

Quality of life: Clean air, water can tip scales toward Iowa

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By **Gina McAndrews**

What could tip the scales for someone choosing a job in Iowa or another state? Maybe it's a bike trail. Maybe it's an abundance of clear streams teeming with hungry fish. After money issues, some human resource managers in the state believe the key could be Iowa's environmental quality and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Despite short-term unemployment concerns, Iowa has for years faced concerns of a labor shortage. An Iowa Policy Project report, *The State of Working Iowa 2001*, put that figure at 91,000 to 154,000 by 2010. Thus, it is worth examining what factors can tip the balance in individual workers' decisions to come to – or stay in – Iowa, and for policy purposes, to focus on factors that are controlled or affected by state and local government.

The people who recruit and interview prospective employees for Iowa companies may be best suited to identify some of these issues. So, I asked their views, particularly about the importance of Iowa's environmental and recreational images and assets, through a questionnaire and in two focus groups. Eighty-six human resource managers responded, and nine attended focus-group discussions. While not a rigorous scientific survey of opinion, it gives an overview of concerns those people see among prospects who have taken the step of considering a middle- or top-level management job in Iowa.

Not surprisingly, economic factors top their lists. Compensation, benefits and taxes rank 1-2-3 in importance to the people they interview. However, there is evidence that environmental quality and outdoor recreation are considered an integral part of Iowa's quality of life. Nearly two-thirds of the human resource managers responding to the survey listed parks, trails and preserves, water quality and clean air as "very" or "somewhat" important. The extent to which Iowa offers these amenities can be an important tool for a human resources manager's ability to sell a prospect on locating in Iowa.

"The environment may not be cited as No. 1, but it's on the list of importance for what we try to emphasize. Commute, the work/life balance, availability of biking trails and parks are all things we capitalize on," one HR manager said.

While Iowa does not have oceans and mountains, or all of the opportunities of larger cities, many HR representatives emphasized that there are many positive features that Iowa does have to offer. As one manager said, "We can't compete with large cities in some ways so we should use nature and environment as an attraction." Another cited an interview with a prospect from Texas.

"He asked a lot of questions about trails and places to go hunting and fishing," the manager said. "He has a boat. He said he really loved all the open space here, and the green."

Many representatives said they emphasize quality-of-life aspects, including environmental quality and outdoor recreational opportunities in recruiting, but added they do not always have specific information or know where to get it. This offers a signal to state and local officials that in many cases, the companies in their communities present an untapped market for their promotional materials about recreational opportunities. One representative wrote, “Parks and natural areas aren’t touted as loudly as they should be.”

Focus-group discussions found a consensus among HR representatives that Iowa has an image among potential employees for clean air and water. As one said, “People take clean water for granted.”

Those discussions also demonstrated a liability for Iowa if monitoring and environmental enforcement is lacking. Three HR reps mentioned that while Iowa may be perceived as having clean air and water, Iowa residents have concerns about pesticides and large concentrated swine facilities polluting ground and surface water. Said one: “I think people think of Iowa as being rural and having clean air and water, but those of us who live here know the truth; the high nitrates in water is a problem.” Another added, “We have hog lots that seem to pollute every body of water near them.”

Iowa policy makers are busy with many issues in an effort to make this state attractive. If these employment recruiters are correct, the state holds a challenge even through tight-budget times to assure environmental compliance and promote Iowa’s natural assets. Iowa’s choice is to gamble that private interests will not squander these assets, or to make the public investments necessary to guarantee their availability to generations to come.

Gina M. McAndrews is a post-doctorate researcher in the Agronomy Department of Iowa State University. Her study was funded by the Iowa Policy Project, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Mount Vernon. Iowa Policy Project reports are available on the web at www.iowapolicyproject.org.