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Trump Models for Open Borders

The candidate flip-flops on H-1B visas, but as a businessman he knows their value.



By L. Gordon Crovitz

“I’m on a 1 visa—‘extraordinary abilities,’ ” the Swedish model says, rolling her eyes: “ ‘Extraordinary ability’ is not really what models are. That’s what I think at least. So it’s kind of a tricky situation.”

The young woman, in an interview with the new [Heat Street](#) website, was referring to the H-1B work visa for “exceptional ability in the sciences, arts or business.” She is represented by [Trump Models](#), one of 250 women for whom Donald Trump’s agencies sought such visas, according to Reuters. Heat Street reports that most of the women represented by Trump Models were born outside the U.S., including Mr. Trump’s wife, Melania, who came to the U.S. from Slovenia on an H-1B.

Mr. Trump’s signature campaign pledge is closing borders. Last week, his new top adviser, Paul Manafort, told the Republican National Committee that the candidate has been playing a role and not to believe everything he says.

“When he’s out on the stage, when he’s talking about the kinds of things he’s talking about on the stump, he’s projecting an image that’s for that purpose,” Mr. Manafort said. “The part that he’s been playing is evolving into the part that now you’ve been expecting. . . . The image is going to change.”

On the work-visa issue, it has already been changing, more or less constantly. Last summer the Trump campaign issued an immigration plan opposing H-1B visas. It includes this criticism: “[Mark Zuckerberg](#)’s personal senator, [Marco Rubio](#), has a bill to triple H-1Bs.”

Mr. Trump was asked in the March 3 presidential debate if he stood by his opposition to these H-1B visas. “I’m changing,” he replied. “We need highly skilled people in this country. . . . We do need in Silicon Valley, we absolutely have to have.”

He added: “One of the biggest problems we have is people will go to the best colleges, they’ll go to Harvard, they’ll go to Stanford, to Wharton, as soon as they are finished they get shoved out. They want to stay in this country. They want to stay here desperately. They are not able to stay here. For that purpose, we absolutely have to be able to keep the brain power in this country.”

Within hours Mr. Trump had changed again, saying in a statement: “I will end forever the use of the H-1B as a cheap labor program and institute an absolute requirement to hire American workers first for every visa and immigration program. No exceptions.” In another debate, on March 10, Mr. Trump called H-1B visas “very, very bad for workers.”

That’s nonsense. For companies, it wouldn’t be worth the expense of filing for visas if there were Americans available for the jobs. The labor isn’t cheap, either: Engineers holding H-1Bs earn an average of 10% more than the national average.

The H-1B visa is critical for Silicon Valley to keep its innovative edge by recruiting and retaining the best talent. The annual nationwide cap of 65,000 H-1B visas is a fraction of qualified applications. This year it was filled in five business days.

Even with restrictions, immigrants founded 44% of Silicon Valley companies—**and most of the startups that are now worth more than \$1 billion.** Congress has been willing to expand visas for skilled workers and attach a green card to every advanced degree in science or technology. But President Obama has held these reforms hostage to full immigration-reform legislation.

Many Americans remember a Republican president who spoke eloquently about an ideal that was the opposite of closing borders and putting up walls. This is how Ronald Reagan—the last president to get broad immigration reform passed—concluded his farewell speech in 1989:

“I’ve spoken of the ‘Shining City’ all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That’s how I saw it and see it still.”

Mr. Manafort’s claims notwithstanding, it’s hard to imagine Mr. Trump playing the role of Reagan on immigration. But the story of Trump Models demonstrates that, in real life at least, he understands the value of an open door.

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