



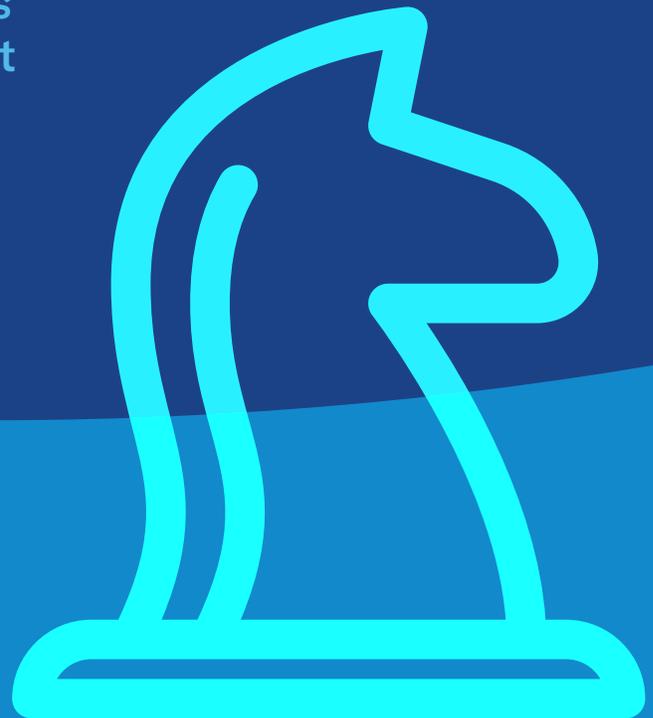
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THE ADVANTAGE OF ADVICE

How small business owners
navigate growth, retirement
and workforce strategies



A white paper by Tracy Ann Shaw, PhD
Research partner: SCORE

Introduction

In today's complex business landscape, small business owners face critical decisions about growth, risk management and succession planning – often with limited guidance. Where do they turn for trustworthy advice? And how does the quality of that guidance shape their confidence in securing both their business and personal financial futures?

Study purpose and scope

This research examines the relationship between the role of strategic advisors and the business owner's confidence across four critical areas:

- **Decision-making processes** and financial professional engagement
- **Business protection and risk management** strategies
- **Succession and retirement planning** readiness
- **Talent acquisition and retention** approaches



Equitable collaborated with SCORE, a nonprofit organization that provides free mentoring and educational resources to small business owners and entrepreneurs, to conduct this independent study, which surveyed 728 small business owners to uncover how industry leaders form strategic advisor* relationships with accountants, lawyers, insurance agents, financial professionals, bankers and mentors to influence small business owner choices, planning and timing.

Since 1964, SCORE has helped more than 17 million entrepreneurs start, grow or successfully exit a business. SCORE's 10,000 volunteers provide free, expert mentoring, resources and education in all 50 U.S. states and territories.

*Strategic advisor is a term used here exclusively to define the relationship of experienced professionals from diverse industries with relevant experience spanning, but not limited to, accountants, real estate brokers, legal as well as estate planning attorneys and financial professionals.

Strategic advisors are the go-to guidance for business decisions — spotlighting financial professionals as one key driver.

Key findings

1

The Strategic Advisor advantage

This study uncovered a portrait of two different mindsets — those who seek advice and those who rely on their own experience. Business owners who engage with financial professionals demonstrate greater assurance in key business decisions, as evidenced by their retirement planning and greater likelihood to have comprehensive protection strategies in place. Millennial business owners place higher value on their relationship with a financial professional, even more so than accountants and as compared to other strategic advisors, at twice the rate of Boomer owners.

2

A relationship with a financial professional grows confidence

While most business owners remain uncertain about the timing of their retirement, those who seek and implement advice show markedly greater confidence in both timeline and outcomes, along with better preparedness for unexpected events.

3

Opportunity in uncertainty

During periods of economic and political shifts, advisor-supported business owners are significantly more likely to seek the opportunity in the changes, accelerating plans for growth and strategic investments rather than retreating.

