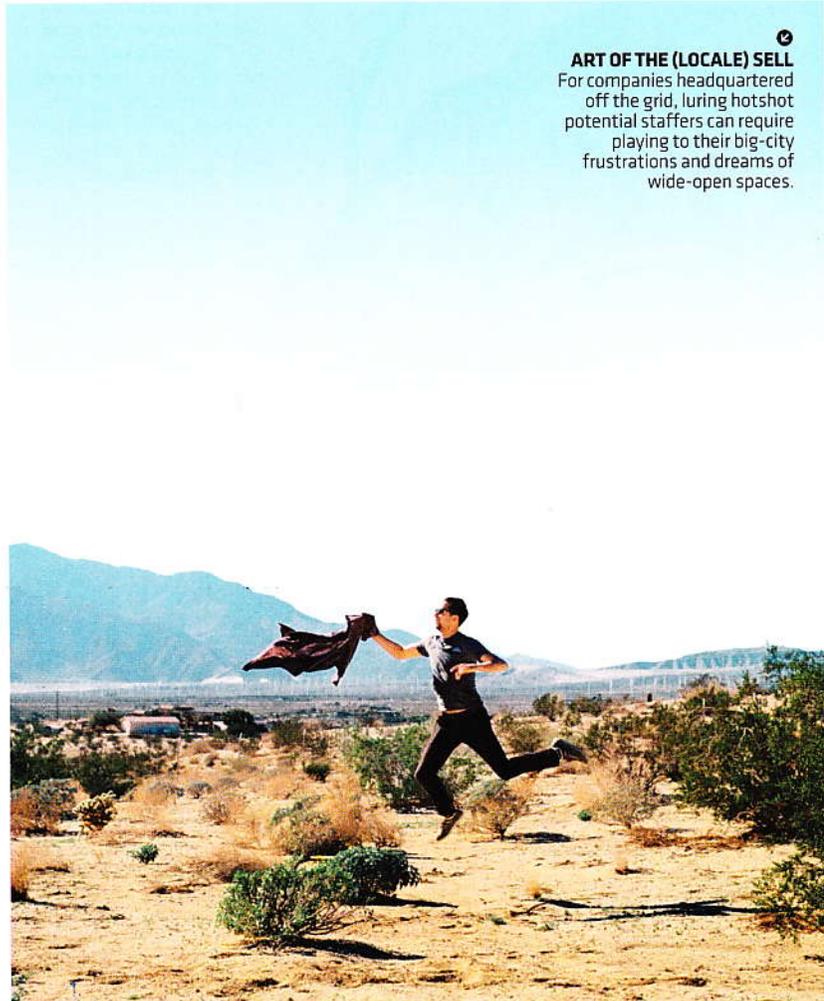


# FINDING A+ TALENT IN A B-TOWN

Recruiting in Silicon Valley or New York City? Easy. Finding all-stars in rural Wisconsin or Tennessee? Flex those seduction skills

**FORGIVE THE BAGS** under John Scribante's eyes. Many entrepreneurs lose sleep over finding top-notch talent, but Scribante's challenge has been especially insomnia-inducing: Hire enough engineers to pivot Orion Energy Systems from old-school manufacturing company to leader in digital LEDs. Oh, and find them in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, population 35,000 (which doesn't include the cows that dot the area's many dairy farms).

"Until 2012, we hired only locally, but as we grew that became a self-limiting proposition," says Scribante, Orion's CEO. "I can find some of the best factory talent in Manitowoc, but I can't find highly talented R&D, procurement, or finance people." As the lighting manufacturing industry has become more technology fueled in the 19 years that Orion has been in business, Scribante has had to face the fact that "there just



**ART OF THE (LOCALE) SELL**  
For companies headquartered off the grid, luring hotshot potential staffers can require playing to their big-city frustrations and dreams of wide-open spaces.

## MOBILITY NATION

The poet E.E. Cummings once wrote, "America is always on the move." Who are we to argue?

