WHITE PAPER

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The Estate Planning Playbook

A Practical Guide for Financial Advisors to Deepen Client Relationships and Drive Better Outcomes

DEEPEN RELATIONSHIPS

DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES

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Executive Summary

What *actually* is estate planning, anyway?

Ask the average person, and you'll likely hear, "It's having a will so my family knows what to do with the house, investments, and a few cherished keepsakes." But that's just one small piece of the puzzle.

In reality, estate planning is far broader and far more valuable. It's not just about what happens after someone passes away. It's about the intentional decisions they make while fully alive and well. True estate planning is a forward-looking process that weaves together family, legacy, health, assets, and values.

This playbook is designed to equip financial advisors with the frameworks, tools, and language to bring estate planning confidently into client conversations. From foundational legal structures to digital assets, family dynamics, and philanthropic goals, this guide covers the full spectrum of modern estate planning.

When done right, estate planning isn't a box to check. It's a differentiator. Advisors who master this discipline can deepen trust, expand relationships, and deliver lasting impact across generations.

Reimagining Estate Planning

Estate planning isn't just about what happens when someone dies. It's about making sure life continues to work the way your clients want it to, even when the unexpected happens.

The traditional view of estate planning as "who gets what when I'm gone" falls short of its real purpose and potential. In truth, estate planning spans a wide range of critical decisions that shape a person's life, legacy, and long-term security.

It addresses far more than asset distribution. It encompasses tax efficiency and wealth preservation, healthcare directives and incapacity planning, business continuity and succession, digital asset management, family governance, conflict prevention, and charitable giving.

> Estate planning governs not just who inherits your assets, but how taxes, guardianship, and even digital access are handled, something increasingly recognized by legal professionals and the IRS alike.[1]

What's more, estate planning is not static. Any time there's a life, financial, or legislative change, a plan needs to be reviewed and often updated. It's never a "set it and forget it" scenario.

As an advisor, normalizing conversations about illness, incapacity, guardianship, and unexpected inheritance before they happen is essential to providing truly holistic financial planning. These discussions, while sometimes challenging, ultimately create deeper relationships and better outcomes for your clients.

In this guide, we'll take you through every area of advice that touches estate planning so you can learn how to talk about and implement each area into your practice. By the end, you'll know how to transform estate planning from an afterthought into a cornerstone of your client relationships.

Let's begin where most estate planning begins: The wills, trusts, and other foundational documents.

CORE STRUCTURES

The Foundations Beyond the Will

The core legal documents that form the foundation of a comprehensive estate plan go far beyond a simple will.

- A complete estate planning structure typically includes a Last Will and Testament that directs asset distribution, names guardians for minor children, and appoints an executor.
- It also includes a Revocable Living Trust that holds assets during life and facilitates a smooth transfer after death while avoiding probate.
- A Financial Power of Attorney designates someone to handle financial matters if your client becomes incapacitated.
- Healthcare Directives, including advanced directives and healthcare proxies, outline medical wishes and decision-makers.

Why it matters to your clients

A will may not avoid probate or guide incapacity on its own, which is why revocable living trusts and directives are commonly recommended.[2] Without these additional documents, clients can face several risks, including probate proceedings that can be costly, time-consuming, and public; court-appointed guardianship if incapacity occurs; family conflict over medical or financial decisions; and delays in asset access when funds are most needed.

How to talk to your clients

When explaining the difference between wills and trusts, consider this analogy: Think of a will as a letter of instructions that only gets opened after you're gone. It tells what should happen, but it can't do anything until then.

A trust, on the other hand, is more like a well-prepared binder with a trusted person already assigned to act on your behalf. It can spring into action immediately if you're incapacitated and continue seamlessly after your death, all without court involvement.

When to update plans

Core documents should be reviewed and potentially updated after any of these events:

- Marriage, divorce, or remarriage.
- Birth or adoption of children.
- Moving between states, as laws vary significantly.
- Purchasing significant assets.
- Changes in tax laws or regulations.
- Every 3-5 years as a general practice.

How to prepare for the unexpected

Have your clients store documents securely with digital backup using tools like Wealth.com's *Vault*. Ensure that named executors and trustees know their roles and where to find necessary information. Review beneficiary designations across all accounts to ensure alignment with the overall estate plan. Lastly, create a "letter of instruction" with any personal wishes not covered in legal documents.

INCAPACITY PLANNING

What if you can't speak for yourself?

Incapacity planning addresses what happens if clients are alive but unable to make their own decisions due to illness, accident, or cognitive decline.

This planning includes:

- **Durable Financial Power of Attorney**: Designates an agent to manage financial affairs.
- **Healthcare Power of Attorney**: Names someone to make medical decisions.
- **Living Will/Advanced Directive**: Outlines wishes for medical treatment.
- **HIPAA Authorization**: Allows designated people to access medical information.