4

The benefits gap

Despite recognizing the importance of talent acquisition and retention for delivery of their products and services, many small businesses underutilize available employee benefit options, often assuming the size of their team makes comprehensive benefits unattainable — missing opportunities to strengthen their competitive position through key talent strategies.

Where do small business owners go for advice?

“Financial professionals are critical. It took me a long time, too long, to realize that I shouldn't do everything myself and that I didn't need to do everything myself, and that I could in fact be far more successful if I reached out for help and advice from the right sources. I got burned a few times early on...so now I am extremely careful where I go for advice.”

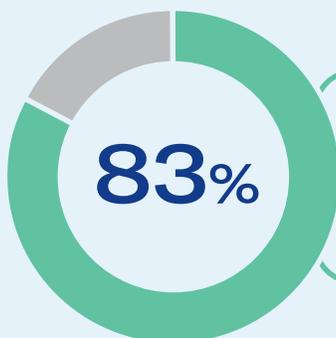
— Small Business Owner, Pinellas Park, FL

To understand small business growth, it's important to first understand owner decision-making processes and support networks.

While some owners seek guidance from external advisors, others decidedly do not. This study reveals that 83% consider it important to work with a financial professional for business guidance and decisions. In fact, most small business owners highly value external advice, even above family and friends. The most important people business owners turn to for guidance are accountants, financial professionals, business mentors, bankers, lawyers and insurance agents.

Those who consider financial professionals very important are three times as likely to also value bankers and insurance agents, and twice as likely to value lawyers, compared to those who do not view financial professionals as important.

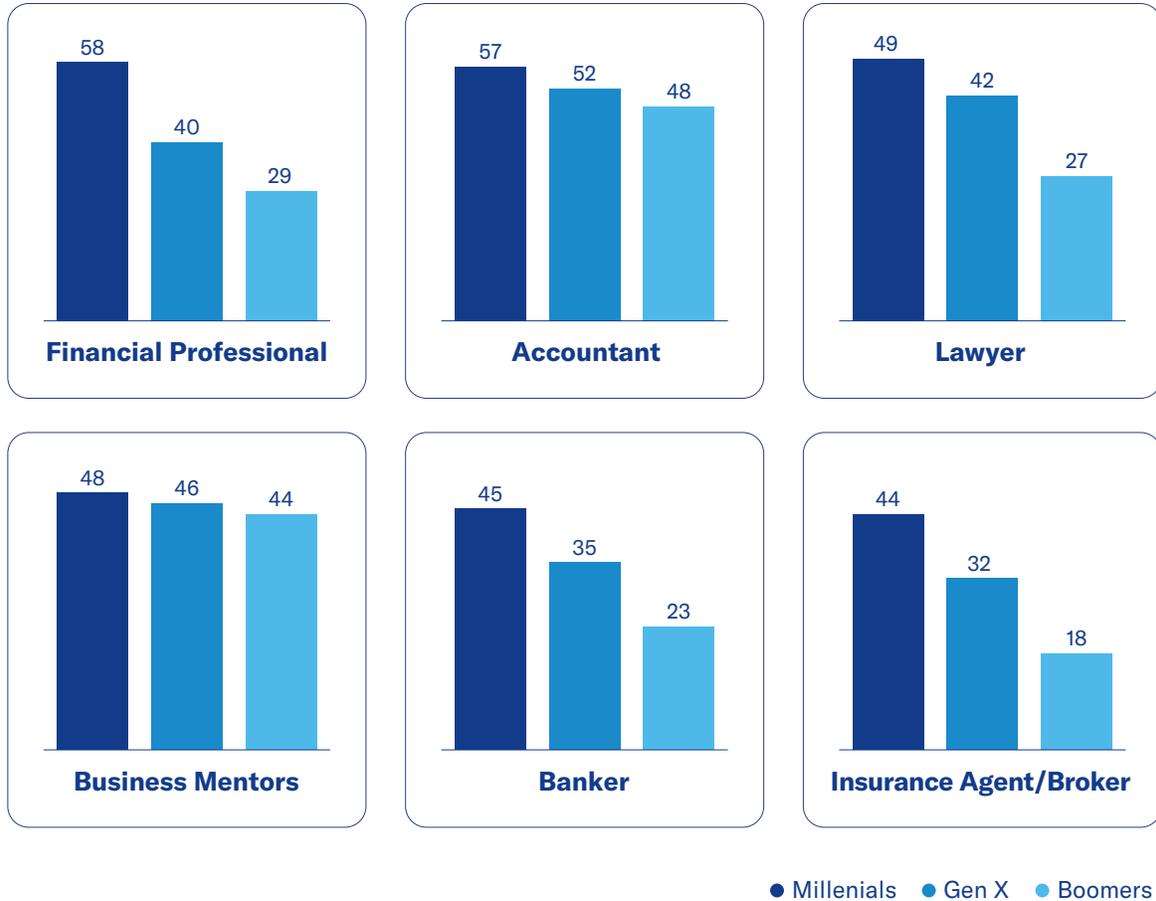
This highlights the interconnected nature of professional guidance in business decisions and suggests that building trust with one strategic advisor can lead to valuing a whole network of expertise for effective owner support.



