



TECHNOLOGY AND THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT

Automation touted as central to repairing the immigration system

BY [ALIYA STERNSTEIN](#) 01/12/2011

The government can fix the immigration system without legislation, by automating visa processing and by granting priority to skilled workers, including technology professionals, over family members, according to a new report by the Brookings Institution.

"The infrastructure for considering and granting visas needs a major upgrade," Darrell M. West, founder of the Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings, a nonpartisan think tank, wrote in a [policy paper](#) released on Wednesday. Currently, the visa program requires people seeking entry to the United States to provide paper copies of sometimes hard-to-obtain documents that are then often lost in the government's system and must be submitted repeatedly, he said. Repairing the nuts and bolts of the immigration process would get to the root of what West sees as the solution to the nation's immigration debate.

"The visa system should adopt digital technology to reduce both errors and delays," he wrote, noting that obtaining a visa often is the first step talented foreigners must take to gain U.S. citizenship. "Changing the composition of the immigration stream, even without increasing its size, would result in a 'brain gain' for the United States."

Other countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, develop immigration policy that is intended to attract workers, according to West. "An interesting byproduct of this strategy is that Canadians see the benefits of the policy and, as a result, immigration is far less controversial than in the United States," he said.

If the government decides to embrace a more credential-based approach to immigration by granting entry according to education and documented experience, any new federal software should be designed to reduce the chances of approving false papers, West added.

Federal contractors have criticized E-verify, an application they must use to check the immigration status of employees assigned to government projects, because they said the software often pulls up erroneous data showing workers are undocumented.

Competing interests in Congress, such as the desire to grant illegal immigrants who contribute to the economy amnesty versus the need to stop them from draining taxpayer-funded services, have blocked progress on sweeping reforms.

West argued the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act unintentionally made family unification the overarching goal of U.S. immigration policy, without regard to an applicant's education, skills or potential value to the economy.

"An obvious place to begin the rebalancing process would be with the many foreign students who come to the United States for education in scientific and technology fields," he wrote. "Under current visa rules, most are sent home as soon as they graduate."

In addition, H-1B visas, which are allocated to workers in special occupations, are valid only up to six years. Most are grabbed within a few months of becoming available. During the economic crisis in 2009, applications exceeded the supply of visas within three months, West noted. Nearly half of the visa requests came from U.S. employers, most of them in high-tech industries, he said.

"A minimal step would be to raise the set-aside for high-skilled workers to the previous, 195,000 level" versus the current 65,000 allocation, West said.

A spokesman for the [Homeland Security Department](#), which oversees lawful immigration to the United States, declined to comment.

Many federal contractors, such as those represented by the TechAmerica industry group, have long championed a market-based approach for distributing visas so that there are enough to cover skilled workers who can support America's innovation economy.

TechAmerica also supports digitizing the visa system. Numerous computer programs are available to confirm the information presented during the visa request process, TechAmerica spokesman Charlie Greenwald said. "These tools are used routinely in the private sector in applications and processes where identity authentication and information verification is paramount to success," Greenwald added. "We also need to continue to work on increasing the security of our breeder documents," such as birth certificates, driver's licenses and passports.