

Delphi Method

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Surveys of recent immigrants into the low population-density Panhandle area will allow the researchers to profile the movement patterns and to identify key factors leading to their relocation decisions. In addition, well-designed focus group interviews (described in the next section) will enhance the level of understanding regarding their actions. This will include their positive response (if any) to deliberate community efforts to recruit new residents and subsequent actions to reach out to them after arrival (potential retention efforts). In essence, these components of the research will emphasize the resident or *consumer side* of the market.

However, in the third phase of the study, researchers will emphasize the community or *producer side* of the market for new residents in population-deficit areas. Keying on the relatively new approach to local economic development—less emphasis on attracting firms and factories and more on attracting entrepreneurial and other specific socio-economic groups of residents—researchers will identify the strategies of this type currently being employed across the region. Referred to as *attraction theory*, authors Blakely and Bradshaw note that this is a reorientation from firm attraction to people attraction:

This approach has been particularly effective in rural areas where the quality-of-life factor can attract new populations, leading to increased economic growth as a response to both internal demands and new export enterprises created by the new migrants. (2002, p.66)

Similarly, Karl Stauber notes the need to connect rural areas with “metropolitan engines”, and that this can be done by encouraging immigration to rural communities of entrepreneurial type of people (2001, p.58). He notes:

“—governments should also consider the important role immigrants can play. If a community is not producing its own entrepreneurs, it can import them. Rather than trying to import prisons, rural communities should strive to import entrepreneurs.”

Historically, such efforts have tended to emphasize the attractiveness of natural amenities to these types of people; and therefore giving some regions of the country particular relative advantages in recruitment (Drabenstott, 2003). However, a whole host of quality-of-life variables in addition to natural amenities seem to be coming to the forefront as factors leading to spatial location decisions. And some communities, realizing they can provide many of these aspects, are pro-actively recruiting potential new residents on those marketing themes.

In addition to aggressive marketing, many communities are offering specific incentives for certain individuals to move to their community. For example, educational scholarships have been offered to local young people studying for medical careers if they agree to return to their home community to practice. More recently, some communities are advertising nationally their offer of free residential lots and/or the relatively low cost of desirable housing. Many others are

maintaining close ties with their high school alums living elsewhere, realizing that relocation is heavily influenced by family ties or previous knowledge of the area (Leistritz, et al., 2001). Others are catering to an older, financially secure group of retirees who no longer have geographical constraints associated with their work. In short, the array of strategies is extensive.

In this study, researchers will investigate the extent of such strategies and marketing programs, both within the Panhandle study area and throughout Nebraska and its neighboring states. Using state and regional economic development association membership directories, a multi-staged *Delphi Survey* will be conducted to assess the array of resident-attraction strategies currently being used and the practitioners' assessment of their success.

The Delphi Method of data collection and analysis is a structured survey for collecting and synthesizing information and knowledge for an identified group of experts. Using a series of questionnaires in a controlled feedback loop (of opinions), the issue(s) under investigation can be moved toward some group consensus. In other words, the techniques can achieve some group judgment without the biases that can be introduced by more out-spoken and influential opinion leaders.

This study will use a series of iterations (at least two) to identify the various recruitment strategies being used and the perceived effectiveness of such efforts. More specifically, the economic development professionals/practitioners being surveyed will be asked to identify particular targeted groups and strategies and the reasoning behind those efforts. Moreover, various scalar measures will be employed to allow the respondents to assess the effectiveness of such efforts relative to the resources/costs expended. Given this information, the researchers will inform the full group of respondents of the previous iteration's results and allow for their response to the new evidence. By using this technique, the centralizing tendencies of the economic development professionals' insights will be achieved.

The survey process will be conducted electronically and will involve a sample of approximately 1,200 community development association members across Nebraska and four adjoining Great Plains states (Colorado , Kansas , South Dakota and Wyoming). Many of this membership are presently employed as city administrators, economic development directors, and active community development volunteers. Therefore, the expertise of the surveyed group regarding recruitment/retention strategies is extensive.

While obviously useful to communities in the study area for designing new strategies and modifying existing ones, the implications of this phase of the research will extend into the community development efforts across the country and beyond. Anecdotal information abounds on the various attraction strategies being used. But definitive research on its use and degree of effectiveness is presently limited. Therefore, this phase of the study, in juxtaposition with the other phases looking at immigrant responses, will prove to be a powerful analytical process.