of owners think it is important to consult with a **financial professional** for business guidance and decisions.

Generational differences in trusted sources for business guidance

How different generations rank their strategic advisors



Reliance varies significantly across generations

Millennial business owners at the leading edge of today's economy are turning to strategic advisors more often than their Gen X and Boomer counterparts — in fact, they are twice as likely to seek out financial professionals. Accountants are close behind as trusted guides, while business mentors remain consistently important across every generation.

When do business owners seek advice?

More mature businesses benefit when connecting with financial professionals, especially as they align personal retirement goals with business transition plans. Yet, paradoxically, this group is least likely to value financial professionals. At a mature business stage, financial professionals can offer action plans to structure business valuation for a potential buyer or for ownership transfer to key employees or family members. Careful financial and operational planning may lead to an optimal result for an owner, their family and the business.

“I believe the more information you can get from qualified sources, the better your chances for success.”

— Small Business Owner, Minnetonka, MN

Businesses operating for 2 to 5 years are 50% more likely to engage with a financial professional than those in business for 20 or more years.

50%

Small business owners deserve support and guidance at every stage of their journey



Start-up



Growth



Strong awareness about their need for advice and guidance



Strong propensity to engage with strategic advisors

Millennial and growth-stage business owners actively seek advice and more regularly engage professional advisors to navigate expansion challenges and capitalize on opportunities.



Transition



Proximity to retirement increases need for advice and guidance



Half as likely to engage with strategic advisors



Mature

Boomer and mature/transition-stage business owners equally deserve planful guidance as they consider successors, prepare for retirement and determine their next chapter — yet are half as likely to seek external advice when facing complex decisions.

Strategic advice powers growth early — and can be more valuable later





Takeaways for owners seeking advice

Build professional networks



Business owners vary in their openness to advice. When they seek advice, it comes from a variety of strategic professionals, each with specific expertise. Financial professionals benefit from being part of strong referral networks, including, but not limited to, accountants, bankers, insurance agents and lawyers.

Target high-potential Millennials



Growth-stage businesses are more likely to seek guidance, creating opportunities for longer-term personal and business planning relationships.

Demonstrate value of advice for seasoned owners



Emphasize retirement and transition planning early to align personal and business goals, noting their proximity to retirement makes advisor support especially critical.

How are business owners looking at retirement?



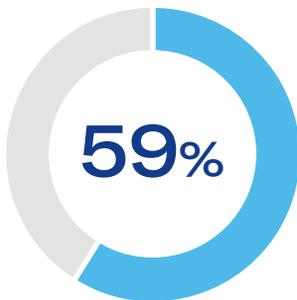
"I have great concerns about whether or not I can retire as planned."

