

U.S. Economy Needs Skilled Foreign Workers

by Deborah Notkin

The recent debate over immigration policy commonly depicts immigrants as undocumented, uneducated people who flood our borders without inspection.

Although many immigrants who enter this country are unskilled laborers who provide essential services in many sectors of our economy, of equal importance to the immigration debate are the highly educated foreign professionals whose skills play a vital role in the enrichment of our economy.

The U.S. economy has shifted significantly over the past 50 years. We are no longer the blue collar nation that we once were. The transformation from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy has created a growing demand for skilled technical workers. This demand has been accompanied by a decline in the number of native-born students seeking degrees in the fields of science, engineering and technology.

Our prestigious graduate institutions currently train more foreign nationals than U.S. citizens in these fields. To alleviate labor shortages, U.S. businesses must be able to recruit and hire additional foreign-born professionals.

We must retain the educated professionals whom we have trained internally in order to benefit from the unique skills that they possess. By sending the best and the brightest workers back to their respective countries, we only create competition for ourselves, thereby diminishing America's economic clout.

In order to increase the number of highly skilled professionals in this country, it is necessary to reform the employment-based immigration system and provide a sufficient amount of avenues through which U.S. businesses can legally employ specialized workers. We must increase the number of specialized worker visas awarded.

H-1B visas, or temporary skilled worker visas, are currently capped at only 65,000 annually. Yet, this "cap" is reached in a couple of months, and U.S. businesses are barred from hiring foreign-born professionals for the remainder of the fiscal year.

At the same time, we must increase recruitment and training of U.S. students. H-1B visas accelerate this process; a hefty portion of the processing fees for the H-1B visas are directed to the education and training of U.S. students in science and technology.

It is important that skilled workers are not overlooked in the current debate regarding comprehensive immigration reform. Raising the H-1B visa cap is vital to maintaining our leadership in the world market. By retaining foreign nationals, we may ensure that U.S. businesses have the most highly qualified workers in their fields, helping America maintain its edge in an increasingly competitive global economy.

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