

Experts say the Triangle still has a shot at Amazon's HQ2 – despite report favoring Boston, D.C.

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Another day brings yet another ranking that tempers the Triangle's chances of winning Amazon's proposed HQ2. This time, New York-based The Conference Board estimates that, based on "real-time labor demand," the Triangle will lose its shot to Boston or Washington, D.C.

To come up with its top picks, The Conference Board studied job types most common at Amazon's existing Seattle headquarters, such as computer occupations, advertising and marketing. The firm then judged that "given the relatively large number of ads for headquarter caliber occupations and the growth rate in those ads, the Washington, D.C. metro area and Boston seem the most likely candidates for a second headquarters."

Ask Jeff Stocks, CEO of executive recruiter the Nautical Group, however, and he says job listings in the Triangle are not only growing, they're being filled.

In his opinion – honed from a resume that includes a CEO tenure at Manpower Group and as co-founder of mobile hiring platform EmployUS – the real-time labor demand his firm has seen makes the Triangle a contender.

"We see it as one of the most robust job markets we've seen in the last three decades," he says of the region, noting that, in addition to securing hires from the local existing pool, employers are successfully recruiting talent from outside of the state. "Look at the quality of life. One of the best things here is that we're able to attract talent ... So I would tell Jeff [Bezos] he should keep us on top of his radar screen."

John Boyd, a New Jersey-based site selection consultant, agrees. He says to take the slew of Amazon rankings available on the internet with a grain of salt.

"HQ2 sites provide a platform for think tanks and consultants and pundits," he says, noting that, in his opinion, the Triangle has the talent recruitment chops to compete.

Stocks' firm primarily works with C-level and management positions. But numbers released as part of North Carolina Technology Association's monthly technology job snapshot show IT positions statewide are growing. NCTA found more than 20,600 IT job postings in the state in March, compared to more than 17,700 postings at the end of December.

IT-related job postings are up, according to a new North Carolina Technology Association report.

Where North Carolina could run into trouble, however, is with incentives, as states have reportedly lobbed mammoth offers at Amazon. The company was in New Jersey last week, a state reportedly offering a \$7 billion package – something North Carolina is unlikely to match. Boyd says he's hearing positive feedback on that visit from officials in New Jersey. That, coupled with Amazon's recent hiring binges in the New York metro area, could make New Jersey a serious contender, he says.

When Amazon's representatives visited the Triangle a few weeks ago, officials said they asked about affordable talent and transit – but that much of the conversation focused on talent.

While talent could work in North Carolina's favor, it's also among the talking points for critics of the state's bid for the project. Some execs have expressed concern Amazon would further tighten the pool, making it harder for existing companies to fill jobs.

A recent survey from Elon University and American City Business Journals, Triangle Business Journal's parent company, shows that while most in the Triangle “strongly support” or “somewhat support” the project selecting the region, it's not unanimous. And 80 percent of those surveyed said they would not be willing to pay more in taxes in order to fund Amazon incentives.

Stocks says concerns about a tighter talent pool are natural, and happen every time there's a major announcement. He points to recent headline-grabbers, such as MetLife, which has been doubling down on its hiring plans in Cary. Following the initial reaction, “things sort of settle down,” he says, noting that the Triangle is an attractive recruitment site for everyone – not just Amazon.

And Amazon isn't the only project eyeing North Carolina. Boyd reminds that both Apple and Google are plotting expansions – and both likely have the Triangle on their radar.