— Small Business Owner, Baton Rouge, LA

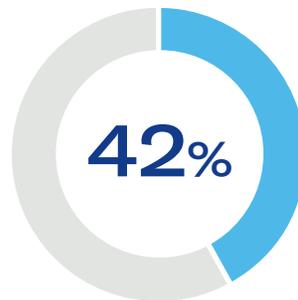
The business-as-retirement-plan dilemma

Six out of 10 business owners find it difficult to completely “retire,” even though nearly half started the business as a means to fund their retirement. Moreover, one-third do not have a financial plan in place if the owner becomes sick or injured and can no longer run the business. When the business is THE plan, many business owners have no backup for retirement or an interruption caused by injury or illness.

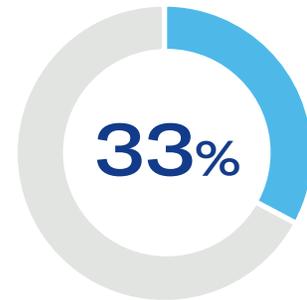
Banking on the business: Owners lack solid plans for retirement and the unexpected



I will find it difficult to completely “retire” from my business



I started my small business to fund my retirement



I do not have a plan to earn income if I become sick or injured and can no longer run my business

Financial guidance transforms business owners' retirement outlook in measurable ways. Business owners who work with financial professionals expect to retire, on average 7 years earlier — age 63 vs. 70 — demonstrating how experienced guidance can fortify confidence and accelerate retirement.

This optimism is attributed to strategic business planning. Nearly half (47%) of owners who prioritize engaging with a financial professional believe their business will enable earlier retirement than originally planned, compared to 15% of those managing without professional guidance — a threefold confidence gap.

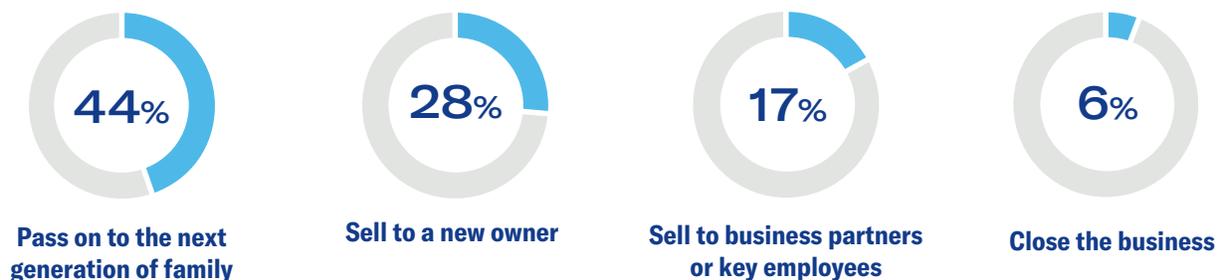
Additional findings point to how financial professionals help drive actionable transition strategies. Owners working with financial professionals are more than twice as likely to develop concrete plans for business sale and transition, converting legacy planning and retirement dreams into executable road maps.



Family legacy and third-party sales shape plans for business transitions

Almost half of small business owners expect to pass their business to a family member. A smaller percentage (29%) plan to cash out by selling their business, and only 18% consider transitioning the business to partners or key employees.

Owner expectations for transferring their business



When do owners expect to retire?

