

Live, Work, Play: Exploring the Rhetorical Dimension of Remote Work Attraction Incentives Programs

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Remote Work Attraction Incentives Programs are local economic development tools offering cash or kind payments and financial incentives to remote workers willing to relocate to sponsoring regions or cities. In this research, I analyze the websites of 15 Remote Work Attraction Incentives Programs to understand how U.S. second-tier cities, rural regions, metropolitan areas, and entire states are reshaping their public images in an attempt to rebrand themselves as places for remote workers. The findings show how Remote Work Attraction Incentives Programs counter canonical models for talent attraction by promoting their respective locations as places of production rather than places of consumption and by playing on the contrast between the lifestyles remote workers can afford in the promoted locations and the issues affecting the quality of life in major U.S. cities.

Keywords: creative city, remote work, creative class, covid-19, content analysis

As the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was ravaging the United States in the spring of 2020, Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Coinbase announced their plans to transition from in-person to fully remote or hybrid working arrangements (Armstrong, 2020; Byers, 2020; Christie, 2020; Heater, 2020). “We are going to be the most forward-leaning company on remote work at our scale” (Meta, n.d., para. 3), announced Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in May 2020, as the company rolled out a plan for many of its 50,000 employees to work from home—a plan that, Zuckerberg anticipated, allowed 50% of Facebook’s workforce to work remotely by 2030 and involved salary cuts for those willing to leave the San Francisco Bay area in favor of relatively more affordable cities (Kelly, 2020).

The announcements were welcomed in the press as the harbinger of a paradigmatic shift in corporate work (e.g., Akala, 2020; Eisenberg, 2020), representing the first step of a transition from large, campus-style corporate headquarters located in the heart of global tech regions to distributed and officeless enterprises. Amid fears of new and deadly waves of COVID-19, the debate about the ripple effects of remote work on the economies of major urban centers flared up on mainstream pages and specialized media outlets (e.g., Edsall, 2021; Kotkin, 2021; Kuper, 2021; Liu, 2021).

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Richard Florida (2012a), whose work on so-called creative cities posited a direct relation between urban density, creativity, and economic performance, appeared confident about the possibility for large cities to re-establish their role as catalysts of creative energies in the post-pandemic period (Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, & Storper, 2021). Others suggested that, as urban density becomes “more of a bug than a feature” (Anderson, Rainie, & Vogels, 2021, p. 37), people might decide to leave overcrowded metropolitan areas and move into smaller, more affordable cities (Barrero, Bloom, & Davies, 2020). Early data seem to confirm this trend, although the exodus from large cities appears more likely for those who can afford the privilege of working from home—often high-salaried, skilled employees, and professionals in the media, finance, and entertainment industries (Mongey, Pilosoph, & Weinberg, 2020). Recent reports show that major tech clusters have increased their share of the nation’s tech sector employment despite the outflow of people leaving dense metro areas during the pandemic (Muro & You, 2022).

Whether irreversible or transient, skilled workers’ centrifugal movement away from tech and creative hubs has been described as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for second-tier cities, rural regions, and metropolitan areas in the U.S. heartland (Haslag & Weagley, 2021) to rejuvenate their local economies, strengthen their talent clusters, and, ultimately, generate additional tax revenues thanks to the influx of a skilled workforce looking for a new place to call home (Bloom, 2021). Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, was in the news limelight during the pandemic because of its Tulsa Remote program. Launched in 2018, the program has been attracting remote workers to Oklahoma by offering them economic incentives and other perks, such as free access to coworking spaces and invitations to exclusive events. Incentive schemes for remote workers, identified in this article as Remote Work Attraction Incentive Programs (RWAIP, as described in Strauss & Jow, 2022), are not new. However, their popularity saw an uptick during the COVID-19 pandemic (Holder, 2020).

The jury is still out on whether the end of the pandemic will coincide with a return to dense coastal hubs or if, instead, second-tier cities and rural regions will be able to retain highly skilled workers for the long term. The goal of this research is not so much to predict the future of urbanization as to understand how cities and regions outside established creative and technological hubs are reshaping their public images in an attempt to lure high-income, skilled remote workers. Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the themes employed by Remote Work Attraction Incentive Programs (RWAIPs) to rebrand second-tier cities, rural regions, and metropolitan areas outside of major economic and tech hubs as places for remote workers?

RQ2: How do Remote Work Attraction Incentive Programs (RWAIPs) compare with previous models for talent attraction and local economic development?

Through a qualitative content analysis of textual and visual content of RWAIP websites, I identify the themes employed by these programs to promote their respective cities, metropolitan areas, regions, and states as places for remote workers, and compare them to previous approaches to talent attraction.

The analysis reveals how RWAIPs counter established talent attraction models by framing their respective locations as places for production or, better, remote production, rather than as places for consumption (Pratt, 2011; Rich, 2013). The narrative RWAIPs websites build around remote work is one of work-life balance, of professionally fulfilling lives spent within connected (to high-speed Internet, major infrastructures, local business communities) and affordable locations. Moreover, the RWAIP websites analyzed in this article portray their locations, which include second-tier cities, metropolitan areas, small towns, and entire states, as places offering remote workers an unmatched quality of life. This points to another difference between RWAIPs and previous talent attraction models. In addition to promoting their destinations by emphasizing the quality of the built and natural environments, which Richard Florida identified as "territorial assets" or "quality of place" (Florida, 2012b, para. 3), RWAIP websites focus, in large measure, on themes about the quality of life that remote workers can achieve in less dense, more inclusive, and more affordable locations. This finding aligns with previous works (e.g., Mcgranahan & Wojan, 2007; Rich, 2013), which identify cities' livability and thick social ties, rather than the quality of place alone, as among the main factors pushing highly skilled workers to leave major metropolitan areas.

