Visa Squabble

Employers making a push for visa expansion.

By Kermit Kaleba

As the global competition for talent heats up, a debate is raging on Capitol Hill about whether to increase the number of skilled foreign workers allowed in the United States each year.

Proponents of an increase, including Microsoft founder Bill Gates, suggest that current limits are hurting the ability of organizations to remain competitive. Opponents meanwhile believe that the current program should be reformed before any expansion is considered.

At issue is the federal H-1B visa program, which is administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) and permits employers to hire nonimmigrant foreign workers to work in specialty occupations, generally in the science and technology

fields. The visas are valid for three years, though they can be extended for a total of six years. Congress caps the number of visas available each year. The current limit for regular visas is set at 65,000 with an additional 20,000 visas available for individuals with advanced degrees from U.S. colleges.

Demand is rapidly outstripping supply. In 2007, more than 120,000 requests were received for fiscal year 2008 visas in the first two days that USCIS accepted applications. The agency conducted a lottery to determine who received the visas. The 2009 application process was closed after only a week.

At Intel, the greatest demand is for process, electrical, and software engineers. Much of their recruiting is done at the college level with about 60 percent of their H-1B applications allotted for workers who recently completed masters or doctoral-level programs. Intel applied for about 260 visas for 2008, but only 230 were approved through the lottery. To Margie Jones, U.S. immigration manager at Intel, this means lost opportunities.

"If we're hiring an international worker, it's because we cannot find a U.S. national for that position. And if we cannot hire the international worker, it means we cannot do that project," she says.

Technology companies aren't the only ones seeking skilled foreign workers. The Prince George's County public school system in Maryland faced a talent crisis five years ago. According to Bob Gaskin, recruitment officer for the suburban school system, the state of Maryland only produces about 2,500 new teachers every year. With roughly 1,500 of the school system's 10,000 teachers leaving each year due to retirement, there simply weren't enough teachers, notably in math, science, and early and special education.

To address these needs, the school system partnered with a recruiter to bring in experienced teachers from overseas. Gaskin says that while the school system probably would not in-

crease the number of visa applications if the limit were raised, any reductions in the number of visas would hurt their ability to fill teaching slots.

Several bills have been introduced during the current session of Congress to expand the number of visas in the coming years, but some legislators are concerned that the program is displacing qualified U.S. workers. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Charles Grassley (R-IA) introduced legislation last year that calls for significant reforms to the program, including a requirement that organizations make a "good-faith" effort to hire a U.S. worker before seeking to hire a foreign employee.

The senators sent a joint letter to the top 25 recipient organizations of approved visa petitions for 2007 requesting information on their recruitment and hiring practices.

In an accompanying statement to the letter, Grassley wrote, "I have no doubt that we'll hear arguments all day as to why the cap on H-1B visas should be raised, but nobody should be fooled. The bottom line is that there are highly skilled American workers being left behind."

Kim Berry, president of the Programmers Guild, a nonprofit organization for information technology professionals, agrees that the program needs to be reformed rather than expanded. Berry suggests that U.S. workers could be trained to fill the positions, but argues that many organizations aren't willing to make the necessary investment.

With the window for legislative action dwindling in this election year, coupled with competing priorities, it appears unlikely that Congress will make significant changes to the program during 2008.

Kermit Kaleba is senior policy specialist for ASTD; kkaleba@astd.org.

REMOTE CONTROL

It may be true that absence can make the heart grow fonder, but it can also make workers more nervous.

In a recent survey of 492 workers and 150 senior executives conducted by OfficeTeam, majorities in both segments think operations run better when everyone on the team is under the same roof.

When asked if they believe their jobs would be easier or more difficult if they were reporting to a manager "who didn't work in the same location," 27 percent of workers believe it would be "much more difficult," and 21 percent think it would be "somewhat more difficult."

Maintaining communication and connectedness is at the center of these concerns. Dave Willmer, executive director of OfficeTeam staffing service in Menlo Park, California, acknowledges the complexities that remote teams introduce.

"Technological advances and global expansion have made it more common and acceptable for people to work remotely. In some cases, it's hard to avoid," Willmer says.

