



U.S. Will Waive In-Person Interviews for H-1B, Other Work Visas

Michelle Hackman

December 23, 2021

WASHINGTON—The State Department is temporarily dropping an in-person interview requirement for some work-visa categories in 2022 to ease visa issuances, as the Covid-19 pandemic stretches into a third year, the department announced Thursday.

Applicants for H-1B, L-1 and O-1 visas applying from abroad won't be required to do an in-person interview at a U.S. consulate, typically the final step before a visa is issued. Those categories represent the most common visa types companies use to attract high-skilled talent from abroad.

Student visas and visas for temporary, seasonal workers have already been exempted from in-person interviews, and the State Department said those categories would continue to be exempted through the end of 2022.

The in-person interview has been one hurdle in the way of consulates issuing visas to the U.S. at pre-pandemic levels. Many consulates are operating at reduced capacity because of the pandemic. Roughly 60% of U.S. consulates are still partially closed, meaning they aren't processing most work-visa types, according to a Cato Institute analysis of State Department data.

In a typical year, the U.S. would issue hundreds of thousands of visas in these categories. In the government's 2019 fiscal year, for example, the State Department issued more than 188,000 H-1B visas and 77,000 L-1 visas to applicants living abroad.

But because of the consulate closures, lines to immigrate have been growing longer, and the issuance of work visas at some consulates, including in India, have come to a standstill.

Consulates that have reduced their operations generally give priority to processing permanent immigrants to the U.S. rather than temporary visa holders.

The logjam is one reason businesses cite to explain a continuing labor shortage in the U.S.

Jon Baselice, vice president of immigration policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, welcomed the announcement.

“The critical factor going forward will be the extent to which consulates exercise these newly-granted authorities; the more the State Department uses them, the more beneficial they will be to American companies,” he said.

Interviews are expected to help the situation but not solve it entirely. As long as consulates continue to enforce social-distancing restrictions, they will likely continue to issue fewer visas.