The lifestyle that RWAIP websites portray and promote, however, is at odds with the programs' definitions of remote work. Despite calls for inclusion and attention to representations of minorities, the programs go to great lengths to define what makes remote work and who is a remote worker. In doing so, RWAIPs further socioeconomic discrimination, already evident and well-known in urban contexts (Florida, 2017; Peck, 2005), beyond the confines of major metropolitan hubs.

Background: Talent Attraction Programs Before and During the Pandemic

Since the 1980s, cities have relied on economic incentives to counter the decline of the urban population (Rieniets, 2009). The flight from densely populated U.S. metropolitan areas, especially among middle-class White residents, started in the early 20th century and accelerated after WWII because of the decline of urban manufacturing jobs (Mallach, 2017). Industrial U.S. cities, particularly in the Northeast and the Midwest, suffered a significant demographic slowdown in the 1970s and 1980s (Brookings Institute, 2012; Eisinger, 1986), as manufacturing jobs continued to fall following the offshoring of labor-intensive activities to low-wage countries (Rieniets, 2009).

As industrial economist Ann Markusen (1996) put it, the global search for profitability made the geography of production increasingly "slippery" (p. 294). To increase their "stickiness" (p. 294), in the 1980s, cities began relying on economic incentives, such as business tax abatements, exemptions, grants, and low-interest loans to new and existing manufacturing firms (Weber, 2000).

Placemaking Projects in the Service-Based Economy

At the dawn of the commercial Internet era, sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) anticipated the impact of the transition to a service-based economy on local economies. Unlike the manufacturing industry, which required complex logistical infrastructures, the service industry allegedly only needed an abundant supply of skilled white-collar workers (Noyelle, 1986). The relative independence of the service industry from logistics infrastructures would have allowed every city and town to compete

globally, assuming their ability to nurture a large enough pool of highly educated workers. However, "create[ing] a great university and wait[ing] 200 years" (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as cited in Katz & Nowak, 2018, p. 239) did not sound like a feasible option for cities without a skilled workforce. These places, Lash and Urry (1994) continued, would have been better off attracting the relatively mobile service workers population by offering them the possibility of living in a city with an affordable lifestyle and quality consumer services (p. 215). Community renewal thus became the focus of talent attraction projects throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s (Katz & Nowak, 2018). These projects involved repurposing abandoned properties for new uses (Mallach & Brachman, 2013), developing urban green infrastructures (e.g., parks, community gardens, restored habitats; see Schilling & Logan, 2008), launching city-wide branding campaigns (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Peters, Coble, Li, & Lewis, 2021), and incubating local business organizations (Katz & Nowak, 2018).

These placemaking initiatives were developed on the assumption that in a service-based economy, firms will follow workers, rather than the other way around (on this issue, see Brown & Scott, 2012). Therefore, rather than promoting cities as places of production in an attempt to attract new firms, cities marketed themselves as places for consumption capable of providing skilled workers with cultural, recreational, and natural amenities. The switch from cities as centers of production to centers of consumption is central to Richard Florida's popular and highly debated theory of the *creative class* (2012a). According to Florida, cities' chances of establishing thriving local economies depend on their ability to attract skilled and talented knowledge workers. These are the holders of creative capital, whose "ideas can be turned into valuable products and services" (Florida, 2012a, p. 120). Together, they compose a new class termed the creative class, whose aspirations and demands determine the geography of knowledge-based and high-value-added industries. Florida described the creative class as cosmopolitan, bohemian, mobile, and entrepreneurial.

Florida (2012a) identified three factors essential for cities to succeed in a service-based economy: technology, talent, and tolerance, the so-called "3 Ts of economic development" (p. 228). Technology refers to a city or region's local ecosystem of tech companies and is measured in "patents per capita and average annual patent growth" (Florida, 2012a, p. 229). The more technologically advanced a city is, the more attractive it is to skilled newcomers. Talent refers to the local availability of "human capital" (Florida, 2012a, p. 231), which, in turn, depends on the number and quality of colleges and universities in the area. The last "t," tolerance, refers to a city or region's inclusivity and openness to a diverse population. Tolerance is core to Florida's idea of a creative city, since the combination of different cultures and cognitive styles, he argued, is essential to creativity and innovation. Therefore, cities and regions should promote tolerance and inclusivity to increase the diversity of the local talent pool and maximize its creative and innovative potential (Florida, 2012a). A fourth "t," Territorial Assets, was added by Florida in a later article to signal the importance of built and natural environments and the vibrancy of street life (Florida, 2012b). Florida would refer to the fourth "t" as the quality of place, understood as the "unique set of characteristics that define a place and make it attractive" (Florida, 2012b, para. 3).

The creative-city model for urban regeneration was welcomed by local governments as a convenient and effective means to respond to the economic stagnation that followed the deindustrialization of cities in both the Global North (Oliveira & Paulino, 2017) and the Global South (United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2013). It was also applied outside of urban contexts to generate new jobs and local growth in rural areas (McGranahan & Wojan, 2007; Roberts & Townsend, 2016). Thanks to the diffusion of information and communication technologies, the expansion of intellectual property rights, and the “natural idiosyncrasy” of local knowledge (UNESCO, 2013, p. 26), every corner of the world could, supposedly, leverage the latent creativity of communities and rebrand itself as a destination for skilled and creative workers.

Unfortunately, creative-city-inspired approaches to urban development, instead of nurturing inclusive and tolerant spaces, have furthered inequalities and widened the gap between the class of highly trained white-collar workers and the class of workers employed in low-paid service industries (Gerhard, Hoelscher, & Wilson, 2017). This polarization, which Florida himself has acknowledged in his most recent works (Florida, 2017), was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early studies on the impact of the pandemic revealed that urban residents employed in service sectors (specifically, finance, media, and entertainment) and employees in managerial and low-contact jobs were less likely to be affected economically by the pandemic (Mongey et al., 2020). However, gig workers, women, younger individuals, and workers without a college degree appeared to be hit the hardest by the ripple effects of the pandemic (Adams-Prassl, Boneva, Golin, & Rauh, 2020). In this context, RWAIPs represented an opportunity for workers ready to change their lives in an attempt to weather the economic storm triggered by COVID-19.

