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/NEWS FLASH/

The Great Foreign Worker Debate

Legislation affecting the number of immigrants in the United States could increase the competency gap.

By Josephine Rossi

While the faces of the immigration debate that touched off a series of demonstrations in U.S. cities last month are of the millions of illegal—and often uneducated—workers, the fates of thousands of highly educated individuals who are or could be filling a crucial skills gap could also be affected. Proponents of the House-passed legislation that would fence off hundreds of miles of the U.S. border and declare illegal immigrants felons argue that businesses benefit from foreign workers by hiring them for low wages. But some cutting-edge organizations are anxious to see the system overhauled for a different reason.

A quieter debate over the abilities of skilled temporary workers—such as mathematicians, scientists, and healthcare workers—to come into the country legally is gaining momentum. And because many of these workers are also industry pioneers, lobbyists are pushing for an increase in the number of available visas so that these workers can spread their knowledge to American firms.

Currently, about 65,000 three-year visas are available each year to skilled workers. But demand for those spots is much higher. At the end of March, the Senate Judiciary committee approved legislation that would increase that cap to 115,000.

That legislation would also help the United States retain foreign students who come to the country seeking advanced degrees. PhD candidates in science, technology, engineering, and math would be permitted to stay for up to a year after they complete their doctorial work to look for employment. Those who do find jobs would be eligible for permanent residency, bypassing the guest-worker program.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, more than one-quarter of recent survey respondents reported that their organizations recruit skilled workers from outside the United States because they believed that there is a shortage of qualified candidates for jobs that require skills in science, engineering, and mathematics. Enrollment statistics from top American universities confirm that belief. Education, law, and business continue to be popular program choices among native-born graduate students.

If history dictates, however, economic pressures may force the issue regardless. Last month the *Wall Street Journal* reported that in 1999, at the height of the dot-com bubble, tech companies convinced Congress to triple the amount of visas for highly skilled foreigners. The paper also said that lobbyists may try to attach their visa measures to a spending bill later this year should Congress not make an agreement.

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Consider This…

IN THE UNITED STATES, Indians and Indian-Americans make up the largest nonCaucasian segment of the American medical community, where they account for one in every 20 practicing doctors.

Source: YaleGlobal

OF THE 2,825 STUDENTS enrolled in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's graduate engineering programs for the 2004-2005 school year, 1,079 were international students.

Source: MIT

/COOL TOOL/

Put Organizations to the Learning Test

If you don't know how your organization stacks up in terms of learning development, British learning professionals have come to the rescue. Last month, The University of Oxford launched a free Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) Toolkit.Designed to expose true learning organizations, the toolkit can be used at any level and across all industries.

The LNA Toolkit offers a health check for companies to identify how learning can be best applied to support organizational objectives and sustain competitive advantage.

MORE/www.conted.oxac.uk/cpd/LNAT

/WORKING LIFE/

Employee Loyalty Changed

A GENERATION AGO, individuals entered the workforce expecting to spend the majority of their careers with one or two employers. Any job change represented a bold step in one's life. The tacit agreement called for employees to be loyal to their employer and, in turn, the employer provided the security of lifetime employment.

That old agreement, however, no longer exists. Today's workforce has a completely different view of work because many workers have experienced economic downturns. Others view a job as a springboard to a better position in the future.

There is a new unwritten agreement whereby employers could make swift job cuts without warning while employees could bolt for a better offer after just a short working stint. Turnover is now a regular feature of the labor market.

To identify the details of the new landscape, Leadership Unleashed, a San Francisco-based consulting firm, conducted an online survey in March seeking to explain why the mutual commitment to a lifetime with one employer has all but disappeared.

The survey revealed that 51 percent of respondents expect to make a job transition in five years or less.

Possibly recognizing that employees do not expect to spend their careers in one place, 91 percent of managers who participated said retaining their skilled, solid-performing employees is equally important or more important than it was five years ago. Of that same figure, 54 percent said it is more important than it was in the past.

Despite the dramatic change in employee expectations, contemporary workers still have high ideals about the employers for which they are willing to work. Seventy percent of survey respondents said they wanted to work for an organization they considered ethical and trustworthy.

Not surprisingly, employees in large organizations believed their efforts are overshadowed. Respondents from organizations with more than 1,000 employees indicated that they would prefer to work for smaller organizations of 101 to 1,000 employees or else work on their own.