**35%**

of job applications are sent from candidates who live out of town.



When new hires relocate to a different county,

**26%** move 49 miles

**21%** move 50-199 miles

**20%** move 200-499 miles

**34%** move 500+ miles



## TIP SHEET HIRING

weren't a lot of people around here to draw from," he says. "We had to get creative."

So in 2013, Scribante blew open Orion's geographical borders, creating a satellite hub in Chicago and picking one up in Jacksonville, Florida. The HR team also made the radical shift to become ZIP code agnostic, hiring the best candidates, regardless of where they lived, to work remotely. Today, nearly 20 percent of Orion's 185 employees

**"Putting a job ad up for paradise is easy. For a job in Johnson City, you've got to romance the entire recruitment process."**

work outside the Manitowoc headquarters, which has helped the \$72 million company attain its goal of becoming a leading producer of LEDs. "We ripped the rug out because we had to," Scribante says. "We had to turn this company around, and that meant finding the people who would get the new vision and come along for the ride."

Some 800 miles south, Jeffrey Bedard, founder and CEO of Crown Laboratories, was facing a similar talent drought in Johnson City, Tennessee. But rather than busting open the pharma company's footprint, Bedard tried to tilt the universe toward him. Attracting scientists and

chemists proved surprisingly easy—"they're less inclined to want to live in a big city"—but prying a hotshot graphic designer or marketing exec from the coasts required psychological jujitsu.

Bedard discovered his ideal talent targets were people who had been living in urban centers for more than five years and had pent-up frustrations and fantasies. "After that much time sitting in traffic in Los Angeles or fighting the New York City subway

and paying high rents, the big-city dream gets old," Bedard says. "If we can get them to come out and visit the Blue Ridge Mountains and tour a \$300,000 home in a great public school district, those are the people we're able to get."

Bedard also realized candidate courtship was a family affair. He now tries to schedule job interviews for Fridays so the prospect's entire brood can tag along for the weekend, with Crown footing the travel bill. He's even cultivated an informal network of town ambassadors—from real estate agents to soccer coaches—so spouses and kids fall in love with the community. In the past year, the \$35 million company has wooed 15 new hires from areas like greater Boston and Raleigh-Durham. "Putting a job ad up for paradise is easy," Bedard, himself a transplant, admits. "For a job in Johnson City, you've got to romance the entire recruitment process." —KATE ROCKWOOD



### PASSPORT NOT REQUIRED

Here are three ways to turn your company town from a liability into an asset.

### BROADCAST YOUR COMPANY'S BRAND

Over the past five years, Otter Products has experienced a massive growth spurt, expanding from 120 employees to more than 1,000. Still, the Fort Collins, Colorado, smartphone and tablet case maker had to develop a broader recruitment strategy. "The locals knew it was a desirable place to work," says HR director Betsy Wheeler, "but we felt like nobody outside the state knew." So she signed up for a survey conducted by the Great Place to Work Institute, which publishes an annual list read by job hoppers nationwide. When Otter made the ranked list at No. 7, the company saw an uptick in applications from across the country.

### MONEY TALKS

How do you boast a tougher admittance rate than Harvard while being based in Lexington, Kentucky? For industrial fan manufacturer Big Ass Fans—which hires just 1.3 percent of all applicants—a key factor is pay. The company says it offers wages that are 20 percent higher than the national average and 40 percent higher than the state average. "We pay more, we offer what amounts to stock options, and every year we pay bonuses to everyone in the company based on profits," says founder Carey Smith.

### HIRE, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU DON'T NEED TO

Most HR departments subscribe to always-on interviewing, but Orion Energy Systems takes it one step further: It recently hired a six-figure-salary manager who lived out of state, even though there was no clear job available. "We'll hire him, then figure out what to do with him," says CEO John Scribante. Not only does it leave Orion open to discovering the best talent; it also forces the company to continuously reevaluate its org chart.

