

Work visa reform plan has few fans

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An immigration reform proposal in the Senate that would nearly double the number of temporary visas granted high-skilled foreign workers doesn't seem to be making anyone happy.

The provision calls for increasing the annual cap on the H1B visas to 115,000 next year from the current 65,000.

But businesses that rely on highly educated immigrant workers say that is not enough.

"We need skilled workers to help us pull the wagon," said Jeff Moseley, president and CEO of the Greater Houston Partnership.

Unions concerned about full employment of U.S. workers say it's too high.

"The answer isn't to constantly increase the visas but to figure out a way to recruit native-born candidates for these jobs and help them get into college and train them," said Richard Shaw, secretary-treasurer of the Harris County AFL-CIO.

Applications galore

At the beginning of April when the government began accepting visa applications for the 2008 fiscal year, more than 130,000 applications poured in for the 65,000 spots.

Harry Gee, a Houston immigration lawyer with Harry Gee & Associates, said several clients who didn't end up with visas are trying to use other more restrictive visa categories to obtain work permits. But many will have to leave the country.

He predicted that as visas get more difficult to obtain, more companies will send their work overseas. Not only can they hire the folks they want, they can also pay lower salaries, he said.

Houston immigration lawyer Charles Foster said one of his clients, an oil and natural gas company, was trying to get an H1B visa for a top financial official.

The company didn't receive one of the 65,000 visas that were allocated in April, Foster said. So the company opted to hire the executive in Europe and relocate the support staff.

The Internet's effect

The visa crunch is coming at a time when developing nations are emerging as high-tech centers and the Internet makes large-scale data transmission possible, Gee said.

Both Gee and Foster argue that the U.S. economy ultimately loses when businesses can't hire the employees they need. It's not just creating jobs but it's losing the revenue that the visa holders would spend on groceries and going out to restaurants, Gee said.

And then there is the matter of national priorities.

"There are certain jobs we want to keep in America, like high-tech jobs," Gee said.

California-based software company Oracle, which has sales consultants in Houston and a data center in Austin, has to go where it can find workers, said Robert Hoffman, vice president of government affairs for Oracle in Washington, D.C.

"And if they are offshore, that's where we will go," he said. "Right now 115,000 isn't enough."

Oracle does 80 percent of its research and development work in the U.S., said Hoffman, who is also the co-chairman of Compete America, a coalition of high-tech educators, researchers and trade associations.

Consequently, Oracle recruits heavily from U.S. universities.

But when half or more of those who graduate from U.S. universities with advanced degrees in math, sciences and engineering are foreign-born, it becomes difficult to fill positions — especially when H1B visas are in short supply, he said.

"It doesn't really make sense if our immigration policy basically blocks half or more than half of the graduates coming out of our universities," said Hoffman, adding that the company has about 120 employees, mostly software engineers, working under H1B visas.

Creators of jobs

Nor should policymakers forget that immigrants create jobs, he said.

Hoffman pointed to the Russian-born founder of Google who was studying math at Stanford University when he started his giant search engine.

Oracle, he said, is joining other tech companies in urging Congress to support a proposal introduced by Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, that would exempt recipients of advanced degrees from U.S. universities from the cap.

But before Congress opens the borders to highly skilled, highly educated foreign workers, policymakers should turn their attention inward, Shaw said.

Shaw would like to see more investment made in education and more resources devoted to intensive remediation so students can master their core subjects. He would also like to see the government do a better job of making college more affordable.

"Right now, we don't have enough investment in educating young people for these high-tech, high-skilled jobs," Shaw said.