

Google exec says immigration changes would help economy

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In this Sept. 9, 2014 file photo, Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt smiles during a meeting about the "right to be forgotten" in Madrid. Schmidt is urging Congress to increase the number of high-skilled work visas made available to foreigners and to deal with other immigration issues later on. Schmidt spoke March 18 at the American Enterprise Institute. He says he believes the United States is better off having more immigrants, not less. (AP Photo/Daniel Ochoa de Olza, File)

The executive chairman at Google urged Congress on Wednesday to

increase the number of high-skilled work visas made available to foreigners and to deal with other immigration issues later on.

Eric Schmidt spoke Wednesday at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. Schmidt said he believes the United States is better off having more immigrants, not fewer, but he particularly is focused on allowing more immigrants into the U.S. with specialized technical skills.

"In the long list of stupid policies of the U.S. government, I think our attitude toward immigration has got to be near the top," Schmidt said in answering a question about the biggest policy change he would like to see the federal government make.

"We take very, very smart people, bring them into the country, give them a diploma and kick them out where they go on to create companies that compete with us," Schmidt said. "Brilliant strategy."

Schmidt said that increasing the number of H-1B visas, a program that's separate from the student visa program, would grow the economy because many immigrants will go on to start their own businesses and hire workers. He also said he believes a majority of lawmakers from both parties agree on this point, which is why they should deal with other aspects of immigration reform separately.

A bill sponsored by Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah would expand the current annual cap on H-1B visas from 65,000 to between 115,000 and 195,000 visas depending upon market condition and demand. But a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Tuesday reinforced that some top lawmakers are strongly opposed to expanding the program. They argued that the U.S. has plenty of high-skilled workers, but companies would rather look elsewhere because it's cheaper.

"Over the years the program has become a government-assisted way for employers to bring in cheaper foreign labor, and now it appears these foreign workers take over, rather than complement, the U.S. workforce," said the committee's chairman, Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama said American schools are graduating twice as many students specializing in science, technology, engineering and math than there are jobs to fill in those specialties.

"It has nothing to do with trying to find the best and brightest," Sessions said of the H-1B visa program's proposed expansion.

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