—Michael Laff

MORE/www.leadershipunleashed.com/survey

/COOL TOOL/

'Lifeline' for Trainers

Instant audience polling isn't just for game show contestants anymore. Trainers, teachers, and speakers can now instantly measure their audiences' knowledge and opinions thanks to the TurningPoint 2006 Audience Response System. The system polls participants so that presenters can tailor their talks to the needs of the audience.

The devices are available in credit-card size units and "virtual keypads" for PCs, desktops, and PDAs. For smaller audiences, event organizers can choose among three handheld units: ResponseCard IR, which uses line-of-sight infrared (IR) technology effective up to 90 feet; ResponseCard XL, an IR unit that includes a self-paced testing mode; and ResponseCard RF, a radio frequency device that registers responses up to 400 feet away.

In addition, users can load the vPad audience response software, the virtual keypad alternative, onto computers or PDAs. The onscreen interface offers both keypad response and a text messaging option for submitting questions as well as for essay or fill-in-the-blank testing. The software is also completely integrated with all Microsoft Office programs.

Another plus: Because the keypads are so small, shipping and transporting them in quantity to a meeting site is easy. Several hundred ResponseCard devices, packed into their carrying case, fit easily beneath an airline seat.

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Depending on the market and the options selected, the price of a complete system ready to collect data from an audience of 32 participants starts at $1,500. TurningPoint 2006 also is available to rent in a "Quick Kit" that includes the software, ResponseCards, wireless receiver, and user accessories.

MORE/www.turningtechnologies.com

/TRENDS/

Web Crawling at Work

A POLL conducted earlier this year may be revealing a trend in the United States regarding Internet surfing on the job. According to Hudson, a global staffing, outsourcing, and talent-management solutions provider, 23 percent of U.S. workers who use a computer at work admit to having searched for a new job on their companies' dime. The national poll, which was conducted in March, also uncovered that three in 10 workers send and receive personal emails at work at least most days, and another 28 percent say they do so occasionally.

Interestingly, most of those workers also say that their employers know they use the Internet for private business. In fact, three-quarters of them believe their bosses are aware of how much they use the Internet for personal activities, and almost half say their companies monitor their use. Of those who believe their Internet use is screened, 74 percent report that their companies have formal policies regarding email and web usage.

"Employers should not discount the impact that attentive managers have on shaping workplace behavior and productivity," says Kris Rzepkowski, interactive manager of Hudson North America. "Corporate policies serve their purpose, but employees respond best when those rules are a part of the day-to-day interaction with their supervisors."

Ironically, however, managers are no better at keeping personal matters off the company computer. Not only have 24 percent of them owned up to job hunting at work, but one-third send or receive personal emails on the job at least most days, compared to 26 percent of non-managers.

MORE/www.hudson-index.com

/FAST FACT/

Back at the Old Gig

During 2005, 13 percent of employees who had been laid off were rehired by their former North American employers. However, only 3 percent of organizations say they rehire former employees often.

Source: Right Management

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/REALITY CHECK/

Where is the Love?

HAS IT BEEN A WHILE since your team received a thank-you note or recommendation from a client? If so, you need to start kindling their love.

"Customers who don't absolutely adore you are more detrimental to your business than those who belong to your competitors," says Jeanne Bliss, author of *Chief Customer Officer*. "The latter might give you a chance in the future, but the former have already tried you and found you lacking."

So how can you make customers feel the love? First you have to respect them. Bliss offers these 10 tips for getting started:

1. Eliminate the customer obstacle course. For most customers, figuring out who to talk to and how to get service is an overly complicated process. Instead of forcing them to figure out your organization chart, simplify the roadmap. Make it clear to them how they can do business with you in a way that's actually beneficial to them.

2. Stop customer hot potato. He who speaks to the customer first should "own" her. Nothing sends a signal of disrespect faster than an impatient person trying to pass a customer off to "someone who can better help" them.

3. Give customers a choice. Let them know up front what you are offering and let them decide if they want it. Sure, you may build a bigger initial mailing list by binding customers to an opt-out policy, but it doesn't show much respect for their time.

4. De-silo your website. Often, websites are cobbled together by each company division. Their structures, terminologies, and appearances vary from page to page, making navigation a challenge.

5. Consolidate phone numbers. Customers are tired of navigating a labyrinth of numbers to talk to someone. Pare down your list and let your clients know.

