

Status quo in H-1B visas will bring cheer to Indian techies

The Trump administration's decision to not follow through with a proposed change in the H-1B regime has brought cheer to between 500,000 and 750,000 Indians, mostly technology workers, and their families in the US. It has also come as a relief to the Indian government which had expressed concern when news of the plan broke.

A H-1B visa holder can spend up to six years (two terms of three years) in the US, but H1 B visa holders whose papers are being processed for a Green Card (or residency) can stay on in the country. Many Indian technology workers and their families had built their lives around the visa. Home, work, life, school – everything revolved around the US for these Indians. The Trump administration proposed changing the rule to ensure that H-1B visa holders could not stay on in the country while their residency application was being processed. That plan has now been dropped, it said on Monday.

Indian technology workers power many US technology companies. Many of them are Indians who have become US citizens; and some are Green Card holders. Both have enough people who once held a H-1B visa. Then there are the current H1 B visa holders themselves. The contribution of such workers to the US economy, and especially the technology industry in that country, is significant. Large Indian software companies, most of whose customers are in the US, also employ H-1B visa holders to power their operations in that country, although their dependence on such workers has reduced in recent years. It is possible that the change, if the US had insisted on effecting it, would have affected all these companies, the competitiveness of the US tech industry, and the US economy itself. It would also, to some extent, have affected the Indian economy.

While there has been some misuse, the H-1B visa regime has, in general, been what management consultants like to call a win-win. It has benefited the technology workers themselves, but it has also benefited local (US) companies, the industry, and the economy. Still, there's no telling what the current US administration – President Donald Trump won on a protectionist, anti-immigration, US-jobs-for-Americans platform – will do. Even as they celebrate the US' change of mind, this is likely to weigh on the minds of Indian technology workers currently in the US on a H-1B visa. Many will probably continue to weigh their options – some were said to be considering Canada (once referred to by a wonk as "everybody's Plan B"). Meanwhile, India, which is keen to accelerate the growth of its own technology industry, would do well to see whether there is anything it can do to attract these, and other technology workers.

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