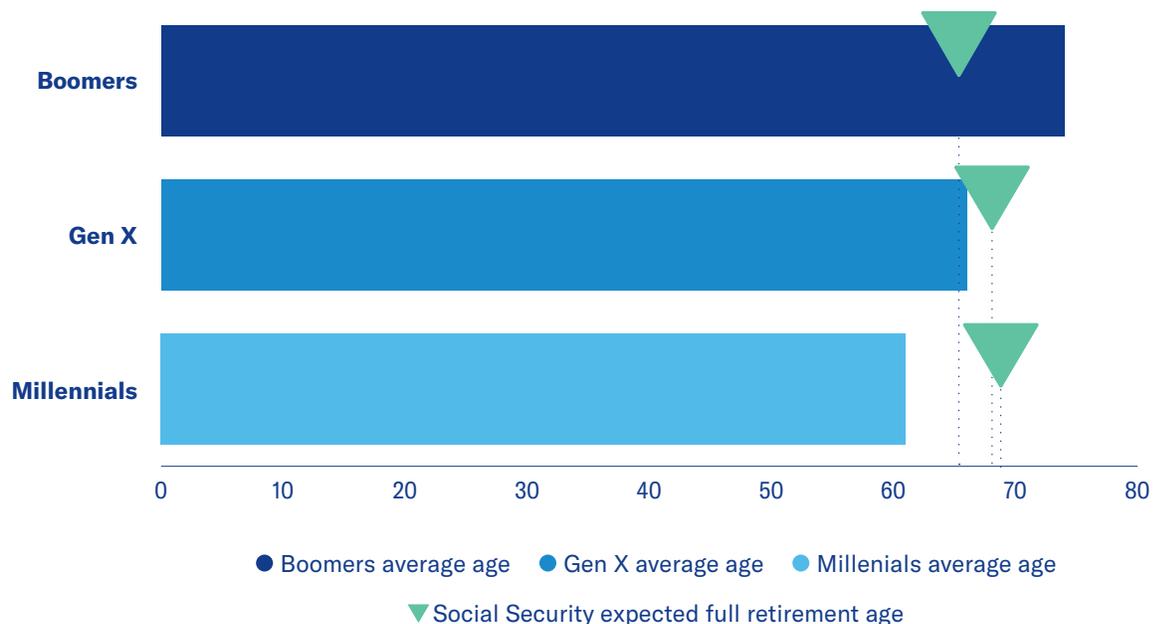
“I would love to be able to retire at the regular age and be comfortable.”

— Small Business Owner, Athens, GA

Generational retirement expectations reveal potential planning gaps and vary significantly from the average (70 years old). Millennial business owners anticipate retiring at 61, 5 years earlier than Gen X owners who expect to retire at 66. Yet, Boomers report to still be working at 74, demonstrating the notably higher optimism about retirement in younger generations.

This generational divide highlights a critical opportunity: younger owners' ambitious timelines require holistic planning to become reality. Financial professionals can play an essential role in bridging the gap between retirement aspirations and actionable strategies, helping owners set realistic expectations that align personal and business goals by outlining pathways to achieve their goals.

Planning for retirement and anticipated age



Seizing the moment: Empowering business owners to thrive amid change

Given the twists and turns of the current economic and political climate, when asked if their business growth plans have changed, most (58%) would stick with their plans or wait before making changes.

Business owners who are accelerating their plans place a much higher value on working with financial professionals. These owners look at disruption as opportunity, not a time for retreat. Because they have financial professionals and plans, they report feeling prepared to keep momentum.

Owners who work with financial professionals are driving growth*

1 in 5 are accelerating their growth or expansion plans

3x more plan to add employees

5x more are likely to speed up employee retention plans

3x more are likely to accelerate their retirement timeline

*This is compared to owners who don't place high importance on financial professionals.

Takeaways for owners looking at retirement



Help face retirement hurdles

Create comprehensive financial plans that balance business value with strategies for guaranteed lifetime income, helping clients overcome planning inertia.



Leverage market movements for growth

Business owners who work with financial professionals are more likely to view shifts as opportunity and more confident about retirement planning.



Engage early for strategic business transitions

Many plan to pass the business to the family or sell for the best offer on the table – opening the door for proactive planning. Insightful professionals work with attorneys to offer strategic advice on transitions, retention and protection.



Prioritize generational needs

Millennials are planning to retire early – five years ahead of Gen X. Both are earlier than previous generations, and financial professionals can be an asset when building financial plans that help grow and protect wealth.



Strategic and comprehensive benefits planning leads business owners to better hiring success



“Providing employees with more benefits and giving them more humanistic care can effectively retain employees.”