Incapacity-related disputes are one of the fastest-growing areas of probate litigation, highlighting the importance of comprehensive planning in this area.[3]

Why it matters to your clients

Without proper incapacity planning, consequences can be severe. These include court-supervised guardianship or conservatorship proceedings, frozen accounts, inability to pay bills, medical decisions made contrary to client wishes, family conflict over care decisions, and potential depletion of assets through legal fees and poorly coordinated care.

How to talk to your clients

Incapacity planning is about maintaining your voice even when you can't use it.

Start with this question: "If you were in the hospital tomorrow and couldn't speak, who would make decisions for you? And would they know what you want?"

For younger clients who may feel this is a distant concern, even a temporary incapacity from an accident could leave finances in limbo without the right documents in place. It's like insurance. You hope never to use it, but you'd never want to be without it.

When to update plans

- Update plans if named agents change as relationships evolve or people move away.
- After significant health diagnoses.
- When a child turns 18 (even college students need POAs).
- After divorce.
- Death of a named agent.
- When preferences for medical treatment change.

How to prepare for the unexpected

Discuss specific scenarios with your clients to uncover their true preferences. Encourage detailed conversations with named agents about wishes. Create emergency contact lists that include all fiduciaries. Consider cognitive decline planning for aging clients. Ensure healthcare directives are on file with primary physicians.

Asset Protection & Wealth Structuring

Asset protection strategies employ legal structures to shield wealth from potential creditors, lawsuits, and poor financial decisions.

Common structures include:

- Irrevocable Trusts that remove assets from a client's estate while maintaining benefits.
- Family Limited Partnerships (FLPs) that separate ownership and control of family assets.
- Limited Liability Companies (LLCs) that protect personal assets from business liabilities.
- Specialized Trusts, such as Spousal Lifetime Access Trusts (SLATs), Dynasty Trusts, and Domestic Asset Protection Trusts (DAPTs).

Why it matters to your clients

Without asset protection structures, up to 70% of generational wealth can be lost within two generations.[4] Proper structuring helps shield assets from creditors, lawsuits, and divorce proceedings, but also creates structured inheritance for unprepared or vulnerable heirs, protects family businesses and real estate investments, and maintains privacy regarding wealth and assets, all of which can help prevent rapid wealth depletion through poor decision-making.

How to talk to your clients

Asset protection isn't about hiding wealth. It's about preserving it for your intended purposes.

Start here: "You've worked hard to build your wealth. Let's make sure it's protected from the unexpected and passed down responsibly."

If you have clients who are business owners, their business represents years of hard work and sacrifice. The right structure ensures that one lawsuit or creditor claim doesn't put everything they've built at risk.

When to update plans

Revisit your asset protection and estate strategies before or after major business transactions, especially those that significantly alter your financial picture. It's also wise to reassess when entering high-risk professions or ventures, after receiving a large inheritance or windfall, when children reach adulthood or get married, or in response to regulatory changes that could impact existing asset protection strategies.

How to prepare for the unexpected

A strong asset protection strategy includes built-in flexibility. Consider incorporating trust protectors or decanting provisions into trust structures to allow for future adjustments. It's also helpful to educate successor trustees about their fiduciary responsibilities to ensure effective management. Review your business continuity plans regularly and maintain adequate insurance coverage as a primary safeguard. Finally, documenting the intent behind your asset protection strategies can strengthen their effectiveness and help avoid disputes.

Tax Strategies Inside Estate Planning

Tax planning within estates includes several types of taxation that can significantly impact wealth transfer. These include the obvious, such as Federal Estate Tax, which currently applies to estates exceeding $13.99million per person, and State Estate/Inheritance Taxes, which vary by state with much lower thresholds in some jurisdictions.

But don't forget about Income and Capital Gains Tax, which affects beneficiaries receiving certain types of assets. Or the Gift Tax, which is integrated with the estate tax system with annual exclusion opportunities. The Generation-Skipping Transfer Tax applies to transfers to grandchildren or more remote descendants.

Though they may be uncommon, knowing about these types of situations is essential for financial professionals. Plus, with the current federal estate tax exemption of $13.99M per person set to sunset in 2026, proactive strategies are essential.[5]

Why it matters to your clients

Tax exposure can dramatically reduce what heirs actually receive.

Proper planning can maximize the amount passed to beneficiaries, minimize immediate tax burdens on inheritors, provide liquidity for paying estate taxes, create tax-advantaged charitable giving opportunities, and prepare for significant changes in tax legislation.

How to talk to your clients

This is likely the easiest conversation you'll have. Everyone likes to keep more of their money.

