

Where Would You Relocate for a Job?

A recent survey identifies the 20 cities where Americans would most want, and least want, to relocate

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Imagine you were offered a dream job that required you to relocate to your favorite city. Which city would it be? And why?

If you're like most Americans, you might select New York, San Diego, or San Francisco, according to a soon-to-be released survey of 2,500 employees and entrepreneurs across the nation by the Human Capital Institute, a Washington-based think tank and professional association largely made up of human resources professionals.

As the economy softens, this becomes more of a pressing issue because many Americans will find that they may be forced to relocate to find work. But even though some workers may not have the luxury of choice, some cities remain more desirable than others.

Favorite, Least Favorite? New York, New York

Interestingly, New York, which seems to evoke strong feelings in people, also topped the list of America's least favorite places to live and work. Survey-takers who like the Big Apple gave it high marks for entertainment options, professional and personal opportunities, and ease of transportation. Workers who don't like it overwhelmingly point to the high cost of living.

Detroit, which has seen its image only worsen with the collapsing auto industry, was the second-least appealing city, followed by Los Angeles [also No. 5 on the best cities list] and New Orleans.

"People have a love-hate relationship with New York," said Allan Schweyer, the industry group's executive director. "There are still people who think New York isn't part of the United States. There are people who might think that even if they were offered their dream job in New York, they don't want to go from a 3,000-square-foot house in the suburbs to a 1,200-square-foot apartment."

Leading Factors: Environment, Affordability

The survey is part of the professional organization's 2009 National Talent Markets report, which is meant to help cities determine how to improve and properly market themselves to attract talented out-of-town workers. The most important issue for workers in determining where to relocate is environment, including climate and park space, according to the survey.

Affordability, which was No. 4 in last year's list, is now the second-most important attribute workers consider before relocating, thanks to the economic downturn. Affordability might have something to do with the fact that Las Vegas, where home prices have fallen faster than in most cities, climbed to fourth place on this year's list of America's favorite cities.

Companies often have trouble recruiting out-of-state talent because people -- especially older professionals -- simply don't like to move. The slumping real estate market has made it even more difficult for many homeowners to move because they can't easily sell their homes. According to the survey, 65% of responders said they were satisfied with the city area where they live now and 67% said they are unlikely to move within the next five years. The most mobile workers are in their mid-20s to mid-30s, have a degree or an advanced degree, earn more than \$100,000 a year, and work in science and technology, media and entertainment, or professional services, the report said.

Image Is Also a Part of It

Scott Simmons is vice-president and founding partner of Crist|Kolder Associates, an executive recruiting firm in Chicago, said it's easier to find workers willing to move to big cities such as New York, Chicago, or San Francisco than it is to convince people to move to a midsize city such as Erie, Pa., which is a one-hour 45-minute drive from either Pittsburgh or Cleveland. People on the coasts, especially in California, are reluctant to move, he said. And workers often would rather not move to cold rust-belt cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, and Buffalo, he said.

"Perception is a big deal when it comes to places," said Simmons, adding that it's important to have candidates visit the city before making a decision. "Everybody has preconceived notions . Everybody thinks Chicago is Siberia when it comes to late fall and winter."

Detroit is a particular challenge, especially now that companies like General Motors (GM) are on the brink of bankruptcy [BusinessWeek, 11/19/08]. The city, which also suffers from crime and poverty, is still a one-industry town and could do more to diversify its economy, Simmons said.

Jane Howze, managing director of The Alexander Group, a national executive search firm headquartered in Houston, said workers who are flexible about relocating have a strong advantage in this economy.

"These are times where we're all asked to do more challenging things than we did a year ago," Howze said. "The winners are the ones that step up and do that . Maybe you take that job and make it a better place than when you got there."