

Hung up on immigration, U.S. turns away top minds

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Body

The European Union took a step recently that the **U.S.** Congress can't seem to muster the courage to take. By proposing a simple change in **immigration** policy, EU politicians served notice that they are serious about competing with the **United States** and Asia to attract the world's **top** talent to live, work and innovate in Europe. With Congress gridlocked on **immigration**, it's clear that the next Silicon Valley will not be in the **United States**.

European politicians face many of the same political pressures surrounding **immigration** as their **U.S.** counterparts, and they, too, are not immune to these pressures. Nationalist and anti-immigrant factions in several Western European countries have made political gains in recent elections and are widely viewed as mainstream. Despite the hot-button nature of **immigration** issues, though, EU politicians advanced the "blue card" proposal in October.

The plan is designed to attract highly educated workers by creating a temporary but renewable two-year visa. A streamlined application process allows qualified prospective workers to navigate the system and start working in high-need jobs within one to three months.

This contrasts starkly with the byzantine system in place in the **United States**, which increasingly threatens America's long-term competitiveness.

The **United States** relies primarily on two programs to augment the **U.S.** workforce with highly educated, highly skilled foreign professionals. The H-1B visa is a three-year temporary visa that can be renewed once. The employment-based (EB) green card is the program for permanent residency. Both programs serve the needs of **U.S.** employers seeking to fill job vacancies in highly skilled professions. Extreme shortages of visas in both these programs are well documented.

H-1B visas, which are capped at 85,000 per year, are now gone in one day, with the "winners" determined by lottery.

The EB green card program has an annual allotment of 140,000 visas; these are allocated equally across all countries around the world, regardless of population. The inflexible country quotas mean that professionals from countries such as China and India are almost always at a disadvantage, finding themselves stuck in a system - often for five to 10 years - in which they cannot seek promotions and raises. Spouses and children count against the quota, which has not been raised since 1990. And even though they count against the quota of foreign workers allowed to come here, spouses are inexplicably forbidden to work, no matter their level of education and skill.

The **U.S.** system forces thousands of valuable foreign-born professionals - including badly needed researchers, scientists, teachers and engineers - into legal and professional limbo for years. Not surprisingly, many are considering opportunities in competitor nations - even those who have lived in the **United States** for years and have graduated from **U.S.** universities.

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To be competitive in the global economy, **U.S.** companies depend on specialized talent coming out of **U.S.** graduate schools. These scientists and engineers are often foreign-born, as more than half of **U.S.** engineering master's students and Ph.D. recipients are international students. Yet America shuts the door on many of these highly educated graduates, forcing them to look abroad for opportunities - and our competitors are capitalizing on our failed policies.

EU leaders recognize that the **top minds** coming out of universities in the **United States** and other countries can help to reinvigorate European industry and enable it to create the next wave of businesses that drive innovation and economic growth.

While its Blue Card proposal still requires approval by member countries, Europe has sent a message. It intends to aggressively pursue the professional talent necessary to compete on the global stage. The **United States**, on the other hand, seems intent on driving **away** the very same talent the European Union is rolling out the red carpet to welcome.

Craig R. Barrett is chairman of Intel Corp., which employs about 2,000 employees with H-1B visas among its 86,000 workers worldwide. He wrote this column for the Washington Post.

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