Incentives Programs for Remote Workers

Remote Work Attraction Incentive Programs aim to develop local economies and expand tax bases by attracting skilled and highly salaried remote workers. They are usually sponsored by chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and private foundations. The first RWAIP was launched in 2012 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and offered a \$10,000 forgivable mortgage and \$1,250 cash to newcomers (De Barbieri, forthcoming). The popularity of RWAIPs increased over the years and accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Holder, 2020; Strauss & Jow, 2022). RWAIPs are innovative in the way they target individual workers instead of employers with cash or in-kind payments and financial incentives. Their effectiveness is still unproven, and legal scholars (e.g., Strauss & Jow, 2022) have questioned the opportunity of using public funds to subsidize private individuals, especially when these are well-paid service workers. As discussed in this article, RWAIPs do more than just deliver incentives; they reshape public images of the places they promote and circulate new representations of remote work. In the following sections, I analyze the rhetorical dimension of these programs and discuss if and to what extent they replicate or counter creative class-informed strategies for talent attraction.

Methodology

This research is based on a mixed-method protocol and is composed of three main stages: (a) data collection, (b) social network analysis, and (c) qualitative content analysis. To identify the main RWAIPs, I extracted data from MakeMyMove.com, an online platform where U.S. “cities, regions and states can list their incentive offers for remote workers looking for a new home and where workers can compare offers and shop for the best deals” (Schoettle, 2021, para. 6). The initial data collection returned a list of 41 cities, regions, and states currently offering incentives to new residents. Of these 41 programs, I focused

exclusively on those with dedicated relocation offers for remote workers. I removed from the initial sample all those initiatives providing incentives to new residents (most often in the form of economic incentives and/or free land for new home construction), but not catering to remote workers specifically. The final list ($N = 15$; see Table 1) includes programs promoting small towns (e.g., Bemidji, Johnstown), metropolitan areas (e.g., Finding NWA), second-tier cities (understood here as regional commercial or political centers; see Roberts, 2014), and entire states (e.g., Ascend West Virginia, Live and Work in Maine).

Table 1. U.S. Relocation Programs.

Program, State	Launch		Population ¹	Website
	Year	City		
218Relocate, Minnesota	2021	Bemidji	15,279	218relocate.com/
Ascend West Virginia, West Virginia	2021	Greenbrier County Morgantown city	32,608 29,219	ascendwv.com/
Bloomington Remote, Indiana	2021	Eastern Panhandle Bloomington	261,041 79,968	bloomingtonremote.com/
Chattanooga Calling, Tennessee	2020	Chattanooga	182,113	chattanoogacalling.com/
Choose Topeka, Kansas	2020	Topeka	125,963	choosetopeka.com/
Finding NWA, Northwest Arkansas	2017	Fayetteville Bentonville Rogers Springdale Siloam Springs Bella Vista Lowell	95,230 56,734 71,112 87,609 17,575 30,808 10,177	findingnwa.com/
Innovate Vegas, Nevada	2017	Las Vegas	646,790	innovate.vegas/
Johnstown, Pennsylvania	2021	Johnstown	18,238	crchamber.com/
Live + Work in Maine, Maine	2015	Entire state	1,372,247	liveandworkinmaine.com/
Move to Michigan, Michigan	2020	St. Joseph Benton Harbor	7,745 8,982	movetomichigan.org/

¹ As of July 1, 2021. Source: City and Town Population Totals: 2020–2021 (2022)

		St. Joseph Charter Township	9,849	
		Royalton Township	5,152	
		Benton Charter Township	14,192	
		Oronoko Charter Township	9,500	
		Lake Charter Township	3,294	
		Lincoln Charter Township	14,863	
		Stevensville Village	1,143	
Remote Shoals, Alabama	2020	Florence	39,933	remoteshoals.com/
		Muscle Shoals	16,618	
		Sheffield	9,337	
		Tuscumbia	9,068	
The Creative Coast, Georgia	2004	Savannah	147,088	thecreativecoast.org/
Think Vermont, Vermont	2018	Entire state	645,570	thinkvermont.com/
Tulsa Remote, Oklahoma	2018	Tulsa	411,401	tulsaremote.com/
Work From Purdue, Indiana	2021	West Lafayette	44,672	workfrompurdue.com/

The resulting list of websites was crawled using a web spider² that followed all internal links and collected information about web pages and hyperlink structures. The results were then used to create a graph representation of each website, in which each node represented a web page and edges corresponded to hyperlinks among them (see Figure 1).

² Specifically, I used Social Network Visualizer (SocNetV: <https://socnetv.org/>), a free and open-source software.

