

## COVID-19 Has Heightened the Interest of Communities in Attracting **Remote Workers**

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Even before COVID-19, many communities across North America identified remote workers as a key target in their resident attraction and economic development strategies. Remote workers are valued because they bring with them their own jobs and tend to be more mobile and easier to attract than businesses, younger, and interested in the higher quality of life and lower costs of living that a smaller centre can provide. They also tend to have above-average disposable incomes.

COVID-19 has further heightened the interest of communities in attracting remote workers by increasing both the numbers of remote workers and the concerns some have about living in more densely populated areas. It has also increased the competition for those workers. Almost all communities have some remote workers, and in principle all communities can compete for these workers. However, those that are most successful tend to be those featuring a high quality of life, comparatively low costs of living, a welcoming attitude, an ability to successfully integrate newcomers, high quality broadband, and accessibility (air access can be particularly important for some workers).

We recently conducted a review of some recent programs developed to attract remote workers. Some findings of our review are summarized below.

- **While most programs target a broad cross-section of remote workers and self-employed individuals (e.g. contractors), many specifically identify technology workers as a primary target.** Within that segment, communities look to attract technology workers who are not frequently required to visit their employer's or client's place of business and are most commonly renting an apartment, concerned about the high costs of living and quality of life in a larger centre, and open to moving.
- **There is increasing use of financial incentives to lure remote workers.** The Tulsa Remote (Oklahoma) program was incredibly successful in both raising awareness of the city and attracting remote workers. Amongst other benefits, the program provides funding of up to US\$10,000 to new residents. Established in 2018, the size of the program has been increased from 100 grants to 250 grants annually. More than 10,000 people applied to the program in its first year of operation. Some of the many who applied for funding but were not successful were still convinced to move to Tulsa.



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Other cities have introduced similar programs. Located in Northwest Alabama, Remote Shoals also provides for US\$10,000 in funding. Choose Topeka (Kansas) provides a bonus to home buyers: those who move to the city and rent can receive up to US\$10,000 while those who purchase a home can receive up to US\$15,000. A more modest program is the Savannah Technology Workforce Incentive (Georgia) which will reimburse up to US\$2,000 in moving expenses incurred by a remote worker or self-employed person moving to the community. Some states have also become involved: Vermont's Remote Worker Program provides up to \$5,000 per year for two years to reimburse new residents for related expenses such as relocation costs, hardware and software, and broadband access.

- **Some programs also provide access to co-working spaces and work to build a community of remote workers.** Recognizing that remote workers may desire meeting spaces, support services, and opportunities to interact with others and spend at least part of their time outside of the home, some remote worker attraction programs are linked with co-working spaces. For example, participants in Tulsa Remote are provided with a one-year free membership to a co-working space, while funding through the Vermont Remote Worker Program can be used to cover membership costs. These spaces can be particularly important given that the remote workers are just learning about the community. Tulsa Remote also helps to create a community of workers through various programs, events and meetup



gatherings and dedicated Slack channels and Facebook groups. The objective is not only to attract new workers but also to ensure that they connect to the community so they will stay.

- **Eligibility criteria varies somewhat by program.** Most commonly, successful applicants must be planning to move to the community (but generally not have already moved), be eligible to work in the region, and be employed or contracted by an employer or organizations located outside of the community (i.e. they work remotely). Some programs have a minimum income requirement.
- **Various organizations partner in developing and implementing the programs.** In addition to local governments, some types of organizations that may be involved include foundations (e.g. George Kaiser Family Foundation funds Tulsa Remote), economic development organizations and agencies, chambers of commerce, colleges, co-working spaces and incubators, and real estate properties.
- **A variety of approaches are used in promoting the programs.** The initial programs that provided sizable financial incentives made extensive use of earned media, generating significant news coverage. Other common vehicles include program websites, social media marketing, and links to related regional economic development promotions. In addition, recognizing that the potential for attraction tends to be higher when targeting former residents, people with families and friends already in the community, and visitors to the region, communities are also active in promoting programs through referral networks, word-of-mouth, major events, and local businesses serving tourists and other visitors. The recently announced Reconnect Oneida County (New York State) intends to make Oneida County a “premiere destination” for remote workers and has identified, as its primary target, individuals who were born and raised in the region.

It is interesting to note that programs targeting remote workers are not limited to local and regional governments. In response to COVID-19, for example, Bermuda has introduced Work from Bermuda which issues one-year residential certificates that allow remote workers to legally live and work there. Barbados recently announced a similar program. Many other countries such as Mexico, Columbia, Portugal, Estonia and the Czech Republic have also introduced programs that specifically target remote workers.

## About Qatalyst

Qatalyst represents a new name and a new operating model for a firm with a long operating history. We have been providing economic research, strategy development and implementation assistance to local, provincial, territorial, federal and Indigenous economic development organizations across Canada for nearly 40 years. Through our network of about 150 consultants and associates across Canada, we assist client in preparing economic development and investment, business, resident and tourist attraction strategies. We also deliver a range of services to support strategy implementation including brand development, website development and management, social media marketing, business retention and expansion programs, business matchmaking and coaching, performance measurement and reporting, benchmarking, ongoing research and trend analysis, database and dashboard development, funding (grant applications) & reporting, and fractional EDO services.



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