An Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Tulsa Remote Program, As an Effective Economic Development Strategy

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An Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Tulsa Remote Program,
As an Effective Economic Development Strategy

by

Kristen J. Padilla

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Urban Studies

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Portland State University
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Abstract

Cities do not exist in a vacuum. They are in constant competition for talented, educated individuals and growing, innovative businesses - even if that competition is not explicit or specific. Traditionally cities have been left with two economic development paths to help diversify their economies: attract talent but without jobs, or attract business but without a strong talent pool. However, due to technological advancements, exacerbated by the pandemic, a new and growing workforce that can work from anywhere has emerged, remote workers. This talent pool shifts traditional economic development attraction strategies from city to industry to city to talent.

Many remote worker attraction strategies have been deployed throughout the US in an attempt to capture remote workers. However, only one, Tulsa Remote, designed its program in a way that integrates remote workers into the community. So far, Tulsa Remote has successfully recruited 1,300 remote workers in four years. This paper investigates the strengths and weaknesses of the Tulsa Remote program. The findings indicate 1) that the Tulsa Remote program is replicable. The strengths of Tulsa Remote, particularly the planning behind its community integration programs, can be adopted and executed elsewhere. 2) Marketing place-based amenities to remote workers should be conducted authentically.
Dedication

I am dedicating this research to my family. To my supportive and hilarious brother, Michael Padilla. To my daughter, Amelia. You have made me stronger, better and more fulfilled than I could have ever imagined. Thank you for providing all of the motivation to finish this thesis I needed. And most important, I am indebted to my partner and husband, Zach. You have been the sole witness to this entire process and I could not have done it without your encouragement, love, and support. Thank you.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Do jobs follow people, or do people follow jobs? Like many cities in the heartland, Tulsa, Oklahoma, has experienced decades-long outmigration patterns of their young and talented. Traditionally economic developers have attempted to attract industry through financial incentives. However, they have primarily been unsuccessful without a trained or educated workforce, especially in attracting businesses in knowledge-based sectors. Remote worker attraction strategies represent a paradigm shift in economic development. Instead of focusing on industry, economic developers can focus on attracting a measurable and footloose supply of human capital, which in the short term can help entice industry and, in the long term, may create economic growth through innovation and entrepreneurship.

Many places have already deployed initiatives to attract remote workers as a community or economic development strategy. They offer various incentives such as bitcoin, cash, or museum memberships and promote various place-based amenities to lure this high-wage, high-skilled workforce. Only one, however, has created specific services geared towards integrating the remote worker into the community, Tulsa Remote. Tulsa Remote was created to “enhance Tulsa’s talented and successful workforce community by bringing diverse, bright and driven individuals to the city for community building, collaboration, and networking” (Tulsa Remote, 2022).

This paper investigates the strengths and weaknesses of the Tulsa Remote program in order to assess whether or not it has the potential to create long-term economic development and determine if remote worker attraction strategies are a viable option for communities suffering from outbound migration patterns, stagnant growth or declining industry. Based on the notoriety of this program, I hypothesize that Tulsa Remote will show
strong signs of short-term and long-term success, especially with integrating remote workers into the community, promoting place-based amenities, facilitating cross-industry networking, and encouraging entrepreneurship. However, I expect that support from the community will wane over time and that even by encouraging entrepreneurship, the lack of community support will jeopardize its long-term success.

For this study, I have adopted Tulsa Remote’s definition of remote workers as people with no geographic requirement to where their work is completed. They are wage and salary employees and exclude self-employed individuals or freelancers and home-based businesses where the nature of their business is not location-based. For Tulsa Remote, remote workers “live and work in place” (Erard, 2016). This rigid definition of remote work allows Tulsa Remote to specify a characteristic of remote workers they are looking to attract. However, their definition does little to help guide this research and others on remote workers because remote work, often referred to as “telework” or “home-based work” or “remote e-work,” has inconsistent definitions across a variety of disciplines (Wallace 2019). Therefore, in this study, I reviewed broad data on “remote workers” that is not necessarily tailored to the above definition.

This study makes two important contributions to the emerging practice of remote worker attraction strategies: 1) the success of the Tulsa Remote program is replicable. The strengths of Tulsa Remote, particularly the planning behind its community integration programs, have the ability to be adopted and executed elsewhere. 2) It revealed that private funding, though not necessary in executing this type of program, is an extremely helpful component because it allowed the program to scale up, both in program administrators and program participants in order to meet the demand of interested parties. It also shouldered
the financial risk of an unproven economic development strategy which allowed the program to grow, adapt and develop without public scrutiny. And lastly, it allowed program administrators to carefully package specific city amenities in order to promote an attractive lifestyle to remote workers.

In this study, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with various Tulsa, Oklahoma, economic development officials and reviewed multiple secondary sources, including Tulsa's Comprehensive Plan, Future Tulsa's Economic Development Plan, Economic Innovations Group's Tulsa Remote Report, Tulsa Remote's marketing materials (YouTube videos, website, application) and other published materials about the Tulsa Remote program. The findings indicate an enthusiasm for the region, strong public/private partnerships, targeted marketing, and a rapidly growing remote worker attraction program that has encouraged strong cross-industry networking, civic engagement, and entrepreneurship.

1.1 Background:

Tulsa Remote was indirectly born out of Tulsa’s 2010 Comprehensive Plan, which like all comprehensive plans, aimed to provide a vision, goals, objectives, and policies that would guide Tulsa for the next twenty years. Though this plan has since been updated, the 2010 version highlighted unpleasant realities for the region. Since 1990 Tulsa has had a flat or declining total population and has experienced a 5% year-over-year decline in young adults (20-34). This is in stark contrast to the region, which has grown by 7%. And though education attainment for residents that hold either a bachelor's degree or higher increased slightly from 28% to 32% from 2000 to 2008, household income and per capita income,
when adjusted for inflation, remained the same from 1990 to 2008. (Tulsa Comprehensive Plan, 2016).

The 2010 Comprehensive Plan outlined a need for “a vigorous and a strategic approach” to economic development. Due to budgetary concerns, the planners recommended that “Tulsa public and private sector leaders will need to align interests and embrace partnerships that can create an environment that welcomes new ventures, particularly those generated by the creative class” (Tulsa’s Comprehensive Plan 2016, 36).

Armed with these statistics, one private-sector firm, The George Kaiser Family Foundation, was excited by the complexity of these issues and willing to create programming to help solve some of these challenges. They created Tulsa Remote.

**Tulsa Remote**

Tulsa Remote is a remote worker relocation initiative, offering a “no strings attached” ten-thousand-dollar incentive and additional support services to eligible workers who move to Tulsa to live and work for at least one year (Newman et al. 2021). Support services include:

- **Discounted Rent**: Participants will have the option of living in a brand new, fully furnished apartment in the Tulsa Arts District for 33% off the base price, plus free utilities, for the first three months.

- **Regular Meetups**: Programming such as monthly dinners and weekly brainstorm sessions with fellow program members will allow participants to build a collaborative remote community.

- **Community Building Opportunities**: Programming and events designed for remote workers and Tulsa’s entrepreneurs to engage with the community, including opportunities to engage with local nonprofits.
• **Co-Working Space:** A year of desk space at 36 Degrees North (a co-working space in downtown Tulsa) as well as programming and events, conference rooms, WiFi, and complimentary snacks and beverages.

(Tulsa Remote 2022)

Eligible workers are remote workers living outside of Oklahoma who are currently employed (employment must be verified) and are at least eighteen years of age. To apply, remote workers must submit an application, pass a series of interviews with program administrators and be willing to move to Tulsa within one year of program acceptance.

Tulsa Remote was launched in November 2018, with three program administrators accepting applications for 35 remote workers. It has since grown to 20 program administrators accepting applications for 1100 remote workers per year.

Funding for the incentives and the program administrators is provided entirely through the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF). George Kaiser is the son of immigrants who arrived in Oklahoma after fleeing Nazi Germany. He has been growing the Kaiser-Francis Oil Company since 1960, and it is worth nearly ten billion dollars. Kaiser invests in GKFF, which initially focused on early-childhood education and criminal justice reform but has since expanded its portfolio to include economic development, neighborhood development, and civic enhancement in the Tulsa region (Kramer, 2010).