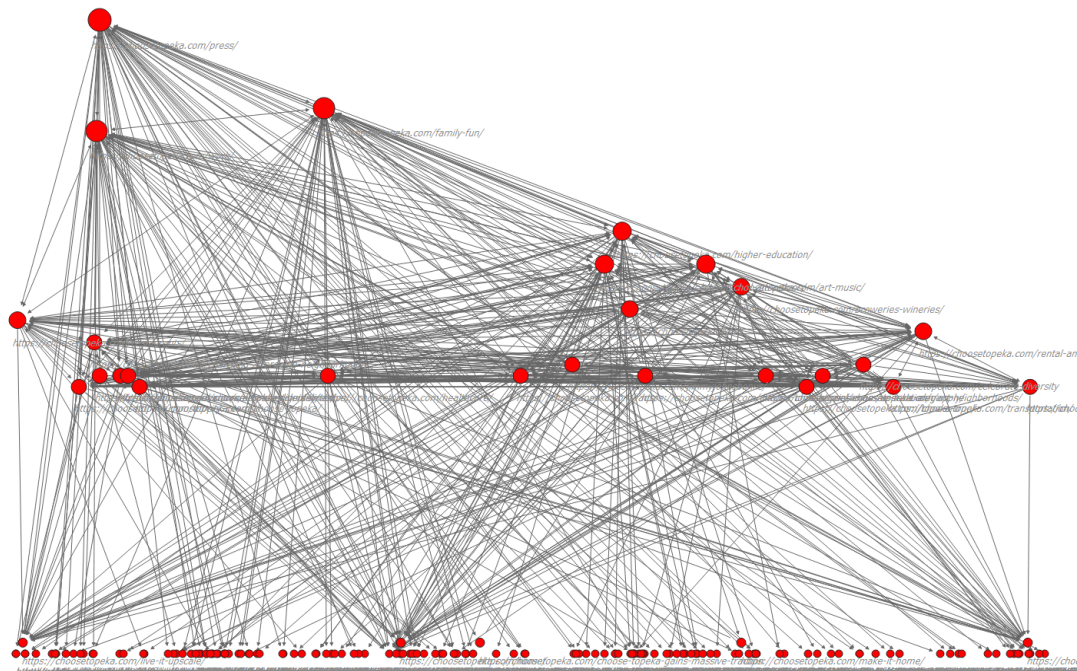


Figure 1. Graph representation of an RWAIP website. Example created from data from Choosetopka.com.

For all websites, I calculated the in-degree centrality of each web page. The in-degree centrality of a node corresponds to the sum of the inbound edges of that node from all adjacent nodes (Freeman, 1978). Using in-degree centrality as a proxy for relevance, I identified the top 10 relevant web pages for each website. I excluded from the list all pages devoid of specific information (e.g., contact forms, privacy policies, and copyright pages). The resulting list of web pages ($N = 117^3$) constituted the input for the next stage of the research protocol.

The third and last stage of the research protocol involved performing a qualitative analysis of the contents of the 117 web pages identified in the previous step. This involved creating a static copy of all the URLs. The static versions of the web pages were subsequently imported into *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. I then coded each web page inductively. The coding involved classifying both the textual and visual contents of each website into themes and subthemes.

This initial coding produced a protocol that was tested on three websites (20% of the sample). It was then revised and harmonized to prevent the proliferation of similar and duplicated codes. Once formalized, the coding protocol was used to code the rest of the data set. In parallel, regular revisions of the coding protocol allowed for the grouping of codes into themes and subthemes and prevented the

³ A list of the web pages is available on the OSF project repository:
https://osf.io/zp5vj/?view_only=6911bd582aca43869728af145bea8e7c.

proliferation of near identical codes. At the end of the process, the coding protocol included 47 codes: 32 codes for textual information, divided into five themes, and 15 codes for images, divided into four themes.⁴

Findings

The qualitative coding of textual content identified five main themes employed in RWAIP websites. The most relevant theme is the work environment (Th.1, 29.9%), which includes subthemes about coworking spaces, business climate, and networking opportunities. The second most relevant theme is quality of life (Th.2); 24.5% of all textual content is classified within this theme. Contents coded under this theme describe the lifestyles achievable in the promoted locations. The third most popular theme is quality of place (Th.3, 21.1%), which emphasizes the features that RWAIP destinations offer to new residents (e.g., recreational amenities, artistic spaces and events, outdoor attractions, etc.). The fourth theme is essential services (Th.4, 16.5%), which discusses issues such as access to affordable housing, schools, and health care services. The least popular theme is incentives (Th.5), which refers to economic, fiscal, and in-kind benefits and accounts for just 8.0% of all codes (see Figure 2).

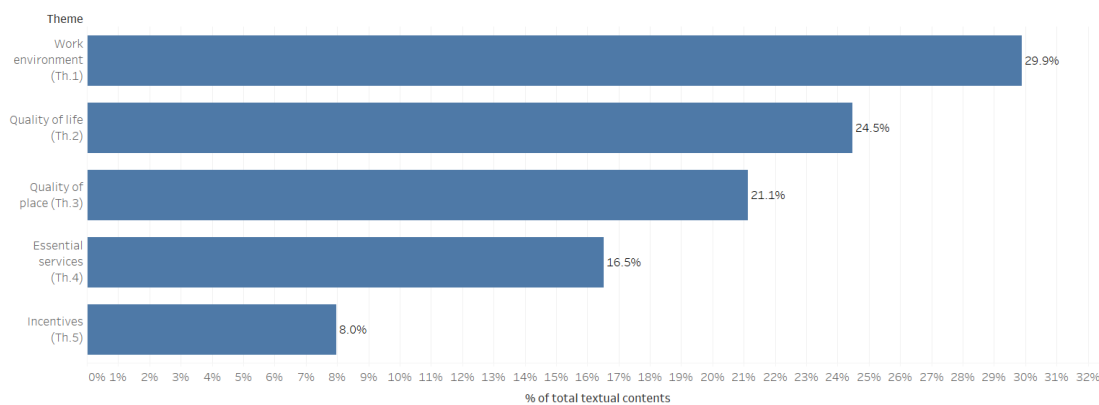


Figure 2. Themes found in the textual content of 15 U.S. RWAIP websites.

The analysis of the websites' visual assets led to slightly different results from the coding of their textual components. From a visual standpoint, most images insist on the quality-of-life theme (Th.2, 41.0%) through images of people in community gatherings and recreational activities. The second most represented theme is quality of place (Th.3, 35.3%). Depending on the location, images within this theme feature nature or vibrant downtown scenes. The third most relevant theme is the work environment (Th.1, 11.9% of all images). As in the case of textual content, the visual assets also emphasize welcoming work environments by portraying people working in state-of-the-art offices and casual-looking coworking spaces. The remaining 11.8% of all images depict essential services (Th.4), such as health care facilities, schools, and houses. The incentives theme (Th.5) is absent from the coding of images (see Figure 3).

⁴ The coding protocol is available on the OSF project repository:
https://osf.io/zp5vj/?view_only=6911bd582aca43869728af145bea8e7c.

