

BRINGING THEM HOME

Strategies to Tap Into Tech Talent

By **Crickett Gibbons**

Justin Keller and his wife, Annie, traded their \$3,600-a-month two-bedroom apartment in Oakland, California, for a brand-new, four-bedroom home in the Fountain Square neighborhood of Indianapolis about a year ago. After living and working in the Bay Area for seven years, they returned to the Hoosier state, where Keller had initiated his tech career.

He interned for Scott Jones after graduating from Indiana University, working on various projects including the Indy Robot Racing Team in 2005. Later, he joined ChaCha as the first non-founding employee. But after earning his MBA at Purdue University, Keller packed up his car and headed west.

“I wanted to be in the epicenter of it. I wanted to be more challenged. I wanted to deepen my experience,” he recalls. The culture, food, nature and diversity of

activities also attracted him.

Now he’s vice president of marketing at Sigstr in Indianapolis.

Just two months after deciding to leave the West Coast – mainly to be closer to family – the young couple returned to what *Forbes* lists as the fifth fastest growing tech job market in the U.S. (2006-2016) and the second for software job growth (2014-2016), according to Software.org.

The Kellers also contributed to the “techsodus,” or tech exodus, of Silicon Valley.

As cost of living and commute times continue to skyrocket, and tech opportunities expand beyond the country’s coastal corridors, migration has started to shift; more people left Silicon Valley in 2016 than arrived, according to the 2018 Silicon Valley Competitiveness and Innovation Project.

Nick Cromydas, CEO and co-founder of the Chicago-based recruiting firm Hunt Club, confirms that affordability pressures combined with fast-growing tech cultures in other areas – like Indiana – encourage people to consider moving to smaller markets, including back to their hometowns.

“There’s sort of a tide coming where talent is coming back to midwestern cities or smaller southern cities to change their

lifestyle a bit,” he relates. They want to continue working in a fast-growing company and tackle challenging problems, “but not have to worry about having to make a half a million dollars to afford their mortgage and go out to dinner once every two weeks.”

With competition heating up in other markets – Austin, Nashville, Charlotte and Cincinnati to name a few – what can Indiana companies do to attract tech talent?

1. Dig for Hoosier roots

Family is a compelling draw for many, as it was for the Kellers.

A 2014 technology workforce report from TechPoint confirmed that being close to family was frequently cited by professionals choosing to locate in central Indiana. Further, central Indiana companies report that appealing to candidates with an Indiana connection works; 81% of businesses surveyed indicated at least eight out of 10 of their tech employees are from Indiana or have an Indiana family connection.

Cromydas advises companies to search specifically for those with an Indiana connection, whether it is growing up in the state or previously attending a college or university here. Referrals and social media networks often reveal if there is a link.

Chris Gresham, assistant director for employer relations and alumni at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, says he hears from graduates who moved out of state looking to return, but they are selective.

“A lot of times you’ll find that alumni want to come back home. That doesn’t necessarily mean they’re going to take anything. The biggest hindrance I see is finding the position at the right location.”

2. Build relationships

For professionals who are used to being recruited – such as computer scientists, engineers and other high-demand talent – it’s important to go beyond a traditional human resources system, Gresham notes. Having someone that a potential job-seeker can call or email and start a conversation with can make a difference.

“If there isn’t a direct connect, if there isn’t a specific person they can talk to, and



Justin Keller and his wife, Annie, purchased a new home within walking distance of downtown Indianapolis shortly after returning to the area – something they couldn’t have done in San Francisco where a similar home would sell for \$3 million to \$4 million.

they get lost in the HR database of ‘submit application here and wait five months to hear back,’ they lose interest. They move on,” he cautions.

Gresham also suggests drawing on the multiple networks available within a company.

“One of the things we see with a large level of success is the idea of leveraging current employees to network,” he remarks. “Many companies may have a staff recruiter 500 miles away. If they are not open to input from people working on the floor, they are often shooting in the dark.”

The Hunt Club uses a technology-enabled referral system where referrers, called influencers, make direct recommendations if one of their professional contacts seems to be a good fit for a specific job opening.

Cromydas also recommends that every Indiana company have a pipeline of candidates and to reach out periodically to see if there have been any personal or professional changes.

“If you come across a candidate who has been working for eight to 15 years, there’s a strong chance he or she is getting ready to have a family, and this could be a good time for them to settle in a city that will support these life changes,” he observes.

In addition, don’t overlook university contacts, even when searching for mid-level professionals. Gresham recalls helping a company fill an engineering position that had been empty for almost two years. “We featured the position in our alumni newsletter so we could shoot it out to all of our alumni. They ultimately ended up hiring somebody from that.”

