ASPIRIANT

Before Your Equity Becomes Wealth

A practical liquidity planning checklist for AI employees

Your equity may create opportunities you never expected. It may also bring complexity.

Long before it becomes wealth, you'll likely face decisions you've never had to make before. Should you exercise? What happens if your company stays private longer than expected? How much of your future should depend on a single company? Are there planning opportunities you should consider now?

You don't need to have all the answers today.

This checklist can help you organize the information you have, uncover areas that may need more attention and prepare you for future financial planning conversations.

If any of these thoughts sound familiar...

- "My equity could be life-changing, but I don't know what it's worth."
- "Everyone around me seems to understand this better than I do."
- "I'm worried about making an expensive tax mistake."
- "I don't know whether I should exercise, wait or do nothing."
- "I'm making career decisions based on equity, but I'm not sure that's the right reason."
- "I don't want to look back years from now and realize I missed an opportunity."

You're not alone. Many employees at AI companies are navigating these questions for the first time.

Checklist

1. What do I actually own?
   - [ ] I know what kind of equity I've been granted (ISOs, NSOs, RSUs, RSAs or something else).
   - [ ] I know what's vested, what's still vesting and whether I've exercised any shares.
   - [ ] I know my strike price, current fair market value and vesting schedule.
   - [ ] I know where to find my grant agreements and other equity documents.
   - [ ] I know if there are deadlines I should be paying attention to.
   - [ ] I know what happens to my equity if I leave my company.

2. What could happen before liquidity?
   - [ ] I've thought about what happens if my company goes public, stays private, gets acquired or delays liquidity longer than expected.
   - [ ] I know whether I might be eligible for a tender offer or another opportunity to sell shares before an IPO.
   - [ ] I've thought about how my plans might change if liquidity comes sooner than expected.
   - [ ] I've also thought about what I'd do if liquidity takes much longer or never happens.
   - [ ] I understand that a company's valuation and the amount I may ultimately receive aren't necessarily the same thing.
   - [ ] I've considered how future funding rounds could affect my equity and the decisions I make.

3. Could taxes create surprises?
   - [ ] I know that exercising, selling or holding equity can have tax consequences.
   - [ ] I have a rough idea of how much cash I might need for exercises or taxes.
   - [ ] I know which tax questions I'd want answered before making a major decision.
   - [ ] I understand that some planning opportunities may be easier to take advantage of before a liquidity event occurs.
   - [ ] I've thought about how future increases in valuation could affect future tax decisions.

4. How much of my financial future depends on one company?
   - [ ] I have a sense of how much of my current or future wealth may be tied to my company.
   - [ ] I've thought about how my plans would change if my company's valuation changed significantly or if a liquidity event took longer than expected.
   - [ ] I'm trying not to base major life decisions solely on my company's current valuation or best-case outcomes.
   - [ ] I've thought about how much of my company's stock I'd want to keep after a liquidity event.
   - [ ] I understand the tradeoff between believing in my company and having too much riding on one outcome.
   - [ ] I've thought about how much financial flexibility I'd want outside of my employer and equity compensation.

5. How does this fit into my life?
   - [ ] I've thought about what I'd want this money to do for me, my family and the life I'm trying to build.
   - [ ] I've thought about whether my equity is influencing career decisions I might otherwise make differently.
   - [ ] I know there are planning steps I can take today, even if timing and valuation remain uncertain.
   - [ ] I've spent some time thinking about what "enough" means for me and my family.
   - [ ] I've thought about how this opportunity fits into my broader financial picture.
   - [ ] I've thought about how another opportunity, or leaving my current company, might affect both my career and my equity.

What your answers may tell you

This isn't a test. You don't need every box checked before talking with a financial advisor. The goal isn't to know everything. We want you to be able to identify the questions worth asking before important decisions arrive.

Mostly checked: You may already have a solid foundation. As your company evolves, continue reviewing your equity and updating your plans as circumstances change.

Half checked: You may have important planning opportunities worth exploring before key decisions arise. Understanding your options now may help create greater flexibility later.

Only a few checked: You're not behind. Many employees receive equity long before they receive guidance on how to think about it. The goal isn't to know everything today. It's to identify the questions worth asking before deadlines, tender offers or liquidity events arrive.

You don't need every answer before starting a conversation. A thoughtful discussion may help you better understand your options, identify potential planning opportunities and feel more confident about the decisions ahead.

What to gather before a planning conversation

Equity details

- Grant agreements
- Equity plan documents
- Equity portal summary or screenshots
- Vesting schedule
- Strike price and current fair market value
- Exercise history, if applicable
- Expiration dates and post-termination exercise windows
- Tender offer, acquisition, IPO or liquidity materials, if available
- Offer letter (if it has equity details)

Financial and tax details

- Recent tax return
- Current cash reserves
- Investment account statements
- Outstanding debt or major upcoming expenses
- Prior tax planning related to equity compensation

Life and planning details

- Major goals (buying a home, supporting family, relocating, taking a career break or starting a business)
- Family or relationship considerations that may affect financial decisions
- Charitable goals or organizations you may wish to support
- Questions you've been avoiding because they feel complicated

Sometimes the next step is simply talking it through

You may finish this checklist feeling more organized. Or you may discover a few questions you'd like help answering. Either outcome is valuable.

A conversation with our team isn't about having it all figured out. It's an opportunity to talk through your situation, understand what's most important to you and explore whether additional planning would be helpful.

There's no pressure to move forward. Just a thoughtful conversation to talk about where you are today and where you're hoping to go.

Talk with us

Resources

Company-specific guides: Anthropic | OpenAI | SpaceX

Equity Compensation: Understanding stock options

Liquidity Events: Thoughtful IPO planning

Tax Planning: Strategies to help manage the timing of capital gains while diversifying

Concentrated wealth: Managing capital gains from concentrated stock positions