

Houston manufacturers stand to benefit from ripple effects of immigration reform

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There may be a glimmer of hope on the horizon for manufacturers having difficulty recruiting skilled workers.

In this week's 2013 State of the Union address, President [Barack Obama](#) said the stars have almost aligned to pass a bipartisan immigration reform bill, which he will sign "right away" if put on his desk in the next few months.

"Real reform means fixing the legal immigration system to cut waiting periods, reduce bureaucracy and attract the highly skilled entrepreneurs and engineers that will help create jobs and grow our economy," Obama said.

In Houston, manufacturers such as Neutex Advanced Energy Group, an LED lighting products manufacturer, said greater access to skilled workers will benefit the industry.

"It's silly that we have (immigrants) getting the best education in the world here and then are pushing them out of the country," said [John Higgins](#), president and CEO of Neutex. "We have a huge shortage of skilled workers in computer systems and manufacturing."

Current regulations allow only a small number of immigrants to work industrial jobs in the U.S., explained [Charles Foster](#), co-chairman of FosterQuan LLP, a Houston-based immigration law firm, and a policy adviser to former President [George W. Bush](#).

Local manufacturing companies need access to more workers, especially if they are among the growing number of businesses considering moving foreign plants back to the U.S.

In the past, Foster said he saw multiple incidents in which Houston-area companies needed just a "handful" of new, skilled laborers to keep their U.S. operations running, but since they had such trouble finding workers, they moved the entire plant overseas, Foster said.

Foster said he is "cautiously optimistic" an immigration reform bill will pass this spring.

"This is particularly big for Houston since we have a very large undocumented population — as large as 40,000 people," Foster said. "If passed in the right form, immigration reform will be a huge stimulus — you will have millions of people who for the first time will be able to work

legally ... and it will give employers ready access to labor that has been in short supply in some industries.”

As for those concerned about American workers who need jobs, [Tony Payan](#), scholar for immigration and border studies at **Rice University’s** Baker Institute for Public Policy, said the U.S. is not able to produce as many engineers and technology experts as it needs.

“The first thing we have to understand is the U.S. economy is about to take off,” Payan said. “And, the U.S. is not producing the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates it needs. A country like Mexico is producing three times the amount of engineers per capita (compared to) the U.S.”

The only way the U.S. would be able to produce as many STEM graduates as it needs would be to completely revitalize the education system, Payan said, which is unlikely to occur anytime soon. On the other hand, immigration reform can happen now, as long as Democrats and Republicans continue moving toward compromise, he added.

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