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U.S. firms need all the technical talent they can get

By Stuart Anderson

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American companies do not hire skilled foreign nationals for “cheap labor,” as critics like Gene Nelson allege (they must be paid the same as comparable Americans), but because they represent a key part of the global labor pool for technical talent.

For large companies, U.S. immigration policies dictate whether these talented people are hired to create jobs and innovations here in the United States or in offices overseas. The lack of an available visa means smaller companies may lose out on hiring a key foreign-born individual needed to grow the company.

U.S. companies hire as much talent as possible, primarily Americans. Government data show that nearly all companies in the United States employ 85 to 99 percent Americans, or permanent residents who can become Americans.

But when U.S. employers recruit on college campuses, they find foreign nationals often make up half or more of the graduates in the fields in greatest demand, such as computer science and electrical engineering.

H-1B visas are important because they are essentially the only way international students at U.S. universities and outstanding individuals seeking to come here from abroad can stay and work in the United States long term. These temporary visas, which are renewable after three years, are generally good for six years.

In April, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced it received more than enough applications for H-1B visas to fill its quota of 65,000 for fiscal 2009 (which starts Oct. 1), as well as enough applications for the additional 20,000 H-1B slots reserved for foreign nationals with advanced degrees from U.S. universities. This marks the fifth year in a row that the H-1B quota had been reached before the fiscal year started.

One of the myths surrounding H-1Bs is that Indian companies get most of them, even though U.S. government data show Indian-based firms received only about 10 percent in 2007. In fact, more than 25,000 individual U.S. employers hired skilled professionals on

H-1B visas in 2007, according to the immigration service.

An employment-based green card is necessary to stay in the country permanently and later become a citizen. A separate quota for green cards (permanent residence) for skilled immigrants is set at 140,000 a year.

That quota has also been insufficient to meet demand. Typically, a skilled immigrant now has to wait five to 10 years for a green card, causing some to give up and others to not even begin the process.

Recent research from the National Foundation for American Policy found that major U.S. technology companies today average more than 470 U.S.-based job openings for skilled positions (bachelor's degrees or above), while defense companies have more than 1,265 each.

Another NFAP study found that contrary to concerns that skilled foreign nationals harm the job prospects of Americans, H-1B visa holders are more likely to complement U.S. workers and create jobs.

The study found that for every H-1B position requested with the Department of Labor, U.S. technology companies increased their employment by five workers. Many U.S. executives confirm this experience at their own firms.

Congress should increase the H-1B visa cap, address the large pent-up visa demand and not count those who have received a master's degree or above against the annual quota. Lawmakers should also significantly raise employment-based immigration quotas (green cards) for those seeking to stay here permanently, such as through legislation recently introduced by Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif.

Adopting these measures would place U.S. companies in a more competitive position internationally and set America on the path to maintaining its edge in innovation and job creation in the 21st century.

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