



Illinois job creators need this immigration act now

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As the founder of a Chicago-based customer experience and digital agency, finding skilled employees is one of my company's biggest obstacles to growth. My industry calls hiring “a battle for talent,” because tech companies compete so fiercely over increasingly fewer qualified candidates on the market. As a result, it can take months to fill open positions.

That's why it's encouraging to see Sen. Tammy Duckworth co-sponsor the bipartisan Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, which is currently being considered on Capitol Hill. The bill would abolish the per-country cap for employment-based green card applications, thereby removing an artificial barrier to accessing highly skilled global talent. In turn, my business, and so many others like it, would be able to grow.

My company, Highland Solutions, helps organizations create digital experiences—websites, apps, and more—for their customers. When hiring, we're looking for people with a unique blend of interpersonal, analytical and technical skills as well as varied cultural perspectives. Diversity gives us an edge over our competition, which is why our staff hails from all corners of the world, including India, Malaysia, Peru, Colombia, Germany and Mexico—and with partnerships in Portugal, Costa Rica and the Philippines.

For example, we recently helped a children's hospital map the emotional journey of kids and parents experiencing the emergency room and intensive care unit. Because some of this hospital's patients and families come from immigrant backgrounds, we needed to pay special attention to the effect of language barriers, diverse views of medical care and culturally specific ways of interacting with authority figures like doctors. This is emblematic of the kind of work that can benefit from a multicultural team who can be uniquely attuned to the needs of a diverse set of stakeholders.

As a small, 35-person tech company in Chicago, rounding out our team with this unique blend of talent is difficult. The mission of the clients we serve increasingly takes into account a multi-cultural and global marketplace. Staffing a team that reflects our client's missions is our strategic advantage.

I went through the rigorous—and expensive—process of obtaining H-1B sponsorship for three Highland team members from India. Walking through this process with them opened my eyes. Under the current system, with its per-country caps on employment-based green card applications, the wait time for skilled immigrants from populous countries like India can be decades, or even more than a century, according to the Cato Institute. My employees waited upwards of 2 to 4 years before they could apply, and they put on hold their personal lives—buying a house, having kids—as they awaited their fate.

The process induces anxiety for employers too. I really had no better options than these three people who perfectly fit the roles we hired them for. But people who come here on the H-1B visa for high skilled immigrants can only stay here for six years before they have to re-enter the lottery, which would allow them to stay. If they must wait longer than that for their green cards, companies in our industry risk losing crucial members of their staff. It hurts our bottom line to operate with that kind of uncertainty. Not to mention the problem of finding new workers with the right skills when we need them. I could expand my business today if I had better access to that kind of global talent.

The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act offers one solution. Lifting the per-country cap would help companies like mine find talent more easily, grow faster and benefit the economy. Research from New American Economy shows that foreign-born talent helped create nearly a quarter of a million jobs in the Great Lakes region between 2010 and 2015. The influx of immigrants brought new businesses to towns, strengthened the workforce and helped employers hire high-skilled employees, thereby allowing companies to stay and expand in the region. It's a win for all of us, which is likely why this bill has received bi-partisan support in the Senate. It's an urgent and necessary piece of legislation; as tech centers spring up all over the world and our economy loses talent to foreign competitors like Canada, opening our doors to a broader market will keep the U.S. competitive. Let's make it easier to attract and retain great people now.