

Silicon Valley ranks highest in 'H-1B intensity' for foreign worker visas

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The Bay Area **ranks** behind only metropolitan New York in recruiting **high**-skilled **workers** from abroad, but it's not just **Silicon Valley** tech giants on the hunt for **foreign** labor, according to a new report.

Sure, a batch of familiar names -- Google, Apple, Yahoo, Oracle, eBay, Intel -- leads the pack of companies seeking to bring **foreign** tech **workers** to the Bay Area on temporary **H-1B visas**, but thousands of other local employers, big and small, are in the temporary **foreign worker** game.

"It's not just about the Bay Area, New York, Boston and Seattle. It's also not just about great-big companies," said Sean Randolph, president of the Bay Area Council Economic Institute, a business advocate. "These (**visas**) are being used by a lot of startups."

The report released Wednesday by the Brookings Institution is the first to detail where in the country **H-1B workers** are sought, confirming conventional wisdom of the South Bay as an **H-1B** hub but also revealing surprises.

Silicon Valley ranks highest in what Brookings calls "**H-1B intensity**," with 17 **foreign workers** sought for every 1,000 people in the workforce.

Next on the **H-1B** per-capita list is more surprising: Columbus, Ind., home to engine-maker Cummins; Durham, N.C., where universities are the biggest **H-1B** seekers; and the area surrounding New Jersey's capital, Trenton, led in the **foreign worker** search by banks, drugmakers, IT outsourcers and the group at Princeton University that runs Graduate Record Examinations.

Employers can sponsor **foreign workers** with "specialty" skills on the three-year **visas** if they try to show local **workers** lack needed skills. The government grants 85,000 **H-1Bs** each year, setting aside 20,000 for people with advanced degrees. The **visas** ran out in 10 weeks this year, faster than at any time since before the recession.

More than 60 percent of the **workers** sought by Bay Area companies work in "computer occupations." The second largest group is engineers.

Financial specialists and life scientists also **rank high** in the San Francisco-East Bay region, with many of the scientists recruited by UC San Francisco. The annual 85,000 cap does not apply to universities and some other nonprofit institutions.

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Amid an ongoing political debate over whether **H-1B workers** take away U.S. jobs and lower wages, the report's author, Neil Ruiz, said he hopes the geographical breakdowns will add nuance to a national debate focused on the biggest companies.

For instance, the fees companies pay for the **visas** fund tech and science training grants for American **workers**, and Ruiz found the grants were **higher** in states -- such as Kansas and Maine -- where the demand for **visas** was lower.

An exception was a \$5 million grant from **H-1B** revenues awarded this year to San Francisco-based educational group WestEd for a four-year project to help IBM and AT&T **workers** keep up with new technology, and also to train the unemployed.

"What those fees are supposed to do is train local **workers** to have those skills" that **H-1B workers** are recruited for, said Matthew Spaur, a spokesman for WestEd.

"The **H-1B workers** are paying to replace themselves ... and making local people more competitive in a global economy."

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