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## Visa limits may trip up IS recruitment efforts

By [JULIA KING](#)  
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Talent-strapped companies can forget about hiring imported IS staffers until after Oct. 1, when the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will begin doling out the 1998 quota of 65,000 visas for all foreign professionals.

An INS spokesman last week said the agency processed a final 1,300 or so applications before it hit this year's quota more than a month before the end of the government's fiscal year.

Although it was expected, the ahead-of-schedule closing has prompted calls for raising the cap on visas, or alternately, creating a special visa category for much-needed computer professionals.

“Based on the crunch the industry is facing, we would definitely lobby to increase the quota,” said Sushma Rajagopalan, vice president of global recruitment at Mastech Corp., a systems integration firm in Pittsburgh. “Anything would be a reprieve, not just for us, but for all companies,” especially those with year 2000 projects under way, she said.

Immigration attorneys said they have been told INS will still process applications over the next several weeks, but no visas will be issued until after Oct. 1.

Waiting a month is little more than an inconvenience in the short term, but in the long term, the cap on visas could cause major problems for U.S. employers. This is especially true as more companies ramp up their year 2000 efforts in the next two years.

Demand for foreign information systems professionals has never been higher, yet the visa cap, implemented in 1990, has remained the same for the past six years.

It also doesn't apply solely to high-tech workers. The 65,000

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visas include those for doctors, nurses, engineers, fashion models and several other groups of professionals coming to work in the U.S.

“And if the government keeps stuffing new occupations under the H-1 [visa category], it will be an even bigger problem,” said Carl Shusterman, a Los Angeles-based immigration attorney.

“We need to have higher quotas, and if we don't, we are basically shooting ourselves in the foot,” said Rajiv Khanna, a business immigration attorney in Washington.

In the past two years, Khanna said his firm has seen a 400% increase in H-1 visa processing, with new demand coming largely from the high-tech sector.

The demand, he said, is for experienced IS professionals, who by law must be paid the prevailing wage rate received by U.S. workers in the same job categories.

But often, foreign workers earn more in the U.S. than their American counterparts, Khanna said.





Rather than fulfill one- and two-year contracts they may have with the U.S. companies that helped obtain their work visas, foreign IS workers “are jumping ship a lot” to follow the big money, Khanna said.

The average tenure of a foreign worker at a U.S. company is six months, he said.

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