When executives were asked whether it was important for all members of their departments to be working from the same location, 58 percent expressed that it is at least somewhat important to them.

"Managers recognize that it's often easier to have a team operating under one roof because it alleviates communication challenges and builds camaraderie," Willmer says.

From the workers' perspective, although nearly half prefer their bosses to be on site with some regularity, one quarter were ambivalent, stating that their work would be neither easier nor more difficult should their managers work off site. Willmer notes that the reason for this may be that many workers have jobs that provide significant autonomy.

As remote work programs become increasingly prevalent, whether employees are comfortable with them or not, extra effort is the key to keeping workplace communication strong on all fronts.

"Some executives are starting to see the benefit of assembling project teams across offices and even time zones," Willmer states. "Although telecommuting is becoming more widespread, both employees and managers understand remote work teams can pose significant challenges."

From a training perspective, he notes that staff may benefit from communication courses offering an overview of how to use communication tools when team members are spread across multiple locations. Other tips to limit uneasiness include providing frequent updates to supervisors, using the telephone rather than email, highlighting achievements to garner recognition, and setting up face-to-face meetings whenever possible.

Voicing communication preferences from the outset is another safeguard against becoming disconnected. And given the variety of preferences regarding remote work and its effects in the workplace, moving toward off-site team arrangements should not be approached lightly.

"Managers and staff should carefully consider whether to work remotely, since this work arrangement can impact communication and make regular interaction more difficult," Willmer says.

Juana Llorens is managing editor of T+D; *jllorens@astd.org.*

COLLEGE GRADS
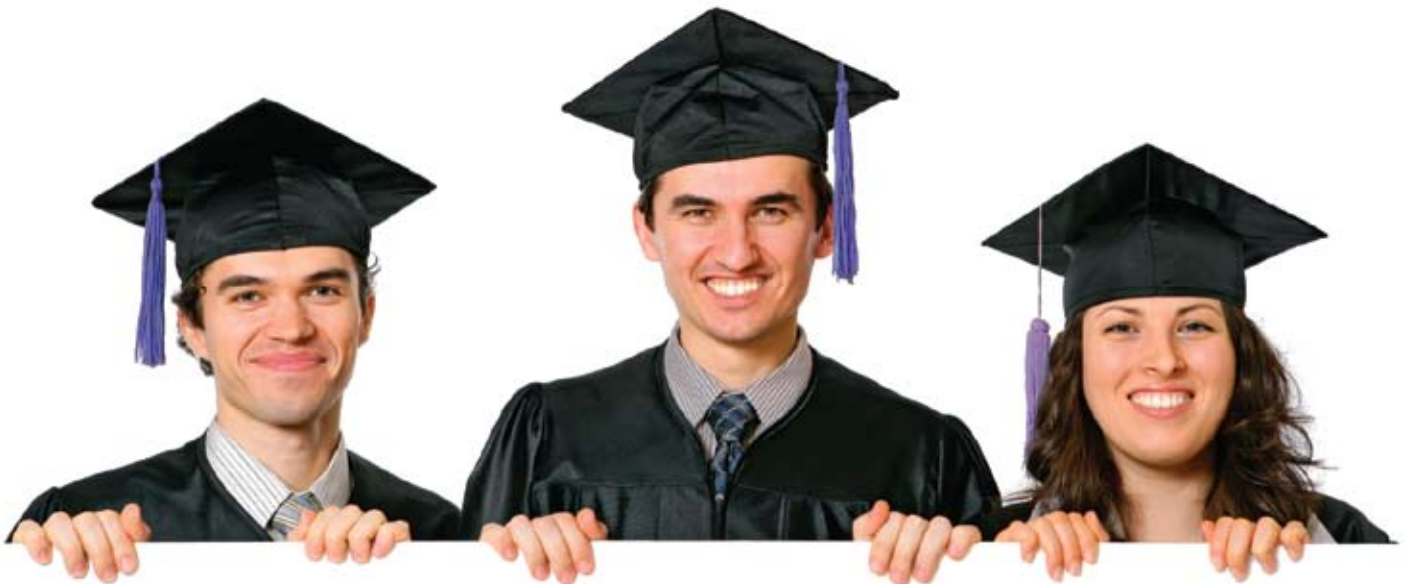
HOLD THE CARDS

While more than two-thirds of graduating college seniors are concerned that an uncertain economy will affect their employment options, the pressure remains on employers to secure high-level talent.

