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H-1B VISA APPLICATIONS DROP

A total of 199,000 applications were received for 85,000 visas

By Laura Meckler
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WASHINGTON – The number of applications for the H-1B visas used by high-tech companies and others to bring highly skilled workers to the U.S. dropped this year after years on the rise, the government said Monday.

It is unclear exactly why, but experts pointed to Trump administration promises to crack down on the abuses in the program, discussion of tougher vetting of foreigners and business decisions by the [Indian outsourcing firms](#) that are heavy users of the program.

A total of 199,000 applications were received in five days for just 85,000 visas for fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, the fifth year running that the cap was exceeded in a week or less and a sign that demand still badly outstrips supply. As a result, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services again distributed the visas by lottery.

But the number was down from 236,000 applications, known as petitions, the previous year. The number had been rising every year since 2013, when it took 73 days to receive 85,000 applications.

“It is definitely a stark drop after years of an upward trend,” said Leon Rodriguez, who was the director of USCIS during the Obama administration and is now an attorney in private practice at Seyfarth Shaw LLP.

He said President Donald Trump’s efforts to restrict travel to the U.S. by certain foreigners and to increase vetting of visa applicants may have made the positions less attractive to some would-be foreign workers. In addition, he pointed to Trump administration promises to [increase enforcement of the program’s rules](#).

But he said business decisions may be at work too, with some Indian outsourcing firms – which typically use foreign workers to service technology needs of U.S. companies – saying they would try to hire more Americans and talking about bringing some of their work back to India. Some of that may be driven by the political environment in the U.S., experts say, and some by the companies’ needs.

The Trump administration hasn’t made major changes to the H-1B program that Mr. Trump promised as a candidate. This month the administration did announce that it would direct more inspectors in the H-1B program to the outsourcing companies, which have drawn scrutiny for displacing American workers.

The companies say they are adhering to the program’s rules and that they only hire foreigners because they can’t find Americans for the jobs.

The H-1B program may also be a victim of its own success, said Leon Fresco, who headed the Justice Department's Office of Immigration Litigation in the Obama administration and now is in private practice. He said that given the demand for H-1Bs, many companies are looking at other visa programs for needed foreign workers. Additionally, he said, many companies are concluding that filing additional applications yields little.

"It is like the Yogi Berra saying, 'It is so crowded, no one goes there anymore,'" he said.