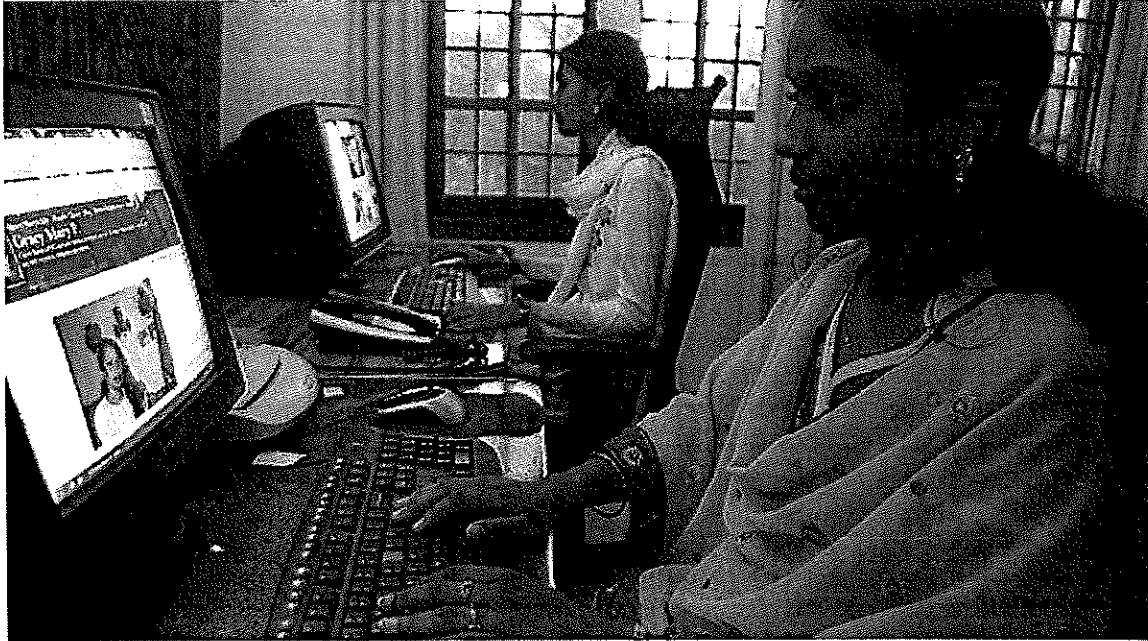


Issue Overview: Skilled immigrants

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.07.16

Word Count **724**



TOP: An employee in Bangalore, India, works on her computer in a small office. Photo by Ulfstein Bild BOTTOM: Courtesy of Homeland Security

When some Americans talk about immigration, they picture those they want to keep out: undocumented people sneaking across the southern border. But when some U.S. businesses talk about immigration, they picture people they would like to bring in: those with science, math or technology skills, notable artists or those willing to pick tomatoes. The United States wants these workers. The problems arise in deciding who and how many should be admitted.

