

Microsoft suggests charging employers for extra worker visas

September 30 2012, by Kyung M. Song

Faced with 6,000 job openings and a Congress unresponsive to admitting more skilled workers from overseas, Microsoft on Thursday offered what it hopes will be a twofer solution: charging employers hundreds of millions of dollars for the right to hire more foreigners and using the money for educational training to eventually fill those jobs with Americans.

The proposal, which Microsoft unveiled in Washington, D.C., is the company's most public foray into the protracted ideological battle over immigration reform and quotas on temporary visas for high-skill foreign workers.

Microsoft is attempting to sidestep such controversies as citizenship for [undocumented immigrants](#) that led [Senate Republicans](#) to block a comprehensive reform bill in 2010. Instead, the Redmond, Wash.-based [software giant](#) framed the issue in stark economic terms - in a nation beset by high [unemployment rates](#), six-figure-salary jobs are going begging for qualified hires, particularly minorities.

For instance, the U.S. is expected to add an average of 120,000 computer-related jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree for each of the next 10 years. But colleges and universities are minting half as many graduates as needed.

"It's a problem that's approaching dimensions of a genuine crisis," said Brad Smith, Microsoft executive vice president and general counsel.

Smith held a briefing for reporters at Microsoft's D.C. office on K Street before his speech at the Brookings Institution, a nonpartisan think tank.

Microsoft is calling on Congress to create 20,000 new H-1B visas solely for jobs in science, technology, engineering or mathematics, also called STEM. The current annual cap is 65,000 visas, about half of which are claimed for computer-related occupations. Microsoft requested an average of 4,100 H-1B visas annually between 2010 and 2011, more than any other corporation.

In addition, Microsoft wants the federal government to release 20,000 [green cards](#) each year from a backlog of a half-million so STEM workers could remain in the United States as permanent residents. Without a green card, an H-1B visa holder's stay is limited to a total of six years.

Smith said companies could pay \$10,000 for each new H-1B visa. Large employers now pay \$1,500 apiece, along with several thousand dollars more in various fees. The proposed "investment" for a green card would be \$15,000. Altogether, Smith said, the fees would bring in \$500 million a year.

Microsoft laid out detailed plans for how that money might be deployed. It called for hiring and training more STEM teachers for kindergarten through 12th grade and making advanced placement computer-science courses available in 95 percent of U.S. high schools that currently lack them, among others things.

Smith called the new \$10,000 fee for an H-1B visa a small one-time investment. A typical Microsoft programmer or software engineer hire might command a salary of \$100,000 to \$120,000, plus a \$20,000 signing bonus. Add \$50,000 in stock options, plus the cost of an office and other expenses, Smith said, and total cost might add up to \$200,000.

Although the proposal is being offered by Microsoft, Smith said the plan has support from information-technology companies and trades groups.

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Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Microsoft suggests charging employers for extra worker visas (2012, September 30)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-09-microsoft-employers-extra-worker-visas.html>

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