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Stingy immigration policy stifles U.S. innovation

By Lezlee Westine and Scott McNealy for USA TODAY

What do the founders of Intel, Sun Microsystems and Google — Andy Grove, Andy Bechtolsheim, Vinod Khosla and Sergey Brin — have in common with Albert Einstein and Wernher von Braun? All are part of America's tradition of welcoming talented immigrants who have made significant contributions to our industry.

Einstein changed the way we look at science and energy; von Braun was the father of the U.S. space program; and Grove, Bechtolsheim, Khosla and Brin are among the many giants who have changed the high-tech industry.

The innovative companies they built created thousands of jobs and have a combined market cap of \$250 billion. But our longstanding tradition of being an open door for innovation is at risk.

Today's broken immigration system closes the door on foreign-born innovators. With arbitrary visa limits and clogged processing, opportunity is knocking at our door and we're fumbling with the keys.

It wasn't always this way. Several of our nation's Nobel laureates are foreign-born. The past half-century of scientific research success that has made our universities the beacon of innovation would not have occurred but for the contributions of foreign-born students. And the efforts of Grove, Bechtolsheim, Khosla and Brin alone have generated thousands of U.S. jobs and hundreds of millions in U.S. tax revenue.

So why the conflict between our laws and our policy?

First, the world is catching on to the job-creating benefits of a strong math and science education. China and India are graduating hundreds of thousands of engineers each year. In addition, they and other nations have established generous tax incentives to lure research and development into their countries. These factors have made the competition for talent global.

Second, our past success breeds the potential for the next "big thing" in fields such as biotechnology, nanotechnology and biophysics. By 2012, it's projected that the demand for technical jobs in science and engineering will increase by more than 25%, and 39% in math and computer science. Factor in the tech rebound, and the need will be even greater.

What happened the last time we saw demand for these professionals soar? Congress created a visa program for immigrants who had unique technical knowledge, a bachelor's degree and a job offer in the USA.

Under the current system, the federal government provides 65,000 H-1B visas each year, beginning Oct. 1. Yet the visas made available last October were spoken for almost two months before that, which means our open door for innovation is temporarily closed for 14 months.

For foreign-born students graduating from a U.S. college in June, the H-1B limitations make it difficult for them to find jobs here. We're even closing the door on those with H-1Bs visas who seek permanent U.S. residency because of extended delays in a system designed largely in 1990, when our workforce and economic needs were different.

For the U.S. high-tech community, these laws present a difficult choice: Innovate or perish. If we can't find professionals to do the job here in the USA, many will simply move the job to the qualified workers overseas.

A new study by the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a non-profit organization, has concluded that the laws are forcing good-paying, job-creating positions offshore. We know that the long-term solution is investing in educational programs in math, science and engineering. But we won't see the fruits of those investments for at least a decade.

In the short term, we should align our immigration laws with our economic needs. What Congress does now will determine whether our nation stays competitive in the global economy. Without innovation, we have nothing.

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