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'Us vs. them' mentality holds us back

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Congress has introduced legislation that would increase the number of H-1B visas, allowing immigrants with specific, high-demand skills to work for a limited time in the U.S.

Opponents of the increase claim that we already have plenty of well-trained engineers in this country and that allowing more foreign-born workers into the labor market drives wages down and dampens incentives to improve math and science education. They accuse the companies requesting the visas of being opportunists -- they just want workers to become familiar enough with the American way of doing business to be able to go home and lead successful outsourcing businesses in India and China.

That view smacks of nationalist economics that no longer holds and is ultimately counterproductive. It reflects an "us vs. them" mentality that holds us back. Most people grasp that our national economy is actually global; they know that the clothes they wear or the cars they drive are only partially "made in the U.S.A." Just as we accept that capital is global, we must also grasp that labor is in constant motion. According to the International Organization on Migration, there are more than 191 million migrants worldwide. Many of them continue to contribute economically and politically to their homelands at the same time that they are hard at work in the U.S. Poor migrants have to piece together livelihoods that cross borders because it's often difficult for them to gain a secure foothold anywhere. Well-educated migrants have the skills and knowledge to take advantage of opportunities in various settings. They're not choosing either/or but both. Just as companies move to reap the greatest advantage, so do they. Why should we hold people to standards that Coca Cola and Starbucks abandoned long ago?

I spent the past five years talking with numerous highly educated, professional immigrants who work in health care, finance or the computer industry. Many are entrepreneurs who have built successful start-up companies employing dozens of native-born workers. More important, those people are at the forefront of building successful partnerships with colleagues in their homelands. They know how to help Americans do business in the countries that they come from and how to bring compatriot clients to the U.S. They often have friends in high places who can make or break a business venture. They know how to push forward cooperative ventures, distributing their operations geographically where it makes the most financial and management sense. They want to promote growth and development in their homelands but they are doing it from their firm base in the U.S. They are neither chauvinists nor polygamists. They are just smart businesspeople who see their playing field as the entire world, just as transnational corporations do.

That kind of economic universalism, or redefining the boundaries of possibility, is an inherently smart thing. Certainly, some people come to the U.S. to take advantage of opportunities and then return home to use them. Many more will become green-card holders and citizens when the current backlog allows them to. Even when they do, let's hope they continue to pursue opportunities globally. Rather than asking people to choose, or treating people with dual memberships with suspicion, we need to celebrate those bridge builders and translators. They're doing the hard work of creating economic opportunities and relationships for the rest of us.

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