Technology firms holding out hope for high-skilled immigration reform

By Jennifer Martinez - 01/27/13 06:00 AM ET

Tech companies are holding out hope that high-skilled immigration reform can finally get through Congress, despite previous failed attempts over the years.

Efforts to pass high-skilled immigration reform have generally enjoyed support on both sides of the aisle, but have been thwarted after getting tangled up in the wider immigration debate. Tech lobbyists say the politics this year are different than they were in 2007, when Congress last tried to pass comprehensive immigration reform, adding that the timing is right for a high-skilled immigration measure to reach the finish line.

Tech lobbyists say Hatch and Rubio's support for the bill gives it additional political heft. The Utah Republican is viewed as a leader on the immigration issue and is the second-highest-ranking GOP member on the Senate Judiciary Committee, which will be at the center of the battle over immigration reform. On the other hand, Rubio has emerged as a rising star in the Republican Party and has recently taken a leading role in the immigration debate for the GOP.

The Cuban American is a presidential contender and seen as the GOP's best chance to gain more Latino support for the Republican Party after November's election. Rubio recently outlined a set of immigration reform proposals to *The Wall Street Journal* and told the paper that bringing more high-skilled labor into the U.S. would be beneficial to the economy.

"There's no question that [Rubio is] seen as one of the important Republicans to have on board, not just on high-skilled, but on far more challenging immigration issues," said Robert Hoffman, senior vice president for government affairs at the Information Technology Industry Council (ITI).

"To have those two names on the bill suggests a depth of understanding and a sense of forward movement on the issue of immigration," Hoffman said. "That gives us reason to be hopeful."

The bill's bipartisan co-sponsors are another bright spot for lobbyists, who expect that other members from both parties will sign on to the measure.

"It's huge, that doesn't happen a lot lately," said Gary Shapiro, CEO of the Consumer Electronics Association, which counts Apple, Intel and Google as members.

President Obama and Senate Democrats have made clear that they want to pass a comprehensive immigration package rather than a set of standalone bills.

The White House opposed a high-skilled immigration bill from Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas) last fall, saying that it would not support "narrowly tailored proposals" that fail to meet the president's goals for comprehensive immigration reform.

Tech insiders view the Immigration Innovation Act as a template for a high-skilled immigration measure that could potentially be wrapped into a larger bill.

"If we want something to happen in the next four years, it's comprehensive or nothing," Shapiro said. "It's not my first choice, but we're like thirsty men in the desert—we want water and if it takes comprehensive [legislation], then we'll do comprehensive."

Shapiro noted that a high-skilled measure backed by the tech industry could be key to passing comprehensive legislation because it's one of the rare immigration issues upon which both parties tend to agree. ITI's Hoffman echoed a similar sentiment.

"If it's linked to a broader effort on immigration, our hope is that the clear need of highly skilled professionals will help give the larger effort momentum, and get it across the finish line," he said.

During his inaugural address this week, Obama made a brief reference to the need for the U.S. to reform its immigration laws so the country can retain foreign-born engineers, computer programmers and graduates with advanced technical degrees from U.S. universities.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican, and conservative immigration scholar Clint Bolick made a similar call for high-skilled immigration reform in an op-ed on Friday in *The Wall Street Journal*. They also argued that tackling immigration reform in a piecemeal fashion is "shortsighted and self-defeating.

"Other nations—including Canada, New Zealand and even China—are luring away students, workers and entrepreneurs with more sensible and welcoming immigration policies," they wrote. "If we do not adapt, we will be increasingly unable to compete."

The U.S. economy is also in a different state than it was when Congress tried to pass a comprehensive immigration bill in 2007, before the signs of the recession started to show. Six years later, Hoffman said lawmakers are more aware about the need for the U.S. to retain foreign-born engineers and graduates with master's degrees and PhDs in science and math due in part to the sputtering economy.

"More policymakers today have a better and deeper understanding of the importance of these issues, particularly the need to develop a skilled workforce pipeline, and that's largely due to the uncertainty of the direction of the economy," he said.

Still, efforts to expand the number of visas available to skilled foreign workers and advanced degree holders will likely face fierce pushback from opponents of immigration reform. It's also unclear whether the Immigration Innovation Act will ultimately be attached to a comprehensive bill or remain a standalone measure. While there is momentum in Congress to pass immigration reform, it will be tough for the two parties to reach agreement on legislation.

Tech companies, in particular, have said they struggle to fill engineering and research job positions because there is a lack of qualified applicants with the requisite skills needed for those roles. When lobbying in Washington, several tech giants like Microsoft and Intel have argued that high-skilled immigration reform will be key to jumpstarting the economy.

For this reason, entrepreneurs and the tech industry have called for Congress to reform the existing immigration rules so they can keep these jobs and talent in the U.S. rather than sending them abroad.

"A 65,000 [H-1B visa] starting point is just not feasible for this economy. That's the same number we started with in 1990, when the economy was one-third the size it is today," Hoffman said. "Demand for highly skilled workers well exceeds the supply."

Read more: http://thehill.com/blogs/hillicon-valley/technology/279463-tech-firms-hold-out-hope-for-high-skilled-immigration-reform#ixzz2JJNSm8Hv