



## Los Angeles, Calif.

While its taxes and real estate prices are higher than in most U.S. locations, there are several reasons to live in California, says Elhum Vahdat, executive vice president of Apex Voice Communications. Those reasons? Weather, weather, weather, he says, not to mention proximity to the ocean, mountains, national parks, excellent restaurants, museums and the entertainment industry.

Apex, a manufacturer of enhanced services and billing solutions, is located in Sherman Oaks, Calif., a suburb just north of Los Angeles. The company was founded in San Francisco in

1989 and moved in 1991 to its present location to be closer to the majority of its customers. But Vahdat says that business location is not that important to prepaid solutions providers today.



Elhum  
Vahdat

"Providers can easily ship products to their customers' premises from any location," he says. However, its location in the Los Angeles area offers Apex access to a large, technically skilled workforce, many industry trade shows and proximity to many high-tech businesses.

"There is an incredible diversity of industries in L.A.," Vahdat says. "And in the last five years, the number of telecom companies in the area has increased significantly."

Vahdat points out that Los Angeles area residents have access to four major airports. Also, Sherman Oaks is located at the juncture of two of California's busiest and most important freeways. "This location facilitates easy travel in and out of the city," Vahdat states, noting that the company must service customers throughout the U.S. and in more than 75 countries.

"People, on the whole, tend to be relatively laid back here," Vahdat adds. "I want to stay in Sherman Oaks or a similar place — a suburb of a large city — so that I have the benefits of a large city without all its hassles." ▶



Brad  
Schaffer

## And now for a little comparison

(Or one man's search for the perfect telecom town)

The saga begins in 1988 in Wyoming, where Brad Schaffer started in the telecom industry by running a sales division branch office. After overseeing operations in Wyoming, Colorado and eastern Idaho, Schaffer moved on to Eugene, Ore., taking over as vice president and general manager

of a small CLEC. Next came a stint in Vancouver, Wash., then a transfer to Austin, Texas, to which he commuted weekdays for almost a year from the Pacific Northwest. (He points out that he actually lived in Texas for only 47 days.) Schaffer's telecom tale ends in Melbourne, Fla., where he is now director of sales and operations, central region, for iSoftel.

"Because of the growth and changes in our industry, my family and I have been able to experience a lot of things that people living in one region wouldn't be able to experience," Schaffer says. He notes that the telecom industry has exposed him to much diversity, as each area of the country truly is unique.

"The business flavor in Eugene and Vancouver, for example, is completely different than other areas," Schaffer states. "A client's office might be very elegant and nicely furnished, yet if you showed up in anything other than a t-shirt, blue jeans and Birkenstocks, you were considered somewhat out of sync." Schaffer notes that a significant amount of business was done in very casual, off-site, non-work environments.

"The disadvantage to doing business in the area was its distance from a telecom hub. When we were building our network, every carrier we wanted to meet was either in Portland or Seattle. So that caused an economic problem, and we had to build that cost into our price structure to be competitive," Schaffer says.

In Texas, Schaffer also found a casual business atmosphere, however, more business was conducted in traditional office settings than he had anticipated. "There was significantly more structure than what I'd experienced on the West Coast," he states. "In Texas, the importance of personal relationships was very similar to what I'd seen in Colorado and Wyoming. In those areas, you knew every customer on a first-name basis. Most people doing business had known each other for a long time in other business ventures, and they would buy based on the relationship you had, regardless of price. A lot of deals were done not on a competitive basis but on a relationship basis. Part of that is simply the flavor of Texas; you trust your neighbor and relationships are held in high esteem."

Now that Schaffer is living in Florida, he is telecommuting and enjoying the mild climate and proximity to the beach. "I love it here and, better than that, my wife likes it even more than I do," he says.

Regarding his many telecom career moves, Schaffer offers some advice. "People in our industry have to be flexible and quick to react to the changes in the market environment," he says. "Those that are adaptable tend to stay in the industry longer and be more successful." **ICM**