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Foreign labor costly, mobile

By [JULIA KING](#)
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A recently hired foreign-born computer professional abruptly quits to take a better-paying job at another employer. His former company is now stuck for the thousands of dollars it spent obtaining the worker's visa or residency card.

Every month, Washington immigration attorney Rajiv Khanna hears stories just like that from a slew of U.S. companies. He has to tell them they are out of luck.

“I've also known cases where a foreign IT worker has gotten a visa approval from a third company, then gone back to the second company and said, ‘This is what they're offering me.’ And the second company will match it,” Khanna said. “The bottom line is they're making employers bid against one another.”

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That factor alone is increasing foreign labor costs significantly, the lawyer said. For example, the average salary of the Indian programmers he has worked with is \$5,000 to \$10,000 more than their American counterparts, Khanna said.

Of course, labor costs are up by about 20% for U.S. information technology professionals as well, according to William M. Mercer, Inc., a New York compensation consultancy.

Yet for companies wrestling with whether to help with visas as a way to attract foreign talent, money is just part of the story. Many foreign IT professionals, like their U.S. counterparts, also want to work on the hottest projects and use the latest technologies. And therein lies the catch-22.

Spooked by the prospect of a quick exit by a key developer, many U.S. employers are reluctant to include foreign talent on top project teams. Not only would they lose a key contributor,

but they also could end up sacrificing their investment in processing visas and green cards, which can take up to two years and run as high as \$10,000.

Consider Ramesh Dorairaj, a 28-year-old native of India. After seven months, he left his software developer job at the New York law firm that sponsored his first three-year work visa. He joined RSG Systems, Inc., also in New York, which sponsored his current visa.

The move netted Dorairaj an immediate 10% increase in pay. But more money, he said, wasn't the main reason for the switch. What he was after was broader IT experience. "At the law firm, I was typically doing a lot of reports. But the main thing I wanted was different projects," he said. Workers with different kinds of experience advance faster, he added.

Today, after a little more than a year at RSG, Dorairaj's resume includes work on several Internet and intranet projects in the entertainment and publishing industries. And that's exactly how RSG executives said they planned it.

"It takes time and effort to instill a sense of loyalty, and the way we're doing it is to constantly challenge the staff and give them a clear advancement path," said Mukesh Sehgal, president of the 60-person consulting firm. About half the staff is foreign-born.

"Compensation is just one part of it," Sehgal said. "People don't wake up thinking, 'This is how much I'm going to make today, so I better get to work.'"

At the other end of the spectrum is Star Enterprises, a \$9 billion Houston-based oil company that has a company policy against sponsoring visas for foreign IT professionals.

"We don't want to incur the overhead," said Gary Richardson, director of IT services. As a result, the 30 or so foreign-born IT professionals who work at the company are contractors.

But that poses a whole new set of challenges, he added. For starters, Star's contract workers are assigned only "commodity work in a standard development environment," which tends to accelerate turnover among workers in search of hot projects.





"When they get bored, they move," Richardson said. He said turnover has run as high as 50% in the past year. On the other hand, "We don't let contractors come in and do one-of-a-kind development because the odds are that they are going to leave you with a legacy problem you didn't want," he said.

The bottom line is that "different things motivate different people," said Amy Naples, who has interviewed and hired

hundreds of foreign-born IT professionals as a recruiter at Bluestone, Inc., a software and consulting firm in Mount Laurel, N.J.

Source: Computerworld

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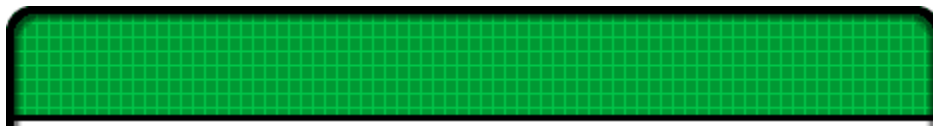
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