# Which client problems suit an advice-only planning service?

## Understanding the advice-only model

An advice-only financial planner provides guidance and a plan without selling products or managing investments. The client pays a fee for the advice itself, not for ongoing asset management or commissions. This structure changes the kind of client problems the service fits well.

Many people assume financial planning is mainly about picking investments or choosing insurance. In practice, the most valuable work often happens before a single fund is selected: clarifying goals, mapping cash flow, identifying gaps, and building a strategy. Advice-only planners focus on that upstream work. They do not need to justify their recommendations by pointing to a product they sell. That independence lets them address problems that product-based advisers might steer around.

## Problems that fit naturally

### Cash flow and spending puzzles

A client who wants to understand where their money goes, how much they need to save for a goal, or whether they can afford a career change benefits from a pure advice engagement. No product is needed. The planner builds a forecast, tests scenarios, and gives the client a clear picture. The client then acts on their own or with a separate provider for any products they need.

### Debt management and repayment strategy

When a client carries multiple debts with different interest rates, the core problem is sequencing: which debt to pay first, whether to consolidate, and how to structure payments without derailing savings. An advice-only planner can model the options without being tempted to sell a consolidation loan or a balance transfer card. The solution is a plan, not a product.

### Retirement readiness without product bias

Many clients want a retirement projection that shows them if they are on track, what their income might look like, and what the risks are. A planner who does not manage assets can still run the numbers, test inflation and market assumptions, and recommend a savings rate. The client can then choose their own low-cost index funds or work with a separate investment manager. The advice stands on its own merit.

### Major life transitions

Divorce, inheritance, career change, or starting a business all create financial questions that are more about strategy than product. An advice-only planner helps the client think through the implications: tax consequences, cash flow needs, insurance gaps, and changes to long-term goals. The planner's recommendation might include products, but the client shops for them separately. The planner's only incentive is to give clear, unbiased advice.

### Education funding and college planning

Parents often need help understanding how to save for a child's education, how financial aid formulas work, and how to balance retirement and college savings. An advice-only planner can walk them through 529 plans, Coverdell accounts, and general savings without steering them toward a particular provider. The client picks the account that fits their situation.

## What the model does not handle well

Not every client problem fits. Someone who wants a "set it and forget it" investment solution, where the adviser handles all trades and rebalancing, will not get that from an advice-only service. The model assumes the client either takes action on their own or works with a separate asset manager. Clients who prefer being told what to buy and then having someone else execute it may find the advice-only approach too hands-off.

Another mismatch is the client who cannot separate planning from implementation. Some people need the emotional support of having someone manage their money directly, because they lack the confidence or time to follow through. An advice-only planner can coach and guide, but the client must still implement the steps. For those who will not act without a manager, a full-service or hybrid model might be a better fit.

## The role of the independent planning model

The independent planning model, as discussed on the GitHub Discussions forum for advice-only practice modeling, offers a framework for planners who want to operate without product ties. The model emphasizes transparency, fiduciary duty, and a fee structure that aligns with the client's best interest. It works best for clients who value objective analysis and are willing to take ownership of their financial decisions.

One of the advantages of this model is that it scales well for clients who have straightforward needs but still want professional input. A couple in their thirties with a single income, some student loans, and a vague idea of wanting to retire early can get a comprehensive plan for a flat fee. They do not need ongoing asset management. What they need is a clear path and someone to check their assumptions.

Similarly, a retiree who already has a well-structured portfolio and just wants a withdrawal strategy and tax planning can use an advice-only planner for a few hours of work each year. The planner reviews the portfolio, suggests adjustments, and updates the plan without taking over the accounts. The client retains control and avoids ongoing fees.

## How the fee structure shapes the relationship

Advice-only planners typically charge by the hour, a flat fee per project, or a retainer for ongoing advice without asset management. This fee structure changes the dynamic between planner and client. Because the planner is not paid by a product provider or by assets under management, the client can ask any question without wondering if the answer is influenced by what the planner sells. That trust is especially valuable for sensitive topics like estate planning, insurance needs, or family financial conflicts.

Clients who want a second opinion on a plan they already have also fit well. A product-based adviser might be reluctant to critique another adviser's work, especially if it involves products they do not offer. An advice-only planner has no such constraint. They can review an existing plan, point out gaps or unnecessary costs, and suggest improvements. The client can then decide whether to implement those changes through their current provider or switch.

## Practical signs a client fits the model

A planner can look for certain signals during an initial conversation. Clients who ask "What should I do, and why?" rather than "Which fund should I buy?" are likely good candidates. Those who have a clear sense of their own values and want help structuring their finances around them tend to thrive with advice-only work. Clients who are comfortable with spreadsheets, online accounts, and self-directed investing are especially well suited.

On the other hand, clients who want a single recommendation without understanding the reasoning, or who expect the planner to handle every transaction, may not get full value from the model. The planner's job is to educate and equip the client to make informed decisions, not to make decisions for them.

## The business model behind the advice

For planners considering this approach, the independent planning model as discussed on GitHub provides a practical framework for structuring a practice. The discussions cover everything from engagement letters to software choices, and from pricing to client segmentation. A planner who wants to serve a niche - such as freelancers, physicians, or young families - can design their service scope around the specific problems that group faces.

The advice-only structure allows the planner to specialize deeply without worrying about whether a product exists for every recommendation they make.

Planners who adopt this model often find that their value proposition becomes clearer. Instead of competing on investment performance or convenience, they compete on the quality and objectivity of their advice. That clarity attracts clients who are already skeptical of sales-driven advice and who are willing to pay a fair fee for unbiased guidance.

## Matching service scope to client needs

An advice-only practice can offer different service levels: a one-time plan, an annual checkup, or a monthly retainer for ongoing coaching. The scope should match the complexity of the client's situation. A client with a single goal, like paying off debt in two years, may only need a one-time plan. A client with multiple goals, changing income, and a desire for accountability may benefit from a retainer that includes quarterly reviews and as-needed questions.

The key is that the service scope is defined by what the client needs to understand and decide, not by what products the planner can sell. That alignment between problem and solution is what makes the advice-only model effective for the right set of client problems.