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The problem with one-size-fits-all documents is that they don't really fit everybody.

Take the power-of-attorney form. When you sign it, you give someone else the legal right to act for you - to sign your checks, manage your investments, run your business - if you're incapacitated. Signing a power of attorney is a wise precaution at any age.

But the standard "short" form - which is what most people sign - gives away more power than you may realize.

It authorizes your agent to handle 16 types of transactions, including real estate, banking, insurance, retirement benefit transactions and personal relationships and affairs. You can initial each power that you want to confer, or you can check one box to grant them all.

Few people understand how broadly the law defines these powers, says Seymour Goldberg, a Melville attorney.

Take the power to do "insurance transactions," for example. It lets your agent pay your premiums, take out policy loans for you, terminate your old policies and buy new ones. It also lets your agent change your policy beneficiaries. "The law says your agent can't make himself or herself the new beneficiary - unless your agent is your spouse, child, grandchild, parent, brother or sister," Goldberg says. "This means if your agent is one of your kids, he can make himself your sole beneficiary, knocking out his siblings."

If you don't like that idea, you can have the form language amended. For example, you can limit the power to do insurance transactions by adding the words, "as defined by law, except that in no event shall my agent be empowered to change or designate beneficiaries."

The power to handle retirement account transactions also lets your agent change your account beneficiaries. Again, the only caveat is that the agent can't designate himself or herself, unless he or she is your spouse, child, grandchild, parent, brother or sister. Goldberg recommends altering the form, first by saying that your agent is only permitted to change beneficiaries as you specify - and then by specifying exactly what you want. For example, you might say that if any of your retirement account beneficiaries is a minor, your agent is authorized to pay his or her benefits into a custodial account until the maximum age permitted by law, and thereafter, directly to the beneficiary.

Custom-tailoring the form also can make life easier for your agent. "Sometimes the custodians of retirement accounts or profit-sharing plans don't like dealing with powers-of-attorney," says Bernard Krooks, a Manhattan estate lawyer. "But we've found that in practice, if the document specifically says, 'My agent has power to deal with TIAA-CREF on my behalf,' there's a greater likelihood it will be honored."

You also should:

Get a durable power of attorney. A power that isn't durable expires when you become incapacitated - in other words, exactly when you want it to go into effect. A durable power of attorney expires only at your death, assuming you don't revoke it. (You can do that any time.)

Make sure the document is valid in the states where you have assets. "In Florida, for example, a

power of attorney requires two witnesses," says Stephen J. Silverberg, an East Meadow estate lawyer. "In New York, it doesn't."

Tell your agent where to find the document. Your sock drawer is a better place to keep it than your safe deposit box, unless your agent has a key to the box.

Choose your agent carefully. You confer the powers as soon as you sign the document. If that makes you nervous, you can opt for a "springing" durable power of attorney. It springs into effect only under circumstances you describe (e.g., "when two doctors say I'm incapacitated"). But there's a downside, warns Jeff Zankel, a Melville estate lawyer: A springing power is an extra procedural hurdle for your agent, who will have to establish your disability before taking any other action.

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