"A smart estate plan doesn't just decide who gets what. It works to reduce what the IRS gets too. Every dollar saved in taxes is another dollar for your family or favorite causes."[6]

For clients near exemption thresholds, the window for utilizing the current historically high exemption amounts may be closing in 2026. There are strategies you should consider now to lock in these benefits.

When to update plans

It's important to revisit your estate and tax strategies at key moments. Consider updating ahead of known tax law changes, such as the scheduled 2026 exemption sunset. Other times to reassess include after significant asset appreciation, when you're approaching federal or state exemption thresholds, if you change your state of residency, or before major liquidity events like a business sale or the exercise of stock options.

How to prepare for the unexpected

Proactive planning can help manage uncertainty. You might use lifetime gifting strategies to take advantage of current exemption levels or consider Roth conversions to help reduce future tax burdens. Charitable giving strategies can also offer valuable tax benefits. Life insurance may provide necessary liquidity to cover estate taxes, and exploring basis step-up opportunities can help manage the tax impact of appreciated assets.

DIGITAL ASSETS

Protecting Your Online Life

Digital assets span a wide range. From financial accounts and business holdings to deeply personal memories stored online. On the financial side, this includes cryptocurrency, PayPal, or Venmo balances, as well as online banking accounts. Business assets might include websites, domain names, e-commerce operations, and other forms of digital intellectual property. Personal assets cover everything from social media profiles and email accounts to cloud storage and digital photo libraries. As our lives become increasingly digital, these assets have become a critical component of estate planning, yet many advisors and their clients are still catching up.

Why it matters to your clients

Without access plans, families may lose control of key accounts and assets, or even simply cherished memories like photos kept in the cloud. Issues include inaccessible cryptocurrency and digital investment accounts; lost access to online business assets affecting business continuity; permanent loss of sentimental digital content such as photos, writings, and communications; identity theft risk from unmonitored accounts; and complicated or impossible account recovery processes.

How to talk to your clients

Your digital life is part of your legacy, so make sure someone you trust can access and manage it. Digital assets often fall through the cracks in traditional estate planning. Yet for many people today, these represent significant financial and sentimental value.

It's easy to begin the conversation like this: "Does someone else in your family have access to your digital accounts? Without proper planning, significant value and memories could be permanently lost."

When to update plans

Updates should happen after acquiring cryptocurrency, opening new financial accounts, or using new platforms, launching or purchasing websites or online businesses, switching password management systems, or when platform policies around account access change.

How to prepare for the unexpected

Start by creating a comprehensive inventory of digital assets, and store access credentials securely using a password manager that supports succession planning. Designate a tech-savvy digital executor, and include clear authorization for digital access in your estate documents. While most states have adopted the Revised Uniform Fiduciary Access to Digital Assets Act (RUFADAA), which provides legal clarity, effective planning still needs to account for platform-specific rules and technical access limitations.

Family Dynamics & Legacy Communication

This aspect of estate planning addresses the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of wealth transfer. It includes family communication about wealth and inheritance; managing expectations around "fair" versus "equal" distribution, as well as navigating blended family considerations, preparing heirs for wealth responsibility, and addressing concerns about challenging the estate plan. Matching your estate plan with your family's needs requires a delicate balance of financial, psychological, and emotional considerations.[7]

Why it matters to your clients

Family conflict is the leading cause of estate plan failure.[8] Research shows that failed wealth transfers rarely result from poor tax or legal planning. They stem from misunderstandings about intentions, unprepared heirs, family discord and mistrust, lack of shared values regarding wealth, and surprise or shock at inheritance decisions.

How to talk to your clients

“Estate planning is also people planning. Let's make sure your plan preserves harmony, not just wealth. The greatest gift you can leave your family is clarity and preparation.”

For clients reluctant to discuss inheritance, emphasize to them that their family will have these conversations eventually, either with them present to guide them or without them after they’re gone. Which situation would they prefer?

When to update plans

Like most everything else, family dynamics planning should receive a review after major family life events such as marriages, divorces, or remarriages; family estrangements or reconciliations; shifts in a child’s financial maturity; changes in family business dynamics; or significant changes in wealth or personal circumstances.

How to prepare for the unexpected

- Facilitate family meetings to discuss values and intentions.
- Create "ethical wills" or legacy letters explaining decisions.
- Gradually prepare heirs through financial literacy education.
- Consider having difficult conversations with professional facilitation.
- Document reasoning behind potentially controversial decisions.

