



Stupid country? ‘I-Squared’ immigration lobby hammers U.S. technology workers

By Kenric Ward

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If it’s good for Google, is it good for America?

Under pressure to bring more foreign technology workers into the country, Congress is weighing a bipartisan bill to triple the number of skilled-work visas and expand other immigrant programs.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, is all in. On Tuesday, the bill’s sponsor called the United States “a stupid country” for failing to maximize skilled labor from overseas.

Critics warn the plan promoted by industry lobbyists would further tighten the screws on U.S. workers.

“We have Americans being replaced by cheap foreign workers and the response is to supply industry with more foreign replacements to put even more Americans out of work,” says John Miano, a tech worker-turned lawyer.

“Giving more foreign labor to industry is like giving cocaine to an addict,” he said.

The proposed [“Immigration Innovation Act of 2015”](#) is hailed as a much-needed fix by tech giants such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook.

Like its 2013 predecessor, the new “I-Squared Act” would sharply increase the ranks of H-1B (skilled) foreign workers. Now capped at 65,000 visas a year, plus 20,000 for holders of U.S. graduate degrees, H-1Bs could rise to 195,000. The benefits work squarely to the advantage of tech companies and their imported labor.

- There would be no cap on H-1B visas for foreign nationals with advanced degrees from U.S. universities.

- Discharged H-1B workers would be given a 60-day grace period during which they could change their immigration status or obtain a new visa with another employer.
- Foreign workers no longer eligible for H-1B can use a variety of other programs to stay in the U.S. and underbid American workers for jobs.

One program — Optional Practical Training OPT — is adding an estimated 120,000 foreign workers per year via student visas.

“Given these trends, it is likely that America’s largest guest worker program is now student visas,” Miano said.

Indeed, OPT participants are not students — they are workers.

“The Department of Homeland Security simply turns these aliens loose in the job market without any supervision, even allowing them to be unemployed to look for work,” Miano said. “Worse yet, employers do not have to pay Social Security and Medicare tax for aliens on student visas. This makes OPT workers inherently less expensive than hiring Americans.”

The [Washington Alliance of Technology Workers](#) is suing the government over the OPT program. “There is no statutory authority whatsoever for aliens to work on student visas, but over the years the Immigration and Naturalization Service and DHS have allowed such work through regulation,” asserts Miano, who is representing WashTech.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, says large companies benefit while smaller companies, like U.S workers, are shut out. As chairman of the [Senate Judiciary Committee](#), Grassley conducted a hearing on Tuesday to debate the I-Squared program that he says “has failed the American worker.”

Opponents of I-Squared face long political odds. The measure enjoys bipartisan support, led by Sens. Hatch, Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. The bill is also the darling of D.C.’s libertarian think tanks.

“If I-Squared were to become law and foreign STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) graduates could easily earn a green card, the United States would become an even more attractive place for international students to pursue those degrees as well as contribute to our economy,” said [Cato Institute](#) researcher Alex Nowrasteh.

By administrative fiat, congressional action, or both, tech companies keep pushing for a larger pool of foreign labor.

“Every year, U.S. employers file more than twice as many H-1B visa petitions than are allowed, and every year the cap is reached in a matter of days. The excess demand will continue to grow as the economy improves,” according to Matthew Kolodziej, an attorney at the lobbying firm of Ogletree Deakins.

Skeptics called that double speak. They testified that the weak economy and government-sponsored foreign labor are sidelining more American workers, especially older ones, as transnational tech conglomerates pad bottom lines.

Rutgers professor Hal Salzman said expanding immigration programs are undermining STEM education at home while [flattening domestic tech wages](#) over the past 15 years. He testified that U.S. universities already supply more than twice as many STEM graduates as the private sector can support, and that disproportionately large enrollments of foreign students “distort” the labor market.

“It’s not competitive hiring, it’s competitive firing,” Jay Palmer, a tech worker from Montgomery, Ala., said of the marketplace, where he has trained unskilled foreign workers to replace skilled Americans at lower wages.

“If some lobbyist went through the entire immigration system, looked for every possible place to increase the amount of foreign labor, and put them in one bill without any coherent plan, we would have the I-Squared Act,” Miano said.