situation, as financial advice must be given “in context” with your broader life circumstances and goals. Therefore, do not be deterred by firms taking their time with this step - it is a positive sign.

Pro Tip: Choosing the right adviser is a vital decision, so it is important to make the right choice. However, meeting with several advisers can be very time-consuming, and you may not want to invest that much time. It is perfectly acceptable to select someone you like straight away. Choosing an adviser largely depends on finding the right ‘fit.’

If you do decide to meet with more than one adviser, we recommend conducting all your meetings in the same week, if possible, so that you have a fresh memory of events for comparison purposes. If that is not practical, take thorough notes immediately after each meeting and evaluate the adviser on various factors that are important to you. For this purpose, you can use our free tool, The Adviser Scorecard, in the appendices.

Step 8: Make A Decision

Having attended the initial meetings and conducted your research, you are now positioned to decide whom you wish to engage for some preliminary advice.

Yes, there will be a cost, and you should be prepared to pay reasonable professional fees for a quality advisor. Once you have assessed their approach (i.e., received the advice), you can decide whether to proceed with any further actions and implement the recommendations offered.

If everything goes well and you are happy with the advice, you may opt to implement the recommendations and become a regular client. Becoming a client involves having regular review meetings (typically annually) to make any necessary adjustments to your plan and to ensure everything is on track as you work towards your goals.

Things We have Excluded (Deliberately)

There is a range of search engines that claim to help you in choosing a financial adviser. The two most commonly used are Vouched For and Unbiased. We would avoid many of the other options listed on Google.

The challenge with these sites is akin to the Google search problem we discussed earlier. While there are good advisers listed, finding them is nearly impossible for someone outside the profession.

The Vouched For 5-star ratings serve as a helpful supplementary research factor; consider them like industry awards. They are valuable alongside other positive information, but on their own, they do not guarantee that you will choose a great adviser.

There are simply too many good advisers who are not included in these listings because the listing agencies can be challenging organisations to work with

The Final Word

We created this guide to help you feel more confident as you search for a great financial adviser.

We hope to be included on your shortlist as you navigate your research process. It is our responsibility to earn the opportunity to proceed.

We also recognise that selecting an adviser is about finding the right 'fit,' so if, for any reason, you decide to work with another financial adviser, we wish you all the best.

Appendices

Questions To Ask Prospective Advisers

1/ What do you do?

We stole this one from Unbiased (a website that lists advisers). You are seeking a concise explanation of the type and benefits of the service the adviser can offer

2/ What qualifications do you hold personally?

We would also recommend asking if these qualifications are above the minimum level.

- University degree
- Industry or professional qualifications
- Are they above the minimum that you must hold?

3/ What qualifications does your team hold?

An experienced adviser who lacks higher-level qualifications can show a commitment to education by employing well-qualified staff around them

4/ What is your investment approach or philosophy?

- What are the investment fund costs (on average) in your portfolios?
- What are the platform costs?

You can compare the responses about these costs between the advisers you interview. As with any other product or service, cost alone reveals very little. However, when considered alongside the answers to all other questions, it may offer additional insight or assist you in deciding between firms

5/ Will you act in a fiduciary capacity when providing me with advice?

I would obtain the answer to this in writing. Investopedia defines a fiduciary as “a person or organisation that acts on behalf of another person or persons, putting their client's interests ahead of their own, with a duty to preserve good faith and trust.

Being a fiduciary thus requires being bound both legally and ethically to act in the other's best interests." Any financial planner worth their salt will specify in writing that they are acting in this role. You might be surprised to learn that most advisers you meet are not acting in a fiduciary capacity and, therefore, have not explicitly agreed to prioritise the client's interests over their own.

6/ How much access will I get to you when I need you?

Most advisers will offer an annual review meeting and will also allow you to contact them via telephone and email whenever you require

7/ Are you independent or restricted? Do you have any in-house portfolios or funds?

