

POLS ARE GOING OVERBOARD ON VISA PROGRAM

Daily News (New York)

May 3, 2000, Wednesday, SPORTS FINAL EDITION

Copyright 2000 Daily News, L.P.

Section: EDITORIAL;; COLUMN,OPINION

Length: 523 words

Byline: BY LARS-ERIK NELSON

Body

WASHINGTON - Where can you hire a skilled young computer programmer who will work long hours without protest and who can't quit for a better-paying job?

Import one!

Even though the country is awash in computer professionals, employers complain that after age 35 or so they are out of touch with the latest computer languages and, worse, want to stay home at nights with the wife and kids. New blood is desperately needed.

The easy solution is to bring in workers from overseas. They're willing to work for 40% less than their American counterparts, according to one headhunter, and if they quit their jobs, they face deportation.

The H-1B visa program that brings in these foreign workers helps the computer industry attract the world's talent. But it also has exposed U.S.-born and immigrant workers to unfair competition, chiefly lower wages and age discrimination.

Horror stories abound: Highly educated 43-year-old computer experts are working as telephone repairers and salesclerks because they're either "overqualified" or not conversant with a computer language they could pick up with a couple weeks' on-the-job training.

The H-1B program has become a government-aided form of job discrimination against older workers. Immigration lawyers even advise employers how to reject all American applicants for jobs so they can hire cheaper foreigners.

Despite these complaints, both Republicans and Democrats want to lift the current cap of 115,000 H-1B visas each year and let in even more foreign workers. One Republican proposal would remove the cap altogether.

Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Tex.) is willing to allow in an unlimited number of foreign workers, provided they receive a minimum wage of \$40,000 a year. This wage wouldn't stop the reputable computer companies from importing professionals, but it would undermine the "body shops" - the temp services that import workers under the H-1B program and lease them out at low wages.

Smith was long a foe of the H-1B program on the grounds that it hurt U.S. workers, but he was converted by lobbyists from high-tech industries complaining of a labor shortage.

"Lamar's bill would raise the numbers to infinity," complains Prof. Norman Matloff of the University of California. "And no matter what restrictions he puts on it, the employers know how to get around them."

Matloff says, furthermore, that there is no shortage of computer professionals in America, and that the abuses in the H-1B program are worse than ever.

POLLS ARE GOING OVERBOARD ON VISA PROGRAM

But both Republicans and Democrats want to raise the limit. The reason is clear: The two parties have collected more than \$10 million from businesses that used the H-1B program in the last year.

Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.), chairman of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, makes the link even more explicit. When asked whether Republicans should side with the computer-industry workers or the employers, he said, "This is a very important issue for the high-tech executives who give the money."

Davis is good man, but his position is enough to make you wish for a visa program to import congressmen. Age discrimination high-tech style

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); DISCRIMINATION (90%); EMPLOYMENT VISAS (90%); AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); WAGES & SALARIES (89%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (89%); POLITICAL PARTIES (87%); TECHNICIANS & TECHNOLOGICAL WORKERS (78%); EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (78%); LABOR SHORTAGES (78%); RESIGNATIONS (78%); SERVICE WORKERS (77%); EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION (77%); AGE DISCRIMINATION (77%); RESTRAINT OF TRADE (77%); MINIMUM WAGE (77%); DEPORTATION (74%); TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT (73%); ELDER LAW (73%); OLDER WORKERS (73%); LITIGATION (73%); ON THE JOB TRAINING (72%); EMPLOYEE TRAINING (72%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%)

Industry: EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (78%); COMPUTING & IT TRADE (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%)

Person: LAMAR SMITH (67%)

Geographic: TEXAS, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: May 3, 2000