1.2 Problem statement and significance

Many remote worker attraction strategies have been deployed throughout the US in an attempt to capture remote workers. However, to my knowledge, only one, Tulsa Remote, designed its program in a way that integrates remote workers into the community through the many planned community events, discounted co-working spaces, and networking
opportunities. So far, Tulsa Remote has successfully recruited 1,300 remote workers in four years. My research attempts to understand how this planned community integration contributes to the short-term success of the program and how the program encourages entrepreneurship in order to set up long-term success.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote worker attraction strategies are an emerging area of interest in the urban studies literature. Previous studies on remote workers focus on occupations and their ability to migrate (Wallace 2019, Ozimek 2022, Newman et al. 2021). And though talent attraction theories are prevalent (Florida 2004, Clark 2002, Glaeser 2000), they offer little evidence regarding amenity preference (Storper et al. 2009). Therefore, this literature review will examine studies related to this topic and create a framework to evaluate this research.

2.1 Economic growth: How do cities grow?

Traditionally, economic developers seeking growth engaged in a strategy commonly known as industrial targeting. Cities would extend financial incentives to specific firms, usually in the form of tax abatements hoping to either bolster a known industrial cluster or maintain or attract industries to a region that already contained a strong supplier or customer base. At the time, it was thought that industries thrived under these linked conditions, that people moved for jobs, and it was the easiest, most cost-efficient way for regions to grow. By the 2000's economic development strategy shifted towards the attraction and retention of human capital because economic developers understood more clearly that people, not industries, were the force behind regional and industrial growth. In a series of studies, Harvard University economist Edward Glaeser found considerable evidence that “firms concentrate to reap the advantages that stem from common labor pools -not to tap the advantages from linked networks of customers and suppliers” (Florida 2004, 33). The implication is that “labor pools” or human capital cause economic growth. However, it is noteworthy that even though economic development strategy experienced this shift in the 2000s, the concept of human capital and its effect on cities goes back, at least to Adam
Smith. In his definition of capital, he noted: “the acquisition of... talents during...education, study, or apprenticeship, costs a real expense, which is capital in [a] person. Those talents [are] part of his fortune [and] likewise that of society” (Smith 1776). In other words, human capital is the collection of skills, health, knowledge, and resilience that manifest as personal “talent,” which allows people to be more productive, flexible and innovative in their work and their community. Thus today, economic growth lies in the cultivation, attraction, and retention of human capital within a region.

But how does human capital turn into economic growth? It is argued that human capital causes economic growth because “high skilled people in high skilled industries may come up with more new ideas” (Glaeser 2003, 3). Jane Jacobs theorized that new ideas were necessary not simply for growth but a city’s survival:

Cities are settlements where much new work is added to older work and that this new work multiples and diversifies a city’s divisions of labor; that cities develop because of this process, … that developing new work is different from merely repeating and expanding efficiently the production of already existing goods and services, and thus requires different, conflicting conditions from those required for efficient production; that growing cities generate acute practical problems which are solved only by new goods and services that increase economic abundance; and that the past development of a city is no guarantee of future development because the city can stop vigorously adding new work into the economy and thus can stagnate” (Jacobs 1970, 122)

Jacobs points out that economic growth occurs when people build from something else or learn from someone else and that this process is necessary for a city’s survival. In his bestselling book, The Rise of the Creative Class, Richard Florida expounded on this idea and attempted to differentiate a new “class” system of creative types that are more or less responsible for this type of growth. He defined the Creative Class as people who “work in a wide range of knowledge-intensive industries, such as high-tech, financial services, the legal and health care professions, and business management;” people who ‘think’ for a living
They engage in creative problem solving, “drawing on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems” (Florida 2004, 39). And according to Florida, the Creative Class itself is insufficient; cities must also foster tolerance and cultivate the advancement of technology in order to prosper.

For this study, we will treat the human capital theory of city growth and Florida’s definition of the Creative Class as the same. A place with high levels of human capital will grow with “special rapidity because of the entrepreneurial, creative and innovative energies that these workers carry with them… Knowledge has a tendency to grow indefinitely, for it can be endlessly re-used, is extremely leaky (and hence its circle of users continually expands), and can be combined and recombined in virtually unlimited ways” (Storper et al. 2009, 148). In other words, innovation or new ideas are born out of individuals with high levels of human capital, and those new ideas and innovations are necessary for not only economic growth but for a city’s survival.

Generally, there are three ways for cities to obtain human capital. One is to cultivate it. Cities and regions focus on secondary and post-secondary education attainment or job training programs that fit particularly well with the industries or job markets within the region. This way, direct links between education and work can be managed, industries and firms can grow through a rich supply of skilled workers, and proper city investment can be displayed. However, cities like Tulsa, which are experiencing decades-long outmigration patterns of their young and educated workforce, have had trouble cultivating talent in this

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1See (Florida 2004, 34) for a distinct definition of the Creative Class which differs from that of the human capital theory of city growth.
manner because Tulsa does not have a large public university, and their core industry, oil and gas, is declining (Tulsa's Comprehensive Plan 2016). The second way that cities obtain talent is to attract it. And it is arguably cheaper, faster, and easier to “buy talent rather than make talent” (Schrock and Jurjevich 2014). This can be accomplished through steadfast planning. Cities can attract talent by offering and creating various amenities that talent would find appealing in a place to live. Lastly, the third way cities obtain talent is to target it specifically through economic development programs. “In place of generic attraction strategies or efforts to improve the local business climate, planners [can] husband their resources and nurture particular sectors that show greater promise in terms of longevity, good jobs, and diversification” (Markusen 2004, 2).

The following two sections are focused on how to obtain talent, namely what cities can do to attract talent and what programs can do to target talent.

2.2 Talent Attraction: What can cities do to attract talent?

It has been said that technologies, from the telegraph and the telephone to the automobile and the airplane, would essentially kill off cities because people who work together no longer needed to be together (Florida 2004). And at the risk of sounding redundant, the technology of today has only gotten better and faster; the rapidly evolving digital, mobile, and information and communications technologies have truly allowed many jobs to be completed anywhere. However, this does not mean that urban life as a whole is under threat but that individual cities are more vulnerable because competition for global talent is stiffer due to human capital's ability to move across space (Levitt 2021).

Attracting human capital is a rich and hotly debated area of study, and it is theorized that
individuals with high levels of human capital make locational choices based (in part) on features of the urban environment, which are known in the literature as ‘amenities’ (Storper et al. 2009, 148). Below, I will briefly discuss three prominent theories, how they define ‘amenities,’ and how they pertain to remote workers. The theories include Glaeser’s Consumer City theory, Florida’s Creative Class theory, and Clark’s City as an Entertainment Machine theory.

Glaeser’s theory focuses on a multitude of factors that create migrant preference, but they hinge on the idea that in the next century, quality of life will get increasingly critical for urban areas because rich workers will have more choices on where to live because they are less and less fettered by constraints on employment location (Glaeser et al. 2001). Glaeser’s theory operates on the “assumption of a world of identical firms, and an equilibrium in production, which requires that all firms be indifferent between locations” (Storper et al. 2009, 4). Glaeser goes on to argue that there are four types of amenities that draw human capital 1) the presence of a wide variety of services and consumer goods, including restaurants and theaters, 2) aesthetics and physical setting, which is broadly defined by architectural beauty and/or good weather 3) good public services such as good schools and little crime, and 4) speed, or the ability to move about the city quickly (i.e., no traffic and/or ease and efficiency of public transportation) (Glaeser et al. 2001, 5). Similarly, Clark believes a new “elite” economy has emerged due to globalization, where more people have more money and also more choice of how and when, and where to spend their money. Clark makes the leap that in a postindustrial and global environment, the “informational city implies the city of leisure” (Clark et al. 2002, 6). This means leisure amenities drive growth. More specifically, stadiums, parks, museums, art galleries, orchestras, convention centers,
and similar facilities (Clark et al. 2002). The pursuit of leisure activities is enough to drive urban economic growth because leisure amenities simultaneously do three things, 1) they attract, entertain, and retain an affluent class of core subscribers, and 2) they imply relevant infrastructures and services are available and utilized by the city, and 3), they attract tourism (Clark et al. 2002). Florida’s Creative Class theory is similar to Glaeser and Clark because he also places emphasis on catering to an affluent group of human capital consumers, or as Florida refers to them, “the creative class.” And like Clark, he focuses on the importance of cultural amenities such as the arts but also emphasizes social amenities like openness and creativity (all of which are free) as fuel for attracting these creative types.