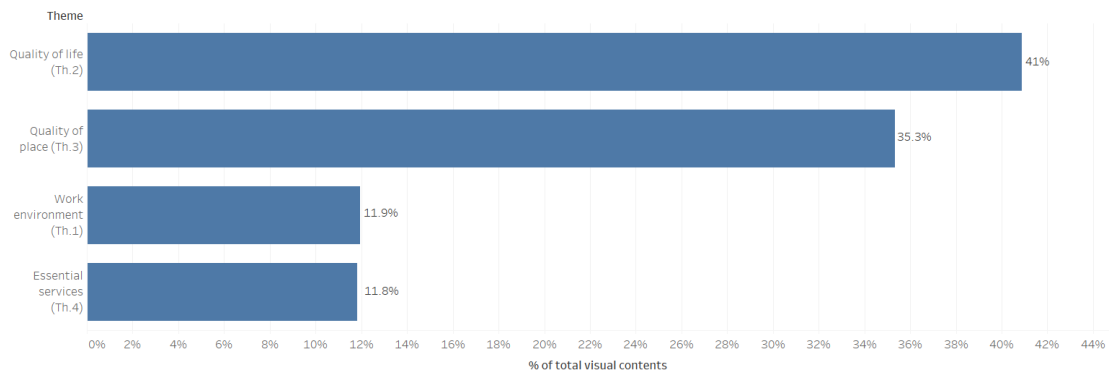


Figure 3. Themes found in the images of 15 U.S. RWAIP websites.

In the next sections, I describe each theme in detail and specify examples from the data set.

Th.1: Work Environment

The most popular theme on RWAIP websites centers on local work and business environments. Even though RWAIPs mainly address people who are already employed, their websites go to great lengths to describe the job opportunities offered by their respective regions and cities. The Bloomington Remote program, for example, describes Indiana as a hidden tech region and as the home of popular indie record labels. Knowledge-intensive and creative industries are not the only ones showcased by relocation-program websites. The Chattanooga Calling website, for example, leverages Tennessee's industrial history to promote the region as an advanced manufacturing and automation hub.

Almost all programs, with the only exception of Work from Purdue, rely on the idea of connectivity as a way to attract highly skilled and entrepreneurial workers. Connectivity, in this context, has three main meanings. The first refers to the opportunity to connect with the local community of skilled workers and entrepreneurs. The Bloomington Remote program, for example, offers a local ambassador service to help newcomers connect with potential clients and like-minded professionals. The Think Vermont program proudly leverages the region's small scale as a unique factor that makes it easier to meet other professionals and establish a productive network in Green Mountain State. The second meaning of connectivity highlights digital connections to high-speed Internet networks. The 218Relocate and Chattanooga Calling programs, for example, advertise the possibility of working comfortably from home thanks to the availability of Gigabit Internet connections. The third meaning associated with connectivity refers to infrastructural connections to the rest of the country via airports and highways. The Move to Michigan program describes southwest Michigan as strategically located 90 miles from Chicago, thus allowing newcomers to "work in the big city while living in a beautiful coastal community" ("Move to Michigan," n.d., para. 1). The Innovate Vegas website leverages Las Vegas's international airport to describe the city as a node within a global network of creative and tech hubs.

Prominent in the work-environment theme are references to work-life balance, a subtheme often discussed in relation to commuting. The majority of programs (11 of 15) mention low/no commuting as one

of the main advantages of leaving congested urban areas in favor of smaller, less densely populated towns and cities. "Commute? What Commute?" (Tulsa Remote, n.d.-a, para. 26) states the Tulsa Remote homepage while comparing traffic in Tulsa to Atlanta and Austin. Some programs even provide exact data about average local commuting times: 18 minutes in Chattanooga (Chattanooga Area Chamber, n.d.), 15 minutes in Topeka (GO Topeka, n.d.-b), and 15 steps in the Shoals region (Shoals Economic Development Authority, n.d.). The Live and Work in Maine program's website connects the commuting and family subthemes when describing moving to Maine as an opportunity for "mid-career dads hoping to coach their daughter's lacrosse team instead of sitting in traffic" (Live and work in Maine, n.d., para. 8).

Visually, the work-environment theme is conveyed through images of office facilities and people working remotely. In the first category, pictures abound of coworking spaces, often featuring the proverbial brownstone postindustrial building converted into an open-space office (e.g., on the Bloomington Remote, 218Relocate, Innovate Vegas, and Tulsa Remote websites). Photos depicting work quality do not refer exclusively to white-collar job settings, but also feature people in industrial facilities, as in the case of the Think Vermont, Live and Work in Maine, and Chattanooga Calling websites. Pictures coded in the remote-workers category (6.2% of all codes within this theme) almost always portray white-collar workers working on laptop computers. For example, a gender and ethnically balanced group of young professionals is portrayed as working from a bar patio on the Remote Shoals website. The Chattanooga Calling website instead features a Black woman working on a couch, while a girl—possibly her daughter, to emphasize the possibility of aligning family and career goals—plays next to her (see Figure 4).

