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Commentary: American economy needs more skilled immigrants

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When I came to the United States from Cape Town, South Africa, in 1983 at age 22, I was fortunate that an American accounting firm sponsored my visa.

Within a couple of years, I was able to apply for a green card — permanent legal status that gave me confidence to put down roots and launch a commercial real estate business that has developed, acquired and capitalized more than \$2 billion in property and created thousands of jobs. I also started the process of becoming an American citizen. Pledging allegiance to my new country was one of the proudest days of my life.

And yet many legal immigrants who come to this country with talents and skills similar to my own must wait decades before they get a green card. That's because a U.S. law from 1965 only allows 7% of immigrants from a given country to receive a green card each year. Because I came from a relatively small country, my queue was short. But immigrants from more populous countries spend years in limbo.

That's why I'm delighted that Sen. Mike Lee introduced the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act. The bill, which the Senate is scheduled to vote on as early as this week, would replace the country caps with a more merit-based approach and allow American companies to hire and retain the best global talent, regardless of where that talent originates. This is just common sense, which is why it's co-sponsored by Sen. Mitt Romney and unanimously supported by Utah's congressional delegation.

Obviously, an immigration system that was designed more than a half-century ago doesn't meet the needs of our current global economy. As a long-time real-estate developer in Salt Lake City and Park City, I depend on immigrant workers when there aren't enough Americans available. I urge Congress to pass this bill quickly, because any delay getting the people you need to get a job done hurts business.

A new study by the Cato Institute found that more than 100,000 legal immigrants – nearly 30 percent of people from countries with maxed-out quotas – waited a decade or more to apply for a green card last year. Shockingly, Indians with advanced degrees who apply today would have to wait 151 years. It's no wonder why more Indians are taking their skills and talents to Canada.

Immigrants are nearly 9% of Utah's population. They are an essential driver of Utah's stunning growth and ascendance as a technological powerhouse. Immigrant-owned businesses create jobs for 38,000 Utahns and generate revenues of more than \$6.3 billion annually, according to research by New American Economy. Foreign-born Utah residents held \$5.3 billion in

spending power and contributed \$1 billion in federal taxes and \$534.6 million in state and local taxes in 2017. They fill critical shortages in healthcare and science and technology fields. They also play an important role in the construction industry as expert plumbers, electricians, framers and stonemasons.

Lifting the current arbitrary country caps would allow our immigrant residents to pursue their dreams and realize their potential. That's because it's impossible to build a future when you're living in limbo. Permanent residency allowed me to build a secure and stable life with my family, buy a home, establish business partnerships and not worry that I'd suddenly have to uproot all our lives and start over somewhere else. On an emotional level, a green card meant that I truly belonged to the country I loved.

As a country, we need to celebrate and welcome talent from every corner of the globe. The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act will help us do what's best for the economy and do what's right for people.