It is noteworthy that researchers focus on individuals with high levels of human capital because they are a population shown to not only be more mobile but to move further distances and therefore exude more preference for amenities (Wallace 2019). This is especially true for remote workers because remote work “enables greater locational flexibility when households consider a move, especially to locations that may offer fewer employment opportunities that match the skill sets and expertise of specialized knowledge workers” (Wallace 2019, 18). In 2020 remote work has already inspired 4.9 million Americans to move, with 18.9 million more reporting a plan to move (Ozimek 2022). Cities most vulnerable to outbound migration are those with both “high cost of living and many jobs that can be done remotely” (Ozimek 2022). This means cities with a low cost of living have the potential to gain extraordinary human capital in this geographic re-shuffle. “Local economies with relatively affordable housing markets and strong connections to major job centers -particularly those with good multimodal infrastructure, including rail connections,
highway infrastructure, internet access, and direct flights to major economic hubs could be primed to take advantage of more remote workers” (Newman et al. 2021, 20).

But what draws remote workers? In a singular pre-pandemic 2019 study, Wallace found that “places with higher stocks of natural, cultural, and recreational amenities are, in fact, a draw for remote workers” (Wallace 2019, 117). He defined “cultural amenities” as places with high levels of performing arts, independent artists, writers, and performers, museums, historical sites, parks, and fine arts education; “recreational amenities” as above-average employment in recreational services, suggesting a region’s ability to leverage natural amenities to advance their economic development; and “natural amenities” as determined by average winter temperatures (Wallace 2019).

And though amenities are important, it is not the singular driver of migration. Remote workers are migrating predominantly from the high cost of living areas like San Francisco, Washington DC, and New York City, all of which are also amenity-rich locations. This means remote workers may show a preference for amenities, but perhaps more important is how people experience and access the amenities (Nelson et al., 2020). Access refers to affordability and time or effort to utilize the amenity. Experience refers to public socializing, the broad spectrum of spontaneous interaction with community members that cultivates long-lasting friendships and expansive social networks (Nelson et al., 2020).

All of this is to say that amenities matter, quality of place matters, but by how much, that’s a squishy and unproven number even for remote workers. It does seem prudent to invest in basic services like safe streets and good schools, but cities that focus on an amenity driven approach to attract talent should also focus on how those amenities create
experiences that foster social networking and friendships as well as affordable access in order to truly benefit their community and attract high-skilled talent.

2.3 Targeting Talent: What can programs do to target talent?
Markusen’s Occupation Targeting strategy focuses less on how cities can broadly create the more attractive quality of life features, but it is prescriptive on how workers in specific occupations can be strategically targeted to fill the gaps within a city’s workforce in order to create economic development. First, she explains cities must identify the target workforce by a particular set of criteria, 1) the workforce must demonstrate capturability or uneven distribution across the US. 2) Occupations should be selected based on pay levels, job security, longer-term career mobility, and/or illustrate the potential for growth. 3) Occupations should match the community or region's economic development goals. And lastly, 4) Cities must identify why a particular workforce remains anchored in specific locations in order to assess the potential for luring occupations away.

How do remote workers fit into this criterion? First, the prevalence of remote workers varies widely among metro areas depending on the dominant industries in the local labor market. However, local economies with greater shares of workers in industries like information, finance, and insurance; management; and professional, technical, and scientific services currently tend to have more people who work from home since those employers typically offer more flexibility for workers (Newman 2021). This means remote workers demonstrate capturability.

Secondly, during the pandemic, August 2021-December 2021, a staggering 37% of households had at least one person working remotely (US Census Bureau 2022). Additionally, this report highlighted other characteristics of these remote workers, including
the link between education and one’s ability to substitute in-person work for remote work. Figure 1.0 illustrates that those with a bachelor's degree or higher were more than three times as likely as those with a high school education or GED to transition to remote work.

Figure 1.0 Percentage of Households by Education and Telework Status during the Pandemic

(U.S. Census Bureau 2022)

Broadly this data suggests that remote workers or individuals with the ability to work remotely tend to have higher educations. Furthermore, those who substituted some or all of their typical in-person work for remote work tended to have higher household incomes than those who did not switch to remote work, as seen in Figure 2.0.

Figure 2.0 Percentage of Households by Income who Switched to Telework during the Pandemic

(U.S. Census Bureau 2022)
In the highest-earning households, those with annual incomes of $200,000 or more, 73.1% switched to remote work, which is more than double the percentage (32.1%) of households with incomes between $50,000 and $74,999 range. (US Census Bureau 2022). Again, this data broadly suggests that remote workers or individuals with the ability to work from home have a high income. What’s more, is that this generality is consistent with pre-pandemic studies that suggested that remote workers are highly skilled and highly paid (Glaeser et al. 2001). Though it is expected that many of the remote workers included in this census data will not remain remote after 2022, some will. The demand for flexibility has increased so much that fifty-five percent of remote workers would consider quitting if their companies tried to force their return to offices (Telford 2022). All of this is to say that remote workers generally obtain high pay levels, are highly educated, and are a growing workforce in the United States, meeting Markusen’s second criteria.

Next, Markusen emphasizes that the occupation should match the community or region's economic development goals. In other words, economic development programs engaging in this type of targeting strategy should focus on industries already within their regions, as this is a seamless way to bolster the workforce of the region. However, communities like Tulsa, whose core industries are energy, aerospace and aviation, and manufacturing, do not tend to produce remote workers and therefore present a potential mismatch between the skillset remote workers tend to have and what a community like Tulsa is looking for.

Finally, Markusen lays out in pragmatic terms that economic development programs should assess whether or not their location has an actual shot at luring these types of workers away from their current location by investigating the conditions under which this
workforce remains anchored in a specific locale. “You must have some reason to believe that your locality has a real or potential comparative advantage for the given occupations.” (Markusen 2006, 12). This means that attracting this targeted talent requires careful forethought as to the amenities and attributes of the city that are marketable in order to incentivize migration. Marketing is the action of promoting; it is inherently political because any marketing is clearly “bound up with... visibility and invisibility, identify formation, framing, inclusion and exclusion” (Vanolo 2020, 14). And so, whether or not programs can market their city honestly is a formidable question, but if done effectively can not only attract talent but could promote place recognition and also raise associations between the place and social features intended to make the city attractive (i.e., innovation, diversity, tolerance...etc.) (Kavaratzis 2005, 513).

Once this workforce is obtained, Markusen lays out short-term and long-term components that a program should aim to incorporate. In the short term, she explains that the workforce should be clustered spatially because “workers are more likely to be committed to the region and neighborhood than to a firm or industry, and will search for livability, amenities and ‘lovability.”’ (Markusen 2006, 3). And economic development programs should ensure that this new workforce is cross-fertilizing with other industry sectors through community organizations or special events.

In the long-term, economic development programs should encourage entrepreneurship with this newfound workforce through incubator space or networking events organized by occupation and not by industry. Finally, the ‘art’ she says is to develop “interventions [that] might enhance the growth and performance of [this workforce] and
discover how target populations (youth, inner-city residents, minorities, women, displaced workers, etc.) could be channeled into them” (Markusen 2006, 13)
CHAPTER THREE: FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Based on this literature review, we know that the survival of a city and its long-run economic development is driven by innovation and new ideas and that innovation and new ideas come (most often) from rich supplies of human capital. We know that attracting human capital is complex and that all of the previously mentioned theories so far are unverified but that the urban environment and its amenities be it natural, recreational, or cultural, play a role in location decisions for remote workers. And we know that remote workers are actually able to move about geographic space with ease. We also know that economic development programs can attract specific talent by marketing a city’s competitive advantage. And if these programs are carefully planned, they can encourage industry cross-fertilization, support entrepreneurship, and create long-term economic growth.

