

Brain trust: Americans can't pass on world-class talent

Editorial

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Right now, there are 1 million doctors, scientists and computer wizards clamoring to add to the U.S. economy. Employers are desperate to hire them. But the United States, which lacks enough native-born workers with this level of skill, can't decide if it's worth accepting them from abroad.

As a result, these proven talents founder in immigration limbo, waiting as long as eight years to get permanent residency in a country that already makes use of their achievements. According to a study released in August by researchers at Duke and Harvard universities, restrictions on visas and permanent residency for highly skilled immigrants threaten to forgo human capital we can't afford to lose.

Every year, those 1 million skilled workers must compete for 120,000 green cards.

They might have had little choice in the past, but many of these workers now have attractive alternatives. Some are already giving up on the United States, taking their talents back to their newly dynamic home economies, such as India and China. While those countries still can't offer the resources and job opportunities of the United States, the cost of living is cheaper, and the workers don't have to live on pins and needles for years, wondering what country to call home.

Instead of fueling the U.S. economy, they will instead take the training they gained during their American stints and stoke rival businesses overseas.

Earlier this summer, the Senate short-circuited immigration reform amid national furor over the fate of 12 million illegal aliens. Most of those low-skilled immigrants will continue to live here, raking our lawns, building our houses and nurturing our children. They have little opportunity back home and abundant takers for their services here.

But reform's failure slammed the door on a more urgent crisis: the competition for immigrants whose skills determine their employers' success — in whatever country they work. A comprehensive reform would have boosted the number of temporary and permanent residency slots for this talent.

Skilled immigrants' productivity while working in the United States is staggering. In 1998, foreign nationals here invented or co-invented the technology for 7.6 percent of our international patent applications.

Last year, these immigrants invented or co-invented 25.6 percent of the products for which patents were filed.

Is this brainpower we want or can afford to send to our rivals?

Some technology workers, it's true, support our stunted quotas:foreign-born talent, they argue, lowers the wages and discourages U.S. kids from studying technology. But vision, drive and skill generate ripple effects, making more jobs and increasing prosperity for everyone. Meanwhile, at the highest echelons of industry, employers will choose whichever workers give them a competitive advantage.

Interestingly, one of the authors of the Duke/Harvard study also argues against expanding temporary visas.

These workers-in-limbo pose little danger of becoming public charges here. Our immigration system instead should treat them as the assets they are, increasing both temporary visas and the green cards to lure them.

We want these workers. They strengthen us. As more employers and local leaders warn about the consequences of losing them, Congress needs to change the quotas now freezing them out.