



Foreign matter

Most temporary work visas go to tech employees

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Few issues in the business world arouse more public concern than American companies giving jobs to foreign workers brought in from overseas.

Many types of temporary work visas are available to foreign workers, but the one most often in the news is the H-1B visa. This is the visa most commonly sought by technology companies, including several in central Pennsylvania, to bring in skilled foreign information technology workers with bachelor's degrees or higher.

Those foreign workers often are from India or China, but they can be from anywhere, including Canada.

"We aren't educating enough professionals to fill these jobs," said Tom Richwine, CEO of Mechanicsburg-based Immigration Support Services, which helps businesses handle visa paper work. "The primary users are ordinary employers who want to hire tech professionals."

About 171,000 companies nationwide asked the Immigration and Naturalization Service about temporary work visas in 2004, Richwine said. About 5,000 of those companies operate in Pennsylvania. Richwine said there could be more because not every company or school with an H-1B employee needs to approach the INS every year.

H-1B visas are good for three years and can be extended for three more years. After that, employees must either get a "green card," which gives them immigrant status and an indefinite permit to work in the United States, or return to their native lands.

Congress cut back to 65,000 the number of H-1B visas that could be issued this year. Those were gone on Oct. 1, 2004, the first day of fiscal 2005. More recently, Congress added 20,000 more H-1B visas for people with master's degrees or above.

In fiscal 2000, 2001 and 2002, Richwine said, Congress allocated 195,000 H-1B visas, although he said the number actually applied for rarely exceeded 170,000.

One midstate company that lost out in the H-1B sweepstakes this year was Infotech Consulting Inc. in Mechanicsburg. Mohun Kapur, a spokesman for the company, said InfoTech tried to get some Indian workers with skills in a particular variety of Unisys software that is still in wide use in the United States.

"We were looking for one or two people, but because of the restrictions, we couldn't get them," Kapur said. "But the overall impact on our business was pretty small."

About 20 percent of InfoTech's 225 employees are here on H-1B visas, he said.

InfoTech has no employees with L-1 visas, which can be used by U.S. companies to bring in existing employees from foreign offices to work here. So if InfoTech had, say, an office in Bangalore, India, it could bring an employee from that office to the United States on an L-1 visa, which has fewer restrictions.

Richwine said H-1B visa holders must be paid the prevailing U.S. wage rate for the job they hold. L-1 visa holders, on the other hand, can be paid what their salary was in their own country.

The Camp Hill office of Tata Consultancy Services, a large Indian computer services firm, is another significant employer of people with temporary work visas. K. Ganesan, human resources director for the company's U.S. operations, said more than 40 people are employed in the Camp Hill office. Of those, he said, 15 have H-1B visas and 20 to 25 are here on L-1 visas. Seven are local hires.

Ganesan said Tata has not had trouble hiring people on temporary work visas, and the lower H-1B quota did not hurt the business.

A non-Indian-related company in the midstate that has always had a few people with H-1B visas or green cards is WebClients.net, an online direct-marketing firm that occupies the former Merchants & Businessman's Insurance building on Front Street in Harrisburg.

Josh Gray, CEO of WebClients, said two tech employees have H-1B visas and two have green cards. The company does most of its recruiting in the region, and got three of those employees that way. The fourth was a database specialist from out of state hired through a headhunter.

WebClients recently used Immigration Support Services to obtain a green card for a valued Canadian employee who was coming to the end of his H-1B visa eligibility. Shannon Gierasch, the company's human resources director and general counsel, said they had to jump through a number of bureaucratic hoops for the green card.

"We had to run a recruitment campaign to show that we couldn't find a citizen, or an existing green card holder, to fill the position," she said. "You have to really want to keep someone, and they must be essential to the organization."

Steve Lamb, vice president of technology at NetComm Solutions Inc. in Mechanicsburg, said his company doesn't have employees on temporary work visas.

"I will tell you that there is a great pool of home-grown talent in the area," he said. "Anytime I have an available technical position, there are dozens and dozens of responses from some very talented candidates that live and work in our local area."

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