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Where Tech Workers Want to Work

By Thomas H. Davenport

I normally try to supply substantial evidence for my arguments, but in this case I am going to be pretty impressionistic. My lamentations today are driven by a fairly recent visit to Dell Inc.'s headquarters complex in Austin. Well, not really Austin, but rather Round Rock, Texas—a suburban city that's about 18 miles north of Austin. Dell maintains a number of industrial-looking “cube farm” buildings in a somewhat desolate-looking part of Round Rock near some freeways.

Now I am sure that Round Rock is a perfectly pleasant place to live if you have two kids and a dog. But it's not a terribly interesting place to work. On the other hand, Austin itself is quite interesting and fun. It's got a funky, laid-back vibe and there are plenty of informal restaurants with outdoor seating, a river (that they call a lake) to run and bicycle around, and huge quantities of live music. I lived there for several years while teaching at the University of Texas, and while it was a bit sleepy at the time (less so now), it was a thoroughly pleasant place to hang out.

Dell's industrially-oriented location may have made sense when its goal was to manufacture commodity PCs and laptops at the lowest possible price. But that's no longer its objective, and the company has entered software and services businesses while trying to be more differentiated in hardware. I don't know of anyone who's established a correlation between excitement in products and services, and excitement in office locations, but it might be worth investigating.

A Dell spokesperson disagrees with my impressions, admitting that they made him “chuckle.” “It's fairly well established that the greater Austin area, including Round Rock, is hugely attractive to millennials – and workers of all ages. The incredible growth of Round Rock as an employment center (beyond just Dell) and in population bears that out.”

The company says it has engineering and development teams working in Austin. And it has flexible work hours policies that allow many of its Austin-living, Round Rock-commuting employees to work from home (or the coffee shop). And as for the commute, it should be noted that 18 miles in Texas probably means less than an 18 mile commute in the Northeast's slushy snow.

But I suspect that most of Dell's young, smart and creative people would prefer to work in Austin all the time.

These days it is difficult to attract great knowledge workers if they know they will be chained to a cube all day in a sea of cubes with a company cafeteria as the only respite. Manufacturing for Dell may have needed to be in a somewhat remote suburban location, but not the entire

company. And the great majority of Dell's manufacturing is now contracted out or offshore anyway.

I don't mean to pick on Dell, because there are a lot of companies in similar situations. Even Silicon Valley, which sounds like an exciting place to work, has many tech companies (including Google Inc. and Facebook Inc.) that are actually headquartered in somewhat boring suburbs—although a number maintain large offices in city centers. They run buses to and from San Francisco, but don't you think the workers that ride them would prefer to work closer to home? Some of the companies in the Bay Area, like Twitter, have decided that they should be in the big city. And if they can afford office space in San Francisco, you can afford it in your town.

I see a dramatic shift to more interesting work locations in my hometown of Boston. Rt. 128, which used to be the home of high tech in Boston, has given way to Cambridge's Kendall Square, South Boston, and even downtown Boston—formerly the home of bankers and lawyers. Biogen Idec, the largest biotech firm in Massachusetts, had a "Round Rock" strategy for a while, and moved its headquarters and many of its people out to a suburban location (the leafy but boring town of Weston, where I once lived). But before the relocation was complete, the company scrambled back into Cambridge, and is building new facilities there. If you want great scientists (or you need to be close to what scientists are doing), you need to be in Kendall Square.

My sense is that an interesting work location, and the ability to get out of your cube (or your office if you are lucky enough to have one), is particularly important to millennial-age workers. My millennial son told me that if he has to stay in one work location all day, he feels like he's in jail. He and his peers tell me that they have had a tough time moving from the freewheeling environment of college to a locked-down work location. Of course many of us have successfully (although reluctantly) made that transition, but millennials seem less willing to do so. There is also a well-documented trend that millennials want to live in the city, and it's very logical that they'd like to work there too.

So coming back to Dell for a moment, here are some recommendations for [Michael Dell](#). I recommend using your newfound private company status to invest in more Austin locations, preferably on the river. You may find it easier to hire smart, creative, and young workers who can make your products and services more differentiated. You and they will learn from all the other leading-edge companies based in Austin these days. And you'll be closer to the dorm room at UT Austin in which you started it all a few decades ago.

And if you're not an owner of a big company but a CIO, CMO, head of R&D, or leader of some other knowledge work function, the same advice applies. Try to persuade your entire company to move to a more interesting location, but if you can't do that, move your own workers. The "creative class" wants stimulation at work, and if you don't provide that you won't be able to employ them.

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