

Episode #154: Tulsa Pays You \$10K to Move There



Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host
Dr. Janel Anderson**

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Hello, and welcome to another episode of the working conversations podcast where we talk all things leadership, business communication, and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

Would you move to a mid-sized city in the middle of the country to work remotely if you were offered \$10,000, a housing subsidy, a free co working space, and a built in community of other remote workers? All you have to do is bring your own job.

This is the offer that Tulsa Oklahoma started offering remote workers back in 2018. The program called Tulsa remote is not just a program. I think it's a bold experiment in reshaping the traditional notions of work and geographic boundaries.

Five years into the experiment we checked in to see how it's going for the over 2800 people who have opted in to the program. Now in the ever evolving landscape of work where flexibility and remote collaboration have become indispensable, given initiatives, like Tulsa remote, are carving a unique path in the midst of the still raging debate about whether to ever return to the office full time or to work from home full time or somewhere in between.

The Tulsa remote experience gives us a fresh perspective. So let's start with how it all began. Tulsa remote was born out of the idea that talent is not confined to Metropolitan hubs. Now this was still pretty visionary back before the pandemic. Tulsa city with a population of around 400,000 People similar in size to Wichita, Kansas or Omaha, Nebraska. Tulsa has been historically known as the oil capital of the world due to its significant role in the oil industry. Tulsa has a somewhat more diverse economy now and it is continuing to transition from its oil centric roots.

Energy related industries still do play a significant role, but aerospace healthcare, finance and technology have all come on to the scene and have become significant players in the Tulsa economy. The population is racially and ethnically diverse for a city of its size in the Midwest slash southwest area.

The program Tulsa remote in a nutshell, is an incentive package to get remote workers to move to Tulsa. It offers a \$10,000 incentive just for coming and living their housing stipend and it includes membership to a co working space and lots of other activities. So built in community. You have to apply and if selected, you need to live inside the city limits of Tulsa. Funded in large part by the George Kaiser Family Foundation which is located in Tulsa.

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The program aims to attract remote workers to Tulsa Oklahoma by offering financial incentives community support any vibrant lifestyle. You see prior to the pandemic when this program began, there was a significant amount of brain drain on cities like Tulsa brain drain well, that is college graduates whether its medicine and finance or other occupations that require a highly educated workforce. Were moving in droves to cities like San Francisco in the Bay Area, as well as Seattle, Boston, New York, Washington DC, hence, the brain drain on the rest of the country.

Now incidentally, this brain drain pattern was in the works for over 50 years. The pandemic with it working from home or anywhere option had the potential to reverse brain drain and redistribute highly educated professionals to wherever they wanted to live. We're still in the midst of seeing how all of that unfolds. That's another episode.

Anyway, the George Kaiser Family Foundation was established decades ago by George Kaiser who came from big oil money, and he felt a moral obligation to direct some of those resources that he had to the systemic economic inequality that he saw all around him. The foundation's basic mission is to overcome that inequity and make Tulsa a great place to live.

Now, to be fair, the Oklahoma remote quality jobs incentive act through the state legislature also provides some funding and support to the remote Tulsa initiative. Tulsa remote has been successful in igniting a conversation about the untapped potential residing outside the well established tech and business centers in our country. Tulsa remote has not just been a blip on the radar, but a substantial movement, drawing attention from professionals seeking to change.

Researchers also have been watching the experiment unfold, seeing what we can glean about the future of work. Since its inception in November 2018 The program has brought diverse skills and experiences to the city. As of the latest statistics the program has seen a steady increase in participation each year showcasing its resonance with the changing work landscape. It started small with just 70 applications the first year as it got off the ground. And now over 50,000 people have applied and of those who were accepted. 2800 people have actually made the move. Cities benefiting from the program to according to local economic impact report, total remote participants generated over \$300 million in employment income as of the end of 2022.

The initiative has not only attracted workers from various states across the US but he's also captured the interest of international talent. The diversity of backgrounds and perspectives brought by participants has contributed to the program's success.

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So what exactly is it that sets Tulsa remote apart from other programs and attracts potential participants? Well, first of all, there are incentives beyond the norm for remote workers. Tulsa remotes success can be attributed in part to those innovative incentives participants received that \$10,000 grant I mentioned, a housing stipend, and they get free membership in a co working space. Plus there are plenty of community based activities organized for them. So these financial perks and the community provide tangible reasons for professionals to consider Tulsa as their new remote work destination.

There's also a longer term economic payoff for participants. A 2022 Brookings Institution report found that those in the program referred to as Tulsa promoters saw their real incomes go up by an average of \$26,500 a year more than those who had been accepted but had yet to actually move to the area and their productivity did not fall even with the move. Now just 30 on you. Real income is how much money someone makes after accounting for inflation and the cost of living.

Undoubtedly, there's a lower cost of living in Tulsa compared with lots of cities, especially the Bay Area, Seattle, New York or Boston. And you can see real wealth being built by the Tulsa promoters in fact, rent or a mortgage in Tulsa costs about 20%. That is 1/5 of what it does in LA or New York, and is beyond significant in terms of a lower cost of living. And there's a long term impact on others in the area as well.

The remote workers go to coffee shops, restaurants and bars. They play golf and they go to the movies and they have out of town visitors who come and stay in local hotels and rent cars. Tulsa remote estimates that the demand for local services has created over 700 local jobs and added nearly \$40 million to local incomes. That is sizable.

