

US pushes to keep entrepreneur jobs in the country

By By RODRIQUE NGOWI

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) — The Obama administration's top immigration official says his agency is working to attract and keep more foreign-born high-tech entrepreneurs who are seeking to start companies in the U.S., a move he hopes will help the nation retain its edge in an increasingly competitive global economy.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service Director Alejandro Mayorkas acknowledged on Wednesday that his agency "has not been especially nimble" to adapt to fast-paced changes in the business landscape, even though it has been quick to respond to the humanitarian landscape.

That is changing, Mayorka said, since the agency added new training for adjudicators who evaluate business visa applications, including those for H-1B visas — temporary employment visas for specialty occupations — sponsored by startups companies whose profile do not fit that of traditional businesses.

"Three years ago if we'd received a petition for a H-1B visa from an individual working in a cubicle who might have received funding from a respectable venture capital firm, adjudicators might have rejected that application," Mayorkas told students and investors at the Sloan School of Management of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"One of the goals of the immigration system: family unity, humanitarian relief and economic prosperity," he said. "And it is in the context of economic prosperity that we really are speaking today," Mayorkas said.

He unveiled a new website that provides entrepreneurs an easier way to navigate their immigration options under the so-called "Entrepreneur Pathways" initiative.

The measure is the first product of the unusual "Entrepreneurs in Residence" program under which the immigration agency recruited five entrepreneurs who reviewed the system and proposed changes to make it easier for investors to figure out their immigration options and communicate with the agency.

Next step? A review of existing laws and practices to ensure that they achieve their full potential.

"We've done a remarkable job, I think, in training our adjudication corps in terms of unique profiles of startup companies and our entrepreneurs. The Entrepreneurs Pathways has followed. We are going to be looking at our policies and practices ... to ensure that we are maximizing existing laws' full potential," Mayorkas said. "But it is no substitute for the need for legislative reforms."

The initiatives drew rare praise from entrepreneur and Duke University researcher Vivek Wadhwa.

“It’s the type of creative thinking that’s needed to fix it because if you speak to immigration lawyers, they tell you that the big problem that they have is inconsistency, the same problem entrepreneurs have — that to get one adjudicator they are able to get a visa, another one declines it and they never get a straight answer,” Wadhwa said.

“So what they did here is they had a bunch of entrepreneurs work with the USCIS to go through the entire process, go through the books and see what was wrong with the system and they are systematically fixing the system,” Wadhwa said. “I’ve got to give them credit for being innovative over here. I rarely say good things about governments. This is one of those rare occasions when they do something right.”

Wadhwa said immigrants are major contributors to the U.S. innovation and competitiveness.

Foreign-born entrepreneurs founded engineering and technology companies that employed about 560,000 people and generated an estimated \$63 billion in sales from 2006 to this year, he said, citing his research released last month.

That contribution, however, is in jeopardy as the growth rate of immigrant-founded companies has stagnated because of visa policies, bureaucracy and immigration laws, Wadhwa said.

“We’re choking off the pipeline here,” Wadhwa said “We are boosting the economies of our competitors, in other words, the people that we’d want here starting companies and building innovation here are doing it in ... India, China, Brazil and Mexico” where researchers are seeing the most innovation because of U.S.-educated returnees.

Mayorkas said his agency is pushing to ensure that existing immigration laws realize their potential to attract job-creating entrepreneurs and enable them to bring and retain people with the expertise and special skills that they need to grow and flourish.

“We know that there is a tremendous need for more accessible pathways for entrepreneurial talent to come and remain here in the United States,” Mayorkas said.

<http://www.boston.com/business/technology/2012/11/28/pushes-keep-entrepreneur-jobs-the-country/0JgLWloMtQmOhLq4kXy63H/story.html>