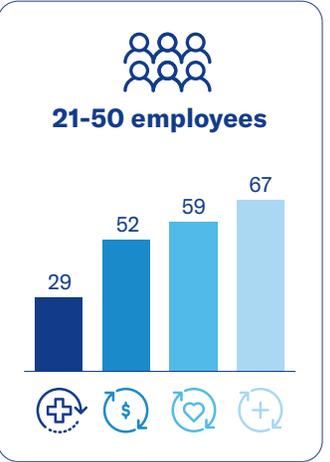
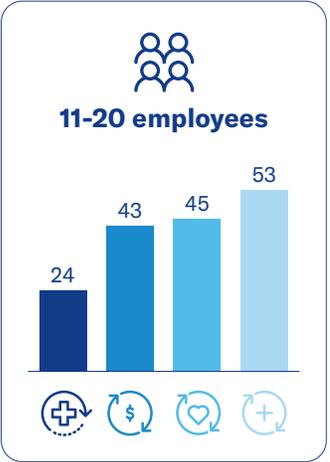
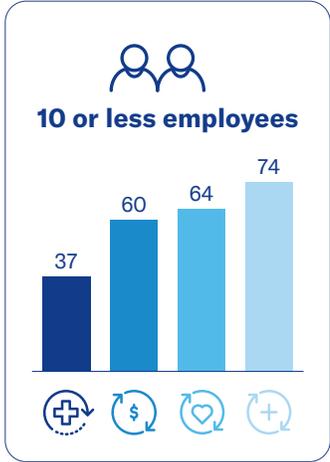
— Small Business Owner, Vineland, NJ

Business owners recognize their team’s talent and skills as their most critical asset, yet their success in attracting and retaining employees depends heavily on expert guidance and preparation. Owners who work with financial professionals are 50% more likely to successfully attract new hires and 34% more likely to onboard employees easily compared to those navigating benefits strategies alone.



Foundational benefits are just the beginning; businesses must go beyond paid time off (PTO), flex schedules and healthcare insurance to attract and retain top talent. Approaches varied along key demographics when asked about other benefits as part of a comprehensive compensation package.

Businesses often feel they are too small or the benefits too expensive to offer medical/healthcare benefits



● Medical/healthcare insurance ● Workplace retirement plan* ● Other health benefits** ● Supplemental benefits***

*401(k), 457, or 403(b) defined contribution plan ** (e.g., Dental, Vision, Group Life, STD/LTD) *** (e.g., Hospital Indemnity, Critical Illness, Accident Insurance)



When looking at health benefits, smaller businesses are less likely to offer basic medical or healthcare insurance compared to larger businesses. Additional health-related benefits, such as vision, dental, group life or short-term/long-term disability (STD/LTD), are also more likely to be offered in businesses with more employees. Cost and business size (10 or less employees) are leading reasons owners are not offering employees these benefits. Regardless of business size, owners aren't offering supplemental benefits as much as other benefits.

Notably, hesitation shifts for those owners who value financial professionals. This group was twice as likely to offer other health-related benefits or supplemental health benefits (such as hospital indemnity, critical illness and accident insurance) because they recognize these benefits attract top talent.

The small business benefits myth: size doesn't limit your options

The study reveals a pervasive mindset barrier – regardless of size, business owners feel their company is too small to offer expanded compensation and benefits: 70% of businesses with up to 20 employees believe they're too small for retirement plans, despite accessible options. This perception extends across health benefits, where size becomes a self-imposed limitation rather than a strategic consideration.

40% of 21–50 employee businesses cite **too small for retirement benefits**

30% of 50+ employee businesses **maintain this same limiting belief and**

30% across all sizes consider retirement plans **too expensive**

Financial guidance doubles expanded benefits offerings

Yet, working with a financial professional transforms benefits strategies. Business owners who highly value guidance from financial professionals are twice as likely to offer comprehensive health benefits (dental, vision, group life, STD/LTD) and twice as likely to provide retirement benefits to their team of employees.