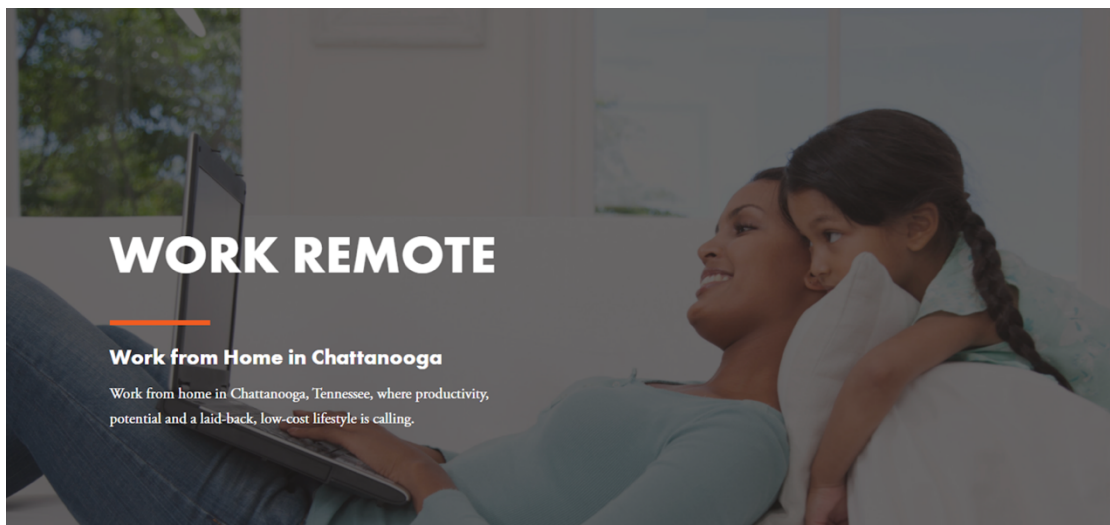


Figure 4. Chattanooga Calling website. Source: Chattanooga Area Chamber (n.d.).

Th.2: Quality of Life

Quality of life is the second most relevant theme employed in RWAIP websites to promote their respective regions, cities, and states. Contents coded within this theme describe the lifestyles that new residents can afford in the promoted locations. Different programs, however, offer different lifestyles to

aspiring remote workers. Programs promoting rural areas tend to insist on opportunities to engage in outdoor activities and sports (32.9% of all textual content coded within this theme). The Johnstown relocation program, for example, describes Cambria County as a place to “Live-Work-Play” (Cambria Regional Chamber, n.d., para. 1) all year round, thanks to easy access to trails, ski resorts, and lakes. If nature and outdoor activities are central topics in rural regions, RWAIPs promoting metropolitan areas frame quality of life differently. Innovate Vegas, for example, promotes Las Vegas as a creative and technological hub offering creative workers access to world-class hospitality, dining, and entertainment.

Despite variations attributable to the different geographies of the destinations being promoted, a common thread that features in 10 out of the 15 programs is social justice, inclusion, and authenticity (26.1% of all codes within this theme). RWAIPs describe their respective regions and cities as places for applicants to express themselves and live out who they are. The Choose Topeka website, for example, describes Topeka as a “Diversecity” (GO Topeka, n.d.-a, para. 1) and provides a list of initiatives and organizations advocating for racial and gender equality. In two cases, the social justice issue is colored by explicit political statements. A case in point is the Tulsa Remote program, which tries to shrug off its image as a conservative Republican city by featuring a quote from a remoter (this is how the program defines its participants) who moved to Oklahoma:

Some generalizations that I had about Tulsa before moving probably is that it wasn't as diverse. I was thinking maybe it's in the middle of the country. Maybe I wouldn't find any Filipinos around. Or maybe that, I don't know, it was mostly, probably Republicans more than it is very liberal. So those are kind of some initial stereotypes that I found to be false. (Tulsa Remote, n.d.-b, para. 19)

Similarly, the Bloomington Remote website describes the city as Indiana's blue dot in a Republican-red state.

Another central theme in the definition of quality of life is community (66% of the programs mentioned it). This code often juxtaposes the supposed anomie of metropolitan areas with the warmth of towns' and small(-er) cities' tightly knit communities. A quote on the Tulsa Remote relocation-program website, for example, describes how a participant found her community in Tulsa after living in Los Angeles for 18 years and failing to “figure out who my people were” (Tulsa Remote, n.d.-b, para. 13). Finding NWA is a program that focuses more on the community aspect (35.6% of all community instances were coded in this program) to promote Northwest Arkansas as a place “for all to connect and share their stories, exchange ideas, and to be at home” (Northwest Arkansas Council, n.d.-a, para. 2).

From a visual standpoint, the quality-of-life theme is conveyed through images of people in social gatherings, public events (34.3% of all images in this theme), and outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, kayaking, and cycling, 35.5% of all images in this theme). A significant number of pictures (15.4% of all pictures coded in Th.2) feature families. Families—almost always in traditional heterosexual acceptance (64% of all family images)—are portrayed while engaged in recreational activities (38% of all family pictures), immersed in a natural setting (38% of all family pictures), and participating in social gatherings (24%).

Th.3: Quality of Place

The third most popular theme is quality of place (21.1% of all textual content). Unlike the quality-of-life theme (Th.2), which focuses on lifestyle elements, textual and visual contents coded within the quality of place theme refer to the built and natural environments of the promoted locations. Variations in the way different programs construct the quality of place theme depend on the destination being promoted. Programs promoting rural regions and towns frame the quality of the place theme by focusing on the natural landscape (40.1% of all textual content coded within this theme). AscendWV, for instance, encourages potential applicants to “break free of the urban confines of remote work and find a breath of fresh air in the mountains of West Virginia” (Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative, n.d., para. 1), while FindingNWA describes Northwest Arkansas as an “outdoor adventurer’s dream” (Northwest Arkansas Council, n.d.-b, para. 1). Programs promoting cities and urban areas tend to focus on the local food scene (e.g., Tulsa Remote), professional sports teams (e.g., Choose Topeka), and weather conditions (as in the case of Innovate Vegas). A common subtheme across programs is cultural and artistic spaces, which is found in 12 out of 15 programs. The only exceptions are AscendWV, The Creative Coast, and Move to Michigan.

The visual profile of this theme is similarly split. Programs promoting cities and towns in rural areas tend to feature pictures of charming towns nestled in beautiful natural settings (40.1% of all codes in this theme), of winding mountain roads and unspoiled lakes and rivers. Programs promoting second-tier cities and metropolitan areas, such as Tulsa Remote and Innovate Vegas, feature views of the cities’ skylines, street-level photography of brownstone buildings, and pictures of recreational venues; 16.7% of all images coded within this frame portray artistic spaces, such as museums and public art installations.

