

## **THE LATEST IN DATA FOR SITE SELECTION**

**By Robyn Domber**

Anyone involved in a site search over the past several years has probably noticed a transformation in how things are done. The bottom line is that locationally active companies want and need better information in a shorter period of time. And fortunately, due to the proliferation of web sites offering data critical to the site selection process, it has never been easier to get the information needed to make a good decision. With the expansion and enhancement of data available online, companies engaged in site searches have almost instant access to data that used to only be available locally and could take weeks to collect. Even more importantly, the data now available from many national online sources sites has been standardized, allowing comparisons across any number of geographic areas. The benefit to companies, primarily the increased ability to narrow searches more efficiently, is clear but the expansion of online sources is also easing the burden on economic development groups who serve locationally active companies. While data from online sources is not foolproof, it goes a long way towards improving the efficiency of corporate location searches and, as more data standards are implemented, can only serve to improve the site selection process.

### **The Site Selection Process**

The availability of enhanced data sources online has had the biggest impact on the second step of the site selection process. A site selection typically will involve four separate steps. A company will first define the scope and goals of the project. Second, a company (either a company representative or a consultant) will evaluate various locations and develop a short list of areas that could potentially meet their goals for the project. Following that step, a more in depth investigation of each of the short list locations will occur including visits to each of the short-listed areas. Lastly, the site selection team will conduct a specific property or building search within their preferred community.

By far, it is the second step of the process described above that is the most data intensive and the step that most of the resources in this article are targeted to. Demographics, industry and occupational employment, quality of life, earnings and wages, utilities and telecommunications are just some of the factors that will be taken into account when comparing and ranking various areas. In the not too distant past, corporate location advisors had to rely on lengthy surveys that would be mailed to the state or local economic development group in order to get this information. In the past, a twenty-page questionnaire was not unusual resulting in a data collection process that was lengthy, inefficient and time consuming. And once the surveys were returned, there was still no guarantee that the data supplied would be comparable from community to community. Contributing to the inefficiency of the process was the fact that once all the surveys were returned, the data often had to be manually entered into a spreadsheet before it could be used effectively.

### **The Latest in Data Sources**

All this has changed however, with the advent of several online, national data sources that can provide consistent, baseline information across any number of areas (See Figure 1 for representative web sites). For instance, location advisors could retrieve baseline demographic information from such sites as [www.developmentalliance.com](http://www.developmentalliance.com), [www.acn.net](http://www.acn.net), [www.appliedgeographic.com](http://www.appliedgeographic.com), [www.claritas.com](http://www.claritas.com), or [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov). Cost-of-living comparisons can be made using data from sites such as [www.erieri.com](http://www.erieri.com), [www.accra.org](http://www.accra.org), or [www.homefair.com](http://www.homefair.com). Even historically difficult information to retrieve on a widespread basis such as data on public school districts ([www.theschoolreport.com](http://www.theschoolreport.com)), taxes ([www.taxadmin.org](http://www.taxadmin.org) or [www.taxplanet.com](http://www.taxplanet.com)) and salaries ([www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com)) are now readily available for free or for a fee online. This data, in most cases, can then readily be imported or copied into a spreadsheet, which allows it to be easily sorted and ranked. Ultimately, this allows corporate location advisors to narrow their searches more quickly and efficiently, get more in-depth data on a consistent basis and finally, not have to involve state and local economic development representatives until later in the process.

