

Microsoft Pushes Plan to Pay for STEM Education With H-1B Visa Fees

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Microsoft is looking to drum up support for an ambitious plan to link immigration reform with increased funding for science education by charging technology companies for access to a new pool of 20,000 H-1B visas for foreign nationals with expertise in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Brad Smith, Microsoft's general counsel, said he hoped the plan could pass Congress in 2013.

"The country has about a year to see Congress take some important steps," Smith told reporters on Thursday. "If we don't see steps over the next year, I think we should all worry about the future of these jobs in the United States."

Microsoft is the leading U.S. employer of workers on H-1B visas, and the company says it is having trouble finding qualified workers to fill open jobs as researchers, engineers, and developers, adding up to more than 6,000 unfilled positions. The company hopes that the promise of an additional \$200 million in potential education funding per year generated by \$10,000 per-visa fees will motivate Congress to look past partisan squabbles over immigration reform and pass a bill that targets the highly skilled workers that are in demand by U.S. companies.

The fee is "sizable by design," according to a Microsoft document outlining the plan. "It is large enough to represent a material commitment to building America's STEM pipeline."

On the education-reform side, Microsoft wants to see more computer-science curricula in high schools, improved training for K-12 STEM teachers, and increased efforts to help college students who begin programs in STEM disciplines to graduate.

In addition to Microsoft, Intel, IBM, Oracle, and Google are leading requesters of H-1B workers, according to the Labor Department. Despite an industry-wide push for changes to the H-1B visa program, Microsoft is rolling out this plan alone, in a presentation on Thursday at the Brookings Institute. Microsoft's Smith said he hopes he can "spark a conversation that brings more people to the table." He discussed immigration reform with senior Democrats and Republicans at the party conventions, and he said that people from other leading technology companies reported similar gaps between job openings and qualified workers.

"We want to work in close partnership with companies and industry groups," Smith said. "And put our voice behind this and see if we can't get something done over the next year."

“I think the politics can work on this,” said Rob Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation and a backer of immigration reform for highly skilled workers. “I don’t think either party is going to get kudos for what they failed to do a few weeks ago on visa reform. I think they’re going to be more sensitive to getting something done after the election. This is a pretty easy slam dunk for them, particularly if other companies come out for it.”

A bipartisan deal to reform immigration rules for highly skilled workers [fell apart in Congress last week](#) over whether visa recipients would be able to bring their families with them. Sen. **Chuck Schumer**, D-[N.Y.](#), and Rep. **Lamar Smith**, R-[Texas](#), who heads the Judiciary Committee in the House, had teamed up on a bid for an increase of 55,000 in the number of visas available to foreign-born graduates of American universities with a degree in a STEM discipline. Schumer and Smith introduced separate legislation last week. Smith is due to relinquish his post atop the Judiciary Committee; he is expected to be succeeded by Rep. **Bob Goodlatte**, R-[Va.](#), who has been active on technology issues and is a cosponsor of Smith's bill.

Microsoft’s plan focuses narrowly on the H-1B visa. Current law permits 65,000 immigrants to enter on H1-B visas annually, with an additional 20,000 visas issued to foreign-born graduates of U.S. universities. The plan, with its \$10,000 fees, seems tailor made for a large company like Microsoft with urgent needs to fill jobs. However, Smith says that starting salaries for engineers across the industry are comparable at big and small companies, with the “fully burdened cost” of a recent graduate in engineering averaging about \$200,000, including salary, benefits, and overhead.

“Most companies would find this an attractive investment to make,” compared with leaving jobs unfilled, Smith said. “Using immigration to raise money provides a new path forward. Will this be the key that unlocks the door? No one knows.”

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