

Engineers and Scientists

Their temporary and permanent entry to the USA

by David North

When U.S. employers hire foreign-born engineers they are much more likely to hire workers with temporary visas than those with permanent status.

Workers with temporary visas, by law, are indentured to their employers. Immigrants with permanent visas are able, like U.S. citizens, to move around freely in the labor market and thus can better fend for themselves economically.

In fiscal year 1995, U.S. employers petitioned for the admission of 55,860 alien engineers with temporary (non-immigrant) visas. That was at least the eighth consecutive year that the number of alien engineers with temporary visas had increased; in fact, there were almost three times as many of them in FY 1995 as

there were in FY 1988. (See Table 1.)

Admission of immigrant engineers has not stirred much controversy, but there has been a vigorous debate in Congress, and in the industry, about the alleged exploitation of technical workers with temporary visas, particularly in computer programming and other engineering fields. **TSC**

Table 1: Admissions of engineers: immigrants and non-immigrants FYs 1988-1995

^a The Immigration Act of 1990 took effect at the start of FY 1992, and it caused a surge of employment-based immigration that year because one of its provisions eased a backlog

situation.

Sources: These are the hard counts of immigrants and estimates for non-immigrants based on data from the Division of Statistics, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, D.C. As to the methodology used for the non-immigrant estimates, see the explanation at the bottom of Table 2.

Note: There is an unknown but significant overlap between the two columns, as people admitted as non-immigrants often convert to immigrant status several years after their arrival. Someone recorded as a non-immigrant in the 1988 data, for example, may also be recorded as an immigrant in the 1990 or 1991 data. The non-immigrants covered by this table are primarily H (temporary workers), J (exchange visitors), L (multinational corporation employees), and those admitted under the free trade agreements with Canada and (to a much lesser extent) Mexico. Neither foreign students (F-1) nor visitors for business (B-1) are included.

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Table 2. Admissions of scientists and engineers on temporary working visas, FY 1995 (estimates by occupational group and visa category)

Source: Estimates made by the author, based on INS admissions data (printout 614) for these visa classes; while the total number of admissions in each of these classes is a count, occupational data are collected only on a sample of those admitted. For more on the estimating techniques used, see the appendix to David S. North, *Soothing the Establishment: The Impact of Foreign-born Scientists and Engineers on America*, University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, MD, 1995.