Jobs ‘and’ Amenities: 
Modeling Talent Mobility and Regional Satisfaction

While it is generally agreed upon that talent is a key driver of economic growth, there is a fierce debate surrounding the optimal set of factors that help to attract and retain individuals with high levels of human capital (‘talent’) and mobility. One camp argues that good quality jobs must be present before talent will migrate while another camp argues that talented individuals are attracted to locations that offer a rich mix of amenities such as theatre, musical venues, restaurants, and other opportunities for recreation. In reality, however, the nature of work and what constitutes a ‘job’ is changing and preferences for work are differentiated by occupation, gender, ethnicity, life cycle, and past experience. As a result, understanding the conditions that attract and ultimately retain talent requires a multi-stage analysis. To move beyond the aforementioned jobs vs. amenities binary, Martin Prosperity Institute researchers Brian Hracs and Kevin Stolarick have developed a conceptual model that includes different stages and allows for the expectations and preferences of individuals to evolve over time while taking into account the draw of both jobs and amenities.

Exhibit A: The Model of Locational Expectations, Satisfaction and Mobility
Put simply, the first stage (“Expectations”) involves establishing expectations and the decision to move. Here we are interested in the impetus for relocation and how expectations about potential destinations are formed. For example, do individuals move for specific jobs and educational opportunities or quality of life considerations? In the second stage (“Stages of Locational Satisfaction”) we consider locational satisfaction. As people enter the labour market, look for housing, form networks and explore the available amenities, opinions of place can be formed and individuals can compare their lived experience to their expectations. Stage three (“Mobility Decisions”) considers the outcomes of this evaluation process. If the expectations of a place are met in reality, then the individual is satisfied and will stay in their current location. If, however, the expectations are not met, then the individual can recalibrate their expectations or change their employment situation. The individual may also decide to relocate either within the existing city-region (intra-move) or to a new destination (inter-move). Our findings suggest that this decision is based on the level of dissatisfaction or the discrepancy between expectations and experience. If the discrepancy is minor or moderate, moving to a different neighbourhood that better suits the needs and preferences of the individual might suffice - but if the discrepancy is larger, individuals will leave the city-region entirely.

This model takes three important factors into consideration. First, that regional expectation is subjective and not objective – what is important to one person may not even be considered by someone else. Second, as expectations of individuals evolve over time, the model dynamically allows expectations to change with life-stage or with lived experience. The evolution of expectations, however, does not necessarily imply relocation. Lastly, by using the concept of a ‘trigger’ to bring about the evaluation process, the model is much more in line with reported experiences and observed behaviour than modeling the mover/stayer question using some kind of continuous evaluation process.

Finally, the model helps to generate important policy recommendations. The limited nature of available information and the way it is gathered and used (or misused) points to the limitations of regional branding initiatives. Further, individual expectations and the evaluation of them are important in deciding whether and where to move. Regions need to be aware of how they are being presented and perceived and need to make sure that those perceptions are accurate. It does a region no good to advertise itself as something that it cannot be. Moreover, regions need more than one brand – they need separate, tailored brands for each of the different types of people and families that they would like to attract. In other words, regional talent attraction is not based on a ‘one size fits all’ approach to either economic opportunities (jobs) or amenities.

For an example of this model in action download the working paper ‘Satisfaction Guaranteed? Talent Mobility and Regional Satisfaction’ (Hracs and Stolarick 2011). Drawing on 51 interviews with musicians in Toronto we demonstrate how individuals go through each stage of the model and the types of factors that influence their choice to move to, within or out of Toronto.
The Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management is the world’s leading think-tank on the role of sub-national factors—location, place and city-regions—in global economic prosperity. Led by Director Richard Florida, we take an integrated view of prosperity, looking beyond economic measures to include the importance of quality of place and the development of people’s creative potential.