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Wrapped in red tape

In 1990, Rob Chess was an adviser to a Bush administration that expanded scientific immigration. Now, as chairman of biotech company Nektar Therapeutics in San Carlos, California, he is watching a different Bush administration contract it. Chess, like most scientists, understands the need for security in a changed world. But he bemoans its unintended consequences in the scientific community. The first ripples hit many foreign graduate students and postdocs when they tried to return to the United States after the 2002 Christmas holiday, delaying them and in some cases leaving them in limbo (see *Nature* 422, 96–97; 2003). Then there were repercussions on broader academic hiring (see *Nature* 422, 457–458; 2003).

Now, Chess sees signs that strangled immigration is constricting recruitment into industry. Rather than taking weeks to process immigration requests, it now takes 3–6 months, he says. This is problematic — with 60–65% of science and engineering PhDs in the United States granted to foreign scientists, firms have little choice but to seek skills abroad. “We’ve always recruited, even in tough times, the absolute best scientists, regardless of where they come from,” Chess says. “The best person in the world sometimes is not a US citizen.”

And the process seems to be getting more cumbersome. In May, the US Department of State instituted a policy to interview everyone applying for a visa. And last October, the number of H1B visas, which are often issued for faculty members, will be cut to 65,000 a year, from a high of 195,000. Even if those decreases hit academia hardest, they will have a knock-on effect to industry.

Unless the visa review process becomes more efficient, recruitment options for US companies wanting to be competitive with their global counterparts will shrink, along with the number of visas issued each year.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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