



What Attracts Knowledge Workers?

Generating a Community Infrastructure
for the Innovation Economy

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for
WIRED West Michigan

March, 2007

Executive Summary

The characteristics of communities that have made them attractive to economic development opportunities are rapidly changing. The key driver of the future will be accessibility to talent as opposed to raw materials and/or financial resources. The attributes of a community that attracts highly talented “creative workers” center around quality of life issues, psychological wants and needs, and “brand.” This brief paper explores those emerging community characteristics based on the research of Daniel Pink (*A Whole New Mind*) and community development authority John Gardner.

This discussion concludes with a set of practical action steps communities can take to develop the kind of “social capital” infrastructure they will need to make themselves attractive to the emerging economic resource of talented knowledge workers. We also offer a checklist of questions that communities can use to begin an assessment of their attractiveness to this new workforce.

What Attracts Knowledge Workers?

The challenge facing every community and region today is how to adapt to the new global economy that depends on knowledge, creativity, and innovation. It is becoming increasingly clear that the key to a thriving innovation-based economy is talent – knowledge workers and professionals. The emerging economic development paradigm focuses on making a region attractive to knowledge workers, in the well-founded belief that an area that attracts talented people will generate enough jobs to keep them there – and will develop a strong regional economy based on their wants and needs.¹

We have addressed the questions of “What is a knowledge worker?” and “What is knowledge work?” elsewhere.² Suffice to say for our purposes here, knowledge workers are the engine of the information- and innovation-based economy; they are the “creative class” in Richard Florida’s language.³ But the larger question remains: what attracts these people to specific geographical areas? What causes them to move from their hometown, from a college town, or from their most recent residence to another area to live? What kinds of services, programs, and institutions make an area attractive to them?

Our strong belief is that first and foremost knowledge workers value self-control and autonomy. And they view their careers and their personal life as something they want to plan and take care of on their own. Having the opportunity to choose among alternatives is thus a key component of what knowledge workers are looking for. But self-control and choice by themselves are not enough; knowledge workers also want to be part of strong communities that meet their other personal interests and needs.

If, as we suspect, these wants and needs become the central features of an area that drives economic development, then cities and neighborhoods must consider carefully what attributes are most attractive in their planning and development programs. Without those attractors, the talent won’t come; and, as the economy becomes ever more dependent on innovation and ever more location-independent, regions that are less attractive will wither, and, in many cases, die.

The short answer to the question of attraction is **community**. Although the physical attributes (weather, recreational opportunities, cleanliness, livability) of a region are important, the equation is far more complicated than that. It is, frankly, about the psychology of the region. We are convinced that you can have all the roads, schools, airports, business services, Internet access, and hospitals you want, but if you don’t have a meaningful sense of community you won’t see much in-migration.

¹ See “Market Segmentation and Development for Remote Work Centers” by James Ware and Charles Grantham, WIRED Working Paper, January, 2007, for a broader discussion of this new economic development paradigm.

² See “Knowledge Workers and Knowledge Work, James Ware and Charles Grantham, WIRED working paper, March, 2007. Available on request from the authors.

³ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic Books, 2002; *Cities and the Creative Class*, Routledge, 2004; and *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*, HarperCollins, 2005.

It's not that roads, schools, airports, business services, Internet access, and hospitals are unimportant or trivial. Indeed, without those basics no region will be able to thrive in today's global economy. Our contention is that these resources are just the price of entry. The more important question is what it takes for a region to be head-and-shoulders above average in attracting and retaining talent.

We believe a good way to approach this question is to take a step backward and examine first what kinds of abilities and competencies will be required of the workforce of the future. Or, put another way, what will knowledge workers have to be good at to thrive in the emerging global economy?

Our hypothesis is that they will be attracted to communities that offer them an **experience** of what they have to be competent at. One of the best answers we have found to that question comes from Daniel Pink in his 2005 book *A Whole New Mind*.⁴

Pink proposes six new competencies for the future of work:

- ◆ Design
- ◆ Story
- ◆ Symphony
- ◆ Empathy
- ◆ Play
- ◆ Meaning

Design is not just function; it is the aesthetic quality of a thing—be it a chair, a house, or a town. For a community design is a combination of architecture, appealing public and natural spaces, layout, and geography. Design also involves non-physical elements: how well the community incorporates diversity, provides mixed-use housing, includes multiple industrial sectors, enables recreational opportunity, and supports a variety of social institutions to create a vibrant, “cool” place to live.

Story is not just argument; it is the compelling narrative. It's the engaging and emotional part of the conversation. Does the community have a strong understanding of its own history and build that history into current events and institutions?

Symphony is not just focus; but variation, interweaving of things, putting it all together across boundaries and synthesizing things.

Empathy is not just logic; it is about caring for others, understanding their various motivations, and identifying with them as part of a larger whole.

Play is not just seriousness; it is humor, lightheartedness, and games.

Meaning is not just consumerism and possession of material things; it is about purpose, transformation, and spiritual fulfillment. It's about the community or region's sense of identity,

⁴ Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, The Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005.

and its connections to other regions and specialized communities of practice around the state and around the world.

