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Skilled-Worker Visas See a Surge in Demand

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In a sign of the improving economy, the U.S. government saw a sharp rise in petitions for skilled-foreign-worker visas during the first week of this year's application season.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has received 25,600 petitions for H-1B visas since April 2, nearly twice as many as it received for the entire first month of last year's application period.

The agency began accepting H-1B petitions last week for jobs with a start date of Oct. 1 or later, typically in computer programming, engineering and other high-tech fields where there is sometimes a shortage of qualified Americans.

"Given the improved economy...it would not be surprising to see the quota filled very early this year," said Stuart Anderson, executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy, an Arlington, Va., group that studies the H-1 program.

The H-1Bs fall into two categories. Each year, a maximum 65,000 visas are granted in a general category of skilled workers. An additional 20,000 H-1Bs are allotted to foreign nationals who hold an advanced degree.

Last week, the immigration agency received 17,400 petitions in the general category and 8,200 in the advanced category, for individuals who usually have a Master's degree.

In contrast, last year in the first week, the government received 5,900 H-1B petitions counting toward the 65,000 cap, and about 4,500 petitions for the 20,000 visas set aside for people with advanced degrees.

In all of April 2011, the government received a total of about 14,000 petitions in the two categories.

In the first application week in 2010, the agency received 13,500 general petitions and 5,600 petitions for individuals with advanced degrees.

Demand for the skilled-worker visas has fluctuated in past years, with the visa limit exhausted on the first few days of filing in 2007 and 2008.

That demand decreased during the economic crisis and its aftermath. In recent years, some lawmakers, including Sens. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) and Richard Durbin (D., Ill.), have expressed concern about the visa program and whether foreign workers, especially in the software sector, are displacing qualified Americans.

But the increased visa applications mirror a pickup in activity for related businesses.

"We're the busiest we have been in four years," said Steve Miller, a Seattle attorney who specializes in business immigration. His clients include large and midsize tech companies, as well as architecture firms.

"We're seeing a widespread increase in hiring of new employees," he said, adding that there appears to be "greater competition in the marketplace for top talent."

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