

# Detroit Free Press

## Thousands of Michigan's high-tech employees at mercy of visa lottery

*Meet the Ann Arbor software company with four employees who will be kicked out of the U.S. if they don't win a visa lottery.*

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By Nathan Bomey, Detroit Free Press



LLamasoft CEO Don Hicks, flanked by several immigrant employees who are pursuing visas, discusses his objections to U.S. immigration policy at the company's office in Ann Arbor on April 9, 2015.  
(Photo: Nathan Bomey, Detroit Free Press)

In a post-industrial, global economy, the most vital asset for companies is talent.

So it's remarkable that U.S. immigration policy forces tens of thousands of high-skilled foreign workers to leave this country every year, effectively handing an incredible advantage to foreign competitors.

Lest you think this is simply a Silicon Valley problem, think again.

Metro Detroit, in fact, had the seventh-highest number of high-tech immigrants with H-1B visas in the U.S. in 2013, according to a Brookings Institution study released last week.

With 7,443 H-1B workers, metro Detroit has more high-tech immigrants than the high-tech Seattle region (7,363), the flourishing Boston area (7,076) and the famed Research Triangle region (6,730) in North Carolina.

But this week, the government announced that U.S. companies had topped the 85,000 annual cap on H-1B applications within just a couple days of the window opening.

That threshold means that all H-1B applicants will be tossed into a randomized lottery to see who gets to stay — and who must go. We're playing a frivolous game of chance with our economic future.

"We are a global leader in talent, and by restricting the amount of global talent we can use we are costing Michigan jobs," said Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit, a group that promotes immigration reform.

Politically, progress on this issue has been halting because of the broader debate about border security and the cultural implications of foreigners snapping up opportunities in the U.S. But the reality is there's bipartisan support for more H-1B visas, including from Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, who has championed the issue since his days as chairman of economic development group Ann Arbor SPARK.

This is not just a problem for major corporations like General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, automakers that are constantly shifting talent around the globe.

It's a threat to the progress of rapidly growing, midsize tech companies, too.

Take Ann Arbor-based software firm LLamasoft, for example. The company, which is considered the world's leading supplier of supply chain management systems, applied for H-1B visas for four of its employees this year.

Any one of them — or all four — could be forced to leave the U.S. if they don't win the lottery. Their chances are poor. Last year, the government received more than 170,000 applications for H-1B visas.

"I've got four people right now sitting around waiting to see if my government is going to boot them out," said Don Hicks, CEO and founder of LLamasoft, which has grown to 150 employees in Ann Arbor since it was founded more than a decade ago. "It's indefensible and asinine."

On Thursday, Hicks delivered a passionate speech about immigration policy, flanked by several immigrant workers, during a gathering on the third floor of the historic First National Bank office building on Main Street in downtown Ann Arbor.

LLamasoft has gradually taken over most of the building and expects to continue growing after recently acquiring one of its only competitors, a supply chain product offered by IBM.

But without access to high-skilled workers — many of them produced by the University of Michigan a few blocks east — LLamasoft is shifting more work overseas.

Last year, for example, one of LLamasoft's most talented software developers, who happened to be an immigrant, had to transfer to the company's London office after he failed to win an H-1B visa.

"This is impacting my ability to serve customers — and even more important it's embarrassing when I have to stand before my employees who are giving their all and tell them, 'I'm sorry, you can't stay,' " he said.

Research shows that high-skilled immigrants are more likely to start new businesses, win patents and have skills in the crucial science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) areas.