

America needs more immigrants like Satya Nadella, Microsoft's new CEO

By Timothy B. Lee
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Satya Nadella, executive vice president, Cloud and Enterprise, addresses employees during the One Microsoft Town Hall event in Seattle, Washington in this July 11, 2013 photo made available to Reuters on January 30, 2014. (REUTERS/Microsoft)

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Few people will be more excited about Satya Nadella's elevation to CEO of Microsoft than his former classmates and teachers at MIT. No, not the famous one in Massachusetts, the Manipal Institute of Technology in India. The Times of India visited the school shortly after Nadella's predecessor, Steve Ballmer, announced his retirement. It reported on the pride that MIT faculty, students and alumni felt knowing that one of their own was a candidate to run one of the world's most important software companies.

Nadella's selection as Microsoft's new CEO is the latest reminder of the critical role immigrants play in America's economy, and especially its high-tech sector. Immigrants are ubiquitous in Silicon Valley, in the nation's best computer science programs, and in software companies across the country. And immigrants have founded and led some of America's most important technology companies.

Take Intel, whose chips powered the PC revolution. Andrew Grove, a Hungarian immigrant, was one of Intel's first employees. He rose to become the company's president and CEO. Google co-founder Sergey Brin was born in Russia and moved to the United States at the age of 6. Jerry Yang, who founded Yahoo, was born in Taiwan.

And it's not just high-profile executives: In 2009, the New York Times reported that half of all Silicon Valley engineers were born overseas.

The reason is simple: Engineering and entrepreneurial talents are rare and valuable. And while Silicon Valley is the world capital of technology startups, the United States is less than 5 percent of the world's population. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the world's most talented engineers and entrepreneurs are among the 95 percent of the world's population not born in America.

If we want to maintain our technological edge in the coming decades, we need to make sure we continue to be a welcoming place for immigrants like Sergey Brin, Satya Nadella, and thousands of rank-and-file engineers who are less famous but no less important to the technology sector. If US immigration laws fail to keep pace with US technology companies' demand for high-tech talent, the next generation of talented immigrants will still put their talents to work building great technology. But they'll do so in Bangalore, Berlin or Toronto, eroding the strength of America's technology sector.