Accenture, a management consulting company, conducted an online survey of students graduating from college in 2008. According to the survey, 71 percent of respondents are concerned that fewer jobs will be available upon graduation. In addition, 73 percent have yet to find a post-graduation job.

However, regardless of their job prospects, only 23 percent of students surveyed said that they will compromise their job requirements. Respondents identified compensation, benefits such as health insurance, and interesting and challenging work as the top three characteristics they seek from an employer. Additional employment qualities that students desire included a social atmosphere and camaraderie with colleagues, a supervisor who will mentor and coach them, flexible work hours, the company's reputation as an employer, and the opportunity to travel.

While it is evident that Generation Y maintains a high and perhaps idealistic standard of work values, David Smith, managing director of Accenture's Talent & Organization Performance practice, believes that these employees can afford to be picky.

"The war for talent is real and is forcing employers to focus on high-performing talent," Smith says. "To be relevant to these job seekers, employers must find ways to satisfy their needs for balance, fun, mentoring, and opportunities to grow and be challenged."

Additional findings from Accenture's survey included surprising discoveries about students' career aspirations, as well as talent attraction and retention issues. Among respondents, 77 percent said that they did not want to pursue a C-level position. This apparent breakdown in traditional career aspirations will have huge implications for employers developing career paths for the emerging workforce.

Large corporate employers must also focus on talent attraction strategies when recruiting Generation Y job seekers—78 percent of students surveyed did not aspire to work for a large corporation. Furthermore, 49 percent of students expect to leave their first employer within two years. When considering that nearly half of today's graduating college seniors could move on to their second job by 2010, employers are faced with some daunting talent-retention challenges.

According to Smith, while both U.S. employees and employers feel the tension from the realities of the weakening economy and the competition for talent, the employee is still in the driver's seat.

Ann Pace is editorial assistant for T+D; apace@astd.org.

Photo by iStockphoto

Staying Focused

High retention rates are often an employer's dream come true, but retention can shadow the importance of employee engagement.

"The State of Employee Engagement 2008," a recently released global survey from BlessingWhite, a consulting agency based in New Jersey, found that 85 percent of engaged employees plan to stay with their companies during the year ahead.

"One of the conclusions is that engaged employees stay for what they give, while disengaged employees stay for what they get," says BlessingWhite CEO Christopher Rice.

Examples of potential benefits include job security, growth opportunities, a salary increase, and favorable job conditions. Engagement is defined as "alignment of maximum job satisfaction with maximum job contribution," according to Rice.

The data divides employees into five levels of engagement within North America. Twenty-nine percent of employees are engaged with their jobs, meaning they are contributing fully and enjoying the work. Another 27 percent of employees fall into the "almost engaged" group in that they are high performers and reasonably satisfied with their jobs.

New employees called "honeymooners" and highly productive workers who focus on the wrong issues, called "hamsters," collectively make up 12 percent.

The two major problem groups are crash-and-burners (13 percent) and disengaged employees (19 percent). Crash-and-burners are high performers with low job satisfaction, while disengaged employees are the most disconnected, making minimal contributions.

The data included 7,508 respondents worldwide, 3,342 of whom are in the United States. Among U.S. respondents, 55 percent hold management or supervisory positions, 16 percent hold HR positions, and 8 percent are vice presidents or higher. The study found no significant difference in engagement between male and female employees.

The top reasons employees cited for job satisfaction included more opportunities to use talent, as well as career development and training. Employees cited lack of career growth, unsatisfying work, and bad management as reasons why they wanted to leave their jobs.

The almost-engaged employees are a primary target for improved engagement. By offering them more growth opportunities, they could move into the engaged group. To keep honeymooners focused, companies need strong onboarding processes that set clear priorities and teach the organization's culture, according to Rice.