PHILANTHROPY

Integrating Charitable Giving into the Plan

Charitable planning involves strategic giving approaches that align with both tax objectives and personal values. These could be any of the following:

1. **Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs)** are flexible giving accounts that allow for immediate tax deductions and

future grant recommendations.
2. **Charitable Remainder Trusts (CRTs)** provide income to the donor with remainder to charity.
3. **Charitable Lead Trusts (CLTs)** provide income to charity with remainder to family.
4. **Private Foundations** are family-controlled charitable entities.
5. **Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs)** are direct IRA distributions to charity.

DAF contributions grew by over 20% in the last five years, signaling increased interest in flexible philanthropic planning.[9]

Why it matters to your clients

Charitable planning isn't just about giving. It's a powerful way to create a legacy rooted in personal values. It can bring families together around a shared philanthropic vision, reduce income and estate taxes, support the causes clients care most about, and align generosity with long-term financial goals. Done thoughtfully, it's a way for clients to make an impact that lasts well beyond their own limited lifetime.

How to talk to your clients

Giving is one of the most meaningful ways to leave a legacy, and this conversation is all about aligning a client's financial plan with what matters most to them. Philanthropy can be a powerful tool for teaching future generations in a family about values and the responsible use of wealth.

While some people are completely altruistic, others also want to know about the other benefits that can come from a solid philanthropic plan. "The right charitable strategies can help you support causes you care about while also creating tax advantages."

When to update plans

Update after major liquidity events like business sales or inheritances, when charitable priorities evolve, and before high-income years when tax deductions would be most valuable. This is also important as family involvement in philanthropy changes, or when new charitable vehicles become available through tax law changes.

How to prepare for the unexpected

- Document charitable intent clearly in estate documents.
- Use flexible tools like DAFs that allow changing grant recommendations.
- Considering charitable remainder trusts that can be modified if needs change.
- Create family philanthropy governance structures to establish clear succession plans for charitable entities.

KEEPING PLANS CURRENT

Monitor, Review, and Evolve

Every single element of an estate plan is a living document that must evolve as your life does. Changes in your personal life, financial status, or federal and state tax laws can significantly impact how an estate is handled.

Ongoing maintenance includes: regular document review, ideally every 3-5 years, beneficiary designation audits, tax law change response, asset alignment verification, and family circumstance updates.

Why it matters to your clients

Stale documents lead to unintended consequences. These include outdated beneficiaries receiving assets, missed tax planning opportunities, ineffective powers of attorney or healthcare directives, assets passing outside the intended plan, and increased potential for family conflict or legal challenges.

How to talk to your clients

Estate planning is an ongoing conversation, not a one-and-done task. Life happens, goals change, and a client's plan needs to keep up. Just like an investment portfolio needs rebalancing, the estate plan should receive regular check-ins to stay aligned with the times.

A simple place to start: "When was the last time we looked at your estate plan through the lens of where your life is right now?"

When to update plans

Update after major life events such as births, deaths, marriages, or divorces, as well as significant financial changes like inheritance, business sale, or retirement. Residential moves between states due to tax law or regulatory changes. Also, any changes in relationships with named fiduciaries.

How to prepare for unexpected

- Implement a systematic review schedule for all clients.
- Use technology tools like Wealth.com's Ester to scan for risks and visualize current plans.
- Create estate planning "dashboards" for clients to track document status.
- Build estate plan reviews into annual client meetings.
- Establish clear document update processes that minimize client friction.

The Modern Advisor's Role In Estate Planning

Clients don't just want investment services. They want advisors who can help them create moments of confidence and clarity, particularly around the sensitive topics of legacy, family, and mortality. By mastering the aspects of estate planning outlined in this guide, you can deepen your meaningful conversations, differentiate your practice in a crowded marketplace, provide truly holistic financial guidance, better protect your clients from preventable risks and mistakes, and create multigenerational client relationships.

Are you ready to step into a broader, more meaningful role with the range of financial planning services that you offer? As the economic landscape grows more complex and your clients face increasing uncertainty, comprehensive estate planning represents both an obligation and an opportunity.

What's stopping you right now from integrating estate planning into onboarding, reviews, and family meetings? If you feel uncomfortable with the subject matter, lack technical knowledge, or even have doubts about your internal processes, that's okay. All of these barriers can be overcome with the right approach, tools, and support system.

Partnering with tech-forward platforms like Wealth.com gives you a clearer view of estate plans, helps identify risks and opportunities, simplifies document sharing, and sparks meaningful family conversations. All while streamlining the planning process.

The most successful advisors of tomorrow will be those who effectively integrate estate planning into their core service offering today. By addressing not just what clients have, but what they care about, you transform your practice from an asset management practice to a true legacy planning partner.

About Wealth.com

Wealth.com provides innovative technology solutions that empower financial advisors to deliver comprehensive estate planning services to all clients. Our platform simplifies complex processes, facilitates meaningful client conversations, and helps you build deeper relationships through legacy planning.

Citations

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