

How to Find the Best City to Work and Live

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Where we reside has more and more relevance to the kinds of work available to us. In a large number of professions, jobs have become geographically specialized — that is, they are increasingly concentrating in certain places. Place can also largely determine how happy we are in our personal lives. Where we live can determine who we meet, how we meet them, and our opportunities for spending time with our friends and loved ones. Finding a place that best fits us isn't easy — as nothing that's truly important in life is — but it can be done. To help you, I've come up with a basic framework, some real-world tools, and a six-step plan to help you narrow the field and make your decision.

Things you will need:

- Once you've researched your prospective cities, your only major expenditure is to book a trip to each "finalist," spending at least a few days in each one.
- Spending time doing your homework on cities is the biggest priority; this Crash Course ensures you won't waste time doing it.
- **Richard Florida's "Place Finder" tool** is a must-have. See Step 2.

A yellow sticky note with the text "step 1" written in a handwritten style.

Get Your Priorities Straight

Goal: Know why you'd want to move in the first place.

If you ask someone what's most important to them in a partner or a job, chances are they'll have a well-rehearsed response ready to fire back. Our relationship with place is no less intimate and should not be neglected, slighted, or taken for granted. Figuring out what your priorities are is the first and most fundamental step before deciding where to live. Consider what's really important to you about the place you live.

Checklist

Key issues and questions to address when starting your research:

- What do you like most and least about where you're living now, and why are you looking for a new place?
- What are dealmakers? Dealbreakers?

- Is it important to you to find a job in a specific field or would you be happy employed in a more general labor market?
- What stage of life are you in and does that figure into your expectations?
- What's most important to you right now — your work? Finding a mate?
- Your physical environment? Your family?
- How important are things like aesthetics, art, culture, and music?
- To what degree does weather and climate matter?
- Do you lead a flexible or more structured lifestyle? How would the people in a new city change (improve or worsen) this? What does maintaining (or changing) your lifestyle require? How would the people in a new city change (improve or worsen) this?
- Do you prefer big cityregions or smaller communities? Do you want to be closer to the action or further from the frenzy?

Take out a piece of paper and a pen and write down every single thing that comes to mind. Consider nothing too big or trivial.

step 2

Test Your Assumptions with the “Place Finder”

Goal: Combine qualitative information with hard data to identify good prospects.

The goal is live in a place that fulfills your needs from bottom to top. When considering a potential move, it's crucial to assess how your new community will stack up against your needs at each level. Where detailed statistical information is available, I'll tell you where to get it and how to use it. But for many things we'd like to know more about, there simply isn't any hard data available. You'll need to collect qualitative information – read local papers, talk to people there, and go out and see for yourself. In many cases, collecting information this way will give you deeper and better insights into the places you're considering. The real power is in the combination of both types of data — hard statistical facts and your own personal assessments.

Hot Tip

Take the “Place Finder” for a test drive

Use it to help you organize your thoughts, consider other priorities, collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative information, compare, rate, and rank places. Fill out each box on the form on a 1-5 scale. Even after you've collected statistical information, use your

judgment. Enter the score that best fits your assessment, your needs, your observations, and your sensibilities.

step 3

Size up a City's Basics

Goal: Understand the basic economic opportunities your place offers.

Jobs: Are you a risk-taker, or do you like to play it safe? Do you want to work for a company, or launch one? The place you choose could determine that. Make sure to focus on job opportunities in your specific field. For detailed statistical profiles, including information on the number of jobs and salaries for more than 800 specific occupations, in every metropolitan region in the United States, look no further than the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Be sure to calculate comparative costs; make sure you know how far your salary will really go in your new location. There are calculators available online that will help you tally the precise cost-of-living differences among the locations you're considering; they also enable you to see what kind of salary you would need to have to maintain a similar lifestyle in different places. These sites, such as Salary.com, also give objective, fact-based tools with which to negotiate future salaries, which is especially important if part of why you're moving is to find a new job.

Lifelong Learning: Whether or not you're on a fast career track, access to professional development and lifelong learning opportunities are important. Studies have shown time and again that expanding one's mind can add years onto one's life. Access to such opportunities may depend, in part, on proximity to great colleges, universities, and graduate programs. But learning outside of formal educational institutions through seminars, networks, executive training programs, and professional development offerings is possible and of equal value. Take note of where graduate programs are located (see guides like *U.S. News and World Report*, or *BusinessWeek*); survey local newspapers, trade magazines, and websites for announcements on continuing education courses and seminar offerings.

Networks: In a similar vein, studies have also shown that people who feel disconnected or isolated age at an accelerated pace. They're also not surprisingly unhappier people. Plugging in, building networks, meeting people, and creating support structures – these are all things that not only further professional development, but they also contribute significantly to overall wellbeing. But in this respect as in most others, not all places are created equal. Do due diligence; talk to people and get their sense of things. Ask yourself: Is this a place I can easily plug into, or is it the kind of place that is resistant to outsiders? Again, read the local press and the alternative papers.

