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Business Leaders Press for More Work Visas

By Stephanie Gleason

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U.S. business leaders on Tuesday urged a Senate panel to implement immigration-law changes that would allow companies to hire more highly skilled workers.

NASDAQ OMX Group Inc. Chief Executive Robert Greifeld said countries like India and China have policies in place to attract scientists and engineers, but the red tape and limited visas offered by the U.S. are driving them away. Every year 17,000 American-trained masters and doctoral students leave the U.S. to find work elsewhere, he said.

"I think we will have more jobs and be more competitive as a country if we make the default setting that you are welcome if you possess skills and knowledge that we need to solve problems and create solutions for the economy," Mr. Greifeld said.

Brad Smith, vice president of legal and corporate affairs for Microsoft Corp., said Microsoft has 4,500 job openings now, many in computer science. There is increasing pressure to move these jobs overseas, he said, because Microsoft can't find enough qualified U.S. citizens and can't get enough visas to fill the positions.

The U.S. offers 65,000 temporary visas a year for specially qualified workers, like foreign-born graduates of U.S. universities, to live in the U.S. for three to six years. Business interests have in the past pressed for a greater number of the work permits, known as H1-B visas, but changes haven't cleared Congress in recent years.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.) suggested "virtually stapling a green card to their diplomas" for higher-level graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Sen. Charles Grassley (R., Iowa) stopped short of agreeing with Mr. Schumer's suggestion. "While it is important to keep the best and the brightest, getting a degree from a U.S. institution should not equate to a fast track to citizenship for all."

Mr. Grassley did call for H1-B visa changes, as did Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas). "I'm not sure what the prospects are for comprehensive immigration reform," Mr. Cornyn said, "but we can fix this."