But because remote worker attraction strategies are new, and the explosion of the remote work revolution during the pandemic is still settling, how can we tell if such strategies are successful in the short and long-term? What are the metrics that would signal success? Table 1.0 illustrates the key performance indicators (KPIs) for a remote worker attraction strategy over time.

Table 1.0 Remote Worker Attraction Strategy KPIs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Pre-Launch</th>
<th>Short-term KPIs</th>
<th>Long-term KPIs</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| • Confirm workforce matches the economic development goals of the region  
• Establish and promote a competitive advantage | • Cluster the workforce spatially  
• Encourage industry cross-fertilization through occupation specific networking events | • Support entrepreneurship  
• Create workforce development programs for the targeted occupation  
• Utilize remote workers to entice industry |
The purpose of this study is to evaluate the Tulsa Remote program and assess its strengths and weaknesses over time based on these KPIs. Below I evaluate how Tulsa Remote has promoted Tulsa’s urban environment in order to establish a competitive value proposition against other markets rich in remote workers. Second, I evaluate the short-term metrics of success, specifically how the program has attempted to cluster this workforce spatially, create occupation-specific networking events, and encourage industry cross-fertilization. And lastly, I evaluate how Tulsa Remote has supported entrepreneurship and generated other interventions that improve workforce development for underserved populations. The strength and weakness of these metrics cannot tell us if Tulsa Remote will ultimately be a successful remote worker attraction strategy, but they can provide insight as to whether or not Tulsa Remote is theoretically on the right path.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Case Study Selection and Design

There are numerous examples of cities, regions, and states deploying creative initiatives aiming to attract remote workers. For example, Utah’s “Rural Online” program is an initiative created by Utah State University and designed to prepare rural communities for the future of work by offering relevant educational certificates and connecting people to modern employment opportunities. In other words, rather than attract remote workers to a region, this initiative aims to retain its population by updating its skills. Or another example would include Hawaii’s “Movers and Shaka’s” program, which provides participants one free round-trip airline ticket to Hawaii, with discounted hotel stays and services for up to one month. Their goal was to help offset the economic damages Hawaii suffered during the pandemic.

However, other cities, regions, and states that want to more permanently diversify their workforce and/or mitigate outbound migration and/or create long-term economic growth have launched initiatives to incentivize remote workers to relocate, all of which were launched prior to the pandemic. Incentives for these types of programs include cash, bitcoin, discounted rent and/or free or discounted co-working space, museum or cultural memberships, and in one case, a bicycle. Those programs include: “Choose Topeka,” Topeka, Kansas, “Remote Shoals,” Northwestern Alabama, “Finding NWA,” Northwestern Arkansas, “Remote Tucson,” Tucson, Arizona, “Think Vermont,” Vermont, and “Tulsa Remote” Tulsa, Oklahoma.

And though these programs have similar end goals and offer incentives to entice remote workers, Tulsa Remote stood out in one distinct way; it was the only program that
created wrap-around services for remote workers. Not only was co-working space offered at a discounted rate, but the program promoted community events, skill share nights, and networking opportunities, all of which were unique to Tulsa Remote. This intentionality signaled extensive planning on the part of Tulsa Remote administrators, which made it an outlier amongst the other programs.

In order to understand what was happening with Tulsa Remote, this research uses a case study design because it allows for an evolving and contemporary phenomenon to be studied analytically while incorporating multiple sources of evidence as a foundation for that understanding (Yin, 2009). In this study, I reviewed and analyzed both primary and secondary data. For the primary data, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with various Tulsa, Oklahoma, economic development leaders, including leaders from the city, local nonprofits, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, Tulsa’s Regional Development office, the Mayor’s office, and a local talent recruitment firm. Interview data were collected by phone, and participants were recruited through email. I obtained verbal consent from each participant prior to the interview. The Human Subject Research Review Committee at Portland State University approved all activities related to this study. The recruitment scripts and interview questions are provided in the Appendix.

For the secondary data, I reviewed data sources, including Tulsa’s Comprehensive Plan, Future Tulsa’s Economic Development Plan, Economic Innovations Group’s Tulsa Remote Report, Tulsa Remote’s published materials (e.g., YouTube videos, website, application), and other published materials and media reports about the Tulsa Remote program.
Secondary data was collected and reviewed prior to the interview participant recruitment. Interview questions were prepared with a goal of filling in gaps and missing or incomplete information in the secondary data.

4.1 Setting and participants

Participants were recruited between January and April 2022. Participants were included in this study if they were connected to or employed by the economic development departments in the city of Tulsa and/or the metro region, connected to or employed by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, connected to or employed by the Tulsa Remote program. Half of the interview participants were recruited through the contact information found on public websites, while the other half were referrals from other interview participants or email communications with individuals who chose not to participate in the study.

4.2 Data collection

Data were collected between February 2022-April 2022. Participants were interviewed one time during the study. Each interview was approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and uploaded on a secure computer. Identifying information was changed to numerical identifiers. Memos were composed after each interview was completed.

4.3 Data analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data in two stages. In the first stage, I reviewed the memos I had created after each interview and organized their content by theme (i.e., interview process, community programs, relationships). In the second stage, I organized these themes by time horizon, which created more concrete groupings in the data. Themes were re-examined by a second review of the original recordings, and direct quotes were transcribed.
Interview data was then compared and contrasted with secondary data in order to assemble a more complete understanding of the case study.

4.4 Positionality

My previous experiences in communications and marketing have led to my interest in how cities (thoughtfully or not) package their attributes to attract and retain talent. I understand that most cities and communities do not hire entire brand teams to artfully craft their messaging and that the participants do not think of their city or this program as a brand. I am also an outsider who is unfamiliar with the culture and relationships formed within this community. I recognize that my positionality influenced the themes I chose and my interpretation of the data. With that said, I made every effort to maintain a balanced view that was informed by the data.

4.5 Limitations of research design and methodology:

There are a few significant limitations of this research design and methodology. The first of which is the small sample size of interviews. Though it is common to recruit a small sample size in qualitative research because it enables researchers to acquire an in-depth perspective of participants’ experiences (Crouch et al. 2006). And in this case, a small sample size does not necessarily inhibit the findings from achieving generalizability, but it does limit the scope of understanding. The scope of this study was particularly limited because I was unable to secure an interview with anyone currently employed by Tulsa Remote. This setback is unfortunate because it hindered my ability to obtain primary data from the current officers carrying out the program.

The second limitation had to do with new hires within the Tulsa economic development community. I classify new hires as individuals who have been employed in
their current position for one year or less. These individuals comprised half of my interview participants. Though knowledgeable, they lacked an institutional history that would have enriched this study. Further outreach to ex-employees was conducted but was unsuccessful.

Lastly, Covid-19 and the ongoing effects of the pandemic created continuous scheduling conflicts that hindered other interview participants from participating.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND EVALUATIONS

The following chapter is broken into three sections; the first describes Tulsa's overall talent attraction strategy and what economic developers have focused on over the past ten to fifteen years. The second reviews how the Tulsa Remote program successfully attracted 1,300 remote workers, representing short-term success. And lastly, the third section audits initiatives the Tulsa Remote program is attempting to implement in order to create long-term economic development success. Each section is organized into two segments, a “findings” component where the empirical evidence is presented and an “evaluation” component where I review how consistent or inconsistent this evidence sits with the previously established theoretical framework.

