

H-1B visa cap reached in record time

Haven't sent in your visa application yet? Don't bother

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The federal government ran out of H-1B visas yesterday when the 65,000-visa cap was reached -- on the very first day that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) began accepting visa applications.

The agency received a huge number of applications for the guest worker visa, about 150,000 by yesterday afternoon, the federal agency announced today.

That number is a record; never before has the USCIS received so many applications so quickly for its allotments of H-1B visas. Immigration attorneys late last week were warning that companies were worried about the expected demand for the visas and were moving quickly to apply for them. Many attorneys representing those firms predicted that the visas would disappear quickly -- and their forecasts proved right.

The main visa cap is set at 65,000 for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1; there's also an additional 20,000 visas available to foreign nationals who have graduated from U.S. universities with advanced degrees.

The USCIS had extra staff on hand to deal with the volume of mail and couriers that arrived with visa applications from companies seeking foreign workers.

Companies won't know for a while whether their H-1B applications have been accepted, and a good measure of luck will be involved. Because the visa cap was exceeded on the first day, in one fell swoop, the USCIS will take all of the applications and use a computer-generated selection process to randomly determine which applications are selected, said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the agency.

"It will take a number of weeks to sort through this volume of mail," he said.

Visas will be issued at the start of the 2008 federal fiscal year.

Any applications received from this point on will be rejected.