



Immigrant Creates U.S. Jobs, Gets Boot Over Visa
By BEN FORER and CHRISTINE BROUWER
Nov. 1, 2011

Last year, Amit Aharoni, an Israeli national and a graduate of Stanford Business School, secured \$1.65 million in venture capital funding with two cofounders to launch CruiseWise.com, an online cruise booking company.

Business Insider ranked the company, which is set to launch its website in just a few weeks, one of the "20 Hot Silicon Valley Startups You Need to Watch," and Aharoni has already hired nine Americans.

But this story of entrepreneurship and job creation is hitting rough waters because Aharoni is not American. On Oct. 4, Aharoni received a letter from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services denying his request for a visa and notifying him that he needed to leave the country immediately.

The government said Aharoni's job as CEO does not require someone with his high-level degree, even though he created the company.

"[The] letter is practically humiliating. It says you have to leave the country, as if I committed a crime of some sort by creating nine jobs," Aharoni said.

Immediately after receiving the letter denying his visa application, Aharoni left for Vancouver, where he now tries to guide his company from a friend's living room. He says he believes his San Francisco headquartered business could create hundreds of jobs in the next five years, a plan that is now in jeopardy.

"I fear that I will be forced to move the center of gravity of CruiseWise to a different place where I can rely on sensible immigration policy," Aharoni told ABC News. "And that would mean that the hundreds of jobs that we'd hope to create, would not be created in the U.S. but somewhere else."

A USCIS spokeswoman said the agency is "working to streamline" the visa process for immigrant entrepreneurs.

"U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is working to streamline the visa issuance processes to realize the full potential of our nation's immigration laws and enable immigrants to invest capital, create new jobs for American workers, and further dedicate their talent to the growth of our nation's economy," USCIS spokeswoman Edna Ruano said in a statement.

Steve Davis, CruiseWise's chief of operations, told ABC News that the USCIS's decision is incomprehensible to him.

"Amit has brought together a million and a half dollars of investment, almost two-thirds of that from outside the U.S., and invested it right here in the United States," Davis said. "[He] created nine new jobs and then at the end of this process was told that he needed to leave the country."

While the United States forced Aharoni out, there are other countries that are eager to have entrepreneurs, enticing them with special visas and funding. According to Partnership for a New American Economy, an organization that advocates "the economic benefits of sensible immigration reform," countries including the United Kingdom, Singapore and Chile have visas for entrepreneurs. Chile even has a program that offers \$40,000 in seed funding.

It is a problem politicians in America acknowledge, but have not solved.

According to statistics from Partnership for a New American Economy, 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

President Obama addressed the issue during a town hall in July.

"What I want to do is make sure that talented people who come to this country to study, to get degrees, and are in -- willing and interested in starting up businesses, can do so, as opposed to going back home and starting those businesses over there to compete against the United States and take away U.S. jobs," he said.

In a May op-ed in the Wall Street Journal titled "A New Immigration Consensus," New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg advocated for reform.

"When every other country wants the best and the brightest, we're trying to keep them out. It doesn't make a lot of sense. ... [T]he truth of the matter is we are sending the future overseas," Bloomberg told ABC News today. "We need people to start companies and create jobs. People that come from overseas are something like ... five times more likely to create jobs than people who are here. ... So we've got to do something about this."

Senators Mark Udall, D-Colo., John Kerry, D-Mass., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind., are taking action, reintroducing the "StartUp Visa Act," a bill they originally proposed two years ago. The act would allow "immigrant entrepreneurs and foreign graduates from U.S. universities to appeal for a two-year visa on the condition that they secure financing from a qualified U.S. investor and can demonstrate the ability to create American jobs."

America has a long history of immigrant entrepreneurs. John Nordstrom immigrated to the United States at the age of 16 and eventually founded Nordstrom's. The cofounders of Pfizer, Charles Pfizer and Charles Ernhard, moved from Germany as adults to start the pharmaceutical giant. And Andy Grove, cofounder of Intel, came to the United States at the age of 20 after escaping communist Hungary.

From 1995 to 2005 immigrants helped found a quarter of all high-tech companies in America, creating 450,000 jobs, according to Partnership for a New American Economy.

Aharoni hopes he can create the next great U.S. company, but for now he waits, running his business from 900 miles away, wishing he could resume his American dream.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Economy/visa-problem-prevents-entrepreneur-creating-american-jobs/story?id=14857757>