T. ROWE PRICE STUDY FINDS DC CONSULTANTS AND ADVISORS ARE MOVING FROM AI EXPLORATION TO EXECUTION, WHILE PRIVATE ASSETS AND PERSONALIZATION GAIN MOMENTUM

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Sixth annual Defined Contribution Consultant Study captures views from leading consultant and advisory firms representing more than $10 trillion in DC plan assets

BALTIMORE, Sept. 16, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- T. Rowe Price, a global asset management firm and a leader in retirement, today released findings from its sixth annual Defined Contribution (DC) Consultant Study. The research captures perspectives from three dozen leading consultant and advisory firms on key retirement trends, including artificial intelligence (AI) adoption moving rapidly from evaluation to execution, growing expectations for private asset implementation in DC plans, and greater emphasis on pairing advice and personalization to support participants as their retirement needs grow more complex.

Firms taking part in the survey represent more than 160,000 DC plan sponsor clients and $10.3 trillion in DC plan assets under advisement, reflecting approximately 72% of the total DC plan market. The study was fielded between January 12, 2026, and March 11, 2026.

"At T. Rowe Price, our research is driven by a spirit of curiosity and a commitment to uncovering deeper insights," said Jessica Sclafani, head of the Retirement Strategist Team at T. Rowe Price. "Our annual DC Consultant Study helps us keep a pulse on current perspectives, as well as where the industry is headed. By capturing the insights of leading consultants and advisors, we are better equipped to anticipate emerging trends, incorporate client preferences into our solutions, and help clients make more informed decisions in an evolving retirement landscape."

AI ADOPTION

As AI tools become more embedded in workplace processes, this year's survey results show consultants and advisors are quickly moving from evaluation to execution. In 2025, 44% of respondent firms described their use of AI as "too early to know, currently evaluating," compared with just 14% a year later.

Respondents reported using AI most often to improve operational efficiency (78%), streamline client preparation (67%), and improve client outreach efforts (47%). Notably, adoption remains much lower in areas where human expertise and fiduciary oversight remain essential, including plan design and benchmarking analysis (12%) and participant engagement, and other advice-oriented activities (9%).

The study also found that firms with formal AI governance use AI approximately 50% more frequently across business functions, suggesting that clear policies, approved tools, and compliance guardrails may help accelerate adoption, rather than slow it.

PRIVATE ASSETS

Consultants and advisors view private assets as increasingly likely to be implemented in DC plans as components of a professionally managed, multi-asset solution—a trend that continues to gain momentum. When asked which alternative investment strategies are most likely to be incorporated over the next 12–24 months, respondents pointed to broader adoption across nearly all private asset categories, with hedge funds the only exception.

The expectation that private credit will be included in DC plan investments increased dramatically from 2024 to 2026, jumping from 1.7 to 2.6 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 representing the greatest likelihood. Private equity followed a similar trend, with its likelihood of implementation rating increasing from 1.6 in 2024 to 2.2 in 2026. Results showed that participants are most likely to gain exposure to private markets through target date funds, either custom or off-the-shelf.

Also of note, three-quarters (75%) of respondents view cryptocurrencies as most likely to be available through a self-directed brokerage window rather than as part of a plan's core investment lineup.

ADVICE, PERSONALIZATION, AND RETIREMENT SUPPORT

Advice and personalization remain areas of focus for retirement plan consultants and advisors. Study results indicate that personalization and retirement income are poised to converge as advice, planning, and income generating investment solutions offer opportunities to address retirement needs.

Support for using managed accounts as a qualified default investment alternative (QDIA) remains limited. Though findings do reveal modest support for a dynamic QDIA implementation where participants are initially defaulted into target date solutions and later transitioned to a managed account program (2.2 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being strongly support). Notably, consultant and advisor firms that describe themselves as directly engaging with participants were far more likely to support dynamic QDIAs. This approach can provide the infrastructure to introduce personalization when participants may be most likely to benefit from additional guidance.

Pre-retiree communications, retirement planning tools, and managed accounts that incorporate personal objectives stand out as potential solutions to retain retired participants, each showing the largest increases in ratings from 2021 to 2026. Support for pre-retiree communications rose from 2.7 to 3.1, while retirement planning tools increased from 2.5 to 2.9 and managed accounts rose from 2.5 to 2.8 (on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being most persuasive), underscoring growing recognition of the need for more holistic retirement support alongside investment solutions.

ADDITIONAL KEY FINDINGS

- ***Active and passive preferences***: Consultants and advisors are taking a holistic approach to investment menu construction by evaluating active and passive strategies based on asset class characteristics. Results show a strong preference for active management in fixed income, particularly among sub-asset classes where credit selection is key. When viewed alongside plan sponsor preferences, the findings suggest an emerging trend towards strategies that can combine characteristics of both active and passive management—offering participants the potential for excess returns, while being mindful of tracking error and fee pressures.

- ***Target date solutions***: There is a strong preference for blend solutions, with allocations to both active and passive strategies. Respondent firms cite cost effectiveness (71%), ability to leverage market inefficiencies (56%), and optimized performance (41%) as the top factors influencing their support for these investment vehicles. Results also show co-manufactured target date solutions are gaining meaningful traction. With more than $70 billion in co-manufactured assets across DC recordkeepers in 2025[1], respondents ranked cost efficiency and pricing leverage as the most appealing attributes, followed by transparency and fiduciary clarity.

- ***Retirement income solutions***: Following a simple systematic withdrawal capability, which is a plan design feature as opposed to an investment solution, professionally managed diversified investment options with income features saw higher average levels of appeal versus standalone investments, both with and without guarantees.

- ***Financial wellness***: With a broader focus on supporting participants' overall financial well-being, two-thirds (66%) of respondents report evaluating recordkeeper-provided financial wellness programs. Proprietary financial wellness programs are increasingly being included or considered as part of a standard retainer, cited by nearly half (47%) of respondent firms in 2026 compared with 29% in 2023.

More details on the findings are included in the Executive Summary.

ABOUT THE DEFINED CONTRIBUTION CONSULTANT STUDY

The 2026 Defined Contribution (DC) Consultant Study captures the latest perspectives from DC consultants and advisors on target date solutions, private assets, managed accounts, advice and personalization, fixed income and capital preservation investments, retirement income solutions, financial wellness programs, and the evolving role of artificial intelligence (AI) tools as they pertain to employer-sponsored retirement plans. The population of the study includes 36 DC consulting and advisory firms representing over 160,000 DC plan sponsor clients and over $10.3 trillion in DC plan assets. Assets under advisement figures are self-reported. Respondent firms' assets under advisement reflect 72% of the $14.2 trillion DC plan market, based on ICI data as of December 31, 2025. The study was fielded between January 12, 2026, and March 11, 2026.

ABOUT T. ROWE PRICE

T. Rowe Price (NASDAQ-GS: TROW) is a leading global asset management firm, entrusted with managing $1.9 trillion in client assets as of August 31, 2026, about two-thirds of which are retirement-related. Renowned for nearly 90 years of investment excellence, retirement leadership, and independent proprietary research, the firm leverages its longstanding expertise to ask better questions that can drive better investment decisions. Built on a culture of integrity and prioritizing client interests, T. Rowe Price empowers millions of investors worldwide to thrive amid evolving markets. Visit **troweprice.com/newsroom** for news and public policy commentary.

[1] Sway Research, *The State of the Target Date Market: Year-End 2025*; as of 12/31/2025.

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