5.1 Tulsa's Talent Attraction Strategy

Findings: A clear focus on entertainment and revitalization of an arts district

Tulsa is Oklahoma’s second-largest city, topping one million residents, and it is located in the state's northeastern quadrant, adjacent to the Arkansas River. Economically, Tulsa's core advantages defined by high regional employment, high average wage, and high location quotients are energy, aviation and aerospace, and machinery and electrical equipment manufacturing (Tulsa's Comprehensive Plan, 2016). All three of which are long-standing industries with histories going back to the early 1900s. In addition to these core industries, Tulsa's Comprehensive Plan outlined two emerging industries that planners felt contained particular promises for the region, information security and entertainment and tourism (Tulsa’s Comprehensive Plan 2016, 190). In the past fifteen years, there has been a robust and clear emphasis on the latter. The following list represents a snapshot of investment in marquee projects.
2008: BOK (Bank of Oklahoma) Center houses large-scale sports and entertainment events. It was the flagship project of Tulsa County's Vision 2025 Plan and cost $228,500,000 in public and private funding.

2009: Tulsa's Regional Convention Center Renovation provides a modern ballroom and meeting space. It was part of Tulsa County's Vision 2025 Plan and cost $55 million in public and private funding.

2012: Guthrie Green is a community town square and outdoor concert venue. It was part of Tulsa's Brady Arts District Small Area Plan and cost $8 million in public and private funding.

2017: Tulsa's Arts District Revitalization, Tulsa's arts and entertainment neighborhood boasting an active, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use area. It was part of Tulsa's Comprehensive Plan and cost $264 million dollars in public funding.

2018: The Gathering Place, an interactive and mixed-use park along the waterfront of the Arkansas River. It is a project of the George Kaiser Family Foundation and costs $465 million in private funding.

2021: Greenwood Rising, a museum commemorating the victims of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. It is a project of the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, which is comprised of government officials from the city, state, and nation. The museum cost $18 million in public and private funds.

2022: USA BMX Headquarters and Museum is an Olympic-quality racing track. It is a project from the Tulsa County’s Vision 2025T Plan and costs $23 million dollars from public funding.

This snapshot illustrates steadfast economic development planning and execution with the mindset that young generations will “have plenty of entertainment options” (Tulsa's Compressive Plan 2016, 13).

Not unique to Tulsa is that these initiatives were produced with public/private partnerships (PPP); however, what is unique to Tulsa and what was prevalent in the interview data is the strong relationship between the George Kaiser Family Foundation and other city and regional economic development offices, a sentiment echoed in the Economic Innovation Group’s Tulsa Remote Report, “Tulsa [is] a highly networked, collaborative place.
-a boon for community initiatives” (Newman et al. 2021). But perhaps more interesting is how these PPPs address problems or discuss projects.

[we] brainstorm on root problems, specifically increasing the population …[so there is a] standing meeting with GKFF every Monday morning, [we discuss issues] that are impacting or inhibiting us from attracting the next Tesla. If we don't have the resources, can they fund something…can they start something that will help. (Participant #5)

And even though joint collaboration was always discussed throughout each interview, it was evident a power structure existed.

It is very clear who is driving these conversations. It is GKFF. It is not necessarily coming from the city or the chamber; GKFF is driving harder, faster, and stronger for initiatives…They are driving this technology innovation space… the private philanthropy dollars are not quiet. (Participant #1)

This information acknowledges that private investment dollars come with strong opinions about the future of the city. And though it is evident a strong network exists, a potential downside is a tendency toward exclusion or groupthink (Newman et al., 2021):

One thing we know about Tulsa is that relationships are the most important thing, and so it's really hard to advocate too hard for what's not going right because if you create a bad relationship, then it can be a ripple effect throughout the entire ecosystem. (Newman et al. 2021, 45)

For now, these strong formal and informal relationships seem to be an asset for the community and can point to various marquee amenities and economic development initiatives that helped increase the quality of life for Tulsans in general but also in attracting talent.

Evaluation:
This type of investment and steadfast economic development planning is consistent with Clark's City as Entertainment Machine theory due to the strong entertainment and leisure activity emphasis. Though the differences in the aforementioned attraction strategies
are nuanced, I did not find a lot of evidence to support Glaeser’s four-part Consumer City theory. Even though Tulsa is a hotbed for restored Art Deco architecture, due to its economic oil boom in the 1920s, suggesting an aesthetically pleasing city, and its “no traffic” acclamation could be seen as consistent with the theory. However, when I compared average commute times by Tulsa’s regional peers (based on population size, geographic location, and economic characteristics), Wichita, Omaha, Chattanooga, and Spokane all posted 20–24-minute average commute times (Newman et al. 2021). Furthermore, there was no clear goal in Tulsa’s Comprehensive Plan that aimed to increase educational attainment. Oklahoma’s education currently ranks #42 for public education, according to US News and World Report. And though the Arts District Revitalization was the largest and most expensive project, suggesting an emphasis on creativity and consistency with Florida’s theory, I found the other investments to be too overwhelmingly entertainment-based.

Suffice to say that these nuances are not that important. What is important is that Tulsa has clearly coordinated efforts to increase its desirability and create a place where young professionals with more education and fewer children prefer amenities geared towards recreation and consumption. (Clark 2002, 9). And this type of investment into the urban environment helped create a competitive advantage for the city, which is one of the KPIs that signal a successful starting point for the Tulsa Remote program.

The second KPI outlined in the framework included a coupling of workforce skills needed in the region to those that this program would aim to attract. Here we find less evidence that remote workers who are traditionally categorized with skills in the professional, scientific and technical services industries “match” the skills in Tulsa’s core industries (energy, aviation, and aerospace) as well as the industries primed for expansion within the
region (information security and entertainment). And therefore, I consider this component of the program to be a much weaker indicator of short-term and long-term success.

5.2 Tulsa Remote’s Short-Term Success

Findings: An engaging, robust application process, fueled by private funding, initially emphasized community integration.

When Tulsa Remote first launched in 2018, no one had any idea how many applicants would apply. In fact, there was an internal debate as to whether or not it was worth creating a CRM (customer relationship management) system (Participant #3). They did. Within the first few months of launching the program, they had over 10,000 applications for a planned 35 spots. Notably, this surge in applications was not due to a paid marketing effort but to a powerful press release that garnered national coverage and various TV segments, including an exclusive feature on CBS Sunday Morning (Participant #3). By early 2020 Tulsa Remote had over 20,000 applicants (Lindzon 2021)! And by the end of 2021, the Tulsa Remote team grew from three GKFF employees in 2018 to twenty. The team now includes specialists in marketing and recruitment, events, and retention. Currently, Tulsa Remote has successfully recruited 1,300 remote workers. The median age of this cohort is 35 years old; 206 of them brought a significant other with them to Tulsa; 88% of them have a bachelor’s degree or higher; 59.9% rent their place of residence; 21% are “boomerangs” (i.e., return migrants who have resided in Tulsa before) (Newman et al. 2021).

The inception of Tulsa Remote actually occurred in New York. A young GKFF consultant, Michael Basch, a self-proclaimed futurist and former millennial candidate for NYC mayor, caught wind of a new and innovative program called “Think Vermont.” Think Vermont is a remote worker relocation program aimed at “building a tech-savvy workforce”
to address Vermont’s young and educated outbound migration problem (Think Vermont 2022). Ginny Lyon, a prominent Democratic state senator, was inspired by her son-in-law’s remote work and created the program. (McCullum 2019) In Tulsa, Basch teamed up with Aaron Bolzle, a former Apple employee, Tulsan native, and actual remote worker, and together they set out to improve upon this idea. First, they created a robust application process that included a mandatory in-person interview and tour of the Tulsa area.

The visit… was not an opportunity to sell the person on the city; it was an opportunity to sell the person on the vision, the intentionality behind [the program]. And to also do a gut check of whether or not they were coming in for the right reasons and the right reasons… was somebody that cares just as much or more for what they can provide for the community than what they get from the community (Participant #3)

This application process was different from Think Vermont’s, which was first-come, first-served. Secondly, they created wrap-around community integration services, including discounted co-working space in downtown Tulsa, skill share nights and other community and networking events which allowed Tulsa Remote participants a streamlined opportunity to get involved in the greater Tulsa community.

