



Stephen Davis: "The 'dot-com' refugees also have to be figured into the mix."

Northeast Florida firms hiring fewer foreign workers

H-1B visa process is cost-prohibitive

BY DIANE K. FAULKNER
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Higher fees and wage requirements are prompting Northeast Florida firms to seek alternatives to foreign-worker visas when filling specialized positions.

Businesses across the nation have dramatically decreased their applications for H-1Bs, work visas that enable foreign nationals to hold jobs in the United States for up to six years.

"This time last year," Jacksonville immigration attorney Stephen Davis said, "the visa limit [of 115,000] was capped out." This year, applications are significantly below the old cap, he said.

Last October, a higher cap of 195,000 went into effect after business interests lobbied Congress for an increase. Applications are down despite that greater availability and a portability provision, which Davis said "allows current H-1B holders to start to work as soon as the new or current employer files a petition without waiting on the INS."

The filing fee hike from \$500 to \$1,000 per application, the requirement to meet the prevailing wage rate and the time to fulfill each step in the application process deter H-1B recruiting.

Jacksonville area human resource professionals said the local need for H-1Bs to fill the gap left by the American labor pool is still strong, but companies are seeking alternative sources for filling high-tech and higher-science needs.

Although recruiting plans are typically a tightly held commodity, local companies contacted showed two distinct patterns. Architectural, engineering and design firms are renewing efforts to marry future internal needs to staff professional growth goals. Higher-science companies, whose needs tend more toward computer specialists and scientists, are using a combination of internal development programs and nationwide community programs to develop junior high and high school student interest.

The reason for targeting the younger

children reflects the large number of young adults obtaining technology certifications during high school and shortly after high school graduation, as well as American students' declining interest in general science studies beginning in the middle school years.

Many small and medium-sized businesses find the H-1B process cost-prohibitive. Also, although large for-profits often can plan budgets to include a good portion of needed H-1Bs, non-profits may be much more restricted by budget, especially when competing for candidates being recruited by for-profits.

Companies in highly competitive markets also have to figure in the cost of additional perquisites needed to attract specialized talent.

Davis said that "for the most part, the general Jacksonville business community is not as aware of the availability of the H-1's as the large multinational high-tech and ITs [information technology firms]."

Tessy King Robbins, technical recruiter for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida and local director of education for the Society for Human Resource Management, said the wait for a new visa can span four months. A transfer visa — to change employers — takes two to three months, Robbins said.

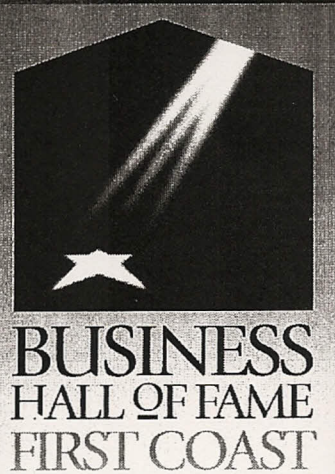
"The 'dot.com' refugees also have to be figured into the mix when accounting for the application decrease," Davis said. "With the number of 'dot.coms' folding in the past year, the nationwide market has been flooded with home-grown talent, decreasing the need to import foreign talent."

According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), new exemption categories have been added to the H-1B cap — categories within companies that don't always have the extra funds needed to bring in as many specialty workers as needed.

Detailed information on the latest H-1B information can be found online at: <http://www.ins.usdoj.gov>.

Diane K. Faulkner is a correspondent with The Business Journal.

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