Now, again, I've mentioned some of the community benefits. This program is taking a community centric approach and I think that's a large part of its success. The program does not just stop at financial incentives. It recognizes that importance of community and work satisfaction and well being. Tulsa remote actively facilitates connections among participants through networking events, social gatherings and mentorship programs. Now we humans crave community and it can be hard to build, especially when you do a geographic move to a place where you know no one. We also tend to underestimate how hard it can be to make friends as adults. Tulsa remote has accounted for this with the built in community. This emphasis on community building distinguishes it from other remote work initiatives.

It's probably also responsible for why there's such a strong retention rate among those who have moved there. If you look back to the program's inception, over three quarters

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of the people who move there have stayed on. It creates a model for other cities who are considering doing something like this as well. It serves as an inspiring model for other cities looking to harness the power of remote work.

The success of the program underscores the idea that remote workers can thrive and contribute to local economies outside the conventional urban centers. It challenges the notion that our innovation and talent are exclusive to Silicon Valley or Seattle or New York. Now tell us about is not alone.

Other programs have been cropping up recently. Other locations include Tucson, Arizona, the state of West Virginia and the state of Vermont. They have all launched similar programs in recent years, although the perks and advantages do vary from one place to the next. And Tulsa remote has been around the longest. Now, let's not just talk about what's happening there.

Let's look at what are the implications for the future of work based on what we see happening in Tulsa with Tulsa remote. Tulsa remote is not merely an experiment, I think it is a bit of a beacon pointing towards the future of work, one which can be realized by companies only that are ready to embrace the work from anywhere movement and the remote workers who are attracted to such companies.

And here's why. First of all, it helps with establishing and redefining work life balance. The program has shifted the narrative around work life balance and what it even is by choosing Tulsa as the remote work destination. Participants are actively seeking that balance between a fulfilling professional career and a personal life that has meaning. This sets the stage for broader reconsideration of the traditional urban centric work model. The work from anywhere model recognizes the importance of employee well being without long daily commutes and rigid office hours. Individuals have way more control over their work life balance. And this has the potential to support mental health work life harmony and overall employee satisfaction. And this focus on well being contributes to higher employee retention and potentially to a more positive organizational culture. And one of the cool things about communities like Tulsa remote is that people are in a thriving co working environment where and when and if they want to be rather than working at home all day long, by themselves. Here human need for connection is strong. And when we're surrounded by people who share our values and our interests. It satisfies that deep need introverted or extroverted we all need to feel like we belong somewhere.

And this community base gives remote workers a way to feel that sense of belonging to counter the untethered feeling that some remote workers have. It's also great for talent

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acquisition and retention.

There's a huge benefit for organizations in this work from anywhere opens up a vast talent pool for companies, they can attract and retain top talent irrespective of their physical location, provided that the companies are able to see the advantages and onboard employees effectively as well as trust them to be productive and effective from wherever they work.

Now in order to be successful with their organizational culture, organizations that embrace a work from anywhere approach need to invest in strategies that foster a sense of belonging, effective communication and shared values among remote teams.

Now, of course, the community of Tulsa remote provides some of that itself, but the company that they work for, and this could be many, many, many different companies needs to also have those shared values among their remote teams. Building a cohesive and inclusive culture becomes even more critical when teams are distributed globally or working from various locations even if they're all domestic. This is easier for some companies than others.

Now, there are companies that have been remote since their very inception, such as the US software company Basecamp, and the social media company buffer that went fully remote in 2015. And those companies have the culture all figured out already. And there's lots of other companies those are just a couple I mentioned. Now on the other hand, there are countless companies that went remote during the pandemic and they are ordering their people back to the office.

In order for those companies to succeed with work from anywhere there will be a complete overhaul needed and a redefinition of company culture as well as a significant shift in the meaning that senior leaders assign to geographic place and colocation in general, a shift to work from anywhere requires organizations to adopt innovative recruitment strategies and reevaluate traditional relocation packages, offering a compelling work environment and attractive incentives as demonstrated by programs like Tulsa remote, well, that becomes a competitive advantage. And that can be less costly to the organization of course, then relocating the right job candidate to the company's physical location and it can also be more attractive to the job candidate, so they can stay put if they like where they're already living, or have the freedom to move to their ideal geographical destination, whether that be Tulsa or somewhere else.

There's also of course, economic revitalization which I've hinted at and this goes beyond the workplace into the local economy. Tulsa remote has definitely injected

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vitality into the local economy. Participants spend their money locally supporting businesses and services and again, they bring their friends and family to visit as well.

This injection of economic activity serves as a testament to the potential impact of remote work initiatives and work from anywhere initiatives on the revitalization of smaller cities and towns places like Tulsa. It also brings a diversity of perspectives. The diverse backgrounds and experiences brought by Tulsa remote participants enrich not only the local community but also that of the companies that they work for. This diversity of perspective fosters innovation, creativity and a more inclusive work environment.

Now I think that Tulsa remote stands as a shining example of how forward thinking initiatives can redefine the future of work. It challenges the status quo offers an alternative model that emphasizes community diversity and a balance between professional and personal life.

As remote work and work from anywhere continues to reshape our professional landscape, tells the remote serves as that beacon of inspiration for cities and individuals alike, inviting us to reconsider where and how we work in the years to come. I'll be keeping tabs on what happens in Tulsa. And you can expect another report out at some point in the future.

Remember, the future of work is not only about technology, it's about the values we uphold the communities we build, and the sustainable growth we all strive for. We need to keep exploring keep innovating, and keep envisioning the remarkable possibilities that lie ahead.

As always, stay curious, stay informed and stay ahead of the curve. Tune in next Monday for another insightful exploration of the trends shaping our professional world.

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