

Eased Immigration Laws May Spur Growth, U.S. Chamber Report Says

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The U.S. needs to ease restrictions on immigrants who plan to open businesses, and create a separate visa for potential entrepreneurs, according to a report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Current immigration laws make it difficult for people to enter the U.S. and start a business, according to the report, released today by the Chamber and the Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Council. Expansion of the visa program would also aid companies' access to foreign-born graduates of U.S. universities, helping economic growth, the authors of the report said.

Immigrant entrepreneurs established 18 percent of the Fortune 500 companies, according to a June 2011 report from the Partnership for a New American Economy, a group of business leaders and mayors that advocates for immigration reform. Those companies, such as Google Inc. (GOOG), Big Lots Inc. (BIG) and Comcast Corp. (CMCSA) generated \$1.7 trillion in revenue in 2010 and had 3.7 million employees worldwide, the report said.

"They are going to contribute and succeed somewhere -- why shouldn't it be the United States?" Thomas Donohue, the Chamber's chief executive officer, said in a Jan. 12 speech in Washington.

Immigrants are more likely than native-born U.S. workers to start their own business or be self-employed, according to the Chamber of Commerce study. Of naturalized citizens, 5.1 percent were employed by their own business, compared with 3.7 percent of the native-born citizens, the report found. In Massachusetts, immigrants were 14 percent of the population in 2008 and started 61 percent of the businesses, the report found.

Legislation Stymied

Efforts at revising immigration laws have been stymied in Congress, including efforts to let temporary foreign workers enter the U.S. and to help illegal immigrants advance toward citizenship. Changing the visa program has gotten lost in the debate, according to the Chamber, the nation's largest business group.

"I'm frustrated by it," Randel Johnson, the Chamber's senior vice president for labor, immigration and employee benefits, said in an interview. "But our reaction is to try to pick off the pits and pieces" of reform, "and this is pretty uncontroversial, though anything with immigration has some controversy."

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