People touch down here, and yes, they may be excited about the Gathering Place, but they are more excited than they can make five friends and join a board and get plugged in really quickly. (Participant #1)

These types of services were not part of Think Vermont’s legislation. And lastly, they secured private funding through GKFF. Private funding allowed the City of Tulsa to try a strategy like Tulsa Remote without taking funding away from other city services or economic development strategies.
When you have private funding, you can take on the risk and prove something works; then, you get public funding to back it up; you just need a funder to take on the risk. Public funding is not high-risk, high reward (Participant #2)

Think Vermont was taxpayer-funded and poorly received by the community because community members felt that paying individuals who already earn a high wage additional money to move to their state was an inefficient way to spend tax dollars when roads needed to be fixed and schools could be improved (McMullum 2019).

Private funding itself was not called out prominently in the interview data as a core component to the success of the program. One interview participant placed emphasis on their ability to make decisions about the program, and the image of Tulsa the program highlighted due to private funding.

People that made this initiative happen were very aware of what makes Tulsa special, and they did not have to jump through a bunch of hoops to make that happen… [like] feature[ing] the Tulsa Pride parade as the first thing [on the website] (Participant #3)

Though this data suggests that Tulsa Remote administrators were very aware of the cultural amenities that needed to be showcased, e.g., diversity and tolerance, in order to attract talent, it also suggests friction between a more conservative community and a tolerant one. This friction was in direct opposition to the promotion of community integration, whose rallying cry seemed to emphasize openness to new ideas and new people.

It's so easy to lend your voice to the chorus of leadership that is pushing for positive change. (Participant #3)

At a young age, I was able to make an impact [I did not] need the right last name [and I] was not old money. New ideas were truly welcomed. ( Participant #6)

We do have an awesome community, that groundwork has been laid…especially young people had a role to play in what the city was going to look like… as opposed to other cities that are like sit down wait your turn, here in Tulsa it is very evident young talent is highly sought after, highly valued, highly recognized, and I think that is… a unique cultural aspect of Tulsa. (Participant #2)
This observation of cultural friction was not directly discussed with interview participants; however, it does point to an undercurrent of division and perhaps highlights the limits of marketing and promotion of a program like Tulsa Remote.

Originally the Tulsa Remote program leaned on the longevity and stability of community partners to create joint programming and events. For example, TYPROS (Tulsa’s Young Professionals) was established in 2004 and is an organization whose core objective is to get young people involved in the community. In order to do that, they created “Get on Board,” which is an internship program that allows young professionals the opportunity to sit on local boards temporarily. By partnering with these organizations, Tulsa Remote participants had the opportunity to be formally integrated into those organizations, networking with locals and forming a community.

[Our] focus was on the true components of community and the opportunity to make an impact, and if we are successful at creating those pathways, they could grow organically. (Participant #3)

What type of community member are you going to be, and what do you hope to do? The community emersion component is so core and has made it incredibly successful that our retention rate is incredibly high because people find the community here. (Participant #2)

Many participants echoed the sentiment that community integration was a key component to the success and longevity of the program. “All events had to be open to the public; we made a concerted effort to never have Tulsa Remote exclusive events” (Participant #3). By recruiting with a community-first approach and partnering with local organizations, program administrators were able to create cross-industry fertilization because many of the events were focused on knowledge-building workshops and were not industry-specific. This
allowed Tulsa Remote administrators to leverage the talents and education of remote workers to positively affect the broader Tulsa workforce.

However, over time and with the onset of the pandemic and increased applications, leaders within the region, city, and GKFF saw the potential for this program to really scale up. The hope was that this initiative could reverse the annual outbound migration of 1,200 Tulsans per year (Participant #5). “We could leverage this initiative to close the gap” (Participant #5). In order to do this, Tulsa Remote needed to expedite popular programming so they could quickly get new talent integrated.

Tulsa Remote started to create its own internal programs. The “Get on Board” program [had] guaranteed positions [for Tulsa Remote participants]…even though it was already open to anyone. Tulsa Remote capitalized on the existing [Tulsa] infrastructure and recreated it for their own program. Because there are so many of them…they are not pushing them out into the community anymore. They are creating insular programming, and I think it is creating a silo. (Participant #1)

This new insular programming created “very little integration with the larger community” (Participant #3), but that was intentional. Tulsa Remote programmers were focused on ways to increase retention and scale during a pandemic. “[We asked] how can we get you connected in a way that increases the chances of you staying (Participant #2). And the answer was to streamline services and increase events” (“Year in Review” 2021).

Simultaneously, the Oklahoma Legislature was passing the Remote Quality Jobs Incentive Act, which allowed companies all over the state of Oklahoma the opportunity to recruit remote workers and be reimbursed for their efforts if participants they recruited stayed for “ten consecutive quarters” and came with income that equaled or exceed “average annualized wage” of the area. This means GKFF could be reimbursed for each participant they recruited. And the sentiment went from a carefully selected bunch of people to anyone that can meet the basic criteria is allowed in.
Get them here however they can… There is not that same process of curation and cultivation for who comes in, and it’s just anyone with a remote job that meets a certain criterion is eligible… droves and droves of people are moving [here]. (Participant #1)

And though a low cost of living was always promoted in Tulsa Remote marketing materials, the recruitment process shifted more directly to wealth creation. “If you sell it [coastal house] and you buy in Tulsa, you can buy three houses…in a city that is rapidly growing, that’s a smart move” (Participant #5). The average income of a Tulsa Remote participant was $85,000, whereas the median household income in Tulsa is $55,500 (Newman et al., 2021). Though this shift in focus was intentional, it made many interview participants uneasy as they quickly pointed to the potential for rapid inequality.

It’s a very easy thing to sell people on a lower cost of living, free money, and free events, and come build your wealth here. But you get people that are motivated by those things. (Participant #3)

[There is full acknowledgment] that high wages, high tech jobs will increase the cost of living. (Participant #2)

They are not bringing anything else with them but their wealth and money. They are paying cash for everything driving prices up, and the community has nothing to show for it. Inevitably the cost of things is going to rise. The attraction piece is the lower cost of living and that low traffic…what if they are still working remote and we can’t attract the capital investment to bring in new companies here. Then what? (Participant #4)

Only time will determine if insular programming and fast-tracking temporary board memberships will be beneficial to the program or the city.

Evaluation:

Private funding or even PPP was not discussed in the literature as a core component to the success of attraction strategies. And it was surprising to see how the private funding affected the promotion of tolerance in the program. Markusen’s theory on occupational targeting makes no mention of tolerance or diversity outright, though she does point to
investigating the conditions under which the workforce you want to attract remains anchored in a specific locale. In this way, it seems that the Tulsa Remote program believes that tolerance and diversity are important conditions that need to be replicated in order to attract remote workers and therefore marketed their city that way. Other imagery on the Tulsa Remote website reflects the new amenities geared towards entertainment, and they are promoted in a way in which participants will always have something to do.

Additionally, Markusen’s theory makes no mention of inequality due to occupational targeting. However, it is still consistent with a known theory about remote workers who migrate (in part) to improve upon their own financial utility by exploiting wage and price differentials. Remote workers have the ability to draw wages in a high-paying region and locate in a region where wages are significantly lower (Wallace 2019, 72). This increase in utility is certainly a concern for the region, which is witnessing early signs of inequality due to the scale of the program.

Perhaps Tulsa Remote’s strongest asset to their short-term success and most consistent with the analytical framework is that they created programming that encourages industry cross-fertilization by partnering with local community nonprofits and encouraging Tulsa Remote participants to serve in leadership positions. However, the explosion of remote workers due to the pandemic and the program’s eagerness to scale up and adopt different programming that focuses on increasing retention has caused this component to be weakened. Tulsa Remote participants are now engaging in insular programming, and it is unclear how this may affect the community. Notably, retention was neither a metric of success born out of the literature nor was it in my original hypothesis. And so, adjusting
popular programming in the name of retention appears to display a strong and surprising component of long-term success.

Another strong component consistent with the analytical framework is that the program clustered the workforce spatially by offering co-working space in Tulsa’s downtown. This strategic move not only enables remote workers a place to congregate, work, and socialize but provides an opportunity for remote workers to build a connection to place.

