

## Big employers, small town jobs

Thinking of leaving the big city for a little town? Well-known companies may be eager to hire you, and woo you with advancement opportunities and work-and-family perks.

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(Fortune) -- I love small towns. In fact, I live in one, in the Delaware Valley in upstate New York. It has 14 streets, one traffic light, 3 restaurants, a small Revolutionary War fort-turned-museum, and, on summer weekends, hordes of sun-burned city folk who come here for the canoe trips and camping. At night it's so dark you can see a zillion stars, the crime rate is approximately zero, and you can live in a 5-bedroom farmhouse with 50 acres of land for about the same rent as the monthly rate to park your car in midtown Manhattan. When people ask me if I miss the Big Apple (where I lived for 23 years), I can honestly say: No way.

In their Best Places to Live list this year, Money Magazine focused on small towns like mine that offer everything a family could want - a place where folks can raise kids, climb the career ladder, and enjoy a real sense of community. But despite all the lovely, laid-back advantages of rural living - a small herd of deer just walked through the woods outside my office window - recruiters say it's still often tough to persuade city dwellers to move to the sticks.

Small-town searches are "the bane of my existence," says San Francisco headhunter **Barry Shulman** ([www.shulmanassoc.com](http://www.shulmanassoc.com)). "With a position in a big city, I can find 10 times more candidates. Every now and then, you luck out and find someone in, say, Seattle or Chicago who

grew up in Bugtussle, Oklahoma, and wants to move back there - but I don't hold my breath."

But what about the advantages of small-town life, like cheap housing, low crime rates, and clean air? **Shulman says urban job seekers are skeptical:** "A candidate from L.A. or Dallas will say to me, 'Sure, I love the fact that there's less traffic - but isn't that because there's nowhere to go?' "

If you're thinking of moving to a small town, employers will likely welcome you with open arms. In fact, to entice doubters, big companies headquartered in tiny towns have come up with some clever strategies.

Consider Aflac ([www.aflac.com](http://www.aflac.com)), based 100 miles south of Atlanta in little Columbus, Ga. The insurer's call center is growing fast, and to attract employees, Aflac offers new hires extensive training to help them earn the Certified Life and Health Insurance Specialist (CLHIS) designation, which qualifies them for advancement in the industry.

Since joining Aflac (Charts, Fortune 500) in 2004 as a customer-service rep, Roxanna Jones, a former school-district secretary, has advanced through four levels of training. "I've been learning the insurance industry both in the classroom and on the job," she says. "It's given me a thorough knowledge of products and regulations." Aflac has added about 2,000 such employees in the past five years and expects to hire and train 2,000 more by 2012.

And what about life after work? "It's true there's not a lot of night life here," concedes Sharon Douglas, whose title at the insurer is Chief People Officer. "But we do have something called Uptown Columbus on Saturday nights. It's like a big party with live music, and restaurants giving out free samples - and I feel safe walking there alone."

Or look at Bayer (Charts) HealthCare's Animal Health division ([www.animalhealth.bayerhealthcare.com](http://www.animalhealth.bayerhealthcare.com)), located in Shawnee, Kan., which makes veterinary medicines and vitamins.

"We wanted to make our headquarters here the center of a cluster of expertise - like Detroit in autos or Nashville in the music industry - so that top talent would want to come here," says Jeorg Ohle, the division's president. "We needed to overcome the Cowtown image."

And so, working with local government agencies and universities to offer everything from advanced research facilities to tax abatements, Ohle's team has managed to entice 20 major research projects to move to Kansas from both coasts, and helped attract many of the 119 other animal-health companies in the area.

That, in turn, has drawn talented new hires like Sally Williams, who signed on as vice president of marketing last month.

"I've lived in several big cities and was considering a couple of job offers in Chicago. But housing there is so horribly costly," says Williams. "You can buy a beautiful home here for a reasonable price."

She also sees a welcome professional challenge in her new job, after 25 years of marketing national consumer-goods and health brands: "The animal health industry is growing so fast, and until now it's been focused on the technical side - on developing products, not marketing them." The chance to start changing that will make her more marketable if she ever does decide to go back to urban life.

In the meantime, Williams points out, "Living in the Midwest in 'flyover country' means you're just a couple of hours' flight from anywhere in the U.S. It makes it easy to visit friends for the weekend."

A third recruiting strategy some employers have adopted is to turn their little hometowns into such fun places to hang out, you won't ever want to leave. Kelly Ritchie, senior vice president of employee and customer services at clothing maker Land's End ([www.landsend.com](http://www.landsend.com)), has worked at headquarters in Dodgeville, Wis., for 22 years.

"My kids practically grew up here [at the office]," she says, and no wonder: Land's End's sprawling campus offers

every kind of work-and-family perk imaginable, from the option to bring newborns to work, to Saturday-morning swim classes and basketball camp for kids, to sports programs for teenagers, to sightseeing trips for retirees.

The company started surveying employees in the late '80s to ask them what they'd like, and has been adding activities and resources ever since. "Lately the focus is on wellness," Ritchie notes. A new on-campus clinic offers health screenings and physical therapy. "But now that it's summertime, we really have fun." A farmer's market on site every Thursday, outdoor grills where employees can barbecue at lunchtime, an open-air concert series - what's not to like?

"It's true that people are often reluctant to come here for a job interview - first we have to explain where Dodgeville is," says Ritchie. "But we've recruited hundreds of professionals from all over, with very marketable skills. Once they come here and get a good look around, they're won over by the quality of life and the sense of community."

Of course, the fact that these employers are big names in their industries helps sway job candidates too. "It's not going to damage your career to move to a small place, especially if you're working for an 'A-list' company," notes recruiter **Barry Shulman**. "If you discover you really can't stand small-town living, you can always go back. Nothing is irrevocable. So if you're on the fence, why not try it for a while?"

**Shulman** should know: He moved to a tiny town in Washington State for 3 years - and then moved back to San Francisco. As for me, I'm with Bayer's Jeorg Ohle, who spent 9 years in Singapore before moving to Shawnee. "After all that time on a tiny island crammed with millions of people," says Ohle, "I'm enjoying the wide open spaces."

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