

# Employers divided over immigration reform

## Some say there is a need for more high-tech immigrants, others fear paper work nightmare.

By Dianne Solis  
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DALLAS — Azam Mirza delighted in a U.S. Senate immigration bill that would almost double the number of visas for skilled workers. The electrical engineer from Hyderabad, India, was once a beneficiary of such an H-1B visa and is now president of a technology staffing company in Dallas.

The same legislation worries Arcilia Acosta.

Claudia Mirza and her husband, Azam, run Akorbi Consulting in Irvine. They support raising the number of visas for skilled workers because 'it will allow us to avoid so much outsourcing,' she said.

The Texas-born chief executive of a Dallas construction firm fears that there could be cascading problems caused by a proposed program that would require employers to verify Social Security numbers of job prospects with a government database.

Employers, particularly in immigrant-heavy states such as Texas, are voicing support and concern as they review bill provisions that affect who and how they hire.

President Bush is pushing for compromise legislation that not only toughens enforcement at the border and in the workplace but also provides a legalization path for immigrants already in the country and a guest worker program for future migrants.

A Senate version of the immigration bill increases the highly sought-after H-1B visa allotment from 65,000 to 115,000 annually. The Senate measure also provides for an escalation of visas if the cap is reached.

When Mirza was here on an H-1B visa, he would not have wanted the added competition of more H-1B holders, he said.

"But now, as a businessman, I am happy about this," he said. "More H-1Bs will help us."

Mirza works at Irvine-based Akorbi Consulting, which he runs with his Colombian-born wife, Claudia, the CEO.

"This is positive because it will allow us to avoid so much outsourcing," Claudia Mirza said.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services says all available H-1B visas have been taken for upcoming fiscal 2006-07, which starts Oct. 1.

The H-1B system draws fire from many engineers born in the United States and other critics, who say it takes jobs from them and drives down wages.

But among those lobbying for the increase have been tech billionaire Bill Gates and Texas Instruments Inc., said lobbyist Sandra Boyd, vice president of human resources policy at the National Association of Manufacturers.

"Unless Congress acts this year, there will be no access to highly educated foreign nationals, no matter how talented, how educated they are, until October 1, 2007," Boyd said. "It is a 15-month blackout, and it demonstrates the real need for reform."

But at construction firm Carcon Industries & Construction LLC, Acosta has several concerns about the legislation.

"There are huge implications with this bill," Acosta said. "I can't even imagine the amount of paperwork there is going to be."

At the heart of her concern is the fake-document industry. It ballooned after 1986, the last time Congress overhauled the nation's immigration laws.

For the first time, the 1986 law made it unlawful for employers across the nation to knowingly hire illegal immigrants; they had to check various documents as proof that a job prospect had legal work authorization.

The proposed employee verification system would essentially build on an existing program known as Basic Pilot that is voluntary.

Since late 1997, Basic Pilot has allowed businesses to verify a worker's status using databases from the Social Security Administration and the Department of Homeland Security, created after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

There are 6,200 employers participating in Basic Pilot at 25,000 job sites. There are almost 23 million small-business employers in the United States.

"This is a pilot program. It is not something that we have aggressively promoted in the business community," said Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which runs the program with the Social Security Administration.

An electronic employee verification program would become mandatory under both the House and the Senate versions of the bill.

The House version requires employers to participate within three to six years. The Senate version requires employers to participate within 18 months.

To get the Homeland Security Department ready for the expansion, the agency has proposed a budget increase of \$134.9 million for the next fiscal year, Saucier said.

But there are still many unanswered questions.

At the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Angelo Amador, director of immigration policy, is comparing the two versions of the immigration bills, looking for ways they can be improved and harmonized. For example, the Senate version has "more reasonable" tiers of fines, Amador said.

Other concerns are that the electronic verification system would not have an accurate database and that there would not be a quick and reliable recourse for the employer, Amador said.

The Latin American tradition of using two last names can cause problems for Latinos. If the names are reversed, a Social Security number can come back invalid, Amador said.

"We continue to say that if there is going to be accountability on the business sector, there should also be accountability on the part of the federal sector," Amador said.