3. Highlight opportunities

Offering a competitive salary, benefits and attractive work environment are well-known must-dos when trying to attract talent, but at smaller companies, selling the mission and emphasizing opportunities an employee may not have in a larger organization can make a difference, Gresham believes.

“We find that when a company can go beyond the quantitative data – how much we pay, the number of employees, our retirement (plan) – and they go into the qualitative data of our mission and why we exist and why people want to work for us, I think that attracts not just more applicants, but I think it attracts a better type of applicant,” he shares.

Cromydas notes that tech workers want to solve problems, be challenged and work on projects or for companies they are excited about. It’s important to help them see the possibilities and potential.

Sharing the bigger story may also pay off when potential recruits realize they would join an expanding tech culture with fast-growing companies.

“The strength that Indianapolis has (is) the fact that they’ve got that talent pool that has experienced what it’s like to grow a fast-growing business and are now in that ecosystem and dispersed across many different companies,” Cromydas contends.

4. Focus on quality of life

Affordability and other quality of life attributes are hands-down selling points for Indiana. In San Francisco, the median home value as of June 30 was over \$1.35 million, with median rent at \$4,500, according to Zillow. In the Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson metro area, it’s \$152,800 and \$1,195, respectively.

Salaries are often scaled to account for some of this difference, but not enough to help employees get ahead. A family of four making \$117,400 in San Francisco (officially the City and County of San Francisco) is considered low income by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Personalized community tours arranged by Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction help incoming job candidates and their families learn about the area. Melissa Little (center) and husband Brad, now the president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne, were looking for arts and sports programs for their kids, so the Jorgensen Family YMCA in Fort Wayne was a highlight. Providing the tour are Kelly Werth (left) and Joelle Ruefer with NEINTA and Reecer Properties.



For the Kellers, the inability to build equity in a home also factored into their decision to move. Justin estimates their 2,900-square-foot home – a 10-minute walk to Fountain Square and 25-minute walk to Monument Circle – would easily cost \$1.5 million in the suburbs of the Bay Area. If within walking distance of downtown Oakland or San Francisco, it would fetch \$3 million to \$4 million.

While Justin could walk to a train and then take a cable car to work in San Francisco, Annie spent about three hours in the car every day to commute to and from work.

5. Sell the location

Despite the lower cost of living and quality of life differences, top job candidates – and their families – may not be able to picture themselves living in Indiana. Even native Hoosiers might not realize how areas may have changed since they left or be familiar with other parts of the state.

To help companies overcome that challenge, the Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction (NEINTA) nonprofit provides personalized tours and information for top job candidates and their families in Allen and Kosciusko counties.

“We call it ‘rolling out the red recruiting carpet,’ ” notes founder Lynn Reecer, who also owns Reecer Properties real estate agency in Fort Wayne. She stresses a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work.

Through an in-depth phone interview, the NEINTA team learns about a top candidate’s – and accompanying spouse or partner’s – lifestyle, community preferences and other concerns or questions, such as education options, extracurricular programs or health care requirements.

When Derek Fahrer’s employer, Raytheon, offered him a program manager position in Fort Wayne – closer to his Michigan family and grandparents for their two young children – his wife, Diana, a lifetime New England resident, recalls feeling “a bit of panic about it. ... I knew nothing about Indiana. My biggest fear was if we came to visit

and I didn't like it, we would be giving up the chance to be closer to family."

Touring and talking with Kelly Werth and Joelle Ruefer, of NEINTA and Reecer Properties, reassured her. Werth addressed Diana's concerns about tornadoes and shared information about schools, outdoor activities and places to explore on the weekends. Diana saw firsthand different areas in and around Fort Wayne and learned about the downtown development, miles of hiking and biking trails, shows, popular activities, festivals and much more.

"Fort Wayne came off as a very family-friendly city, which was important for us," she summarizes.

Derek accepted the position and they moved to Fort Wayne at the end of July.

As part of the process, candidates are asked a telling question: In order of priority, what is most important to you in making this decision? The job itself and the offer, how your spouse or partner feels about coming here or how good of a fit this community is for your lifestyle and your family.

So far, no one has placed the job at the top, Reecer reports. In fact, some rank the job dead last.

She contends that this is a new way of being a head hunter. "It's very personal. It is very much like a concierge service. It is kind of match-making, but we are trying to match-make them with this community if we can."

Landing top candidates is about much more than the job and it may mean enlisting help outside the company. The whole family needs to feel comfortable with a move.

"There are so many good jobs out there; it's so competitive, so that's why the whole paradigm has completely changed," Reecer observes.

RESOURCES: Justin Keller, Sigstr, at www.sigstr.com | Nick Cromydas, Hunt Club, at www.huntclub.com | Chris Gresham, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, at www.rose-hulman.edu | Lynn Reecer, Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction Inc., at www.neintalent.org



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