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OPINION: 'MINIMALLY VIABLE' IMMIGRATION REFORM

By L. Gordon Crovitz
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Silicon Valley pioneered the concept of a "minimally viable" launch for new websites and services. The idea is to introduce products with limited features to learn what works and what doesn't work. Proponents say this approach has a better chance of ultimate success than trying to get everything done at once.

This is the opposite of how Washington often operates, as the ObamaCare debacle illustrates. Democrats have also taken an all-or-nothing approach to immigration reform, a top Silicon Valley priority. With comprehensive reform looking unlikely, technology leaders should urge the minimally viable approach as the best way to get smarter, more economically beneficial and more humane immigration policies.

In presentations on the minimally viable approach, technology entrepreneur Eric Ries says it "allows us to achieve a big vision in small increments without going in circles" and "requires a commitment to iteration" as circumstances change. For example, Zappos launched its website to test whether people would buy shoes online and invested in inventory only when they did.

The stall in immigration reform over many years illustrates what Mr. Ries means by "going in circles." Both parties say they want to make it easier for foreigners who get technology degrees from U.S. universities to stay instead of becoming entrepreneurs back in China or India. Venture capitalist John Doerr famously declared: "I would staple a green card to the diploma of anyone who graduates with a degree in the physical sciences or engineering in the U.S." But that was five years ago, and it hasn't happened.

President Obama says he supports the idea of relaxing immigration rules for skilled workers, but last year House Democrats opposed a Republican bill that would have done just that. The Democrats insisted that any visa reform must be part of a broader immigration bill. Even Rep. Zoe Lofgren, a Democrat who represents Silicon Valley, held her own constituents hostage by opposing stand-alone visa reform. So even though almost everyone agrees on the urgent need for visa reform, the U.S. has pushed hundreds of thousands of talented people out of the country.

The Dream Act is another example of immigration reform that could be passed right away. Democrats proposed this law, which would put illegal aliens who were brought to the U.S. as children on a path to citizenship. Republicans in the House now also support this reform, which Rep. Eric Cantor dubs the Kids Act. Some Republicans suspect, though, that Mr. Obama would rather have a campaign talking point against them than have any immigration reform.

A minimally viable approach to fixing immigration could combine these two ideas. Visa reform would get the U.S. back into the global competition for entrepreneurs, which Canada, Australia and China are now winning. For those who oppose citizenship for the estimated 12 million people living here illegally, legalizing those who arrived as children would be a reminder that fellow citizens make the best neighbors.

The broad immigration bill that passed in the Senate earlier this year has many virtues, including refocusing policy on the economic benefits of immigration and creating simple routes to citizenship that would reduce illegal immigration in the future. The Senate bill, however, is weighed down by numerous complex rules and billions of dollars for futile border fencing.

Getting immigration reform one smart step at a time would be better than the status quo. More open borders would reduce the federal deficit, since immigrants tend to be younger and pay more in taxes than they get in benefits. In the meantime, the opportunity costs for years of inaction on immigration reform continue to grow.

The ultimate immigration reform would be an iterative system that kept the borders open by matching immigration goals to the country's growing need for more economically productive people. The fastest way to get to this result is to start with workable reforms.

The last significant immigration reform was decades ago, under Ronald Reagan. If Washington could agree on a minimally viable approach, we could eventually get policies to meet the country's need for immigrants without having to get politicians to agree on a massive new law every generation.

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