Lastly, I was unable to secure an interview with current Tulsa Remote administrators and so I have no insight into how applications are being selected or what kind of rubric they are using to admit individuals. The information I have obtained about the cohort is through the Economic Innovation Group’s report on Tulsa Remote and that information was obtained via a survey from Tulsa Remote participants. The information regarding “boomerangs” is the most surprising because it raises the question: would these individuals have moved anyway? And from a cost standpoint ($2.6MM) is a lot of incentive money to spend on someone that already knows the area.

5.3 Tulsa Remote’s Long-Term Success

Findings: Creating an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem and an unclear future.

By the end of 2021, GKFF had created its own economic development ecosystem equipped with 36 Degrees North (a co-working space), Tulsa Remote, Atento Captial (a venture capital firm), Tulsa’s Innovation Lab (an innovation and incubator space), and InTulsa (a recruitment company).

Atento Capital invests in and attracts tech companies to Tulsa. InTulsa finds the talent those tech companies need to succeed [and] gets them affiliated with the local government to help them with other incentives (Participant #5)
This type of investment and coordination by GKFF displays an effort to encourage business start-ups. In a survey conducted by the Economic Innovation Group, thirty-seven percent of Tulsa Remote participants “have at least thought about starting a business in the near future,” and twenty-seven percent of all survey respondents reported actively managing their own business locally or in another city. All of this is to say that GKFF is hoping that these participants, given the tools and resources, will be able to provide a needed entrepreneurship jolt to the city.

In the meantime, economic developers engaging in more traditional industrial targeting are successfully recruiting tech companies. So far, Logistyx, a transportation logistics company, chose Tulsa over Chicago, as did ClearSign, a refining and petrochemical industry company that moved its headquarters from Seattle to Tulsa. Additionally, a software development school with locations around the world, Holberton, opened its newest location in Tulsa.

Though this emerging Tulsa tech scene sounds promising, especially to Tulsa Remote participants who claimed: “Tulsa will be the better Silicon Valley in the coming years” (“Year in Review” 2021), the future of the program is unclear. Interviewed participants had varied responses as to whether or not you continue a program like Tulsa Remote

How do they [Tulsa Remote administrators] continue to engage and support remote workers when they can’t access and support the companies they work for? (Participant #6)

Suggesting that the only way to support remote workers was to continue to offer free events as opposed to helping businesses grow and expand.

This is not a long-term program. What would be the incentive to move an office to Tulsa when you have remote workers all over the world? Why would they need
office space…if we can’t recruit and retain that lower skill at that lower wage, then what are we to do? (Participant #4)

Still, program officers plan to invite another 1100 remote workers to Tulsa by the end of 2022.

Evaluation:

Earlier, I had hypothesized that community support for this program would wane over time due to the over-the-top welcoming of program participants into the leadership folds of the city. However, this negative sentiment may hinge on the program’s ability to create jobs and spread prosperity across the region. So far, GKFF is encouraging entrepreneurship which is consistent with the analytical framework, and Tulsa is creating tech-specific job training avenues through the Holberton school. However, Holberton is a private for-profit education system with tuition costing $85,000 for two years (none of which needs to be paid back until its graduates have found employment). This means that the barriers to tech-specific jobs, regardless of where they are located, are still high. And even with the creation of an entrepreneurship ecosystem, regular Tulsans and traditionally underserved populations (minorities, women, displaced workers) may find themselves left out of this emerging sector in the same way they have traditionally been left out of higher education institutions.

Be that as it may, the coordination between GKFF and its entrepreneurial ecosystem and the recruitment of tech-related businesses could encourage long-term economic growth. This would be consistent with Jacobs’ theory that growth occurs when people build from something else or learn from someone else. And that this process of innovation ultimately impacts socio-economic objectives because new and growing businesses represent the principal source of job creation in any economy. In essence, there is a positive feedback loop
between innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic development, which generally results in job creation and rising standards of living for all.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary objective of this research was to evaluate the Tulsa Remote program, assess its strengths and weaknesses over time and determine if this kind of economic development strategy is a viable option for communities suffering from outbound migration patterns, stagne population growth, or industrial decline. This chapter evaluates the significance of this study’s findings, policy implications, and a discussion on possible future research.

6.1 Discussion

My research found that the Tulsa Remote program shows strong signs of success based on the attainment of KPIs outlined in this paper’s analytical framework. The strengths of this program include, 1) the city’s ability to execute marquee projects through public private partnerships, creating a marketable competitive advantage, 2) the program’s community integration and wrap-around services for remote workers promoted cross-industry fertilization, and civic engagement and 3) the program encourages entrepreneurship through the George Kaiser Family Foundation entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Tulsa Remote successfully attracted talent by carefully packaging various amenities, namely tolerance, entertainment, and consumption for highly educated and high-wage earners. These amenities were recently created and are part of long-term economic development planning. This type of human capital attraction is generally consistent with the literature on talent attraction strategies (Clark 2002, Glaeser 2000, Florida 2004) and that amenities play a powerful role in remote worker attraction programs (Wallace 2019). However, this case study does not prove nor does it expand on any one of these theories in particular. The amenities most recently invested in lean heavily towards entertainment, though a low cost of living seemed to be a powerful driver as well.
This study found that the program’s intentionality, the wrap-around services that integrate remote workers within the greater Tulsa community, and the many networking events and workshops and discounted co-working space are major factors pointing towards long-term success. Consistent with Markusen’s occupational targeting framework, this type of intentionality promotes cross-fertilization of industry sectors which allows the greater Tulsa community the ability to leverage this new human capital in a variety of ways but also creates a space for this group of newcomers to cluster spatially.

Lastly, the shift to create insular programming that mimics what is already out in the community is not ideal. However, it seems like this is due in part to promoting entrepreneurship within the remote worker cohort and also to increase retention. This may be an especially powerful combination in the long-term especially since GKFF has created an entrepreneurship ecosystem within itself, which includes a venture capital firm, an innovation lab, and its own talent recruitment firm.

Two additional strengths to the Tulsa Remote program, not mentioned in the literature, are the size of the city and the program’s timing. With one million residents, the Tulsa region is not small. It is accessible via major highways and railways, boasts a domestic airport with 23 non-stop daily connections, including Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Dallas, and Atlanta, and it has nine internet providers that offer fiber or high-speed internet connections. This suggests that the success of this program may also be attributed to the fact that the program is situated in a major urban environment. Additionally, the timing of the program could not have been better. It was launched prior to the pandemic, which allowed the program to take advantage of the remote worker revolution by establishing itself as the
quintessential remote worker destination. In this regard Tulsa enjoyed “first mover” advantages that other cities have been attempting to replicate since 2020.

Though the Tulsa Remote program shows promising signs of long-term success, it is not perfect. Continued support from the community will be paramount as the program continues to grow, but also because the program is now funded publicly and events are insular. Additionally, more communities will attempt to replicate this program which will create additional competition for remote workers. Tulsa Remote will need to innovate in order to stay competitive. And lastly, the growing inequality due to the influx of this wealthy cohort is concerning. City officials and GKFF will need to investigate how remote workers affect the cost of living and attempt to combat this potential negative effect.

6.2 Policy Implications
If Tulsa Remote has taught us anything, it is that remote worker attraction strategies can work as an effective economic development initiative. This remote worker attraction strategy lured a measurable and footloose supply of human capital to Tulsa and in the short-term, city officials have been able to utilize this talent to bolster workforce statistics and entice industries. And in the long-term Tulsa Remote has encouraged entrepreneurship and innovation which may create sustainable economic growth. Suffice to say the strengths of Tulsa Remote should be and can be replicated, specifically the community integration and wrap-around services component which support cross-industry fertilization and civic engagement. As well as the encouragement of entrepreneurship and innovation which Tulsa Remote facilitates through an entrepreneurship ecosystem.

