

Considerations on Where to Work and for Whom

Knowing what we do may make everything worthwhile, but there are still a lot of considerations when targeting where and for whom we work. All too often, people accept offers “just to have a job” and later stress out over things like commuting time, company culture, or benefits packages. Following are but a few examples to consider.

1. Location

Fresh out of school and headed to New York or San Francisco to launch your career? Depending on your starting salary your paychecks may stretch further in areas with a lower cost of living such as Phoenix or Atlanta. Most personal finance magazines publish annual surveys with a lot of informative statistics on places to live and work for young professionals.

2. City vs. Suburb

Neighborhood considerations are not as straightforward as most people believe because several factors influence the decision, including preference to work in a big city or in a suburban office complex, where you live in relation to the job, local income taxes, cost of commuting, cost of meals, accessibility to public transportation, need for a car (or a second car), and more.

Further, if your preference is to work in the city, you need to heed the growing trend in the United States to move jobs from city centers to suburban areas and either be willing to move with your job or accept that you’d have to look for a new job if your current employer relocates. According to a recent study, “... *the movement of jobs from cities to suburbs, or creation of new jobs in suburbs rather than traditional urban centers, is a national trend. Population and jobs have both been growing more rapidly in suburbs than cities throughout the United States.*”¹

3. Commuting Time

How much commuting time are you willing to spend each and every day getting back and forth to work? Think of sunny and balmy days as well as rainy and snowy days.

Thirty-four percent of adult workers who are employed full or part-time spend over one hour commuting to and from work. Of this amount, 8% spend over two hours commuting to and from work.²

Commuting time is definitely a factor to consider when targeting your employer, but bear in mind that it is also a subjective measure in that you control your transit time indirectly based on where you choose to live in relation to your job.

4. Commuting Cost

Drive to work? Most Americans do. Volatile gas prices can cause stress if you have a gas guzzler, long commute, or simply spend countless hours on a snail-paced highway. Consider

also the cost of tolls, parking, wear and tear on your car, and higher insurance costs resulting from the use of your car to commute back and forth to work.

Does your town offer public transportation? While this is the green and preferred alternative it is not available in all places, but where it is you need to consider things like condition, availability, and cost. In big cities you may find yourself jammed like a sardine in less than pleasant surroundings. If you work in the city but live further out in the suburbs, or vice versa, public transportation may not be that much cheaper than driving, and in really remote places you may find a sparse and limited schedule.

Consider whether your targeted employer offers a flexible spending account for mass transit and parking under IRS Section 132(f). Regardless of how you commute, it always helps to pay for commuting expenses with pretax dollars.

5. Ability to Work Remotely

In today's electronic age, more and more people work remotely either all of the time or some of the time, so add this to your list of considerations if this is important to you.

- ▶ Forty-five percent of workers in the United States worked remotely in 2008, ³ up from one third only two years earlier. ⁴

6. Days / Hours Worked

Dolly Parton may have popularized the expression "Nine-to-Five" with her 1980 Grammy-winning song from the movie bearing the same title, but many jobs extend into the "five-to-nine" hours that immediately follow, and then some. Other jobs start early and end early, and others start late and end later. And some workers pull all-nighters - all too often.

Most business offices in the United States operate on a Monday to Friday schedule, but many workers find themselves catching up on Saturdays and Sundays, as well as on holidays. Some workers are compensated for this either through overtime pay or with compensating days off, but a huge majority is simply expected to do whatever it takes to meet a deadline.

Hospitals, airlines, call centers and hotels are but a few examples of industries that work 24x7, but even if you remove the "24" from the phrase, many other industries operate 7 days a week.

- ▶ As you ponder your career choice, understand the time demands on different roles in the field.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to ask prospective employers about their policy on the number of hours and days worked if either of these is important for you.

7. Flexible Hours

Many businesses offer flexible scheduling perks, so if you need to attend classes during the day, drop off / pick up children from school, or simply find that working late into the night is more in tune with your "biological clock," consider targeting employers offering flex time perks, even if the salary may be slightly lower than others.

8. Culture

Do you want to spend over a third of your life in an unpleasant environment? Of course not, so remember that a 40 hour work week represents over a third of your existence when compared to the number of hours that you are normally awake, and definitely consider atmosphere and culture of the potential employer during your research and job search.

This is not always easy to do, but leverage your network for connections in your targeted employer, and when the interview process nears the final stages, simply ask the hiring manager if they would mind introducing you to some of your potential coworkers. If you don't get a sense of camaraderie from meeting your future coworkers, perhaps this is not the place for you.

9. Benefits

Make sure you consider benefits when choosing your employer. *"In June 2008, private industry employer compensation costs averaged \$26.78 per hour worked. [Of that amount...] benefits averaged 29.4 percent."*⁵ Despite that benefits are worth nearly a third of compensation, many job seekers overlook this important compensation component. This is especially true of young adults.

Consider medical and dental insurance, health care flexible spending accounts, transit flexible spending accounts, life insurance, pension, 401(k) including company match, tuition reimbursement, relocation expense reimbursement, and other intangible benefits discussed earlier, such as flexible work hours or telecommuting opportunities.

10. Advancement Opportunity

Don't come across with the *"it's all about me"* syndrome during your job interview, but definitely add to your checklist a subtle inquiry about advancement opportunities, training programs and other forms of workplace education, and mentor relationships. These will hone your skills, enable you to cultivate important contacts within the organization, and make you more valued by the employer...and also increase your attractiveness to competitor organizations when you are ready to move on.

11. Security

You will change jobs during your career; that's almost a given. United States workers between the age of 18 and 50 held an average of 10.8 jobs over the 26 year period from 1978 to 2004.⁶

The important thing is to make sure that you control when you move. The last thing you want is to find yourself without a job because the company went out of business, or the industry plummeted. Consider your personal risk tolerance when targeting a potential employer, and weigh advantages / disadvantages of joining start-ups versus mature organizations, and industries that may be particularly volatile during your search period.



© Dennis Abenanty: 2008

1. Brome, Heather. "Urban vs. Suburban Job Growth." Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, New England Public Policy Center. 20 October 2006.
2. Carroll, Joseph. "Workers' Average Commute Round-Trip Is 46 Minutes in a Typical Day." Gallup Poll. 24 August 2007.
3. "Most Working Americans Now Use The Internet Or Email At Their Jobs." Pew Internet & American Life Project. 24 September 2008.
4. Jones, Jeffrey M. "One in Three U.S. Workers Have "Telecommuted" to Work." Gallup Poll. 16 August 2006.
5. "Employer Costs for Employee Compensation Summary." U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics. 10 September 2008.
6. "National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Data." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957-64 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 41 to 50 in 2006-07.)