

U.S. News: Remote Work Spurs A Pitch for Tech Visas

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FULL TEXT

WASHINGTON -- Tech-industry representatives are coming to Capitol Hill this week to warn that the remote-work trend will lead to more offshoring of software developer and other technology jobs unless the U.S. admits more high-skilled immigrants.

Remote jobs in tech jumped by more than 420% between January 2020 and last month, growth that was intensified by the pandemic, according to a jobs data review by Tecna, a trade group for regional tech councils. In February, more than 22% of all tech jobs were listed as remote, compared with 4.4% in January 2020.

"The level of remote tech positions that are open is drastically higher than it was prepandemic," said Jennifer Grundy Young, Tecna's chief executive officer. "That means workers can live anywhere in the U.S., but it also unfortunately opens the door to more outsourcing -- workers staying in India, in China, or moving to places like Canada that have more flexible immigration policies."

The U.S. allows 65,000 skilled-worker visas annually under its H-1B program, plus an additional 20,000 for people who hold graduate degrees from American universities. Those numbers haven't budged since 2005 despite the sharp rise in tech jobs.

In contrast, Canada, which has been courting tech workers for years, has no cap on visas for immigrating tech workers and entrepreneurs, making it an attractive destination for Indian, Chinese and Eastern European computer coders and software engineers.

Toronto added more than 81,000 tech jobs since 2016, more than any other city in North America, according to a report published last year by CBRE Group, a U.S. commercial real-estate services and investment firm.

The U.S. unemployment rate for tech occupations was 1.3% as of March, about one-third of the national unemployment rate, according to data from the Computing Technology Industry Association and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many in the tech industry say they are desperate to fill open positions and argue that turning away foreign talent because there aren't enough visas jeopardizes the country's position as a leader in technology and innovation.

"There is tremendous frustration, which I share, among tech companies that have been asking us to improve the system for more years than I can count, and nothing has been able to move," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D., Calif.), chairwoman of the House Immigration and Citizenship Subcommittee, whose district includes Silicon Valley.

"Ultimately, this could hurt the U.S. economy."

Ms. Lofgren has pushed to increase the number of available visas and is working with Rep. Darrell Issa (R., Calif.) on changes to the H-1B program. She also has proposed legislation to eliminate a per-country cap for employment-based immigrant visas.

A spokesman for Mr. Issa said the congressman isn't open to increasing the total number of visas.

In congressional hearings, Republican lawmakers have focused on immigration at the border with Mexico as the priority and have said companies should focus on training U.S. workers instead of relying on immigrants.

"This Congress has made very clear, both through its actions and its inaction, that it places Americans last and it places foreign labor and the big corporations that shamelessly exploit it first," said Rep. Tom McClintock of California, ranking Republican of the immigration subcommittee, at a hearing last summer about how high-skilled

foreign workers are flocking to Canada because of U.S. immigration policies.

Ms. Grundy Young said Tecna's study shows that tech jobs shifted during the pandemic from places like Silicon Valley to smaller hubs, including Nashville, Tenn.

The pandemic has accelerated a trend of U.S. tech companies looking for easier ways to hire the software engineers and developers they need.

"There's still a desire for the employer to have their employees in the U.S., but if that's not possible, they will hire talent and place them where they are able to work productively," said Stuart Anderson, executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy, a nonpartisan research organization that focuses on trade and immigration.

Tecna's study of how tech jobs have shifted since the pandemic found that Tennessee had the largest increase in tech jobs, with an 8% increase.

Even so, research by the Nashville regional technology council found that there are about 15,000 open industry positions, and they worry about Tennessee-based tech companies turning to Canada.

"The rising need for tech talent is overshadowing the incoming number of tech workers," said Elise Cambournac, chief executive of the Nashville Technology Council.

States with the highest tech worker growth, December 2019–December 2021

Maryland	+8.4%
Indiana	+8.4
New York	+8.3
Texas	+8.2
Georgia	+8.1
Florida	+7.8
New Jersey	+7.8
Tennessee	+7.8
North Carolina	+7.7
Missouri	+7.7

Source: Technology Councils of North America

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Credit: By Julie Bykowicz

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