Hot Tip

Does the Place Get It?

Aside from statistical analysis, like formal polls, anecdotal evidence will be your best resource in assessing the quality and efficacy of leadership in a given area. Per usual, read the local media, especially the alternative papers and local bloggers. When possible, read up on the political history of a place; past events will undoubtedly inform its present context. Who are the political and business leaders? What are their track records, their popularity? Do their values and visions fit yours? Do they address issues that are important to you? Are decisions about the community discussed and made out in the open or behind closed doors? Are there opportunities for citizens to be involved? Talk to residents: How informed and engaged are they?

step 4

Do a “Values Check”

Goal: Know how well a city aligns with your worldview.

The next step is look closely at the values your places offer. This category includes intangible qualities of place — not easily reflected in numbers or hard analysis — but they are among the most important thing to consider.

Checklist

Diversity: Like people, places have varying abilities to open up to and absorb newcomers — particularly those who are different from current residents. Some places like New York City are natural melting pots. Others can be more resistant to “outsiders.” Consider how important this is to you, and how well (or not) you may fare in a new place.

Trust: Trust — not only between people but also between people and institutions — is hard to measure, but not impossible. There are signs everywhere. Do people make eye contact with one another on the street? Do they hide their handbags or briefcases when they sit down? Does someone’s “word” still seem to matter in everyday business transactions? Do people lock their doors when they leave their houses or cars? Are residents valued; are people nice to one another? How are children treated? What about young people, families, the elderly, or people with disabilities? Are some groups marginalized? Who are they and why?

Self-expression: Here again, places vary a lot. Some welcome self-expression, others remain more conformist. How strong is your need to be yourself? What role does individuality play in your daily life? Is it important to you to find a place where you can be unique and reinvent yourself should you so desire?

step 5

Consider Other Important Intangibles

Goal: Know how well a city aligns with your personality.

Now it's time to find out whether the places you are looking at really have the spark you need. Aesthetics and vibrancy, for instance, are among the most important factors in how happy people are with their places. Take it seriously.

Checklist

Beauty: All of us are drawn to beauty, but remember the old adage, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Each of us looks for different things in the places we live. Some consider a pleasant aesthetic to be a gritty urban streetscape. Others prefer well-manicured parks. What do you find beautiful?

How Real Is It: In a mass-produced and mass-marketed world, many people are looking for authenticity. If you're one of them, ask yourself the following. How authentic is the place? What gives it its true soul? What makes it different, unique? How does it value and promote its history, uniqueness, physical structures, and culture? Decide for yourself what really matters to you and rank your places accordingly.

The Fun Factor: Places are not just about work. What are the things you really love to do? Arts and culture? Music or theater? Spectator sports or participant sports? A once avid cyclist may one day choose a different form of exercise. A person who likes clubs and nightlife in his 20s may become a symphony or jazz buff in his 30s, or find himself coaching soccer when kids come along. What activities are the most important to you? Do you imagine them changing overtime?

Buzz: Every city has its own energy level or buzz. Are you inspired by high energy and lots of activity, or do you prefer more a slower speed? What is the energy of the place? Does it jibe with your own ideal pace of life?

step 6

Schedule a Reconnaissance Trip

Goal: Collect all that invaluable first-hand evidence.

Few of us would ever make an important decision on the sole basis of someone else's opinion. Deciding where to live is no different. Say you're thinking about moving to Santa Fe. Do you know anyone who lives there? Talk to them. According to a Yankelovich consumer

research survey published in 2006, anecdotal knowledge is considered to be one of the most reliable forms of information about a place.

My personal rule of thumb is to visit at least three possible places, if not more, before making a final decision. According to the same Yankelovich survey, visiting for the weekend was by far the best means to a useful assessment. My own advice is to spend more than just a weekend – spend enough time to get to know the place. You owe it to yourself, your family and your future. While you're visiting, make sure to consider how you would feel about the city in future stages of your life.

Visit a neighborhood you might like to live in now, and a neighborhood you might like to live in 10 years from now. Ask yourself some questions and think about how you might feel in the future: Can I see myself walking down this street everyday? Can I take the noise level? Is it too crowded or too empty? Too gritty or too ersatz? What would start to get on my nerves? What places would I visit a lot? How would I get around?

Most importantly, if a city doesn't feel right for any reason while you're actually there, don't hesitate to reject it based on your gut feeling, regardless of how it ranks. Realize that your intuition is telling you something important. It's much more than the hard facts that matter. It's how you feel about the place – and how it makes you feel.