Importance of financial professionals

Likely to offer comprehensive health benefits*

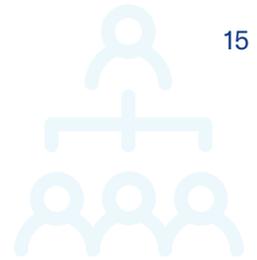


Likely to provide retirement benefits



● Highly value ● Not important

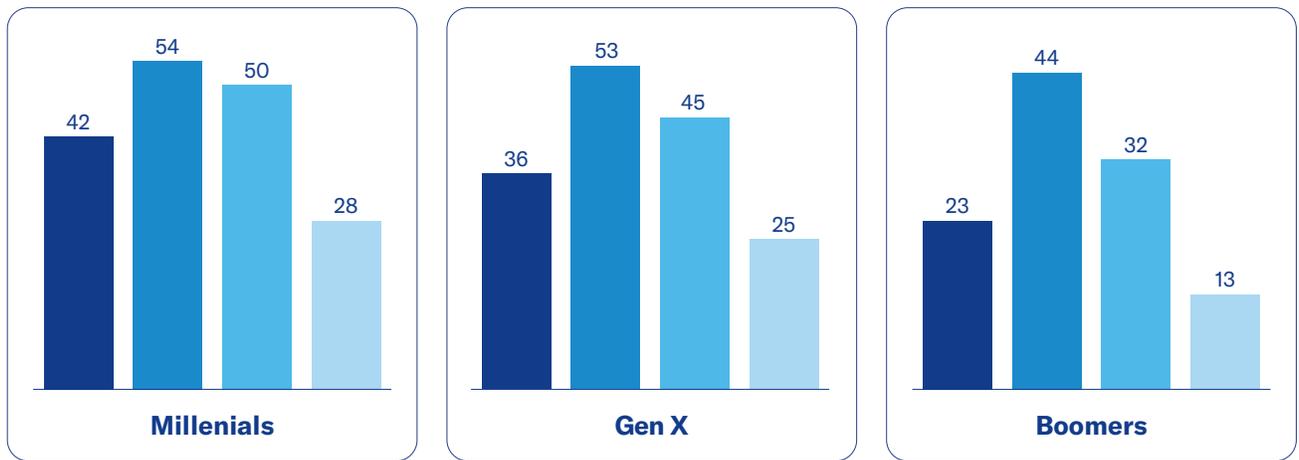
*Dental, vision, group life, STD/LTD



Generational shift creates opportunity

Millennial and Gen X owners significantly outpace Boomers in benefits offerings (employer-based retirement plans as well as voluntary employee benefits options) even more so when made aware of what’s possible via guidance from their financial professional. This generational divide represents a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining top talent – and the chance for strategic professionals to educate all generations about workplace strategies that can strengthen the business.

Benefits offered, aside from salary – by generation

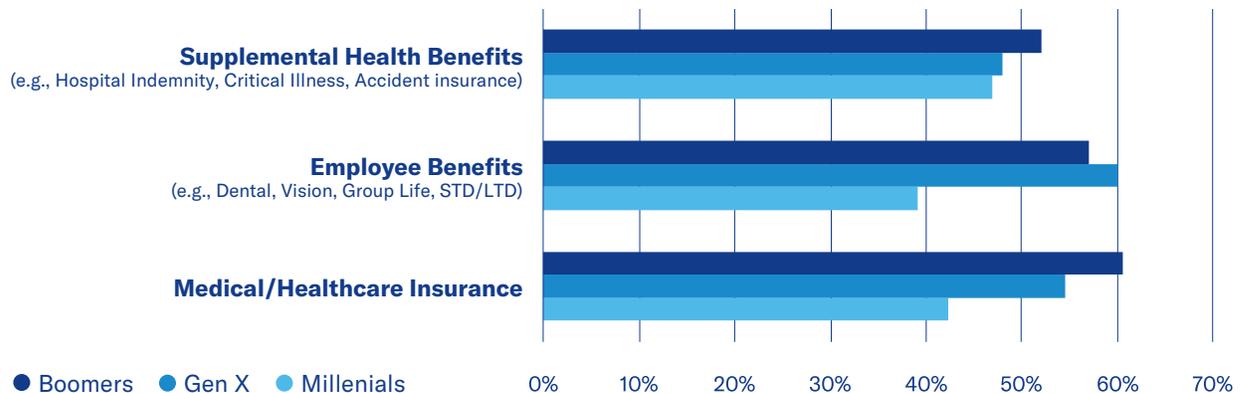


● Workplace Retirement Plan ● Medical/Healthcare Insurance ● Employee Benefits ● Supplemental Benefits

