

Work for Audible, Live Rent-Free?

360 View

By RONDA KAYSEN MAY 26, 2017



Deanna Paquette inside her apartment in the newly restored Hahne & Company building in downtown Newark, where she is a recipient of the \$2,000-a-month rent reduction. Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

Would you live in Newark if your boss paid your rent for a year?

That was the question that [Audible.com](https://www.audible.com), the audiobook company, posed to its workers when it announced a housing lottery in January. The 20 winning employees would get \$2,000 a month in free rent for a year if they signed a two-year lease at the newly restored [Hahne & Company building](#) in downtown Newark, a 10-minute walk from Audible's headquarters.

Of about 1,000 employees in the company's Newark and Jersey City offices, 64 applied. In March, the company, which has 16 global locations, expanded the offer, pledging a \$250 monthly rent stipend for a year to any employee who lives in, or moves to, Newark. More than two dozen employees have taken advantage of that offer.

Audible is among a handful of companies around the country offering housing assistance to its workers, although such benefits tend to happen in areas where the cost of living is extraordinarily high, which is not the case for Newark.



The Hahne & Company building in downtown Newark.
Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

For example, Addepar, an investment software company, offers rental assistance for employees in Silicon Valley and in [New York City](#), two pricey markets. A March survey for the [Los Angeles Business Council](#) found that out of 14 large employers in the area, about half offered workers some kind of help with housing, but most programs were reserved for senior staff members and helped with mortgages, not rent. “One of the things that really stresses people out is affording the cost of housing,” said [Jeffrey Lubell](#), the director of housing and community initiatives for Abt Associates, a research and consulting firm. Companies are “going to be in a better position to both attract and retain workers if they can offer a strong housing package.”

The idea that your boss might provide housing has roots in the 19th century, when many company towns were best known for subpar housing and overpriced company stores. By the 1920s, many company towns vanished as Americans bought cars and began commuting. In its prime, a town such as Hershey, Pa., where the chocolate company mowed the lawn for you, “was a way to attract the kinds of workers that you’d want to get,” said Hardy Green, the author of [“The Company Town”](#) (Basic Books, 2010). Today, the company town has been reinvented as the enviable corporate campus, with such technology companies as Google and Facebook luring workers to a home away from home with foosball, masseuses and private chefs, not to mention endless work hours.

But how do you draw workers to a place without much of a draw?

Only about 70 Audible employees working in the headquarters live in Newark, and that number includes those who took the company up on its housing offer. About a quarter of the company's New Jersey-based employees live in New York City and Jersey City and the rest commute from elsewhere in the tristate area, coming from as far away as [Connecticut](#).



A living area in Ms. Paquette's apartment. Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

Many Audible workers suffer through long commutes not because they can't afford to live near where they work, but because they don't want to. So for Audible, the incentive isn't really about money; it's about Newark. "Clearly what they're trying to do is to get people to give Newark a try," Mr. Lubell said.

Audible's founder and chief executive, Donald R. Katz, has been something of a cheerleader for the struggling city, ever since he moved the headquarters to Newark from Wayne, N.J., a decade ago.

Conference rooms are named after notable natives like Aaron Burr, Gloria Gaynor and Shaquille O'Neal. Two years ago, the company helped start an incubator, [Newark Venture Partners](#), to lure fledgling technology companies to the city. And next year, Audible will expand into three buildings on nearby

James Street, including the Second Presbyterian Church from 1811, which Mr. Katz calls a “tech cathedral.”



A bedroom in Ms. Paquette’s apartment.
Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

For Mr. Katz, persuading workers to live in the city is a logical next step now that [developers are pouring money into housing downtown](#). The first project to catch his eye was the Hahne department store at 50 Halsley Street, which underwent a \$174 million renovation to build 160 apartments, a Whole Foods Market and a Rutgers University cultural center. “Young people want to be pioneers,” he said. But Mr. Katz, who is 65 and lives in Montclair, a wealthy suburb about 10 miles away, has no plans to move to Newark anytime soon.

As exciting as it may be to discover a new area, leaving New York for a city that has only recently begun to climb out of decades of neglect is a big change, even if the boss is footing most of the bill for the first year.

“It was definitely a period of adjustment,” said Deanna Paquette, 29, a senior designer at Audible and a recipient of the \$2,000-a-month rent reduction. Ms. Paquette moved in April to a \$2,450-a-month one-bedroom apartment that was twice the size of the studio she had been renting in South Williamsburg for around \$3,000 a month. “I knew I needed to leave [Brooklyn](#) for a while,” she said. “But it was such a big jump.”

For Ms. Paquette, the biggest hit has been to her social life. “If you step out at 9 p.m. on a Saturday, there’s not a ton going on the way there was in Brooklyn,” she said. No longer can she text her friends and immediately meet one somewhere in the neighborhood.

The move has had another significant impact on her life — nearly eliminating her commute. Now, rather than spending two and a half hours a day on subways and PATH trains, she spends about 20 minutes walking to and from the office. Already, Ms. Paquette cooks more at home and has taken on more volunteer opportunities with the company.

Audible didn’t decide to help pay the rent because it was concerned workers spent too much time in transit. Yet this unintended consequence may be the one that delivers the biggest impact. Moving a few dozen workers to Newark isn’t going to save the city. But reducing commute time could drastically improve a worker’s quality of life. The hours we spend each day sitting on trains, buses and in our cars contributes to our collective misery. Anyone who has ever had an hourslong commute knows that time spent in transit means less time to do things like go to the gym, hang out with friends or even just pet the cat. Shorten your commute and odds are you’ll be happier and healthier.

“Next to housework, the thing that we most dependably hate about our daily lives is our commute,” said Dan Buettner, the author of [“The Blue Zones Solution: Eating and Living Like the World’s Healthiest People”](#) (National Geographic, 2015). “To virtually eliminate our commute is probably one of the best things Mr. Katz could have done to improve the lives of his employees.”

When Amy Garas, 36, the executive assistant to Audible’s chief financial officer, entered the housing lottery, she was thinking about the two hours she spent in her car each day driving back and forth from her apartment in Somerset County, N.J. “If I didn’t work at Audible, I don’t know if I would have been so eager to move” to Newark, she said. “But having a really great commute was a huge selling point.”

Since she won a spot in the Hahne building, she has spent time exploring her new surroundings. Among her latest finds: an alcoholic milkshake at the [Tops Diner](#) on Passaic Avenue in East Newark. She has a long list of things she plans to do with that extra daily two hours of her life she just got back. “It’s been more of a game changer than I realized it would be,” she said.