The study found that only 53 percent of employees trust their senior leaders. For engagement rates to improve, managers need to be held accountable for how active their employees are in the workplace.
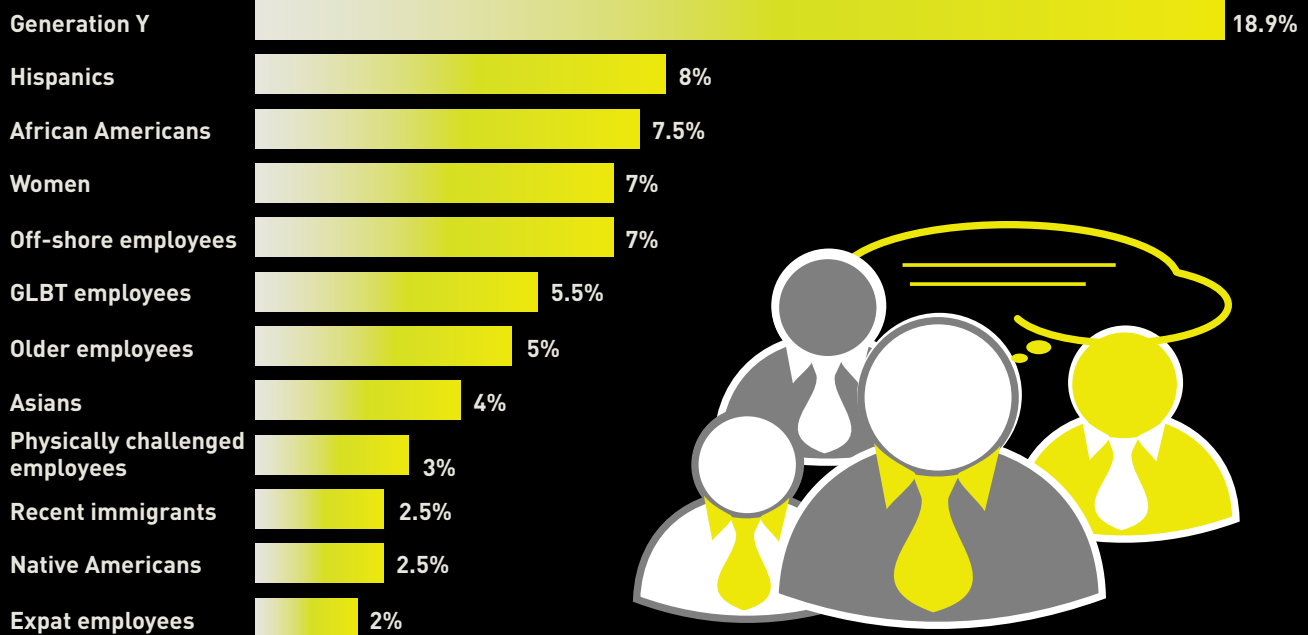
"It's no longer acceptable to have a manager that just focuses on results because that's a short-term outcome," Rice says.

Aparna Nancherla *is an associate editor with* T+D*; anancherla@astd.org.*

SHOP TALK

Does senior management encounter problems communicating with any of the following employee groups?

PERCENT SAYING YES:

Group	Percent
Generation Y	18.9%
Hispanics	8%
African Americans	7.5%
Women	7%
Off-shore employees	7%
GLBT employees	5.5%
Older employees	5%
Asians	4%
Physically challenged employees	3%
Recent immigrants	2.5%
Native Americans	2.5%
Expat employees	2%

Skills Search

There is a disturbing workplace trend surfacing in the United Kingdom, according to a new study.

More than half of 735 individuals surveyed lack confidence in their ability to find enough people with the right skills for their business, according to the CBI/Edexcel education and skills survey. Basic skills such as the ability to read, write, and do simple arithmetic are still a major business concern.

More than 60 percent of employers described staff in high-skilled positions as "good," but fewer did so for their intermediate lower-skilled staff. About 32 percent of jobs in the United Kingdom require a college degree, and that number is expected to grow. By 2014, it is expected that the United Kingdom will need to fill more than 730,000 jobs requiring high numerate, analytic people with skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Currently, 59 percent of companies employing these high numerate employees say they are having difficulty recruiting to fill the ranks. There has been a 15-percent decline in engineering and technology graduates.

To combat this skills gap, more than one-third of employers are recruiting from India and China. Another 35 percent said they will look to Europe to hire employees in the next three years.