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Lifestyle

Best Places To Get Ahead

Francesca Levy, 02.01.10, 6:04 PM ET

Professional success often requires some degree of sacrifice. Surprisingly, one of those sacrifices might include moving to the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. Living in Delaware County is, in some ways, a smarter career move than packing up and heading for Wall Street or Silicon Valley.

With three-year income growth of 11% between 2007 and 2009, Delaware County is one of 10 places Forbes found best for professionals to get ahead. The fastest-growing county in the state, it has benefited from both a diverse mix of jobs that has kept the economy strong, and family-friendly neighborhoods that expanded out from the city center.

In Depth: Best Places To Get Ahead

The counties on our list are geographically spread out and varied in industry, but they have one thing in common: They're all suburbs of big cities. But these aren't sleepy bedroom communities feeding off of urban spillover.

"The inner-ring suburbs look very much like their city neighbors," says Lawrence Levy (no relation to this story's writer), executive director of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University. "They look like it physically, racially, ethnically, and economically."

Behind the Numbers

To find the best places to get ahead, we looked at counties where the number of jobs had grown the most between the second quarter of 2007 and the second quarter of 2009 (the most recent quarter for which county-level statistics are available), using data from the U.S. Department of Labor. We factored in the counties with the highest income growth as well, using median household income growth between 2007 and 2008, the most recent year that the data are available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

We limited our search to counties where the median household income was \$75,000 per year or higher, to focus on places where you can earn a solid salary and move up quickly, rather than ones that went from low to average incomes. It's a sign of the times that in many of these counties, job growth was flat or even down, but they still placed high because the drop was more modest than elsewhere in the country.

Fort Bend County, Texas, a suburb of Houston, topped our list. Incomes there have grown 10% between 2007 and 2008, and that's not a fluke based on a small contingent of wealthy residents. The county has also added 5,913 new jobs since the second quarter of 2007, an increase of 5%.

Like the rest of Texas, Fort Bend gets a healthy chunk of its revenue from the energy sector, but it also benefits from a diversity of industries—including education and hospitality—that has fueled several decades of rapid population growth. Several companies on Forbes' 400 Best Big Companies list are headquartered there, including Texas Instruments, Baker Hughes and Thermo Fisher.

Center Strength

In the Midwest, the decline of the manufacturing sector has curbed employment growth in many areas, but some pockets have bucked the trend. Kendall County, a suburb of Chicago, is No. 3 on our list. The area's 90% population growth, from 54,560 in 2000 to 103,460 in 2008, spurred an influx of restaurants, stores and service-industry businesses to accommodate the newcomers. The result: a 7% rise in income and a 3% jump in job growth. Another fast-growing Chicago suburb and No. 6 on our list, Will County, Ill., saw incomes grow by 7% between 2007 and 2008. Carver County, Minn., on the outskirts of Minneapolis, ties Hanover County, Va., for the No. 10 spot, with income growth of 5%.

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If you live on the east coast, your best bet is to head to areas just outside the capital, where a steady churn of government jobs has kept nearby suburbs growing. Loudon County, Va., and Alexandria County, Va., wealthy communities outside of Washington, D.C., saw 4% and 7% job growth, respectively.

If you're driven by sheer ambition, you'll have the best shot at getting ahead in places where industry is diverse enough to be buffered from a decline in any one sector, or areas dominated by education, health care or government.

But even in these places, employment has inched--rather than leapt--ahead recently. Only a handful of the counties we ranked saw job growth in the past three years, and even then, only at an average rate of 2%.

So no matter where you are in the country, the real key to getting ahead might just be holding on until the economic recovery takes off.

In Depth: Best Places To Get Ahead