If these are the core competencies, the things that knowledge workers engage with, then how do they translate into community characteristics? Table One captures our initial linkages.

Table One

Competency	Community Characteristic
Design	Social and ethnic variety; “coolness”
Story	Performing Arts; Historic Preservation
Symphony	Civic involvement; diversity of interests
Empathy	Social action programs
Play	Recreational variety; whimsical architecture and natural spaces
Meaning	Number of faith-based organizations; connectivity to the global economy and society

Design is about **variety**. Creativity and innovation (the end products of design) usually come from the interaction of people from varied backgrounds, viewpoints, and philosophies. The amount of ethnic, religious, and social diversity are good indicators of how much potential variety exists in a community. Knowledge workers are attracted to regions that have these kinds of variety. Conversely, they are generally not attracted to highly homogenous communities because they don’t find the amount of social stimulation they are looking for.

Design is also by nature an “edgy” profession. Is the community on the leading edge in its physical and social architecture? Does it “push the envelope” in experimenting with new structures, new outdoor spaces, new businesses? Is it a “cool” place to be?

The **Performing Arts** are about telling stories and expressing emotions – some old, some new. The extent to which communities have locally staged productions and events tells prospective residents about the story-telling capacity and intellectual energy of the community. Is there an opera house, symphonies, venues for live music? Those are critical elements of communities that are attractive to the creative class (whether or not a given individual is personally a performing artist is not the question; it is the possibility of participating and the opportunity to attend performances that matters).

But Story is not just about the performing arts. It’s also about a community’s **sense of history** and connections with its past and its roots. A community that offers its residents well-preserved (but updated) buildings and a strong sense of neighborhoods that include people of all ages is a community filled with stories. And stories contribute deeply to that sense of place that knowledge workers crave. In a world that has become virtually a global village, a strong sense of local place is more important than ever.

Symphony, or the ability for members of the community to interact, translates into **civic involvement**. Political, professional, and civic associations (i.e., Kiwanis, Masons, Elks, etc.) show how involved residents are in local activities. These kinds of associations are evidence

that a community has the potential for high involvement – and that there is citizen interest in a wide variety of community activities.

Social action programs like help for the homeless, Habitat for Humanity, gay and lesbian support groups, and proactive environmental programs are additional examples of a community's empathy for its members, and of its openness, inclusiveness, and tolerance of diversity.

Recreational variety is a key ingredient for a well-rounded life for knowledge workers, no matter what their age. Outdoor venues like skiing, boating, biking, and hunting (and their indoor counterparts) are as important as, and often much more important than, spectator sports. Again, the more variety the better to accommodate a wide range of interests. Organized sports leagues are another great example. How the community reaches out and develops different opportunities for its residents of all ages is a key indicator of recreational variety – and of energy and zest for life as well.

One of the executives we interviewed for this project actually said that things that helped people bring “meaning to their lives” were a very important attractor for the people his company was trying to recruit. Institutions that generate meaning are another critical variable, especially for young families and older groups who “want to give something back.” In the United States today this theme translates roughly into the number and (especially) the variety of **faith-based organizations** that are active in the community. Organized churches, places of worship, active philanthropic organizations, and other volunteer groups all help provide people with deeper meaning in their lives.

But Meaning isn't just about formal religion. Healthy communities also include respect for the environment, a commitment to citizen activism, and high-quality public schools. These other institutions also demonstrate a commitment to Meaning in that they offer residents specific opportunities for acting out their values – to a sustainable environment, to citizenship and the community at large, and to the next generation.

Communities possessing these qualities and resources are the ones that, if marketed appropriately, will attract and retain the knowledge worker talent they need to thrive economically.

Conducting a Community “Health Check”

But how can you tell if your community has what it needs? We don't know of a fully-formed, statistically supported answer yet, but we are actively investigating the development of a widely agreed-upon set of community-based “health” metrics.

For now, we turn to the work of John Gardner, former head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and then a professor at Stanford University. Professor Gardner was fascinated with leadership: what is it and how do you grow it? Later in life he turned to the study of communities and in particular how to promote and develop a sense of community. He felt that the contemporary breakdown of community was a root cause of many social ills and a significant contributor to a general decrease in the quality of life in America.

As a result of his interest and concern Gardner developed a framework for measuring the ingredients of community. While there is not an exact one-to-one match between Pink's six

competencies for the new economy and Gardner's framework for community, there is a rough correspondence that we find compelling. Gardner's categories are:

- ◆ Wholeness incorporating diversity
- ◆ Reasonable sense of shared values
- ◆ Caring, trust, and teamwork
- ◆ Effective internal communication
- ◆ Participation
- ◆ Affirmation
- ◆ Links beyond the community
- ◆ Development of young people
- ◆ A forward view

We have taken all these ideas and synthesized them into a few simple questions we pose to participants when we conduct community development workshops. Please bear in mind that this list is research in progress and doesn't yet exist as a formal diagnostic instrument, but we believe it gives us a good basis for working with serious community leaders.

