

BOTTOM LINE PERSONAL

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HOW TO FIND YOUR LOST PENSION MONEY

It's not unusual for a worker to lose track of a pension benefit. Perhaps you left an employer long ago and forgot that you left behind a pension. Or maybe you worked for a company that changed owners or went belly up many years ago, and you figured the pension went with it...but you might have been wrong.

Today, millions of dollars in benefits are sitting in pension plans across the US or with the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), a federal government agency, waiting to be claimed by their rightful owners. The average unclaimed benefit with PBGC is \$6,550.

To help you look for a pension, here are some steps to take and some free resources that can help you search if your previous employer has gone out of business, relocated, changed owners or merged with another firm...

CONTACT THE EMPLOYER

If you think you have a pension and the company you worked for still is in business, your first step is to call the human resources department and ask how to contact the pension plan administrator. Ask the administrator whether you have a pension, how much it is worth and how to claim it. Depending on

how complete the administrator's records are, you may need to show proof that you once worked for the company and that you are pension eligible.

If you haven't saved your old tax returns from these years, you can get a copy of your earnings record from the Social Security Administration, which will show how much you were paid each calendar year by each employer. Call 800-772-1213, and ask for Form SSA-7050, *Request for Social Security Earnings Information*, or you can download it at www.SSA.gov/online/ssa-7050.pdf. You will pay a small fee for the report, depending on the number of years of data you request.

Some other old forms that can help you prove pension eligibility are summary plan descriptions that you should have received from your employer when you worked there... and any individual benefit statements that you received during your employment.

SEARCH PBGC

If your former employer went out of business or if the company still is in business but terminated its pension plan, check with the PBGC, which guarantees pension payouts to private-sector workers if their

pension plans fail, up to annual limits. Most people receive the full benefit they earned before the plan was terminated. The PBGC offers an online pension-search directory tool at <http://Search.PBGC.gov/mp/mp.aspx>, or call 800-400-7242.

GET HELP

If you need help tracking down your former company because it may have moved, changed owners or merged with another firm, contact the Pension Rights Center, a nonprofit consumer organization that offers seven free Pension Counseling and Information Projects around the US that serve 30 states. For more information, visit www.PensionRights.org or call 888-420-6550. If you, your company or your pension plan happens to be outside the 30-state area served by the projects, or if you're trying to locate a federal or military pension, use Pension Help America at www.PensionHelp.org. This resource can connect you with government agencies and private organizations that provide free information and assistance to help your search.

Also, the PBGC has a free publication called *Finding a Lost Pension*. Go to www.PBGC.gov/res (scroll down to "Additional Resources") to see it online, or call 800-400-7242 and ask for a copy to be mailed to you. ■ ■

Jim Miller, an advocate for older Americans, writes "Savvy Senior," a weekly information column syndicated in more than 400 newspapers nationwide. Based in Norman, Oklahoma, he also offers a free senior news service at www.SavvySenior.org

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