

Austin American-Statesman

yahoo!

OPINION: MORE BIG TECH IS COMING TO TEXAS, BUT WHO WILL FILL THE JOBS?

By Glenn Hamer and Justin Yancy

Published By: Austin American-Statesman and Yahoo
November 27, 2022

Recently, the CEO of a prominent biomedical company in Brownsville shared a cautionary tale: One of his top employees had left Texas due to the state's poor treatment of immigrants. The young man was a DACA recipient with a valid work permit, but without long-term security in the United States, he could be deported at any time if DACA ended. As anti-immigrant rhetoric from national and state leaders increased, he worried that his home near the border put him at risk. He's now working at a company in Chicago.

The Texas business community can't afford to lose young people like this. The number of online job postings in Texas more than doubled from 2017 to 2021, according to a recent report from the American Immigration Council. Yet many companies are struggling to fill positions. The latest data shows more than 10 million job openings in the U.S. — but only around 6 million unemployed workers. Now, with global companies like Samsung, Tesla, and Google opening locations here, we need to address workforce constraints and perhaps more importantly, change our messaging around immigration. Without welcoming policies or leaders who are willing to engage in practical immigration reform, the workers we need will go elsewhere.

Congress recently passed the CHIPS and Science Act to boost domestic chip manufacturing and scientific research, aimed at increasing U.S. competitiveness against China. Many of these companies will be locating in Texas, including Samsung's \$17 billion computer chip plant outside of Austin that will create some 2,000 high tech jobs. That is great news for our state. But where will the workforce come from to staff these new ventures? STEM workers are particularly challenging to find. In 2020, there were 1.36 million job openings for computer-related roles, in an industry with a 1.9 percent unemployment rate. And according to a survey by recruiting company Linius, 82 percent of employers struggle to fill engineering positions.

Immigrants are critical to meeting this demand. Despite making up just 17.1 percent of Texas' population, they comprise 21.9 percent of the workforce. Among these

workers are Texas Dreamers, young adults who were brought to the U.S. as children and grew up here. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was launched ten years ago, giving temporary legal and work authorization to 800,000 of these young people, but last year a Texas federal judge ruled against the program, putting a stop to any new applications. Now, more than 100,000 undocumented immigrants are graduating high school without the ability to apply for legal status. That's a huge untapped resource.

In addition, we can recapture unused visas to increase the number of STEM workers living and working in our country. Major semiconductor companies like Intel, GlobalFoundries, ASML US and Samsung Semiconductor Inc. have called on Congress to allow more highly skilled workers to remain in the U.S. Due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and funding shortfalls, we now have a backlog of 9 million green cards. We must clear this backlog so hardworking individuals who have been waiting in line for decades can remain in the country they call home.

During the recent midterm election campaigns, some politicians used anti-immigrant messaging. Of course we need a safe and secure border for the sake of both businesses and Texas families. But we also need a growing, skilled workforce. We can and should have immigration policies that achieve both goals. When anti-immigrant rhetoric is used, it creates a culture that's not friendly toward business. If we want our state to continue to serve as a top destination for business, we've got to change the way we talk about foreign-born workers and reform our immigration policies.

Glenn Hamer is president and CEO of the Texas Association of Business and was formerly the CEO of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Justin Yancy is president of the Texas Business Leadership Council and has served in the administrations of Governors George W. Bush and Rick Perry.