



A newsletter of the Society of Actuaries/Casualty Actuarial Society

2010 Fall Issue



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Working in Small vs. Big Cities

By Terrence Chin

Special thanks to Philip Lam and Shirley Song for contributing their opinions to this article.

During your career, you will likely come across the option of working in a small city or large metropolis. This article aims to provide you with insight into how working in different sized cities can work to your advantage or disadvantage. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of the benefits and disadvantages; the quality of the job or your personal (or even familial) needs should have the most weight on your decision. Yet all other things being equal, here are a few items to keep in mind when deciding where to work:

Small City

Networking can be easier in smaller cities. Social gatherings and team-building activities are often more plentiful and foster a strong sense of community. As a result, there are a wide range of opportunities to speak with VPs and other senior management in informal settings. This can be a great advantage for promotions or for future employment opportunities. If you are an intern, these social events enable you to expand your network. After an internship, you may even know the interviewers when looking for full-time employment after graduation. Nowhere else will you have better exposure to company leaders and a chance to grow your professional network with senior management.

Due to the structure of the organization, communities in smaller cities tend to be very tight-knit. Coworkers are very supportive and you will quickly develop a network of great peers that you can rely on. Local professional groups and company seminars provide additional support. However, there can also be limited learning or growth opportunities in a small city. International companies may have headquarters in large cities where senior management and major corporate functions are located. In this case, a promotion to more responsibility may naturally entail relocation to a different city.

There are undoubtedly fewer events happening at any point in time in a smaller city. The environment can be quieter and the pace slower, but also friendlier and easier to

transition into. After some adjustment and learning the local venues, small cities can be just as fulfilling to live in as larger cities.

Big City

Traffic is the biggest headache when working in a large city. Commuting can take upwards of an hour, and on days of inclement weather it may even take several hours to come into work. For an 8-hour workday, an hour-long commute can extend your time commitment to work to 10 hours. This should be one of your primary concerns when considering working in a big city.

On the upside, there are tremendous learning and growth opportunities in large metropolises. The work environment is often fast-paced, constantly changing and may better reflect the industry outlook and frontier. The practices and experiences you gain may also be ingrained with a global perspective. Small cities may focus on local or domestic markets and thus provide specialized experience for only this sector. In large cities you will also find coworkers from all over the world. In New York or London, for example, you will meet a network of professionals from diverse backgrounds. This provides you with an opportunity to learn—since each individual brings their own experiences—and widen your network of contacts from all geographies.

Large and small cities both offer the chance to live life to the fullest. Cities such as Denver, Houston, Toronto, Hong Kong and Zurich, however, host many more events just by virtue of being more populated. Chicago, for example, has a very rich cultural background. Thousands of tourists from all over the world head to Chicago each year for music, dining, architecture and much more. The Taste of Chicago, the Chicago Summer Dance, the Chicago Marathon, the Willis (formerly Sears) Tower, the Magnificent Mile and Lollapalooza are just some of the city's attractions. Two baseball teams, a great basketball team and a championship hockey team further ensure that there is plenty to do after work each and every day. The vast amount of entertainment options is the best part of living in a big city.

Treat each situation differently

Each situation is unique, and the pros and cons of each opportunity cannot be directly compared. An important idea to note is that a company could have its national headquarters in a small town, and/or its international headquarters in a large city. In a scenario where the company-wide headquarters is in a small town, opportunities similar to those found in a big city will also exist. Wherever you work, it is important to choose an environment conducive to work-life balance and a city that encourages you to pursue happiness.

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