

A plea for open doors

But governments are averting their ears

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TRADITIONALLY, COMPANIES HAVE allied themselves with conservative political parties that champion free enterprise and low taxes. But there is one issue where businesses and right-wing politicians do not see eye to eye: immigration. Most conservatives oppose free movement of labour, whereas business generally wants fewer immigration controls. The technology industry in particular is keen to attract the brightest staff from all over the world, and ideally to group all their best engineers in the same place, usually in California.

Last year Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of Facebook, formed an action group, FWD.us, to campaign for immigration reform. In an editorial in the *Washington Post*, Mr Zuckerberg recounted that when he was teaching a middle-school class for budding entrepreneurs, he found that many of the children were undocumented and were not sure they would be allowed to go to college when they grew up.

“In a knowledge economy, the most important resources are the talented people we educate and attract to our country,” he wrote. “Why do we kick out the more than 40% of maths and science graduate students who are not US citizens after educating them? Why do we offer so few H-1B visas for talented specialists that the supply runs out within days of becoming available each year, even though we know each of these jobs will create two or three more American jobs in return? Why don’t we let entrepreneurs move here when they have what it takes to start companies that will create even more jobs?”

FWD.us also has the support of other technology entrepreneurs, such as Reid Hoffman of LinkedIn, Drew Houston of Dropbox and Andrew Mason of Groupon. Stan Druckenmiller, a hedge-fund manager, backs the campaign, too. According to Joe Green, the founder and president of FWD.us, “the number one thing technology bosses spend their time thinking about is recruiting people; 75% of the money they spend is on payroll.” The two things that would make it easier to recruit talented people are education and immigration reform. “Also, tech people are entrepreneurs who have taken a risk—they appreciate the risk involved in moving halfway round the world to a new country. Some of their ancestors may have done the same.”

The issue has bedevilled American politics for a long time; the most recent reform bill was passed in 1986. One problem is partisan bickering: Republicans do not want to be seen helping Democrats, and vice versa. To get round this, FWD.us set up two separate organisations.

Not surprisingly, the group has exploited its technological expertise. In November last year it held a 25-hour “hackathon” during which techies created new tools to boost the prospects of reform. Among the websites created were Push 4 Reform, which has a page for each member of Congress outlining their stance on issues such as immigration reform, and Undoculife, a game in which players live as undocumented immigrants.

The National Immigration Forum is a more traditional campaign group that has been around since 1982. Ali Noorani, its executive director, says the group concentrates on the three Bs—bibles, badges and business. They have much in common, Mr Noorani believes: the fastest-growing faith group in America comes from the Hispanic community; many badge-wearing law-enforcement officials would rather not get involved in the time-consuming process of checking residency papers; and business has an interest in hiring talented workers.

Immigration is a live issue in other countries, too. The British government's attempts to reduce net immigration are causing problems for its businesses. "Companies are facing skill shortages in science, tech, engineering and maths," says John Cridland of the Confederation of British Industry. Like America, Britain has a visa programme for highly skilled staff, but it leaves much to be desired. "The problem is not just the number of visas that are issued but the time it can take to process them and whether workers are allowed to bring their families," says Mr Cridland. As in America and elsewhere, political and business interests in this area are out of kilter.

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