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Microsoft hosts skilled immigration roundtable

By Emi Kolawole

Microsoft topped the list of companies requesting H-1B workers, according to a July Brookings Institution report. (TOBIAS SCHWARZ - REUTERS) *This post has been updated.*

The sleek conference room at Microsoft's Washington, D.C., office was packed Wednesday morning with industry and policy leaders. The conversation topic: The skilled worker pipeline in the U.S., particularly the cap on H-1B visas. Talk ranged from policy prescriptions to where the demand for H-1B visa workers is most concentrated. And the discussion was predictably weighted with empirical evidence, to the point where talk of the anecdote-as-argument against raising visa caps elicited light laughter.

But beneath the data, policy, corporate interests and politics rest central, non-empirical questions: Why aren't American students interested in science, technology, math and engineering? And when they are, why do they pursue employment in non STEM fields — a phenomenon known as "diversion." What role does ballooning student loan debt play? And, of course, what of the perception among those in the general public that a job given to an H-1B visa recipient from overseas would take a job away from an otherwise qualified American or depress wages?

"It's not necessarily a zero-sum game," said Georgetown University professor Nicole Smith, outlining the underlying shift taking place in the STEM workforce, where a mechanical engineer laid off from a factory job isn't being replaced by a Chinese immigrant who specializes in software engineering. But at a time of high unemployment and a politically charged election year, that argument is a tough one to make.

And when it comes to the war for talent, according to James Brown, Executive Director of the STEM ED coalition, it isn't nation versus nation, but company versus company. A top-25 list in a July Brookings Institution report illustrated that point. The host, Microsoft, topped the list, with Mumbai-based Tata Consultancy Services coming in second and Deloitte Consulting in third. One of the report's three authors, Brookings Senior Policy Analyst and Associate Fellow Neil Ruiz, participated in the roundtable discussion.

The growing student-loan debt burden on America's youth isn't helping. "We haven't really said, 'What field are you going into?' before rolling out the loan paperwork," said Brown of colleges and universities. Brown predicts higher education institutions will feel increased pressure to start being more forthcoming with students about where their academic interest falls on the wage scale.

In terms of the need for congressional action, all participants fell firmly on the side of changing the laws surrounding skilled immigration to widen the talent pipeline.

"We can't stand still and do nothing while other countries are moving forward," said Microsoft Vice President of Immigration Policy Karen Jones. But when it comes to legislative action, if past is precedent, standing still appears to be exactly what Congress is going to do.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/post/microsoft-hosts-skilled-immigration-debate-roundtable/2012/08/01/gJQA1vyXPX_blog.html