

Immigration: A Reality Check

How do we deal with this complex problem? Try looking at it from a managerial angle

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by Jack and Suzy Welch

Do you have a stand on immigration? — Stephen Barnard, Oxnard, Calif.

We do, and since you asked us this question at a conference, we know you do, too, rooted in your livelihood as the owner of several avocado farms. "People are making this issue insanely complicated and political," you told us. "It's economic. All immigrants are here for is work. If we don't find a simple, fair way to keep them in this country, it will kill thousands of businesses."

We're with you. Government estimates say there are around 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Even if only 6 million of them hold jobs, losing these workers would erode the viability of the countless industries that rely on them to fill the least attractive of jobs. Just as onerous, current immigration policy kicks out too many foreigners, in the U.S. on student visas, after they finish their educations. We've met many of these students, and the irony is that most of them hunger to put their science and technology backgrounds to work either launching companies in America or working at one of the country's high-tech companies, from 20-person startups in Silicon Valley to Microsoft. In other words, our economy desperately needs these entrepreneurs, just as it needs day laborers, to stay competitive.

But we'd go farther. Immigration isn't just an economic issue. It's a managerial one, and any plan that suggests the U.S. deport illegal workers violates one of management's cardinal rules: You have to face reality. Forget the notion that illegals will suddenly heed "the law of the land" and pack their bags. With the better life America provides, that ain't happening. Which leaves deportation. But come on, there is no way this country can send millions of people back where they came from. We can't even figure out a way to renew drivers' licenses at the local DMV without making normal citizens feel homicidal. Maybe that's hyperbole, but our point is: The government has a hard time managing logistics now. Add a surge in activity—a massive, challenging one—and the system will blow out.

People have to face reality, too, when it comes to laying blame—and taking responsibility—for the immigration problem. Yes, many immigrants broke the law entering the country. But our borders were obviously not secure enough. So let's just say accountability for the problem can be shared and move on to solutions. Everyone agrees we need to stop the inflow of immigrants with better border control, whether with walls or technology or both, and that we must try to expel all convicted felons. Both should be top priorities. Next, the government needs to design a process that moves law-abiding illegals out of the shadows. We don't know the precise details of such a process. Should illegal immigrants pay a \$5,000 fine or a \$25,000 one? Should they have to wait three

years to become citizens or seven? The answers hardly matter in the long run. What counts, in the immediate term, is that immigrants are registered and paying taxes. Imagine the freedom of movement such a change will unleash in the millions who have been living in fear, and how much easier it will make the widespread teaching of English, the language that makes the fullest expression of U.S. citizenship possible.

Now, we don't intend to oversimplify this. It's not a quick-fix problem, nor is it a new one. Not long ago, we attended a lecture by Sol Gittleman, a professor at Tufts University and a leading expert on U.S. immigration history. He gave a narrative—one that would make most Americans cringe in shame—of how every wave of immigrants to this country since 1620 has tried ardently, sometimes violently, to stop the next. Indeed, according to Gittleman, bitter, class-based opposition to immigration, even when fully legal, is as much a part of American culture as pride in being the world's "melting pot." No wonder immigration is stirring up such a political maelstrom right now.

And yet, like you, we believe the storm can be calmed. Not with rhetoric about principle but with pragmatic managerial action. Millions of immigrants across the economic spectrum keep our country running, and sending them away makes no sense. It's time to face reality—and fix it.

Jack and Suzy Welch await your questions. E-mail them at thewelchway@BusinessWeek.com For their video podcast, go to www.businessweek.com/search/podcasting.htm