

Wary of Trump, some foreign-born tech workers choose Canada, not Silicon Valley

December 15 2017, by Tracey Lien, Los Angeles Times

Petra Axolotl knew her chances of getting an H-1B visa were slim. She had an MBA from Wharton and a job offer at Twitter, but luck would decide the Dutch data scientist's fate—and in 2016, it did not fall in her favor.

Axolotl missed out in the lottery for the coveted visa but remained determined to work in Silicon Valley, a place she considered the global capital of tech innovation. The plan was to reapply this year.

Then Donald Trump became president, and she found herself preparing to move somewhere else entirely: Canada.

Unlike many liberal-leaning technology workers in Silicon Valley, Axolotl doesn't consider herself "anti-Trump." But the new administration's position on immigration—the unexpected travel bans, the anti-immigration rhetoric, the president's tweets about scrapping entire visa categories—made her question whether the U.S. was the right country for her.

"Trump seemed too unpredictable," she said. She was preparing to start a family with her partner, and "let's say something happens in the U.S. and I cannot stay—it will be more complicated when you have a child. I could have handled this kind of unpredictability two years ago. But now? Not anymore."

Uncertainty in the United States has been a boon to Canada, which since

the election has had a surge in immigration and interest from tech workers and entrepreneurs.

Inquiries to the Vancouver Economic Commission, an agency in British Columbia that helps entrepreneurs and companies set up in the region, have increased 400 percent this year, said Ian McKay, chief executive of the commission. The number of tech workers from around the world migrating to Canada is on track to beat 2016's total by 18 percent, according to data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Though election-related calls to move to Canada aren't unusual—actress Susan Sarandon said in 2008 she'd move to Canada if John McCain won; performer Cher pledged in 2015 she'd move to Jupiter if Donald Trump won—surveys of tech workers in the U.S. suggest some are seriously considering making the move. In a survey of its job-search startup Hired's users, 40 percent of respondents said they had thought about leaving the U.S. since the 2016 election, of which 32 percent said Canada was their top choice.

Hired didn't ask respondents their reasons for considering a move.

Canada's sudden desirability is a confluence of several factors, said Bill Tam, former president of the British Columbia Tech Association. Its proximity to the U.S. helps, and similarities in culture, language and quality of life make for an easier transition. But cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal have also become tech hubs in their own right, and over the past decade have fostered homegrown success stories such as Slack, Shopify and Hootsuite. Major game development companies such as Ubisoft, Electronic Arts and Bioware have studios in Vancouver, Edmonton and Montreal.

The Canadian government has also laid the groundwork to make the region more tech-friendly, Tam said. There are tax incentives for

companies that invest in research and development. Students who study at public Canadian universities are offered a path to permanent residency. And a new, fast-tracked worker's visa established this summer allows companies to bring foreign talent to the country without having to go through the rigmarole of a lottery.

"When the government launched that program and said we'll help you get an overseas employee to Canada in two to three weeks, I was like, come on, there's no way," said Yishay Waxman, founder of Toronto startup Platterz, which hired Axolotl this year.

Applying for a U.S. H-1B visa can be a months-long process, and the path to permanent residency can take years. For Waxman and his foreign hires, though, "from the day we filled out the forms to the day my three engineers were in the country, it was about 10 days."

It's not just startups that are making the most of Canada's immigration programs. A growing number of established technology companies eager to capitalize on the talent graduating from Canadian colleges, such as Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Uber, have set up shop up north. And one of the upsides to having a presence in Canada, according to immigration attorneys, is that American companies wanting to attract and retain foreign talent can offer their Canadian locations as friendlier, more stable alternatives to the U.S.

"The company is happy because they're saving this highly skilled worker, and the highly skilled worker is happy because in Canada there's a pathway to get immigration," said Stephen Green, an immigration attorney with Green and Spiegel in Toronto. "It's considered 'on-shoring' because we're so close to the U.S."

Silicon Valley isn't yet panicking about the politics-driven brain drain, though. In a Bay Area Council poll released this year, 40 percent of Bay

Area residents said they want to move away from the region within the next few years—up from 33 percent last year. But the key motivating factors were cost of living, traffic and housing, with only 5 percent saying the Trump administration was "the worst problem facing the Bay Area."

U.S. tech companies aren't exactly hurting either under the Trump administration. Silicon Valley giants have continued to reap enormous profits and increase their market values. Facebook's market capitalization rose 51 percent this year, Google's by 30 percent, and Apple's by 66 percent.

Facebook declined to comment on whether its recruitment efforts in the U.S. have been affected by the political climate. Google did not respond to a request for comment.

And while H-1B visa demand declined for the first time since 2014, the number of applicants seeking visas remains almost triple the available supply.

Recruiters from Canada say Silicon Valley has lost some of its shine over the last year among workers from outside the United States. Foreign-born tech workers once adamant about going to or staying in the Bay Area are now more receptive to job offers from Canada, they say. And investors are also more willing to consider Canada than in the past, according to startup founders.

©2017 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Wary of Trump, some foreign-born tech workers choose Canada, not Silicon Valley (2017, December 15) retrieved 3 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-12-wary-trump-foreign-born-tech-workers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.