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A New Push to Raise Cap on H-1B Visa

By MIGUEL HELFT

SAN FRANCISCO, Nov. 14 — A coalition of business and education groups is making a renewed push to persuade Congress to raise the number of skilled foreign workers allowed into the United States this year.

The coalition, which calls itself Compete America and whose members are drawn heavily from the technology industry, sent a letter to every member of Congress on Monday calling for an increase in both the number of so-called H-1B visas, which are used by skilled immigrants and the number of employment-based green cards given to foreign workers.

“The first part is to ensure that U.S. companies have the ability to hire the best and the brightest,” said Jack Krumholtz, managing director for federal government affairs at Microsoft. “The second part is about making sure that we are able to retain them.”

Microsoft’s chairman, Bill Gates, is one of many technology executives who have advocated increased flexibility to hire educated foreign workers like engineers and scientists. He is expected to return to that theme at an industry conference on Wednesday at Stanford University.

Increasing the number of H-1B visas has long been a top legislative priority of technology companies, which say they cannot find enough skilled workers in the United States. After a temporary increase to 195,000 during the years of the Internet boom, the annual number of visas issued has been capped at 65,000. An additional 20,000 visas have been granted to foreign workers who have an advanced degree from an American university.

But in recent years, all the visas allotted for a given year were claimed on or before the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1.

“We can’t hire people,” said Jenifer Verdery, director of work force policy at Intel.

The notion of allowing more skilled foreign workers in the United States generally enjoys bipartisan support in Congress. Earlier this year, the Senate passed a bill that would increase the cap on H-1B visas to 115,000 and would automatically raise the cap by a further 20 percent if all visas for a given year were claimed. The bill also would raise the number of employment-based green cards issued to 290,000, from 140,000.

But the bill stalled as the House and Senate deadlocked on broader immigration reform legislation. And not everyone agrees that raising the cap on visas is a good idea.

“We think that before raising the H-1B cap there should be reform of the H-1B system,” said Ronil Hira, vice president for career activities at IEEE-USA, a professional organization representing engineers and computer programmers.

The organization, which includes many immigrants among its ranks, is not opposed to legal immigration. But Mr. Hira said that the H-1B visa program, which requires companies to pay foreign workers wages comparable to those they pay American workers, was riddled with loopholes that allow employers to pay subpar wages to immigrants. That, in turn, depresses the wages of American workers, Mr. Hira said.

Lynn Shotwell, chairwoman of Compete America, said there was virtually no chance that Congress would pass the Senate bill this year. But Ms. Shotwell said the coalition, which includes universities and the Chamber of Commerce, was asking Congress to raise the cap on H-1B visas and green cards for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Members of the coalition are hopeful that legislation modeled after the Senate bill could be enacted next year, when Democrats will control Congress. House Democrats have promoted what they are calling an innovation agenda that includes wide availability of visas for skilled immigrants.

The National Venture Capital Association, which is among those advocating an expansion in visas and green cards for skilled workers, is backing that case with a study, to be released Wednesday, that highlights the role of immigrant entrepreneurs in the American economy.

The study found that one in four publicly traded American companies that were initially financed by venture capitalists in the last 15 years included at least one immigrant among their founders. During the 1980s, immigrants were involved in founding one in five such companies, and prior to 1980 only 7 percent.

“The notion of being able to come here and shape your own destiny is tremendously appealing and, you have to believe, valuable for the economy, job creation and wealth creation,” said Axel Bichara, a partner at Atlas Venture in Boston. Mr. Bichara came to the United States from Germany in 1986 to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A year later, he became co-founder of a software company.