While all age groups cite their reason for not offering retirement benefits as too expensive, Boomers and Gen X owners are most hesitant.

The too small, too expensive myth limits competitive potential

Employee benefits (mis)perceived to be too expensive





Takeaways for strategic benefits planning with owners



Dispel misperceptions about affordability and emphasize positive impact

Educate clients and challenge their assumptions about business size and cost as limitations. Position voluntary benefits and accessible retirement options as competitive differentiators — an investment in the team, not an additional expense.



Engage Millennial owners

Leverage their natural inclination toward a comprehensive compensation package that includes voluntary employee benefits options and retirement plan benefits. These owners show the highest receptivity to guidance and a willingness to implement.



Quantify the talent ROI

Frame benefits conversations around measurable hiring and retention outcomes. Clients working with a financial professional report 50% better hiring success — a compelling business case for strategic benefits planning.



Be the financial professional of choice

Owners who work with a financial professional are more likely to offer a greater range of benefits and incentives to employees, leading to greater confidence in their workforce stability, establishing a stronger competitive position and strengthening the ability to attract and retain top talent.

Conclusion

Financial professionals drive measurable differences

This independent research demonstrates quantifiable differences between small business owners who engage with financial professionals and those who do not, in terms of confidence and operational planning. Owners who value advice generally approach economic uncertainty as an opportunity rather than a setback. They appear to be **more growth-oriented, more prepared** for retirement and better able to retain talent. They also have broader networks of strategic professionals, stronger growth strategies and higher confidence in their retirement plans. The relationship with a financial professional is often a clear catalyst for sustained success.

Retirement reality check

While many owners remain uncertain about retirement timing and funding, those who are guided by a financial professional show measurably greater confidence in their retirement strategy, succession plans and protection strategies. Boomers would benefit from aligning personal financial goals with business continuity planning, though they may be more hesitant to seek the advice of a financial professional. Still, the gap between aspiration and preparation narrows significantly with professional guidance.

Generational mindsets matter

Millennial owners are more likely than Gen X or Boomers to seek the guidance from a team of strategic advisors and integrate comprehensive employee benefits into their business model. Perhaps this helps them feel more optimistic about planning for early retirement. Boomers face the most immediate planning needs and stand to gain significant advantages from professional guidance.

Workforce strategies as a competitive edge

Support from financial professionals can consistently overcome the **too small, too expensive** mindset, offering comprehensive benefits that drive measurable talent advantages, such as improve their ability to attract, onboard and retain top talent. Financial professionals can help overcome the perception that smaller businesses cannot afford competitive benefits, unlocking workforce advantages.

Methodology



June 2025

In partnership with Equitable, this report presents results from a blind study conducted by SCORE Association, the largest small business mentoring and education organization in the United States. The study's aim was to learn more about small business leader attitudes regarding the use of financial professionals, long-term business plans and the capacity to attract and keep strong talent. This snapshot study was fielded and compiled from June 2025–July 2025.

General population

Business owners or key decision makers (728) were surveyed from SCORE's client base with additional responses via a small business owner survey panel to ensure the sample size was sufficient with representation across multiple key demographics.



Age

Millennials
(age 27–44) **40.9%**

Gen X
(age 45–60) **40.8%**

Boomers
(age 61+) **18.3%**



Business size (by employees)

10 or fewer **45.2%**

11–20 **26.5%**

21–50 **19.0%**

51+ **9.3%**



Gender

Male **53%**

Female **47%**

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