The questions we encourage a community to ask itself are:

1. Do the people in our community share a similar purpose for living here?
2. Is our community highly diverse in its cultural and ethnic makeup? Do we practice an openness that allows all of us to question assumptions?
3. Is teamwork among our community members very important and valued?
4. Are people in our community recognized publicly for their contributions?
5. Does everyone in our community communicate well with each other?
6. Does our community have a distinct and unique identity? Is there local pride in what we do and represent?
7. Is our community connected economically and politically with others in our region? Do we play an active leadership role in developing the region politically, economically, and environmentally?
8. Do we welcome new members to our community, even when they come from different backgrounds and have different lifestyles?
9. Do we believe in the "equal rights" of all our residents to transportation, education, clean air, and public spaces?
10. How easily does our community resolve conflicts among our members?
11. Do our residents invest time and energy to develop the community? To improve our schools? To ensure a sustainable environment?
12. Do we have adequate resources in our community to help it thrive?
13. Are we constantly seeking to "push the envelope" and striving to become a better, more interesting place? Do we support and encourage innovation in both our public and our commercial enterprises?

Vision into Action

What, then, should communities do? If they want to attract highly talented people who are motivated in their lives by design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning they need to develop programs, organizations, and capabilities that support exactly those kinds of experiences. Let's consider these components one at a time, and then we'll conclude with some thoughts on how to promote community using Gardner's approach.

Social and ethnic diversity exists to some degree in most communities. But it is often hidden within the larger context of the dominant culture. Community leaders should spend time and effort helping minority groups within the community organize themselves. For example, this might mean supporting a Hispanic Business Leaders group or an African-American Chamber of Commerce. Supporting these groups then helps them develop a known identity, a social structure, and a means for new community members to quickly connect to them and to others with similar views, values, and needs.

Performing arts are usually supported by local philanthropic groups. Cataloging these groups, developing a roster of key contacts, and compiling schedules of events are the kind of activities that again promote visibility and offer connection points. Funding periodic public events that showcase local performance groups is another tactic that can help communities emphasize their support for the performing arts.

Civic involvement is a natural process for communities to emphasize. But, again, how do local residents (and others as well) know what's going on, and what's available? More is needed than the pole with all the Kiwanis and Elks Club signs on it alongside the main road leading into town. In today's world the more effective way to broadcast and promote civic involvement is via the Internet and Worldwide Web. A professionally-designed and -maintained civic website is a good way to get started.

See http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR650/mr650.ch5/ch5.html for a good example of this kind of effort.

Social action programs are also important. Find the ones already operating in the community and promote them. Most community social action programs are associated with a religious or fraternal organization. Look for local chapters, or contact national associations to find out how local chapters can be formed. In our experience the most important contemporary organizations are those related to environmental issues (being Green), social venture networks, and "triple bottom line" advocates and implementers.

Recreational variety depends very much on local geography and weather conditions. Each region should promote its own strongest candidates (i.e., boating, skiing, biking, hiking, and so on). Again, we recommend connecting with national organizations and publications to promote the local region.

Faith-based organizations are usually fairly visible, but often stand alone. Supporting the development of non-denominational groups and inter-faith organizations is a powerful way to mobilize this community resource. And there are many professional and volunteer organizations and communities of practice that do "Good Works" beyond the purely faith-based ones. Active local chapters of national groups like the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, 4H, the NAACP,

and the wide variety of political action groups speak volumes about the meaning that local residents add to their lives.

In closing, once a community begins to organize itself around these kinds of attractors it then needs to mount a major marketing campaign to tell its story both to the outside world and to its own residents.

We recommend that the core message in that kind of campaign be taken from John Gardner's work. A campaign that emphasizes the theme of wholeness through a forward-looking view will be aimed squarely at your target audience. Encourage local community and regional leaders to respond to the questions we listed above, and then publicize their testimonials as a centerpiece of that campaign.

About the Work Design Collaborative

The Work Design Collaborative, LLC (WDC) has grown out of a groundbreaking research and development project, "The Future of Work" that began in early 2002. Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham joined forces and recruited several corporate sponsors to address questions about how changing workforce demographics and values, new technologies, and new workplace designs were driving transformation in the very nature of work.

WDC now represents the combined interests, resources, and experiences of Jim and Charlie over the past 25 years. Our partnership has grown out of 10 years of collaborative research and consulting in information technology, human resources, and facilities management

Today the Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community, a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

WDC and *Future of Work* are focused on understanding and shaping the future of work and helping both organizations and individuals achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work.

WIRED West Michigan has contracted with WDC to investigate the feasibility of establishing one or more remote work centers within the seven-county region of West Michigan. The goal of these remote work centers is to provide physical facilities and infrastructure support services to both organizational employees and independent entrepreneurs on a low-cost shared basis. It is our belief that these RWC's will support and enable the transition of the economic base by making it easier for the region to attract and retain talented knowledge workers, and by enabling and fostering growth in new small businesses.

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