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Lift Visa Restrictions for Professionals

By Stuart Anderson

In Utah and the rest of the United States, one can see that America's technological and scientific edge has been gained by our openness to talent from around the globe. A congressional proposal to exempt 20,000 advanced-degree graduates of U.S. colleges from current restrictive visa limits on foreign-born professionals, which could be acted upon in a lame-duck session, would enhance innovation and keep more jobs in the United States.

While the tech downturn and national security concerns have tightened U.S. policies on student visas and employment-based immigration, excessive restrictions could doom the country to mediocrity in science and technology. Today, half of the engineers with Ph.D.s working in the United States are foreign-born, according to the National Science Foundation.

However, future talented contributors are today being prevented from coming to America by Congress' failure to raise the annual ceiling of 65,000 on H-1B (professional) visas, resulting in months-long delays for employers hiring skilled professionals.

In fact, the immigration service says it already received enough applications in October to reach the 2005 cap. If, unlike in previous sessions, Congress never raises the ceiling, then backlogs will result in yearlong waits, causing many employers to place prized employees outside the United States.

Moreover, if post-graduation employment in the United States becomes, in practice, impossible, then many international students will likely abandon plans to study in America, diminishing our place as the world's beacon for the most talented.

Unfortunately, some critics seem to welcome such a development, arguing that a policy of "natives only" in high-tech will bring more employment opportunities for U.S. citizens. This is shortsighted. If U.S. employers are not allowed to hire skilled professionals inside the United States, there is no doubt they will hire them in India, China or elsewhere.

Critics would say, "We can solve that by stopping offshore outsourcing." Do they suggest that America will or should adopt a policy of autarky, or economic self-sufficiency? Simply put, the insular model of no trade and no immigration followed by Burma and North Korea is not the pathway to prosperity.

Some argue that U.S. employers only want H-1B visa holders because they work cheaper. However, National Science Foundation data show negligible salary differences between the native and foreign-born in science and engineering. A 2003 study by Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta economist Madeline Zovodny found no evidence H-1B visa holders lowered the wages of native IT professionals. The wage differential between a U.S. professional and one working in India and China can be 4:1 or higher, making concerns about the salaries of U.S.-based H-1B visa holders seem mild by comparison.

Talented and driven people still want to study and work in America -- if we let them. When immigrants are allowed to come to the United States legally and stay, the nation also, in many cases, gains the future skills of outstanding children who become U.S. citizens.

Exempting 20,000 international student master's and Ph.D. recipients from H-1B visa limits is a modest proposal, perhaps too modest in terms of the numbers needed to prevent large backlogs. Congress could go further. One way to increase falling international student admissions without compromising security would be to eliminate or modify the current U.S. consular practice of denying entry to international students if a consular officer thinks the individual might later work in the United States.

Such a policy is ironic, since we hope the most capable international students stay in America and add their talent to our scientific, educational and technical base.

Many outstanding immigrants, including a significant number of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, first came to

America as international students. In fact, without a welcoming posture toward international students and high-skilled immigrants, Google, eBay and many other successful high-tech companies employing thousands of Americans would not exist today, at least not in America. History shows that in the global competition for talent, America gains from openness, not restriction.

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