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The Next Best Career Move: Actually Moving

A Growing Number of Job Seekers Find Relocating in Advance May Give Them an Advantage Over Candidates From Afar

By ELIZABETH GARONE

When James Marvin retired from the Navy Seals in September, he had two choices: seek a civilian government position in his current state of Virginia or pursue the unknown. He chose the latter. "We literally put the 'for sale' sign on our home, packed up the minivan, and drove cross-country," says Mr. Marvin, 44, who moved to Seattle with his wife and daughter to pursue a position with an alternative energy company.

Mr. Marvin is part of a small but growing group of job seekers who are relocating to areas of the country with stronger job markets or more desirable living—but without the security of a job waiting for them. Driving the self-imposed moves are personal desire and cuts in company relocation programs that have forced hiring managers to look locally for candidates.

So far the trend is visible at either end of the job spectrum: from senior-level job seekers who have a financial cushion to weather the costs of the move and the following transition period to more junior-level job seekers, who have fewer fixed expenses and can move easily.

Nancy Keene, a director in the Dallas office of executive search firm Stanton Chase, calls it the "act local/be local" phenomenon, in which job hunters are doing whatever they can to appear to be—or become—part of a community. It's a career move that—if executed right—can be a good investment. "People are looking to reposition for the next phase of their career," she says. "If you're going somewhere with a robust and diversified economy, it's a pretty safe bet."



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Mike Kane for The Wall Street Journal

James Marvin moved to Seattle with his wife and daughter with no job. He later landed a senior-level post at a hydrokinetic turbine producer.

Some who can't afford to make the move are giving the illusion of being local by renting a mailbox, getting a local cellphone number, and staying with friends and family nearby to attend networking and industry events, Ms. Keene says.

Some job seekers don't feel like they have any choice but to take a chance and move on their own, says Beth Ross, an executive career coach in New York City. Over the past two years, companies are loath to pay hefty relocation costs for out-of-state candidates. Being local can be the difference between getting an interview and being passed over, Ms. Ross says.

Some 58% of companies have reduced their corporate relocation programs, 27% have frozen such programs, and another 17% have eliminated them entirely, according to an October 2009 Society of

Tips for Making a Move

Research companies in your sector to target your move

Update your online profiles with your new address or location

Take a "bridge job" to tide you over in the new city

Consider a partial move, with one working spouse staying behind temporarily

Human Resource Management poll of 371 people. "Companies want to pay less—not more—in acquiring new talent," says Ms. Keene. She says many of her clients have asked her to search for candidates locally, instead of nationally, particularly in large metropolitan areas.

At 700-employee Campus Management Corp. in Boca Raton, Fla., local candidates are preferred, says Kathleen Bocek, vice president of human resources. "All other things being equal, we absolutely would

hire the local candidate," she says, to support the local community, to save the company money, and reduce risk. "When you displace an individual, you're usually displacing an entire family," says Ms. Bocek. "What if the job doesn't work out?"

In some markets—like New York City—being local is critical for entry-level or junior-level positions in some fields. When the Kansas City, Mo. public-relations firm where Anna Tabakh was interning announced a hiring freeze in September 2008, she knew her hopes of getting a job there weren't going to be realized. Ms. Tabakh decided she wanted to try to find work in New York and most people she knew advised moving to the area if she wanted a shot at an interview. She started the process—eventually moving without a job—with a cousin's Brooklyn address to use on her résumé.

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"Relocating to New York is by far the best decision that I've made thus far in my professional life," says Ms. Tabakh, 24. "I was a lot more successful when sending out my résumé with a local address on it."

Before she arrived in October 2008, she sent about a dozen applications with the New York address, and once she arrived she says she had three job offers within two weeks.

Some professionals have found that going home, particularly to locations where the cachet of their former city is coveted, can be a

good move. One of Atlanta-based career coach Jodie Charlop's out-of-work clients made an extended visit to her hometown, Philadelphia, from New York City, to save money. The financial professional ended up staying after she landed a position there. "She was considered highly valuable with her New York financial firm experience, whereas in New York, she felt like she was a dime a dozen," says Ms. Charlop, who has seen similar results for other clients.

The best jobless moves are carefully researched and locations targeted for the highest possibility of landing a job, says Stanton Chase's Ms. Keene. Juju.com, a national job-search site, recently began publishing a monthly "Job Search Difficulty Index" that measures how hard it is to find a job in 50 major cities around the country. For four months running, Washington, D.C., ranked the easiest city to find a job. In March, it was edged out by San Jose, Calif. Detroit ranks the toughest. You'll also want to target locations where your chosen industry is hiring.

Mr. Marvin, for example, settled on Seattle because he had friends and family in the area, along with job opportunities in alternative energy and good schools for his daughter.

It's important to establish a professional network before arriving, says Ms. Ross. In Mr. Marvin's case, he made half a dozen scouting trips to the Seattle area over a six-month period before moving. In advance of each trip, Mr. Marvin set up interviews with top executives at companies he was interested in; his introductory letters detailed his military background and interest in each firm.

While none of the interviews landed him a permanent position, they did help him establish a network of high-level executives in the Seattle area. Once he made the move, the people with whom he had met introduced him to other executives, he says.

In the end, the move paid off for Mr. Marvin. Last week, he received an offer from an alternative-energy start-up where he had an informational interview earlier this year and accepted the position as Director of Business Development and Field Operations at Hydrovolts, a company that produces hydrokinetic turbines. "There is no way this opportunity would have ever presented itself from afar. It took being here to put it all together," he says. "[I] absolutely could not

have done it if I was not part of the Seattle community."

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