



Visa delays are contributing to the U.S. labor shortage

Asma Khalid speaks to software professional Reetu Sharma and to the Cato Institute's David Bier about how visa delays impact the current labor shortage.

Asma Khalid

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ASMA KHALID, HOST:

The U.S. labor market is dealing with an unprecedented demand for workers. Some economists have suggested that federal pandemic aid and the lack of childcare have kept people out of the workforce or changed what they're looking for in a job. But analysts have discovered another factor that could be contributing, immigrants - or rather the lack of them. We'll talk with one of those experts in just a moment, but first, let's hear from one woman who wants to get back to work but is not yet authorized to. Reetu Sharma is a software professional in Northern California with specialized skills that she says makes her highly attractive to U.S. employers.

Welcome to the program.

REETU SHARMA: Thank you, Asma.

KHALID: Where are you originally from? And how did you end up coming here to the United States?

SHARMA: Yeah, I'm from India. I was living and working in Bangalore. I was a IT professional there, and so was my husband. And he got a job on H-1B visa in U.S.

KHALID: And the H-1B visa, we should explain - it's a visa category that allows U.S. employers to bring over highly skilled, highly educated foreign professionals to work here in the United States.

SHARMA: Yeah, I moved here after some time in 2016 on H-4 EAD. H4 is the visa status given to dependents of H-1B.

KHALID: And how long have you been working then in the United States?

SHARMA: Yeah. So I was working from 2019 till this August, where my husband undergo another renewal for his H-1B, which happened very quick, within a few days. But this time, my H4 renewal took a longer time, and that's why I have to stop working.

KHALID: How long has it taken?

SHARMA: My extension is applied and accepted, received by USCIS on 9 of June.

KHALID: So customs and immigration then?

SHARMA: Yes, so it's more than five months, I should say.

KHALID: Do you mind me asking, how much of an economic loss has this been for your family?

SHARMA: We are the family of four people, me, my husband and two of our kids. So it is a financial loss. We have to cut off and really think. For example, my older kid - he has some soccer and other activities. I mean, this is a very small thing to say, but again, for every expense, we need to think it will be not as same as when we both were working.

KHALID: You know, when you hear about the apparent labor shortage, what's your reaction, given that you are somebody who is willing to work, but you're saying to me you cannot work?

SHARMA: I should say if I hear of labor shortage, I definitely think I can contribute into the availability of labor. I just need my H-4 and EAD approved. I wish it happen soon.

KHALID: That was Reetu Sharma from the Bay Area.

Now we turn to David Bier, a research fellow who specializes in immigration policy at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. Welcome to the show, David.

DAVID BIER: Thanks for having me on.

KHALID: You recently wrote a column arguing that the solution to the apparent labor shortage is to increase legal immigration. How so?

BIER: Well, over the summer, every month saw an average of about 10 million open jobs. And legal immigrants are ready and able to fill this labor shortage. We have more than 9 million people in the backlog of the immigration process, both here and abroad, trying to get permanent resident status. We have people both at the high-skill end of the spectrum in that backlog. We also have many people, as you know, at the lower end of the spectrum in the immigration backlog.

KHALID: You know, David, from your perspective, to what degree is the fact that there remain so many unfilled jobs at all attributable to the visa backlog and the visa system?

BIER: There are about 1.2 million adult foreign workers or work-eligible immigrants who are just not here because of the restrictions that have been imposed during the pandemic. And so that's about a quarter of the increase in job openings.

KHALID: We spoke recently with Reetu Sharma. Her visa ran out, and she's been waiting since June to get it renewed. And how typical are those stories?

BIER: Incredibly typical. In fact, since the start of the pandemic, there are about 700,000 additional people who were added to the backlog for employment authorization documents, which allow people to work in the country illegally. The last administration took many actions related to closing appointment centers and service centers throughout the country. You know, one of the other actions that the Trump administration took was requiring people to get fingerprinted again, a second and third and fourth time every time they renewed their visa or status. And that was contributing to lengthy wait times and backlogs because there weren't enough resources.

KHALID: You know, David, my day job is I'm a longtime political correspondent with NPR. I have interviewed people, and they will say that there are still millions of Americans out of work. And so why should the United States continue to allow immigrants into the country if there are so many unemployed Americans?

BIER: There is not a fixed number of jobs in the economy. And so when you let in a bunch of farm workers, they're also creating jobs for Americans in positions like being a manager at the farm. You bring in 10 construction workers. You're creating a job for a civil engineer. And so that's how the economy works. We all move up together when more people are contributing to it.

KHALID: Are there any quick, simple things that you think the Joe Biden administration could do without going through Congress?

BIER: Yes, of course, there are. There are numerous avenues for the administration. It has broad executive powers over things like grants of parole, which is a temporary status that was used just recently and very publicly to bring in tens of thousands of Afghans from Afghanistan. But the administration is really taking a very slow approach to reforming and fixing many of the mistakes of the last administration. Talking about going above and beyond that is really not even getting a hearing with this administration at this point.

KHALID: That's David Bier, a research fellow at the Cato Institute. Thanks for joining us.

BIER: Thank you.