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## **Field Notes: Assessing the Potential for a “Telework” Center**

*By Ron Willett*

Like all potentially disruptive innovations, the concept of a Business Community Center™ (BCC) smashes into protective screens in our present business cultures, and in this case because of the need for place-dependent support, into civic cultures generally (see [“Business Community Centers”](#), *Future of Work Agenda*, September, 2005, for a detailed description of the concept).

Envisioning the opportunity for a Business Community Center™ (BCC) calls for recognizing the human resources already in place in a community, plus the opportunity and incentives for people to be attracted to relocate to a community with a BCC.

The distance knowledge-worker is arguably a very special case of smarts, discipline, and entrepreneurship; so the aspects of place that support that human resource are likely reach beyond the traditional topics of economic potential analysis. In the “micropolitan” sites described by Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware as target telework venues (see [“What is a Micropolis? Why Should You Care?”](#), *Future of Work Agenda*, June, 2008, for a discussion of micropolitan areas), a place’s culture contributes to worker productivity and sustainability of the model, or can hinder because of embedded values and resistance.

The following thoughts flow from, first, seeing community as a special case of “organization,” and, second, viewing assessment as probing a site’s culture and processes rather than just its visible features.

Two perspectives are relevant: what makes a micropolitan area a candidate for strategic telework; and what are the indicators of receptivity?

The first question is easier. The presence of bandwidth; the usual economic/demographic indicators; communities that have experienced economic or social losses and recouped; relatively more doctorate, masters, and bachelors degrees per capita; places with great diversity, or the stimulating influence of an academic enclave; contemporary housing; recent investment in major infrastructure change.

Question two is more subtle, with fewer metrics. Besides acknowledged primary research, there are indicators of communities that may welcome or support new business models, including the culture, the education system, political styles, social structure, and whether there is real versus symbolic “community.”

- ◆ Is there *really* broadband Internet, i.e., greater than 15-20 mbps download speeds? This means fiber to the door, with the servers to match, or potentially WiMax to provide seamless service via wireless. It may take a community-based system or special initiative to reach that standard in the present competitive environment.

- ◆ Is communication a way of life in the community – for example using community access television service (CATS) to provide public meeting coverage? Sounds trivial, but it isn't; as a single factor that kind of usage speaks volumes about the capacity of the community for openness and debate.
- ◆ The first place a knowledge worker may be turned off is by a retro and bureaucratic school system. Is the K-12 system transparent? Is a basketball trophy revered, while a scholarship is dissed? Is the school board a rotating closed-shop? Does the system have a one-to-one computer commitment and STEM plan? Are there AP courses? What's the ratio of SAT or ACT takers to total students? Does "learning" pop up more frequently in dialogue than "teaching"?
- ◆ Are "green" values apparent? Is there at least interest in alternate transportation and energy sources, or is the community stumping for an ethanol plant and higher corn prices?
- ◆ Does the area have a community master plan that extends beyond 2008?
- ◆ Have the same leadership, city council, commission, and political human resources been in place for an extended period of time, or do those folks simply periodically trade assignments?
- ◆ Is there any evidence of adult education?
- ◆ What does the community value as entertainment and the arts?
- ◆ Can you find the city budget, city salaries, and the proceedings of public meetings without a "freedom of information" request?
- ◆ Is there a local newspaper? Does it have an online version offering the opportunity for comment? Read the editorials, letters to the editor, and comments; they call out the social intellect and values of a community, or lack thereof.
- ◆ Are the social collectives that serve as sponsorship of many alleged community initiatives ones that seek citizen input and welcome newbies?
- ◆ Lastly, and this is impressionistic, but if you "browse" a community do you sense curiosity and hear questions, or rather attitudes like "This is the way we do it," and "Why would we do that?" Is there evidence of a sense of humor? The latter, parenthetically, probably has a higher correlation with working intelligence and the potential for collaborative work than any other metric I can think of.

These variables jump beyond the traditional bases for economic potential, but are high-impact over the long haul. A community's culture will ultimately shape how creative work models are accepted, or ignored, or viewed with contempt; hence, will help you determine whether funding for a Business Community Center will be enhanced, and how teleworkers will fare over time.

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