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Whether it's working from home, streaming entertainment or watching retailers go bankrupt, the pandemic has further fueled many trends that were already underway. The outflow of companies and individuals from the Bay Area is likely to get a similar Covid-influenced boost.

Last year saw corporate titans like Charles Schwab, McKesson Corp. and Core-Mark either announce or complete plans to move their headquarters out of the Bay Area, along with a host of startups and smaller companies whose departures don't create headlines. That happened as census data released in December showed California's population in 2018 and 2019 grew by its smallest percentage in more than a century. Other data showed the state and Bay Area losing population during this time.

Now, as cost-cutting becomes an urgent priority for companies laid low by the pandemic's economic fallout, corporate relocation experts expect the impetus to shed the Bay Area's pricey real estate, plentiful taxes and expensive government mandates will become even more compelling. Meanwhile, Bay Area companies like Twitter, Square and Facebook are making working from home a permanent or long-term option for virtually all of their workforce. Those employees can go elsewhere, confident that they can take well-paying jobs with them to places where those dollars will stretch farther. Details for these working arrangements are still being developed by employers.

Some shifts to a remote workforce are more straightforward, such as this month's decision by StitchFix, which announced plans to lay off 1,400 California employees and move those jobs to lower-cost areas.

And it's not escaped notice that smaller and lower-density cities have in many cases done better in avoiding major Covid-19 outbreaks than major metros like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Even though the Bay Area compares well on this metric, it adds a new factor into the mix.

"One of the big stories in the business cycle over the past several years has been the dramatic migration of wealth and business from high-tax states like California, New Jersey, New York and Connecticut to lower-tax states," John Boyd Jr., principal at The Boyd Co., a site selection consulting firm in Princeton, New Jersey, told me. He sees no sign of it slowing.

Shifting center of gravity

Even some of the remaining pillars of the Bay Area business community increasingly appear to be remote-controlled, changing their headquarters in all but name.

The most striking example is Wells Fargo. CEO Charlie Scharf and many of the bank's senior executives are based in New York. Of Wells Fargo's top 15 executives, described as the "senior leadership team" on the bank's website, only four are based in San Francisco, which the bank has called home since it was founded in 1852. Seven are based in New York. Three are based in Charlotte, which has blossomed into Wells Fargo's largest employment center since the bank's 2008 purchase of troubled Wachovia. For those counting, one is based in Portland, Oregon.

"It would almost be malfeasance if Wells Fargo executives did not consider leaving California," Boyd said, telling me that he's putting his money on the bank's headquarters one day landing in Charlotte.

"Charlotte makes a lot of sense," Boyd said. "North Carolina is on a roll, with Charlotte being one of the most successful banking markets today."

The bank says otherwise.

"Wells Fargo will continue to be headquartered in San Francisco," a spokesman for the bank said. "The company has a nationwide footprint, a nationwide customer base, and a workforce of 263,000 dedicated to serving our customers and communities during these challenging times and beyond."

Schwab, too, had been steadily bulking up a Texas operation that came to dwarf its San Francisco workforce long before it made the headquarters change official.

But part of the challenge of civic and political leaders eager to keep companies based in the Bay Area is that relocating a corporate headquarters could simply be a matter of issuing a press release announcing a new hometown.

“The corporate headquarters is one of the most mobile areas of the corporate structure today,” Boyd said.

But even if a headquarters relocation is no longer a big ordeal, it’s still a big deal.

“Companies no longer view the headquarters as simply housing its talent and real estate,” Boyd said. “They view the headquarters site selection process as an opportunity to rebrand the company and recalibrate its image in the marketplace.”

That was evident in troubled e-cigarette maker Juul’s recent decision to move its headquarters from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., reportedly driven in part to distance itself from Silicon Valley’s reputation for growth at any cost.

Texas hails Uber

As Charles Schwab and McKesson were packing up for Texas, Bay Area boosters voiced little concern, pointing to the high-growth companies that continued to fuel the region’s economy. But now it’s some of those high-profile companies that are signaling they may leave the Golden State.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk tweeted in May that the electric car maker was heading to Nevada or Texas. Whether he follows through on such talk is questionable, but Musk’s effort to sell several of his California homes signals he might be serious.

Palantir Technologies, co-founded by Peter Thiel, also signaled it may take its Palo Alto headquarters elsewhere.

Palantir is “getting close” to deciding whether to move out of California, Palantir CEO Alex Karp told “Axios on HBO” in May. “We haven’t picked a place yet, but it’s going to be closer to the East Coast than the West Coast (is). If I had to guess, I would guess something like Colorado.”

San Francisco-based Uber is another company where control appears to be shifting. In Dallas, the ride-hailing company received \$36 million in state and local incentives to build what the company calls a “new U.S. general and administrative hub.”

The new Dallas office will house Uber employees making a minimum average annual salary of \$100,000, working as finance executives, systems analysts, software engineers, salespeople and in other corporate positions.

Uber's shifting public stance on speculation about its San Francisco headquarters eventually moving to Dallas, coupled with intense cost-cutting pressure the company now faces, could signal an increasing likelihood that the company's home base will shift to Texas.

Asked about the prospects of a headquarters move out of San Francisco in late April, Uber spokesman Nick Smith told me, "We'll decline to comment on this."

That's a change from Uber's outright denial of a headquarters move last August, when Smith told me, "We are expanding our presence in Dallas ... but we are not moving our headquarters there, and we don't have plans to."

Work from home 'the new model'

Speculation over Bay Area companies that could move their headquarters out of state occurs as a growing number of Bay Area companies explore another form of remote control: allowing much of their workforce the ability to work from home, virtually wherever that may be. Twitter and Square, both led by CEO Jack Dorsey, adopted permanent work from home policies for their employees in May.

"As larger technology companies go to work-from-home optional mode for the rest of this year or forever, we think we're going to see an exodus. Now, the gaps caused by this exodus may be quickly filled because, after all, this is the Bay Area and folks love living here," said Ryan Gilbert, a serial-entrepreneur-turned venture capitalist at Propel Venture Partners and an early adviser to Square and Dorsey. Many of those considering exiting the Bay Area are people in their late 20s and early 30s, Gilbert said, adding that some of them are thinking about returning to their hometowns, pulled in part by family ties and a lower cost of living.

That could be good news for those cities that don't fall on the short list of popular places Bay Area startups have often chosen as their new hometown or expansion sites in recent years: Namely, places other than Austin, Dallas, Denver and Nashville.

"People are recognizing that where they grew up is not a bad option," Gilbert said. "Cleveland has the potential to rock again, because the kids are going to come home again if this continues.

"I don't think being in the Bay Area is as important as it used to be," Gilbert said. "The Bay Area still has its value, its access to capital, smart people and community, but I think it will be clear that you can build great startups in other places.

"With Jack Dorsey taking a very bold lead at both Twitter and Square, saying it's work from home and this is the new model, I think more and more people are going to take this very seriously," Gilbert said. "This is about Jack realizing that productive employees are going to be productive wherever they live in the country."

It wasn't long before Facebook joined Twitter and Square in allowing employees to permanently work from home. The social networking giant said employees' pay will be cut to match wage scales where they live, meaning the new policy also offers potential cost savings.

Facebook said it's also setting up "hubs" in Dallas, Denver and Atlanta, where employees in those markets can gather for training sessions, team meetings and social events.

"This is probably overdue," Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a post about the company's new policy. "Over the past few decades, economic growth in the U.S. has been quite concentrated, with major companies often hiring in a handful of metropolitan areas. That means we've been missing out on a lot of talented people just because they happen to live outside a major hub."