**Figure 1 –Sample Websites for Data Critical to the Site Selection Process**

<b>DEMOGRAPHIC AND EMPLOYMENT DATA SOURCES</b>	
Applied Geographic Solutions	<a href="http://www.appliedgeographic.com">www.appliedgeographic.com</a>
American Community Network	<a href="http://www.acn.net">www.acn.net</a>
ACCRA	<a href="http://www.accra.org">www.accra.org</a>
Conway Data/IEDC	<a href="http://www.developmentalliance.com">www.developmentalliance.com</a>
CACI	<a href="http://www.infods.com">www.infods.com</a>
Claritas	<a href="http://www.claritas.com">www.claritas.com</a>
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<b>ENVIRONMENT/NATURAL HAZARDS</b>	
U.S Geological Survey - Geological Hazards	<a href="http://www.usgs.gov">www.usgs.gov</a>
Online Hazards Maps from FEMA and Environmental Systems Research Institute	<a href="http://www.esri.com/hazards">www.esri.com/hazards</a>
EPA non-attainment areas	<a href="http://www.epa.gov/oar/oagps/greenbk">www.epa.gov/oar/oagps/greenbk</a>
VistaInfo.com	<a href="http://www.vistainfo.com">www.vistainfo.com</a>
<b>TELECOMMUNICATIONS</b>	
KMI Corp.	<a href="http://www.kmicorp.com">www.kmicorp.com</a>
CDS Mapping	<a href="http://www.cdsys.com">www.cdsys.com</a>
Atlas of Cyberspace	<a href="http://www.geog.ucl.ca.uk/casa/martin/atlas">www.geog.ucl.ca.uk/casa/martin/atlas</a>
<b>SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY SCHOOL DATA</b>	
SAT scores and other public school data	<a href="http://www.theschoolreport.com">www.theschoolreport.com</a>
U.S Department of Education -Enrollment and Degrees Conferred - Post-secondary	<a href="http://nces.ed.gov">http://nces.ed.gov</a>
<b>QUALITY OF LIFE/COST-OF-LIVING</b>	
Realtor.com	<a href="http://www.realtor.com">www.realtor.com</a>
Yahoo Real Estate	<a href="http://list.realestate.yahoo.com/">http://list.realestate.yahoo.com/</a>
ACCRA	<a href="http://www.accra.com">www.accra.com</a>
Homefair	<a href="http://www.homefair.com">www.homefair.com</a>
Monster Moving	<a href="http://www.monstermoving.com">www.monstermoving.com</a>

**TAXES**

Tax Planet

[www.taxplanet.com](http://www.taxplanet.com)

Vertex

[www.vertexinc.com](http://www.vertexinc.com)**WAGES/SALARIES**

Salary.com

[www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com)

Salary Source

[www.salarysource.com](http://www.salarysource.com)

US Bureau of Labor Statistics

[www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)**TRANSPORTATION/LOGISTICS**

Airport Landing Sites by State

[www.airnav.com/airports/state](http://www.airnav.com/airports/state)

Association of American Port Authorities

[www.aapa-ports.org](http://www.aapa-ports.org)

American Motor Carriers Directory

<http://www.cbizmedia.com/amc.html>

The Official Railroad Guide

<http://www.cbizmedia.com/org.html>

Rand McNally

[www.randmcnally.com](http://www.randmcnally.com)

Maps and directions

[www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com), [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com)

This method of gathering data is not without potential hazards or drawbacks. In some cases, a user will only be able to access the data for a fee. Also, if a company is conducting an international site search, they will find that online sources of international data are far behind what is available for the United States. And even in the United States, despite considerable improvements, corporate decision makers still have to assess the quality and accuracy of data online and in some instances, go to the state or community to confirm information received from online sources. Attempts are being made to minimize this issue by implementing data standards such as those recommended by the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). The IEDC is suggesting that all agencies and groups involved in economic development adopt a common set of data fields so that data becomes increasingly standardized across time periods and geography.

There is no question that the increased availability of online data sources has improved the efficiency of and reduced the time needed for the site selection process. But while data is easier to obtain, it's what a decision maker does with that data that ultimately determines the outcome of the process. All the data in the world will not guarantee a good decision unless it's confirmed to be accurate and interpreted correctly. However, the continued rapid acceleration of data sources available online and increased adoption of widespread data standards, can only serve to improve the site selection process.

**About the Author:**

Robyn Domber is a consultant with the Wadley-Donovan Group, a firm specializing in corporate location. Robyn has advised a number of service and manufacturing enterprises on facilities location.