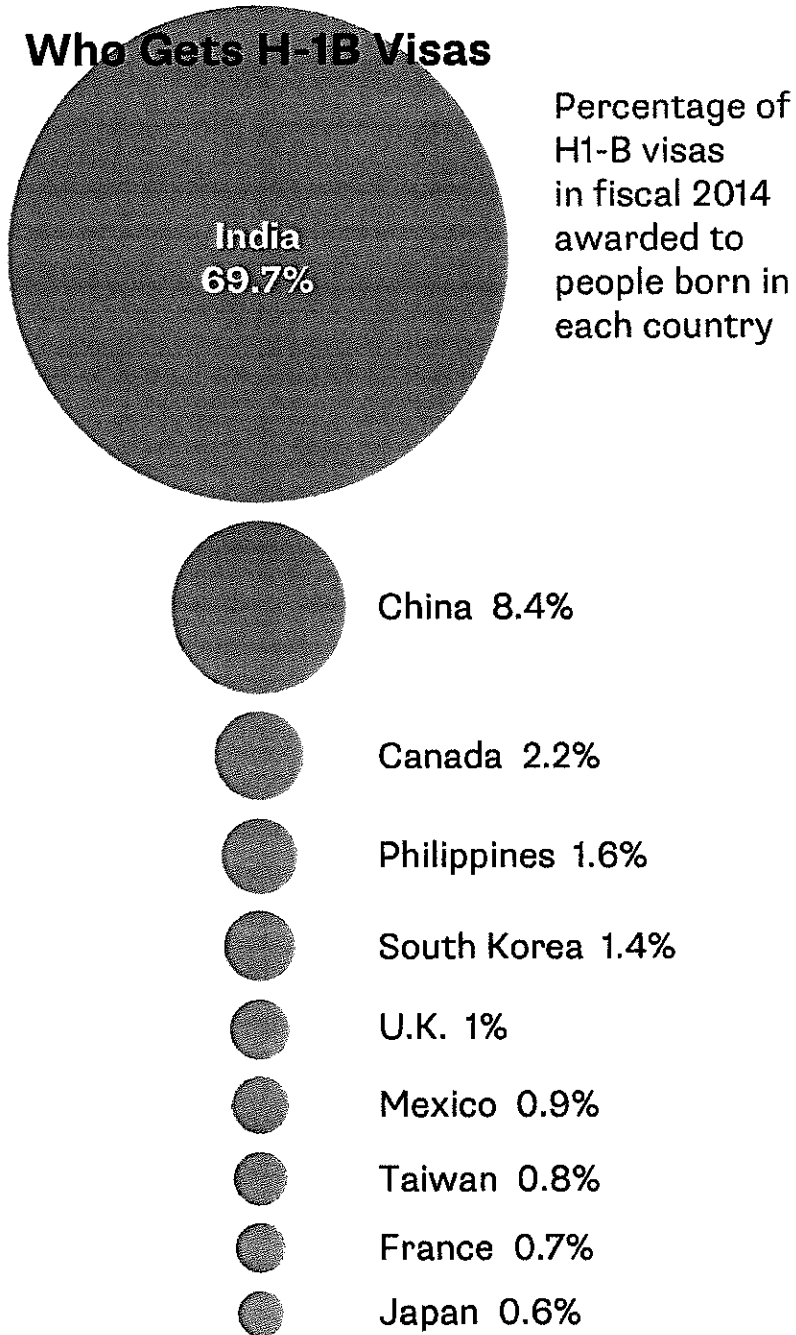
The Situation

It took less than a week for the U.S. government to exhaust the year's 85,000 allotted petitions for H-1B visas, which are generally used for technology workers to enter the country. Companies like Facebook, Google, Intel and others are lobbying Congress to increase the number of these visas. The companies want more foreign workers. In fact, Facebook more than doubled its lobbying spending in 2015 from 2012.

In December, Congress doubled the fees for H-1Bs to \$4,000. Many of the workers who need this visa come from India. That country is taking up the visa issue with the World Trade Organization. India says it is the U.S. government's way of protecting local businesses and jobs from foreign competition.

U.S. businesses also bring in seasonal agriculture workers under the H-2A visa program. There are 66,000 of these visas per year. Movie stars, distinguished academics, professional athletes and others with "extraordinary ability" can get special U.S. work visas. Extremely wealthy people can receive visas if they are willing to invest at least \$500,000 in the United States and create at least 10 jobs within two years.

Who Gets H-1B Visas



The Background

The U.S. immigration system has categories and limits on how visas are given. This is because of a 1924 law meant to curb a wave of post-World War I immigration. The law established a quota system limiting immigration from any one country to 2 percent of the number of people from that country already living in the United States in 1890, though it excluded Asian immigrants. The new restrictions coincided with the start of the Border Patrol agency, which monitors activity on the nation's borders. Quotas tightened after World War II after the United States faced a flood of Europeans fleeing Hitler and communism.

Congress later carved out special visas for certain nationalities. In 1990, for example, Senator Ted Kennedy, great-grandson of an Irish immigrant, helped to establish an annual visa lottery program that benefited Irish immigrants.

The U.S. Senate passed an immigration reform bill in 2013 that would have raised the annual H-1B visa limit to 135,000 from 85,000. It stalled in the House of Representatives. Some Republicans did not like that it included a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and instead wanted separate legislation for technology worker visas. Democrats who then controlled the Senate resisted. They wanted to use the promise of more H-1Bs to help enact broader immigration reform.

In 2014, President Barack Obama used his authority to expand a program that allows foreign graduates in science, technology, engineering and math to work in the United States for up to 29 months.

Opposition to immigration tends to rise and fall with the state of the economy. In tough times, Americans desperate for work don't like seeing businesses hire workers from abroad. Bad behavior can also sour Americans on immigrants. For example, Canadian-born pop star Justin Bieber, who is living in the United States on an "extraordinary ability" visa, was arrested in 2014 for drunken drag-racing. Some people called for the singer to be deported.

The Argument

Employers in both the agriculture and tech industries say there are not enough Americans able to fill all the available jobs. Food producers say crops are rotting in fields because there aren't enough farmworkers after immigration crackdowns.

U.S. tech employers say American universities are not producing enough mathematicians and engineers to keep pace with an economy producing 120,000 new jobs a year. They also worry that stiffer global competition will make it more difficult to hire skilled workers in the future.

Opponents point to an increase in American students seeking degrees in science and technology-related fields and say the companies are just trying to avoid paying higher wages to U.S. workers. They also say offshore outsourcing companies receive half of the H-1B visas, allowing workers to be trained in the United States and then take the tech jobs back to their home countries.