Th.4: Essential Services

The fourth theme refers to the availability of essential services; 16.5% of all textual content was classified within this theme. The theme, in turn, was developed around four main subthemes: school and education (41.7% of all codes within the essential-services theme), affordable housing (32.1%), health care (23.8%), and childcare (2.4%). The school-and-education subtheme is present on 13 relocation-program websites, except for Tulsa Remote and Remote Shoals. Content coded within this theme promotes the quality of local K–12 and higher education institutions. This subtheme is also discussed in relation to the job market, as an indicator of the region or city’s capacity to nurture and sustain a class of skilled workers. This theme is particularly relevant on the Work from Purdue website (50% of all essential-services codes are about school and education). The program is unique compared with the others in our data set, since it offers participants the possibility to work remotely from the Purdue University campus. The website emphasizes the opportunity of having direct access to Purdue’s facilities and courses and of working “among the brightest minds on campus” (Purdue Research Foundation, n.d., para. 1).

Also relevant within this frame is the affordable-housing subtheme (10 of 15 websites mention it). Content within this subtheme emphasizes how a lower cost of living, compared with major U.S. metropolitan areas, would make it possible to buy or build a new house. Websites sometimes offer statistics about housing affordability (e.g., Tulsa Remote, Remote Shoals) that allow potential applicants to calculate how much they could save a month compared with their current living arrangements. This theme emphasizes the housing

crisis as affecting major metropolitan areas and offers remote workers the dream of homeownership. Even large and dense cities, such as Tulsa and Las Vegas, frame housing affordability as an opportunity for newcomers to settle in the heart of the city and experience the urban vibe at a fraction of the cost they would have to sustain in major metropolitan areas.

The other two subthemes within the essential-services theme deal with healthcare and childcare. Ten of 15 relocation-program websites mention the availability of world-class hospitals as a motivating factor for moving to their respective areas, while only two programs (Live and Work in Maine and Chattanooga Calling) discuss the availability of childcare options on their websites.

The visual dimension of the essential-services theme revolves around three main topics: homeownership (33.3% of all images in Th.4), schools (44.8% of all images in Th.4), and health care (21.9% of all images in Th.4). Pictures of homes almost always portray single-family homes in suburban or rural areas, except for Tulsa Remote, Choose Topeka, and Innovate Vegas, whose websites offer pictures of postindustrial lofts and downtown apartments. Whenever pictures include people, they almost always portray nuclear heterosexual families, sometimes with children (64% of all family pictures portray heterosexual nuclear families; 6% portray nonheterosexual families). The case of Tulsa Remote is emblematic. On the community web page, a family of three is pictured gardening and playing guitar in their backyard (see Figure 5). The quote next to the picture emphasizes the relative affordability of Tulsa compared with major coastal cities: "We are able to afford a bigger place to live. We have a backyard to play in. Some of these things we couldn't afford in California have been easy to do here in Tulsa" (Tulsa Remote, n.d.-b, para. 3).



Figure 5. The affordability and the family themes are in full display on the pages of Tulsa Remote. Source: Tulsa Remote (n.d.-b).

Th.5: Incentives

Within the incentives theme, I have coded all content that refers to economic, fiscal, and in-kind incentives offered by RWAIIPs. This theme is the least relevant and accounts for only 8.0% of the textual content analyzed. Economic incentives are cash incentives paid to successful applicants. Seven of the 15 programs analyzed offer economic incentives to newcomers. With a \$12,000 cash incentive, Ascend West Virginia offers the most generous economic incentive to applicants moving to West Virginia for at least two years. Similarly, Tulsa Remote and Remote Shoals offer \$10,000 to new residents who move to Tulsa or the Shoals region and live there for at least one year. Other programs, such as Move to Michigan, offer economic incentives on the condition that applicants purchase a house in designated cities. Bloomington Remote, however, makes a point not to offer economic incentives at all: "We'll be frank: we're not paying people to move here. We want you to move here because Bloomington is a great place to live and remote work. The real payoff is happiness and finding a place to call home!" (The Mill, n.d., para. 13).

The fiscal-incentives subtheme refers to benefits offered to newcomers in the form of tax relief and discounted financial services. These incentives are offered by 6 of the 15 programs analyzed and are often provided in place of direct economic incentives. Of the 15 programs analyzed, only two offer both economic and fiscal incentives (Remote Shoals and Think Vermont). For example, Bloomington Remote offers access to banking services and loans at a discounted rate. Innovate Vegas instead leverages Nevada's 0% personal income and corporate tax rate in an attempt to attract new remote workers and entrepreneurs.

Some RWAIIPs offer in-kind incentives. Ascend West Virginia is probably the most creative one, offering free outdoor-gear rentals for one year to all newcomers. Similarly, finding NWA offers all new residents a free bicycle to explore the region. More pragmatic is the Move to Michigan approach, which offers new Michiganders a free shuttle service to and from regional airports for one year as a way to ease work travel. Tulsa Remote offers access to a dedicated community of new residents and free participation in events intended to introduce all newcomers to local organizations and initiatives. Finally, 5 programs of 15 (218Relocate, Ascend West Virginia, Bloomington Remote, Move to Michigan, and Tulsa Remote) offer new residents free access to local coworking spaces.

Whether economic, financial, or in-kind, all programs have clearly defined criteria for applicants to meet to be eligible. In general, remote workers are defined as employees of a company located outside the region/state being promoted and who do not have to commute to an office daily. Not all jobs performed at a distance, however, qualify as remote work. Bloomington Remote and Tulsa Remote, for example, make it clear that gig workers employed by companies such as Uber, Lyft, and Doordash, while being remote workers in the sense that they do not have to travel to their place of work every day, do not qualify for the program. To avoid any ambiguity, Remote Shoals sets an additional minimum salary requirement (\$52,000 per year) that applicants must meet to be eligible.

