

Tech companies blast 2008 H-1B visa cap

April 4, 2007

SEATTLE, Washington (AP) -- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services says it reached its limit for 2008 H-1B visa petitions in a single day and will not accept any more, to the dismay of technology companies that rely on the visas to hire skilled foreign workers.

The agency began accepting petitions Monday for the fiscal year starting October 1 and said it received about 150,000 applications by mid-afternoon.

The temporary visas are for foreign workers with high-tech skills or in specialty occupations. Congress has mandated that the immigration agency limit the visas granted to 65,000, although the cap does not apply to petitions made on behalf of current H-1B holders, and an additional 20,000 visas can be granted to applicants who hold advanced degrees from U.S. academic institutions.

The agency said it will use computers to randomly pick visa recipients from the applications received Monday and Tuesday. It will reject the rest of the applications and return the filing fees.

Employers seek H-1B visas on behalf of scientists, engineers, computer programmers and other workers with theoretical or technical expertise. In Microsoft Corp.'s case, about one-third of its 46,000 U.S.-based employees have work visas or are legal permanent residents with green cards, said Ginny Terzano, a spokeswoman for the company.

"We are trying to work with Congress to get the cap increased," Terzano said. "Our real preference here is that there not be a cap at all."

Compete America, a coalition that includes Microsoft, chip maker Intel Corp., business software company Oracle Corp. and others, voiced its opposition to the visa cap in a statement Tuesday.

"Our broken visa policies for highly educated foreign professionals are not only counterproductive, they are anticompetitive and detrimental to America's long-term economic competitiveness," said Robert Hoffman, an Oracle vice president and co-chairman of Compete America.

Opponents say increasing the visa limit will bring down wages and discourage American youngsters from pursuing tech careers.