

Dim Lights

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deprecating humor." Adds small-town native Bo Powers, "Act as if there's no difference between you and everyone else. For example, if you're anti-hunting and moved to West Point, you probably wouldn't fit in."

Unfortunately, deciding how you'll fare in a certain hamlet is rarely so clear-cut. Corporate recruiter Nick Marlin, for example, says he's seen shy graduates struggle and fail in rural communities, while other introverted new hires make out famously. "We tell students, 'It's going to be up to you to meet people, through community organizations and the like.' But we've seen that some introverted people are happy living in their own worlds, and can do so in any type of environment," says Marlin, college recruiting manager for Mead Corp., the Dayton, Ohio-based paper manufacturer that operates plants in such far-flung locales as Escanaba, Mich., Kingsport, Tenn., and Menasha, Wis., to name a few.

"We sell students on the career opportunity first, then we stress the many outdoor activities," says Marlin, who tries to sign up students potentially interested in small-town living for on-campus interviews. Even then, he says, "some people can't be sold no matter what. They like going to bars to meet other young people, but there isn't much of a bar scene in places like Escanaba."

Forget all rules of thumb

If there is an equation to determine who succeeds in a small town and who doesn't, Richard Niemeyer says he wouldn't trust it. Niemeyer, college relations manager for Procter & Gamble Co. in Cincinnati, says he discounts such old wives' tales, and he advises students to do the same.

"When companies make assumptions about fit, about whether someone with a certain personality will be happy living in a certain area, they're making a psychological assessment which they aren't qualified to make," he says. "That's a very subjective process which risks screening out every introvert. That's not the best way to go." P&G recruits students for 40 different plants nationwide, many of them in rural settings, including Mehoopany, Pa., Flint River, Ga., and Cape Girardeau, Mo.

Instead, P&G "aggressively pursues the right match" between candidate and job, which includes compatibility with the area. It also encourages students to "screen themselves" before interviewing with P&G. "If you wouldn't enjoy living in a small town, then why waste everyone's time" by interviewing for a manufacturing job with

Procter & Gamble, Niemeyer says.

How do you know whether a small town is for you? "Visit one," says Bachtel at the University of Georgia. "Rural areas tend to be homogeneous. Once you've spent time in a little town, you know what life in most small towns is like," he says. "Look at movie theaters, restaurants, shopping centers and bars. Talk to people there and ask what they like about living in the town. Remember," he says, "you're not going to Ethiopia. All of your needs will be met, but life definitely will be different" from suburbia.

If you can't visit a town as isolated as the one where you may work, never fear. Companies rarely hire new graduates to work in a remote location without first sending them there for a look-see. "Every candidate must come on-site before they're offered a job, so that they're familiar with the surroundings," says Arnie Guerra, who handles college recruiting for the Computer Sciences Corp. office in Ridgecrest, Calif., a desert town about 160 miles east of Los Angeles.

On recruiting trips to colleges along the Pacific Coast and in Colorado, Guerra carries a 12-minute videotape produced by the Ridgecrest Chamber of Commerce. Out of every 100 computer science and engineering majors who watch the tape and interview with Guerra, "about 25% are interested in coming here," he says. "The job remains the No. 1 attraction, but a lot of big-city kids appreciate the small-town environment. The pressure here is less, because the competition among co-workers isn't as high, and there are no two-hour commutes. Our office is 10 minutes from anywhere in town," he says.

Betty Ganung, a recent grad from Cornell University's labor relations school, has experienced both the rewards and the drawbacks of small-town life. The Monticello, N.Y., native joined Computer Sciences in southeastern California as a human resources administrator after visiting the area during a vacation. "A friend from school was from Ridgecrest and she told me about the job. It's a small community, but everyone is quite friendly."

The challenge of handling personnel matters for 500 employees lured Ganung to the desert, and low living costs made her transition particularly easy. "There are a lot of housing tracts, with homes starting around \$60,000," she says. "Some new grads buy

houses, but most rent two-bedroom apartments, which are about \$400 a month." Other benefits, she says, are the ease of commuting, the great climate, the proximity to hiking and skiing and the close relationships that exist between co-workers.

Being single, it was easier to meet people [in Ridgecrest] than it was in New York," she says. "I socialized mostly with people at work and with their friends and, while there's not a wild nightlife, there are three clubs for dancing and the restaurants are OK."

When small-town life became too claustrophobic, Ganung says she hit the highway. "Within three or four hours are L.A. and Mexico. I probably drove to L.A. about once a month." Not any more, however. Ganung left Ridgecrest last November for a job in Elmira, N.Y.—not a bustling metropolis either, but much closer to home.

"In part, I'm leaving to get back to my family. My parents are getting older, and I don't want to live so far away," she says. "But mostly, I'm leaving because the job opportunity is better."

Beware a downturn

Aside from possibly hating where they live and wanting to leave immediately, the biggest risk some students face when accepting small-town jobs is what they'll do in the event of layoffs. That's a real concern these days

given merger-mania and the white-collar cutbacks that usually follow. Just ask Barry Dreaden, an accountant with the Cluett Peabody division of WestPoint Pepperell. Cluett was sold last fall to a division of a French conglomerate, just months after WestPoint Pepperell itself was acquired by Farley Industries. Dreaden's future with WestPoint Pepperell is cloudy at best.

"The day I took this job, it didn't look like Farley would buy the company. The very next day he got it," Dreaden says. "There aren't enough opportunities in the area for me to find another accounting job here, so my fiancée and I agreed that if I lose my job, we'll move to Birmingham." His most critical piece of advice to new grads considering careers in rural locales: "Look for stability, because if your job falls through in a little town, you don't have a whole lot of options."

Mr. Lee is editor of Managing Your Career.

"Churches are the center of entertainment in many small towns"