6. Fix your customers' top 10 complaints. Questionnaires are only as good as the actions they prompt. Customers read the lack of action as a lack of caring and respect.

7. Help your front line to listen. Frontline workers have been programmed to achieve certain goals, so they often direct the conversation to the company's advantage. Instead, teach those workers proper listening skills so that they can serve customers based on their needs.

8. Deliver what you promise. Because many companies fail to deliver what they say, many customers have to strong-arm their way through the corporate maze just to accomplish the basics. They're exhausted and annoyed from the wrestling match, and they're talking to others.

9. Right a wrong. There's nothing more frustrating to customers than a company that does something wrong and then acts clueless about what they did, or refuses to fix it.

10. Believe. Don't doubt your customers' integrity when they need to return a product, put in a claim, or use the warranty service. As tempting as it is to be suspicious of their stories, know that most are honestly relaying what happened to them. And because of all of our policies, we've conditioned customers to come in with their dukes up when they have a problem. Furthermore, they'll have little respect for a company that that gives the third degree.

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/YOUR HEALTH/

Visual Ergonomics

WHILE STUDIES HAVE FOUND that prolonged computer usage causes eye strain or vision problems, increased use of smaller, portable gadgets such as PDAs, laptops, and cell phones used for text messaging and web access may also be contributing factors to the visual fatigue and discomfort experienced by millions.

"The unique characteristics and high visual demands of computer work and play make many individuals susceptible to the development of eye and vision-related problems," says Dr. Jeffrey Anshel, a practicing optometrist and author of *Visual Ergonomics in the Workplace*.

A national survey of doctors of optometry found that more than 14 percent of their patients have eye or vision-related symptoms resulting from computer work. Furthermore, in a survey of more than 2,000 current and former contact lens wearers, time spent in front of a computer (41 percent) was the activity most frequently mentioned as causing discomfort while they were wearing their lenses.

Staring at a computer monitor or the small screens on most devices can lead to a variety of ailments, including headaches, eyestrain, blurred vision, dry and irritated eyes, neck and backaches, and sensitivity to light. "Eye stress and strain may be caused by a combination of individual visual problems, improper viewing habits, and poor environmental conditions, such as glare, improper workstation set-up, dirty screens, and poor lighting and viewing angles," explains Anshel.

"Uncorrected or under-corrected vision problems can be major contributing factors to computer-related eye stress, which affects visual performance and comfort," cautions Dr. Anshel. "The good news is that many potential eye and vision problems can be reduced or eliminated by appropriate adjustment and placement of computer monitors, lighting control, good preventive vision care habits, and regular professional eye care."

In addition, he offers these tips:

Reduce glare. Extraneous light is the greatest source of eyestrain for computer users. No matter where your computer is relative to a window, adjustable shades, curtains, or blinds should be used to effectively control light levels throughout the day. Avoid facing an unshaded window since the difference in brightness between the monitor screen and the area behind it may be cause eye stress and discomfort. Consider using an anti-glare screen to reduce reflections.

Check for dry eyes. When working at a computer, people spend a lot of time concentrating and less time blinking—about three times less than normal. "Computer work is particularly stressful for contact lens wearers," says Anshel. "Long nonblinking phases may cause the surface of contact lenses to dry out, which can lead to discomfort and a loss of visual clarity."

Adjust your monitor. Ideal monitor placement is dependent upon several factors, including an individual's physical make up and visual capabilities, work tasks, and other workstation design elements. For maximum eye comfort, place the center of the screen five to nine inches below your horizontal line of sight. "You should be looking just over the top of the monitor in your straight-ahead gaze," he says.

Take a break. "Our eyes were not made to see at a close distance for hours at a time without a break," notes Anshel. A preventive approach to reducing visual stress includes occasionally looking away from the screen of your computer, PDA, or portable game player. He recommends the 20/20/20 rule: "Take a 20-second break every 20 minutes. Focus your eyes on points at least 20 feet from your terminal. Keep your eyes moving while looking at objects at various distances."

Consult your eye care professional. The American Optometric Association suggests yearly eye exams to ensure ocular health. For individuals whose jobs may require extensive time in front of a monitor, Anshel suggests a comprehensive eye examination soon after beginning computer work and periodically thereafter. He adds: "If, at any time, you experience any vision problems or discomfort, talk to your eye care professional."

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