

ASK THE EXPERT

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Quality of Life Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Quality of life usually is assessed by people living in the neighborhood. But it all depends on your definition of quality. Here's a guide for evaluating living conditions from afar.

Q We are in the midst of a site selection, and all the material I received speaks of a location's excellent quality of life. I know this is important, but how do you even begin to assess and compare what seems like a completely subjective factor?

The Expert Says: There are 3,141 counties in the United States and each and every one of them have an excellent quality of life. At least that is what I have been told. However, there have been a few places that I have traveled to that, in my opinion, had a less than desirable quality of life. Nonetheless, in all of the places that I have visited, I've met people who ardently believed that their community was the greatest place on earth.

From the perspective of a site location consultant, quality of life issues are best viewed from a number of different lenses.

Some companies know they will be recruiting a high number of people from other locations with specialized skills and talents. For example, manufacturing facilities that will also be home to a research and development facility or have a significant engineering and technical staff may need to relocate existing personnel or recruit new personnel from outside the region. Other companies that will be doing all of their hiring from the local labor pool are typically more concerned about how the quality of life may impact the productiv-

ity of the workforce (i.e. will employees be focused on problems with local schools, or focusing on their job?). There is a third set of companies who will be relocating almost all of their existing workforce (i.e. headquarter relocations). For them, quality of life is the most important criterion.

Regardless of why quality of life is so important to these companies,



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they typically define quality of life the same. The definition almost always has the following elements: access to housing, quality education system, low crime rates, access to health care facilities, easy commuting patterns, reasonable cost of living, and access to some level of cultural and recreational amenities. And for many of these criteria, a key component is diversity of choices.

Access to housing means having a diverse mix of housing options in all price ranges. This means everything from large estate homes to apart-

ments, from suburban neighborhoods to downtown lofts. This factor can differ considerably from one location to the next, but it is relatively easy to define and measure.

A quality education system, on the other hand, is a lot more difficult to define and measure. For some clients the focus is primarily on K-12 education. For others it is important to look at access to colleges and universities. Communities either have access to those institutions or they don't. In terms of quality, there are many rankings of the "Top 50 Business/Engineering/Undergraduate (you can fill in the blank with almost anything you want) Programs". With K-12, it is more difficult. State-level data, and in many cases school district level data, does not paint an accurate picture of how good any one individual school or "school track" is. Ideally, your research will include data from individual schools where the employees are most likely to be sending their children.

Access to health care facilities is relatively easy to measure, although assessing capabilities and quality require more effort. Commuting patterns and cost of living also are readily compared. Access to recreational and cultural amenities is much more difficult. Sporting venues, ballet, symphonies, operas, theaters, parks, lakes, bike trails—the list of amenities that your company is interested in may be long, so it is best to look for diversity of choices. 