Are there differences in strategies for maximizing Social Security benefits for a married couple depending upon the earnings history of the couple?

Yes. Depending on whether the members of the couple had a large difference in earnings or similar earnings, there will generally be different considerations.

# Married Couple — Large Difference in Benefits

This collection strategy, often referred to as the Hybrid Approach, tends to work best for couples who are around the same age with one individual entitled to benefits that are more than double those of the other spouse.

This approach entails the lower earner claiming individual benefits early to start the flow of income and adding adjusted spousal benefits later, with the higher earner deferring, which maximizes benefits as well as potential survivor benefits. The lower earner would file at age sixty-two and collect individual benefits. When the lower earner reaches full retirement age , assuming the higher earner is also at least FRA, the higher earner would file for benefits to allow spousal benefits to be paid but suspend collecting until reaching age seventy.

By filing for benefits when the lower earner reaches FRA, the higher earner enables the spouse to collect unreduced adjusted spousal benefits in addition to the lower earner’s reduced individual benefits. The higher earner deferring collection to age seventy allows for the highest possible benefits to be paid not only during the higher earner’s lifetime, but also as survivor benefits when the higher earner passes.

# Married Couple — Small Difference in Benefits

This collection strategy, sometimes referred to as a Two High Earners strategy, tends to work best for couples who are entitled to similar benefits.

This approach entails the lower earner claiming spousal benefits at FRA and switching to individual benefits at age seventy, while the higher earner defers until age seventy, maximizing potential survivor benefits. When the lower earner reaches FRA, assuming the higher earner is also at least FRA, the higher earner would file for benefits to allow spousal benefits to be paid, but suspend collecting until reaching age seventy.

Are there differences in strategies for maximizing Social Security benefits for a married couple depending upon the earnings history of the couple?

By filing for benefits when the lower earner reaches FRA, the higher earner enables the spouse to collect unreduced spousal benefits. Since the lower earner has attained FRA, the lower earner can choose to collect “spouse only” benefits (which are their highest at FRA) and defer collecting individual benefits until later when benefits have accumulated delayed retirement credits. The higher earner deferring collection to age seventy allows for the highest possible benefits to be paid not only during the higher earner’s lifetime, but also as survivor benefits when the higher earner passes.