Buckets of cash: Johnny Depp made lots of money as Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, but apparently can't save. Picture: Peter Mountain

Are there any companies that I'd recommend? No.

That's because I have a boring, old-fashioned rule: I only invest in companies that make money — and none of the ASX-listed medicinal marijuana companies are making any money (in fact, most are burning cash).

Look, I have absolutely no doubt that there will be huge demand for medicinal marijuana all around the world. Yet I also have absolutely no doubt that there are literally hundreds of companies trying to meet that supply.

And that's the (long-term) thing. Growing weed isn't that hard (heck, my old uni mate did it in his dorm room). It's just another crop, and eventually it will become just another commodity . . .

just with more government regulation.

Magpies bite back

Jan writes: I have followed you for years and recommend you to all who listen, but I wasn't impressed with what you said about the Collingwood Football Club last Sunday.

Having been a supporter for more than 50 years I am sick of people putting the club down. They do a great job in helping the underprivileged, which I thought you would be all for.

Barefoot responds: Not. Happy, Jan!

For those who missed my column last week, I wrote about an old bloke who got scammed as a result of looking at an inappropriate website. I joked that it was collingwoodfc.com.au but said that while he was probably looking at birds, I'm not sure they were Magpies.

Harmless, right?

Actually, no.

The Collingwood faithful (including employees of the club) gave me a shirtfront this week.

Jan, I wholeheartedly apologise.

I have no right to take a dig at your great club, especially given that I'm a Demons supporter.

Banks' only interest is in themselves

Noel Whittaker

THE email header was irresistible: Bank madness! And "madness" was the perfect term for it. The writer — I'll call him Barry — has spent much of his life working in banking and is well aware of how the system works.

He lives in a Queensland coastal town and in 2016, due to a change of jobs that required relocation, rented out the family home for his three-year period of tenure.

Given his home was to become an investment property for a few years, he negotiated a change in his home loan from principal and interest to interest-only, with a three-year fixed rate. The deal was that interest would be payable annually in advance, and it would be renegotiated at the end of the three-year interest-only term.

The total loan was for $250,000 and it was with one of the major banks.

At the time, Barry was 61.

He noticed the loan had been written on a 30-year term, but he said he didn't make a fuss about it at the time because the other terms suited him.

This all happened three years ago. Now Barry is back in his original home, and has been making his payments without fail. When the three-year term came up last month, he went to the bank to discuss moving the loan to a variable rate so he could start to make headway in the loan, and hopefully have it paid off when he retired.

Not so, said the bank, you've got a 30-year term with 27 years to run and that's the way it's going to stay. As an old banker, he was stunned, and asked the obvious question: "Why would you want to lock me into a loan that can't be paid back until I'm 91?"

He tells me his words fell on deaf ears.

So he approached the financial ombudsman service, hoping it could convince the bank to change its stance.

Luckily, the process was quick. Within a fortnight the bank had backed down, and offered to change the terms of the loan to a variable rate, which would enable him to pay it off as needed.

But it obviously wasn't happy about it and warned him he would "almost certainly" be liable for mortgage insurance. He was amazed.

Why would a bank that was happy to roll over a loan until the borrower was 91 without asking for mortgage insurance, now look for it just because the loan was to be moved to a variable rate?

In any event, he reckons his house would be worth at least $350,000, which means the loan-to-valuation ratio would be no more than 70 per cent — comfortably under the 80 per cent threshold over which mortgage insurance is required. What's more, Barry has plenty of money in super and could withdraw a few thousand dollars to reduce the debt if the bank pushed the mortgage insurance line.

All banks received a pasting during the royal commission, and the media is now reporting hundreds of millions of dollars are to be spent on remediation, and sharing a plethora of motherhood statements from bank executives telling us how much their culture has changed.

That might be fine in theory, but as the above example shows, common sense is still way down their list of priorities. I reckon we need a return to the "good old days" when the friendly local bank manager had both the authority and the common sense to make decisions.

Noel Whittaker is the author of *Making Money Made Simple* and other books on personal finance. His advice is general in nature and readers should seek their own professional advice before making any financial decisions.

ASK THE EXPERT

Send your questions to Noel Whittaker noelwhit@gmail.com or tweet @NoelWhittaker

Q Both of my children are in their early 20s. Due to an inheritance, I have $140,000 for each that could be used as a deposit to purchase property. I am 59 and retired and have about $1.4 million in super. This is more than I need and I recently thought I could use money from my super to lend to them to purchase a unit each. I would like to hold a mortgage over the two properties and have them pay principal and interest at a market-competitive rate. Does this strategy sound feasible?

A Your super fund would not be allowed to lend money to your children, so any loan would need to be done in your own name. From a holistic point of view, the drawback would be that your children would be making payments to you from after-tax dollars, while you are paying tax on the interest. If you have faith in your children to handle money, a better option may be to give them an interest-free loan, and forgive it as time passes.

Closing the door on the open-plan office

WORKPLACE MATTERS

Gary Martin

OF all the workplace fads that have inspired grumbling, none has spawned more acrimony than the open-plan office.

Not only was the open-plan workplace credited with reducing real estate costs, it was also said to have stimulated interaction among workers to promote more collaboration, job satisfaction, productivity and support.

But open-plan office insiders — and almost 60 per cent of the Australian workforce is operating in an open-plan office — point out new Harvard Business School research, which concluded that switching to an open-plan office actually resulted in substantially less face-to-face interaction, and increased the use of email communication and instant messaging.

In other words, it achieved the exact opposite of what open-plan designs were meant to inspire.

For many, the Harvard research will merely highlight what has been an open secret in many open-plan workplaces for years.

But for fear of getting the boss offside or being labelled a poor team player, many workers are reluctant to call out the limitations of workplace set-ups that insiders claim are even more disruptive than the Harvard research suggests.

For a start, the insiders will say, open-plan designs sabotage a worker's ability to focus. Chatting, ringing, pinging, sneezing and laughing all result in sensory overload that wards off any semblance of productivity, reduces overall quality and often leaves a worker highly agitated.

Working in an open-plan office, for example, can generate angst at the thought your boss and colleagues can tally the number of times and duration of your bathroom visits, awkwardness that all and sundry can monitor your social media and internet browsing habits, and annoyance that anyone can listen in on your phone calls.

And how distracting is it when you are trying to write a sensitive performance review while wedged between one colleague who is making an appointment with their urologist and another who is picking the anchovies out of a tuna salad?

The lack of a physical barrier also makes it impossible to protect yourself from a toxic, difficult or harassing colleague — and if you are working in an open-plan office during the current cold and flu season, you are probably seeing your colleagues fall like dominoes.

Unlike other office fads, however, killing off the open-plan design may not be an option.

But it just might be possible to put in place some measures to make the open-plan workplace more effective, productive and enjoyable.

You could, for example, encourage your boss to create more private working areas for when you really do need to focus.

Consider also whether a good set of headphones might assist in blocking out background noise.

But if you are really struggling, perhaps seek your boss' approval to work from home more regularly.

Professor Gary Martin is chief executive at the Australian Institute of Management WA