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What Attracts Knowledge Workers to a Community?

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This article is excerpted from our WIRED West Michigan white paper “What Attracts Knowledge Workers?” The full white paper is available online, at:

http://www.thefutureofwork.net/assets/What_Attracts_Knowledge_Workers.pdf

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 (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).

Knowledge workers are the engine of the information- and innovation-based economy; they are the “creative class” in Richard Florida’s language ([The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life](#), Basic Books, 2003; [Cities and the Creative Class](#), Routledge, 2004 – links are to Amazon.com).

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.

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 approaches we have found to that idea comes from Daniel Pink in his 2005 book *A Whole New Mind (A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, The Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005).

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, 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.

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

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.

As usual, your comments and reactions are more than welcome. And as always, please send your thoughts to us at comments@thefutureofwork.net.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

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