However, there is one other factor that this case study revealed that seems to have greatly impacted the probability of short-term and long-term economic development success, private funding. Though private funding is not a necessary component to remote
worker attraction strategies it is plus factor for three reasons 1) it allowed the program to scale up, both in program administrators and program participants in order to meet the demand of interested parties. 2) It shouldered the financial risk of an unproven economic development strategy which allowed the program to grow, adapt and develop without public scrutiny. Lastly 3) private funding allowed program administrators to carefully package specific city amenities in order to promote an attractive lifestyle to remote workers. Additionally, cities looking to adopt a similar attraction strategy without private funding should not underestimate the amount of administrative work required to duplicate Tulsa Remote’s success.

6.3 Future Research

Though this research focused on Tulsa Remote, a remote worker attraction strategy based in a mid-sized city with many amenities, future research could involve a comparative analysis of a rural area attempting to attract remote workers and gauge their strengths and weaknesses for that particular cohort. Are there differences in remote workers as far as personal characteristics, job, or skill type who prefer rural areas? Would the same kind of wrap-around services be as necessary? Additionally, because it is an increasing concern in Tulsa, the impact of remote workers on inequality should be studied. How does the concentration of remote workers influence local prices and housing markets? Is there a carrying capacity for remote workers before you start to see the potential negative effects of their presence? Furthermore, boomerang targeting, or targeting of individuals who have already lived in the city should be explored. Would boomerang participants migrate with or without the remote worker program? Would they migrate with or without the cash incentive? And lastly, due to the explosion of remote workers during the pandemic, many of whom find the flexibility of
remote work now paramount to their work/life balance, how are firms responding? Are there geographical restrictions as to how far workers can move? If you sell goods or services as part of your work, how are those goods and services taxed if your work is in one location and your firm is in another? And will firms that offer remote or flexible employment options continue to lease/own or build office space?
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

My name is Kristen Padilla and I am a graduate student at Portland State University in the Master of Urban Studies (MUS) program. And I am conducting research for my master's thesis which focuses on remote worker attraction strategies as a way to create economic development for urban regions. I am writing to see if you would be interested in participating in my research as your current work pertains to this subject.

Participation includes one phone interview lasting around 30 -45 minutes, and is completely voluntary.

Additionally, if you know anyone who would be interested in participating or of whom I should speak with, please pass along my contact information to them. I can be reached by phone at 505-577-5173 or by email Kristen.Padilla@pdx.edu

If you have any inquiries about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Kristen Padilla
MUS Candidate, Portland State University
Kristen.Padilla@pdx.edu
Appendix B
Participation Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research (No Signature)

An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Tulsa Remote program as an economic development strategy.

Kristen Padilla, Toulon School of Urban Studies and Planning, Portland State University
Kristen.Padilla@pdx.edu | 505.577-5183

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below shows the main facts you need to know about this research for you to think about when making a decision about if you want to join in. Carefully look over the information in this form and ask questions about anything you do not understand before you make your decision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Voluntary Consent.</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to involve yourself or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to join in or decide to stop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Purpose.</strong> The purpose of this research is to understand whether remote worker attraction is an effective economic development strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Duration.</strong> It is expected that your part will last no more than 45 minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Procedures and Activities.</strong> You will be asked to describe your role, how it relates to the Tulsa Remote program and whether or not you believe Tulsa Remote has been successful in creating urban economic growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Risks.</strong> We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Benefits.</strong> You may not receive direct benefit by taking part in this study but the study may help to increase knowledge about the effectiveness of remote worker attraction as an economic development strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Options.</strong> Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What happens to the information collected?
Information collected from you during this interview will be kept confidential and anonymous - no personally identifiable information will be stored with your responses. All data collected through this research project (approximately 10 subjects) will be reported in aggregate and is intended to be published as a degree requirement.

How will I and my information be protected?
We will take measures to protect your privacy, by keeping your personal information confidential. Your name and any other personal details will not be revealed in the study. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

To protect the security of all of your personal information, we will upload data and recordings on a secured computer protected by a password. I will delete the digital files off of the recorder once they are securely transferred onto a computer. Interview recordings will be destroyed as soon as they are transcribed. Despite these precautions, we can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information.

Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information. These individuals and organizations include the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research and the faculty advisor of the project Dr. Greg Schrock.

**What if I want to stop being in this research?**
You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to join in any study activity or completely stop your participation at any point without penalty or loss of benefits you would otherwise get. Your decision whether or not to take part in research will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**
There is no cost to taking part in this research, beyond your time.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**
If you have questions or concerns, contact the research team at:

Kristen Padilla  
505-577-5173  
Kristen.Padilla@pdx.edu

**Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?**
The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of the people who take part in research are protected. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity  
PO Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207-0751  
Phone: (503) 725-5484  
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400  
Email: psuirb@pdx.edu
Consent Statement
I have had the chance to read and think about the information in this form. I have asked any questions I have, and I can make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions anytime while I take part in the research.

☐ I agree to take part in this study
☐ I do not agree to take part in this study
Appendix C

Interview Participant Organizations

- Tulsa’s Regional Chamber
- George Kaiser Family Foundation
- City of Tulsa: Tulsa’s Authority for Economic Opportunity
- Tulsa’s Future: Regional Economic Development
- InTulsa
Appendix D

Interview Participant (Semi-Structured) Protocol

[Record] With your permission, I would like to tape our conversation so that I can make an accurate transcript. The tape will be destroyed as soon as the transcript is complete. Is this something you can agree to?

[Continue recording during the interview or stop, per request of subject]

Informed Consent

Prior to this interview, I provided a ‘Consent to Participate in Research’ form. Do you have any questions regarding its contents? Do you agree to take part in this study?

[Continue interview after questions about the consent form are answered and an audible consent is recorded]

[Begin questions] Questions varied depending on whom I was speaking with.

1. Tell me about your role at [insert institution]?
   a. How is it funded?
   b. What are the metrics of success?
   c. Do you report to a Board of Directors and how are those folks chosen?
   d. What involvement (if any) do you have with Tulsa Remote?
2. Where did the idea for Tulsa Remote come from?
   a. Who was involved?
3. How are applicants chosen?
   a. Do you know how applicants here of the program?
   b. How is marketing targeted?
4. How has Tulsa Remote changed overtime?
   i. Tulsa Remote’s interview process was initially extensive, including trips to Tulsa. Given the increase in the number of remote workers is the interview process still as thorough?
   ii. George Kaiser Family Foundation has streamlined programs like “Get on Board” in order to help efficiently place remote workers on
local boards in Tulsa. Can you talk about how those types of leadership positions are offered to Tulsa Remote participants and the pros and cons of that change?

5. How long does the George Kaiser Family Foundation plan to continue this type of recruitment, in other words is there a point in which the foundation might say, we’ve recruited enough remote workers?
   a. How long should the George Kaiser Family Foundation continue recruiting remote workers? In other words, is there a caring capacity for remote workers in Tulsa?

6. To your knowledge how has Tulsa Remote been included in long-term economic planning for the greater Tulsa area?
   a. Was a strong technology sector something that Tulsa always wanted to grow and cultivate?
   b. Tulsa Remote has/is creating a robust tech sector for the region to your knowledge how has this tech sector changed the course of Tulsa’s future economic development plans?
   c. What do you hope for, for Tulsa Remote, and the by-products of Tulsa Remote?
   d. What do you envision for this program 10 and 15 years down the road?

7. What conditions, generally speaking, were in place in Tulsa to make this program so successful?
   a. Can you tell me more about the institutional relationships that exist in Tulsa (Tulsa’s Regional Chambers, the Mayor’s office, PlanitTulsa, George Kaiser Family Foundation?
      i. How much does one influence the other? Who would you say leads policy/ economic development conversations?

8. How would you categorized public support for the program?
   a. Do you think there has been a positive or negative impact on the city due to the program or its press coverage?
   b. Has there been any public backlash to the program from the recently passed “Oklahoma Remote Quality Jobs Incentive Act”?

9. What could other cities and people in similar positions learn from Tulsa’s experience?

10. Do you think there are things now in hind sight Tulsa Remote could have done differently or planned differently?

11. Can you talk about how Richard Florida might have influenced Tulsa Remote?

12. How do you define “talent”?

13. When recruiting business to Tulsa, what metrics do you supply?
   a. What do you consider the core “selling” points for Tulsa that make it a great place to do business?