

Returning companies ripe for picking

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Lee County has golden opportunity to land firms as they come home from overseas locales.

It's called "reshoring": a growing trend for U.S. companies to bring back call centers from overseas locations where the people speak English but can't connect with their American customers.

As this happens, experts say, Lee County's sitting in the catbird seat when it comes to landing the returning operations — which tend to be the more sophisticated and higher-paying ones.

"There is a movement of higher-end consumer and a lot of business-to-business customer service functions over the phone being reshored here to the states," said John Boyd, head of The Boyd Co. in Princeton, N.J., a relocation consultant.

"In India, in the Philippines, there are a lot of English-speaking workers," he said. "These same workers have the difficulty connecting with the caller.

Added to that are concerns about loss of intellectual property, Boyd said. "Companies are concerned about putting digital facilities overseas."

Moreover, he said, the U.S. is becoming more competitive globally as energy costs come down here.

Lee County picked up a number of call centers in the 1990s and is a known quantity in the call center industry, Boyd said.

Reshoring isn't a factor in the Alta relocation, but Randal Mercer, a partner in local real estate brokerage CRE Consultants, said he's fielding inquiries from other call center operators looking to move here.

This area's biggest advantage, he said, is that with operating costs cut to the bone in the recession, it's hard to find further savings.

"What's left is to cut occupancy costs," Mercer said. "And where are the lowest occupancy rates in the United States? Florida."

Lee County, its economy still hard hit by the home construction implosion of 2006, is a bargain for office space even in Florida, he said.

Converting office space to call centers is relatively inexpensive and simple, Mercer said. "You start tearing down walls and making it big open space again."