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Progress on Immigration, Education Key to Reviving Jobs, Tech Leaders Say

BY Juliana Gruenwald

Education and immigration reform dominated Tuesday's meeting of the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness on ways to boost the nation's struggling economy.

The council met at cloud-services provider VM Ware's headquarters in Palo Alto, Calif., to solicit ideas on how to jump-start the economy and create more jobs. Those ideas will help form a list of recommendations that the council will make to President Obama in September, council member and AOL cofounder Steve Case said.

Case was joined by council members John Doerr, a partner with the high-profile Silicon Valley venture-capital firm Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers; and Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer. Also present were two nonmembers--Aneesh Chopra, the federal chief technology officer, and Reed Hastings, Netflix's CEO.

Case, who is leading an effort focused on high-growth companies, said more needs to be done to promote entrepreneurs. "If we want to get the economy going and jobs going, we need to get more attention on entrepreneurship," he said. "If every part of America worked like Silicon Valley, we would have a booming economy."

Sandberg and others underscored the need for immigration reforms that would make it easier for companies to keep talented foreigners in the United States, pointing to the difficulty that Facebook and other firms have had obtaining visas for skilled workers from abroad.

Sandberg said if Facebook had been unable to get an H-1B visa for a Facebook engineer from Spain who was leading a key project after graduating from Stanford, the company would have moved him and his project offshore. She added that other companies such as Google have been forced to do just that because of the problems they have faced in getting work visas and green cards for high-skilled foreigners.

Sandberg praised the Obama administration announced on Tuesday to make it easier for high-skilled immigrant entrepreneurs to come and stay in the United States. The Homeland Security Department announced that it was clarifying its frequently asked questions to make it more clear that immigrant entrepreneurs can sponsor themselves for an H-1B visa, which are reserved for high-skilled foreign workers, and also took steps to speed up the processing time for foreign entrepreneurs seeking a visa reserved for those who pledge to invest money and create jobs in the United States.

Case urged those in attendance to push lawmakers to unbundle reforms related to visas and green cards for high-skilled foreigners from the broader debate over comprehensive immigration

reform. That "is the only way to get [to the] issue of high-skilled workers in the next 12 months," he said.

Echoing concerns raised by tech firms for years, Sandberg said that the U.S. needs better graduation rates and must get more students interested in pursuing science, technology, engineering, and math degrees. "We are not investing for the future," she said. "We are falling behind in every way possible."