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Feature: Is This a Nice Place to Live, or What?

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This is the last in our three-part series on the transformation of the workplace. Our first article ("[Someone Hit the Reset Button](#)" in May) looked at the basic characteristics of transformation; our second ("[Scotty, Take It Up To Warp Factor 5.6!](#)" in June) focused on the specific impacts of transformation on societal institutions like education, government, and the economy. Now we have come full circle; this concluding piece is going to give you an idea of what we believe communities of the future will look like.

To start, we'll go back to our old rant about the need for communities to become places that attract talent—talent of all ages, we might add.

To start, we'll go back to our old rant about the need for communities to become places that attract talent—talent of all ages, we might add. We wrote extensively about this issue during our West Michigan days a few years ago—see, for example, our white paper "[What Attracts Knowledge Workers?](#)" (available on our website).

In addition, Ron Willett wrote a "Notes from the Field" piece for the newsletter a year ago titled "[Assessing the Potential for a Telework Center](#)" that focused partially on what makes a community a desirable place to telecommute from.

If, as we suspect, the wants and needs of local residents become the central features of a region that drives economic development, then public officials and volunteers must consider carefully which attributes are most attractive to the people they want to live and work in their cities and neighborhoods.

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 what attracts most people is **community** (in its broadest, most socially-focused sense). Although the physical attributes of a region (weather, recreational opportunities, cleanliness, livability) are important, the equation is far more complicated than that. For those of you with a geography bent we suggest visiting the "patron saint" of urban areas, **Joel Kotkin**, at <http://www.joelkotkin.com/>.

Following our logic, the economy is clearly transforming, and so are communities. We believe that the "psychology of regions" is changing in a very deep and fundamental way. In fact, we're convinced that you can have all the roads, schools, airports, business services, Internet access, and hospitals you want, but if your area doesn't have a meaningful sense of community your city or town won't experience much in-migration or wealth generation in the post-industrial global economy.

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. It's a tough challenge. But we have to start somewhere.

We have also been particularly drawn to the work of the late **John Gardner**, former head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and then a professor at Stanford University (see in particular <http://www.pbs.org/johngardner/chapters/7.html> for more details on his work).

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 that "sense of community" we're also interested in. He believed 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—prescient observations from thirty years ago, in our humble opinion.

As a result of his interest and concern about communities Gardner developed a framework for measuring the ingredients of community (see "The New Leadership Agenda," in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business*, Kazimierz Gozdz, editor, New Leaders Press 1995 – link is to a description of the book on Amazon.com).

Gardner's categories describing the ingredients of community, which are similar to Rebecca Ryan's but go well beyond the obvious, include:

- 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

Okay, so much for theory. What can you do to help *your* community become a net attractor of knowledge worker talent?

We have synthesized our ideas and Gardner's into a few simple questions you can use in 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 to start the conversation.

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 all of our 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?
14. Do we support and encourage innovation in both our public and our commercial enterprises?

That's it. Short and sweet. The world changes, and your community changes or dies. Give this quick-check diagnostic a try. Go out into your community and ask people these simple questions (and ask yourself, too). You may be surprised at the answers—or you may decide to rent a moving van the next day.

[Please send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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

Future of Work is 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.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients 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. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

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