

Immigrant talent pool can fill needs of metro Detroit employers

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Talk to economic developers or business leaders and they will tell you the economic future is tied to talent. The race for highly skilled workers is more competitive than ever.

This past week, five days after opening the application process, the federal government closed the window for U.S. employers to file H-1B visas for workers who could fill unmet talent needs. This is the 14th year in a row that the supply of H-1B visas has been exhausted, with 233,000 applications filed for 85,000 spots in 2015.

This issue significantly hurts metro Detroit's economy. According to a 2015 Brookings Institution report, metro Detroit ranked eighth in the nation in H-1B approvals — more than Seattle, Boston, the Research Triangle, Houston, Philadelphia or Atlanta — and ninth in the nation in the density of H-1B workers with more than twice the national average.

The 12,000 H-1B visas awarded to Michigan companies between 2010 and 2013 will create 22,000 new Michigan jobs for U.S.-born workers by 2020, while the rejected H-1B applications from metro Detroit in 2007 and 2008 are estimated to have cost our region as many as 15,000 jobs and \$135.9 million in additional earnings.

Despite these challenges, metro Detroit benefits from significant innovations that help employers use global talent. Global Detroit, a nationally recognized leader in immigrant talent integration, has worked with partners in the business community, state and local government, and the nonprofit sector to build competitive regional advantages in job creation and business growth.

Global Detroit oversees the Michigan Global Talent Retention Initiative, the nation's first international student retention program. When 70.3 percent of all the graduate students in electrical engineering in America (and 63.2 percent in computer science) are international, it makes perfect sense to connect this talent pool to local employers.

A second successful strategy has been to better connect college-educated immigrants who are underemployed, working outside of their professional careers — the proverbial engineer driving a tax cab. The Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs is a national leader in integrating highly skilled immigrant and refugee talent.

While Congress is caught in gridlock, Michigan employers benefit from the nation's first international student retention program and one of the nation's leading state highly skilled immigrant integration efforts, giving them tremendous access to global talent, a significant competitive advantage.