Discussion and Conclusion

The five main themes emerging from the content analysis reveal how RWAIPs represent both an extension and a point of departure from conventional talent attraction initiatives inspired by Florida's theory of the creative class (Florida, 2012a).

Regarding RQ2, RWAIP websites break from canonical talent attraction programs in the way they rely on the quality-of-life theme (Th.1, 24.5% of all textual contents and 41% of all visual contents) more than on the quality-of-place theme (Th.3, 21.1% of all textual contents and 35.3% of all visual contents) to promote their respective cities, regions, and states as ideal locations for remote workers. RWAIP websites articulate the quality-of-life theme (Th.2) by playing on the contrast between the lifestyles remote workers can afford in the promoted locations and the issues affecting the quality of life in major U.S. cities. This is particularly evident in subthemes promoting second-tier cities, rural regions, and less densely populated metropolitan areas as being more affordable (subtheme of Th.2 and Th.4), safer (subtheme of Th.3), and more laidback (subtheme of Th.2) than overcrowded coastal tech hubs, all the while offering a similar cultural vibrancy and diversity (subthemes of Th.2). From a visual standpoint, these subthemes are communicated through images of traditional nuclear families (with nonheterosexual families accounting for 6% of all pictures), often portrayed in relation to single-family homes (59.4% of pictures feature a home).

Issues of inclusion and social justice, which were central in Florida's theory of the creative class, also figure prominently in the quality-of-life theme (Th. 2). Florida (2012b) identified the quasi-anonymity afforded by loosely connected urban communities as the essential element for inclusion and diversity, since sparse networks "allow us to admit a greater variety of people and information into our lives" (para. 13). In contrast, RWAIP websites frame cities as places of anomie, of lives spent between long commutes, inauthentic relations, and detachment from family and friends. RWAIP websites connect inclusion to the possibility of becoming part of close-knit societies, allowing people to be themselves without having to conform to any pre-established norms or customs.

Regarding RQ1, the relevance of the work-environment theme (29.9% of all textual contents and 11.9% of all visual elements) signals an important rhetorical shift taking place on the pages of RWAIP websites. Previous works have already identified quality of life among the main factors pushing skilled workers, especially those older and with families, to leave major U.S. cities (Herslund, 2019; McGranahan & Wojan, 2007; Williams & Jobes, 1990). Contextually, economic development initiatives have framed second-tier cities, rural regions, and less densely populated metropolitan areas as places of consumption, rich in amenities and recreational opportunities tailored to fulfill the needs of a new middle class (Ley, 1980). The RWAIP websites analyzed in this article frame their destinations as places of production by emphasizing how well-connected (both physically via transport infrastructure and virtually via high-speed Internet) their locations are with the rest of the country. Leveraging on the popularization of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, RWAIP websites insist on the possibility of pursuing a fulfilling professional career despite living miles away from major U.S. major economic hubs, while enjoying the benefits of living in more affordable, less congested but likewise diverse and authentic communities.

Despite calls for inclusion and equity, RWAIPIs are not for everyone, in part because, as mentioned in the review of the creative-city model, workers who can afford to work from home tend to be in higher managerial positions, skilled, or employed in the finance, media, and entertainment industries. In addition, programs set their own rules defining what does and what does not constitute remote work (as coded in Th.5). In this respect, RWAIPIs represent an extension of creative, class-inspired initiatives for talent attraction and replicate their discriminatory logic. Elite members of the creative class are offered the opportunity to live in low-density communities "rich in cultural amenities and conducive to diversity in local social life" (Scott, 2006, p. 11), while the creative underclass (variously defined by employment conditions, job, or salary, depending on the program) are left at the door.

Finally, it was surprising to discover how marginal the incentives theme (Th.5) is. Relocation and talent incentive programs made headlines during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the cash incentives they offered to remote workers. "Cities offer cash as they compete for new residents amid remote work boom" (Linndzon, 2020, para. 1) was the title of an article describing the new wave of RWAIPIs. The findings indicate that these programs leverage fiscal and economic incentives only marginally and that most of them (8 of 15) do not offer economic incentives at all.

This study faced some limitations that must be considered when evaluating the generalizability of the findings. The main limitation was the reliance on MakeMyMove.com as a single source of data. Despite being constantly updated, the website might not include all RWAIPIs available at any moment in time. A second limitation is the speed at which new RWAIPIs are launched. At the beginning of the investigation (June 2021), MakeMyMove.com included 41 programs (of which 15 were dedicated to remote workers). One year later, the website featured 82 programs. Furthermore, the RWAIPIs analyzed in this article promote second-tier cities, small towns, metropolitan areas, and entire states. Future research could segment the analysis by destination type (e.g., only rural areas, only second-tier cities, etc.) and investigate if and to what extent geography influences how RWAIPIs promote their locations. Lastly, the qualitative analysis of visual elements presented indicates a tendency to identify remote workers as members of heterosexual families (as discussed in Th.2 and Th.4). Future studies could also look at the way RWAIPIs reinforce, or challenge, stereotyped and normative representations of remote workers in terms of race, sexuality, class, and gender identity.

Despite these limitations, I hope that this work can contribute to the debate on remote work and inequality (e.g., Aneesh, 2006; Casilli, 2017; Gray & Suri, 2019). Creative class-inspired talent attraction models have led to increased intraurban polarization between the holders of creative capital and performers of infrastructural work, allowing the creative city to operate smoothly (Donegan & Lowe, 2008). The RWAIPIs analyzed in this article build on this legacy of polarization. Despite the rhetorical shift in the way they promote their locations (places of production as opposed to places of consumption, quality of life instead of quality of place), and regardless of calls for inclusivity and openness, RWAIPIs set clear and questionable rules (for instance, based on minimum annual income, as in the case of Remote Shoals) defining who is, and who is not, a desired remote worker. This can further widen the gap between skilled and unskilled, yet essential workers. For this reason, sustained and critical inquiry into remote work in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is necessary.

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