In many instances, a restricted adviser is limited because they are part of a large organisation that looks to reduce their advisers' liability by minimising the number of investment funds and other products they must consider before providing advice.

Some of these organisations will encourage or incentivise their advisers to use in-house investment options, which are generally more expensive without offering additional value. It is contentious and potentially misleading to state this, as some restricted firms have merely focused their offerings on high-quality investments and financial products.

However, in my experience, such cases are rare and beyond the capability of most retail clients to ascertain with certainty. We recommend opting for an independent adviser based on that consideration. (Although independence alone means very little, there are both good and bad advisers who are independent)

8/ Do you have other clients like me?

It is always reassuring to know that the adviser you are working with has experience with individuals like you in the past. It would be even more beneficial if they specialised in working with people like you.

9/ Are you directly authorised by the FCA or an appointed representative of another organisation?

The adviser should be regulated via the financial services firm for which they work. You can consult the Financial Services Register to ensure the firm is authorised

10/ How do you charge?

Is this separated for the initial advice, implementation and ongoing advice?

What am I likely to pay for each stage of advice?

Can I walk away after the initial advice if I do not want to go further?

11/ How big is your team?

Many smaller advisers might take offence at this question. However, it is worth asking whether there is some backup and other support within the business, as it might ensure a better standard of service in the medium term.

12/ Would I have a dedicated person to contact when needed?

Ideally, this person should not be the adviser, as they are often busy in meetings. Therefore, having another dedicated point of contact within the firm is preferable.

13/ What are your plans for the business over the next xx years?

In our view, it is important to hear about the businesses' plans. Will the business be sold within the next five years? Will you be sold on it? Most clients do not like that thought very much, so be sure to probe a little if you sense hesitation from the adviser.

14/ Who owns the company?

It is worth knowing. You can decide for yourself whether the answer is one you like or dislike. Is there a larger company, such as a fund manager or venture capital firm, who has a stake in the ownership

15/ How many clients do you work with at present?

Do you have the ability to take on new clients?

16/ What is the best thing you have ever done/ achieved for one of your clients?

17/ Can you put me in touch with a couple of your clients to chat with?

While no adviser is likely to connect you with someone who will give you a bad report, you can ask a few questions of the existing clients, and their answers might give you some extra confidence or scepticism.

18/ How long will it take to receive advice?

Good quality advice takes time and is a process, not a singular event.

Unfortunately, many of the delays in the process can be due to obtaining important information from your existing product providers. This is not the adviser's fault.

19/ Will I have mobile access to all the files and financial info?

Unfortunately, very few advisory firms will answer this question affirmatively.

However, those that do are showing they are well-versed in the latest technology. A 'no' in this instance would not alone dismiss an adviser or firm, but a 'yes' could be a positive aspect that distinguishes one adviser from others you are considering.

Adviser Scorecard

To help you make your decision, we recommend scoring prospective Advisers on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 if the answer or evidence is not satisfactory, five if it is extremely compelling) and highlighting topics of concern with an exclamation mark (!).

This is useful when comparing different service providers, but first you need to understand what is most important to you and your business. It is up to you to decide where you need higher scores and what your lowest acceptable scores are on various questions. Any areas that concern you may need further investigation or could result in automatic exclusion.

Experience to date

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern
First impressions				
General response times				
Attention to detail				
Client care to date				
Professionalism				

Company background

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern
Firms mission & values				
Ownership structure				
Business Plan/Exit plans				
Investment Philosophy/Approach				
Capacity to take on new work				

Team & Qualifications

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern
Size of team				
Adviser qualifications				
Team qualifications				

Regulatory

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern
Regulatory Status				
Fiduciaries				
Conflicts of interest (if any)				

Services offered

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern
Meets my needs				
Access to adviser				
Dedicated contact				
Service Level Agreement				

Other

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5	Area of concern

	Company 1 Score 1-5	Company 2 Score 1-5	Company 3 Score 1-5
Total			

