Execs favor easier immigration for skilled workers

(Moneywatch) The overwhelming majority of U.S. businesses favor immigration reform that would make it easier for people with science and other technical expertise come to the U.S., according to a new survey. But that consensus appears to break down when it comes to immigrants without those skills or those who have entered the country illegally.

The Duke University/CFO Global Business Outlook survey found that 88 percent of chief financial officers at more than 500 U.S. companies favor switching from the current lottery system of immigration to one based on merit. For corporate executives, such merit appears to mean having the right set of professional skills.

Slightly more than 80 percent of the polled CFOs think foreign undergraduate students working on degrees in science, technology, engineering or math should have easy access to the H1B work visas. These temporary permits allow internationals to stay in the U.S. as long as they are employed by the company that sponsors their stay.

Nearly as many executives think the government should make it easier for those with or pursuing advanced degrees in these topics to become permanent U.S. citizens. Some 78 percent say people with these qualifications should have "easy" access to "green cards," according to the survey.

While the survey did not directly ask about the status of less-skilled workers, it did ask executives to respond to the question, "From the perspective of your company, what is the most important change that should be made to U.S. immigration policy?" Those comments, which were given anonymously, suggest that senior business execs are as divided about this as the rest of America. Among the responses to the survey:

- "In the Midwest, we have a shortage of workers. I would like to see a streamlined process that allows a qualified immigrant to obtain valid work permit. The lack of available labor is hindering manufacturers, construction companies in the Midwest."

- "Make employees in agriculture legal and allow them to work here and tax them and treat them like any other citizen except for voting."

- "Immigrants must have gainful employment within six months of entry."

- "Deport all illegal aliens. Tighten up e-verify. Strengthen [the Department of Homeland Security]."

- "The first step should be to fully control and protect our borders before any other action is negotiated or accepted."

- "Decrease the time required to process citizenship, but enforce the requirements."

- "Have a rational policy to admit immigrants, with a five-year provisional visa to allow them time to learn the language and citizenship requirements prior to taking a naturalization test. If they pass, they become citizens. If they don't pass, give them free passage back to their home country."

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