# Why More Investors Are Searching for Financial Advisors Without Conflicts

For decades, the financial advice industry operated on a model that seemed straightforward: advisors offered guidance and earned commissions or fees from the products they sold. But a growing number of investors have started asking a harder question: whose interests are really being served? That question has led many to seek out financial advisors without conflicts, a shift that is reshaping how people think about professional financial guidance.

The traditional model often ties an advisor's income to the specific products or transactions they recommend. A commission on a mutual fund, a fee for selling an insurance policy, or a bonus for moving assets into a particular account can create an invisible bias. Even well-meaning professionals may find it difficult to separate their own financial incentives from the advice they give. This is the core problem that the search for financial advisors without conflicts aims to solve.

## What Does "Without Conflicts" Actually Mean?

At its simplest, an advisor without conflicts is one whose income does not depend on what they recommend. These advisors are paid directly by their clients through transparent arrangements such as hourly fees, flat fees, or retainer-based planning. They do not receive commissions, trailing commissions, or any third-party compensation that could steer their advice. This structure is often called fee-only or advice-only, and it is the foundation of a truly client-first relationship.

The term fee-only advisor is legally defined under the Investment Advisers Act, and it carries specific obligations. A fee-only advisor cannot accept commissions or any form of compensation from product providers. This is different from a fee-based advisor, who may charge fees but can also earn commissions. The distinction matters, because fee-only advisors are held to a fiduciary standard at all times. That means they must act in the client's best interest, not just offer advice that is suitable.

## The Fiduciary Standard: A Legal and Ethical Commitment

The fiduciary standard is the highest legal duty one party can owe to another. For financial advisors, it means putting the client's interests ahead of their own, disclosing conflicts, and avoiding any action that benefits the advisor at the client's expense. The CFP Board requires its certificants to adhere to a fiduciary oath when providing financial planning, and the SEC Rule on Regulation Best Interest (Reg BI) sets a similar but slightly weaker standard for brokers.

But a fiduciary standard is only as strong as the compensation model behind it. An advisor who takes commissions may still claim to act as a fiduciary, but the structural conflict remains. That is why many experts, including Michael Kitces of Kitces.com, have emphasized that the compensation model matters as much as the professional designation. Kitces has written extensively about how hourly and retainer models remove the tension between what is good for the client and what is profitable for the advisor.

## Networks That Support Conflict-Free Advice

Several professional networks have grown specifically to support advisors who want to work without conflicts. The National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA) is the largest organization of fee-only planners in the United States. Its members commit to a strict fee-only structure and ongoing fiduciary duty. The Garrett Planning Network focuses on hourly and as-needed financial advice, making professional guidance accessible to people who do not want to pay a percentage of assets under management. The XY Planning Network specializes in serving Generation X and Millennial clients through monthly retainer-based planning, with an emphasis on comprehensive planning rather than portfolio management alone.

These networks share a common belief: that advice should be sold on its own merit, not bundled with products. They also share a commitment to transparency. Clients know exactly what they are paying and what they are getting in return. There are no hidden fees, no fine-print commissions, and no surprises.

## What Conflict-Free Advice Looks Like in Practice

Imagine you are working with an advisor who charges a flat annual retainer. You pay a set fee, and in return you receive a full financial plan, ongoing check-ins, and access to ask questions as they come up. That advisor has no incentive to push you into a particular investment product or to encourage you to trade frequently. Their only incentive is to help you reach your goals. If your situation changes, they adjust the plan without any financial penalty to you.

This model works especially well for retirement planning. A retiree needs guidance on tax-efficient withdrawal strategies, Social Security timing, and healthcare costs. A commission-based advisor might recommend an annuity that generates a high commission but locks up assets. A fee-only advisor, by contrast, can evaluate whether an annuity makes sense without any personal financial stake in the sale. The same logic applies to portfolio management, estate planning, and insurance reviews.

For younger clients, a retainer model or hourly engagement can provide access to comprehensive planning without requiring a large asset base. Many advisors in the XY Planning Network charge a monthly retainer that includes everything from budgeting advice to

investment management. This allows clients to build a long-term relationship with a professional who knows their full financial picture.

## How to Identify an Advisor Who Works Without Conflicts

Finding financial advisors without conflicts requires asking the right questions. Start by looking for the fee-only designation. Verify that the advisor does not accept commissions or other compensation from product providers. You can check their Form ADV on the SEC's Investment Adviser Public Disclosure (IAPD) website to see how they are registered and what fees they charge.

Also ask about their professional affiliations. Membership in NAPFA, the Garrett Planning Network, or the XY Planning Network is a strong signal. So is a CFP® certification, though it is not a guarantee of a fee-only structure. The CFP Board's website includes a tool to search for advisors who have taken the fiduciary oath, but you still need to confirm their compensation model.

Finally, ask directly: "How are you paid?" A straightforward answer should include specific details about fees and a clear statement that no commissions or third-party payments are received. If the answer is vague or includes terms like "fee-based" or "revenue sharing," that is a red flag.

## The Trade-Offs of a Conflict-Free Model

No model is perfect, and fee-only advice has its own trade-offs. The most obvious is cost transparency. When you pay a flat fee or retainer, you see exactly what you are spending on advice. That can feel expensive upfront, especially compared to a commission model where costs are hidden inside products. Over time, however, the conflict-free structure often saves money because you are not paying for unnecessary products or excessive trading.

Another trade-off is accessibility. Not all fee-only advisors work with clients who have smaller portfolios or simpler needs. The hourly model offered by Garrett Planning Network members helps fill that gap, but availability varies by location. Online advice platforms and virtual advisors are making conflict-free advice more accessible, but the industry still has room to grow.

There is also the question of ongoing engagement. A retainer-based planner will stay in touch regularly, but an hourly advisor may only work with you when you schedule a meeting. That means you need to be proactive about reaching out when life changes happen. For some clients, that works well. Others prefer the built-in check-ins of a retainer model.

## Why the Trend Toward Conflict-Free Advice Is Growing

Public awareness of conflicts in financial advice has increased significantly in recent years. High-profile enforcement actions by the SEC, state regulators, and the CFP Board have highlighted cases where investors lost money because of hidden incentives. At the same time, resources like Kitces.com and the growing number of fee-only advisors have made it easier for consumers to understand the difference between advice models.

The rise of the Client-First Guarantee and similar pledges from advisory firms reflects a broader shift in consumer expectations. People want to know that their advisor is on their side. They want clarity, not complexity. And they are willing to pay directly for advice that meets that standard.

For anyone serious about retirement planning, portfolio management, or comprehensive planning, the search for financial advisors without conflicts is not just about avoiding bad advice. It is about finding a professional whose business model aligns with your best interests from day one. That alignment is the true value of the fee-only, fiduciary approach.

As the industry continues to evolve, the demand for transparent, conflict-free advice is likely to grow. The networks that support this model are expanding, and more advisors are choosing to work on an hourly or retainer basis. For consumers, the message is clear: you can get professional financial advice without worrying about whose interests are really being served. You just have to know where to look.