



Untold Stories: The American Workers Replaced by the H-1B Visa Program

Eleven Americans explain how Big Tech's cheap foreign labor cost them their livelihoods

By Matt Sussis

Introduction

Immigration reporting tends to rely heavily on stories — stories about illegal immigrant families looking to be reunited, about TPS recipients facing potential deportation, or about legal immigrants working their way toward citizenship. One type of story that receives far less attention from the media, despite its prevalence, is from victims of foreign guest labor — American mothers, fathers, and breadwinners who lost their livelihoods to cheaper foreign replacements and outsourcing.

Big corporations and their lobbyists will often claim that there is a “shortage” of American STEM workers that necessitates an ever-growing number of “high-skill” visas, such as H-1B, L-1, and H4 EAD. This is absolutely false.

In fact, only about a third of natives with college degrees in STEM fields actually hold STEM jobs, meaning there are millions of Americans who could be recruited prior to turning to foreigners.¹ Foreign-educated immigrants are also less-skilled than U.S. degree holders when it comes to tests on numeracy, literacy, and computer operations.² Foreign-educated immigrants with a college or advanced degree perform at about the level of Americans with only a high school diploma, according to test scores.

Congress has established that, each year, 65,000 H-1B visas will be made available for workers with bachelor's degrees, plus 20,000 more for those with master's degrees or higher. Certain groups, such as universities and research organizations, are exempt from these caps. In addition to H-1B, there are also L-1 visas for foreigners with managerial or specialized knowledge (no cap), H4 EAD work authorizations for H-1B spouses (no cap), and the Optional Practical Training program, which subsidizes employers who hire F-1 foreign students who graduate from college in America instead of hiring Americans. There are over one million international students in the United States.

Key takeaways:

- There is no shortage of qualified American STEM workers — most Americans with STEM degrees work in other industries, and American graduates outperform foreign-educated immigrants when tested on a range of skills.
- The H-1B program has transformed over time from a means to supplement the American tech workforce to a means of cheaply replacing it.
- Americans who are replaced by H-1B guestworkers are often forced to train their replacements or risk losing their severance.

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- Foreign STEM workers often come from sham universities abroad — particularly in India — and have far fewer specialized skills than they claim.
- President Trump and members of Congress ought to meet with laid off American STEM workers in order to hear their stories.

The Victims' Stories

One group seeking to remedy the lack of information on the impact of “high-skill” visas is Protect US Workers, an organization dedicated to educating America on the displacement of workers by H-1B visas. They hosted a conference call along with Rep. Paul Gosar’s (R-Ariz.) office where the victims of the H-1B program could share their stories. They recounted tales of being forced to train their replacements, being verbally harassed by foreign H-1B workers, and left unable to support their families.

The participants asked to remain anonymous. Below are some of their stories.

1. Person 1 is a middle-aged programmer who has struggled to afford to care for his mentally handicapped daughter. He was fired from his last job and replaced by an H-1B guestworker, whom he was forced to train. He struggled to find medical insurance for his daughter while he was busy training his replacement. **“I’m not a ‘has been’ programmer,”** he says. **“I am still doing the tech. I am still doing the work.** The truth is that it’s just cheap labor for corporations who line the pockets of Congress.” Fortunately, he was able to find another job with a former client of his, and now has medical insurance for his daughter. He said that others were not so lucky.
2. Person 2 is a former rocket science engineer who was laid off approximately three years ago and is near retirement age. She is not sure if she should give up and move into senior housing or try to find another job in her profession, which increasingly discriminates against Americans, especially older Americans. **“There is structural nation-of-origins discrimination in tech. We need to meet with Trump so we can tell him the truth. He meets with everybody else — why not with STEM workers?”**
3. Person 3 has degrees in computer science and math and is a software engineer. She is in her 40s and has worked in the financial sector in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. **“I have been outsourced more times than I can count, and I am a higher performer. I have a career of no gaps, of models, of commendations, of awards, and of promotions,”** she said. She saw almost no Americans at her former employer of 7,500 people and says it is inaccurate to classify H-1B recipients as “high-skill.” She said, **“The notion that these H-1B visa holders are specialized is a complete sham. They come out of sham universities in Bangalore with no specializations whatsoever.”** She said the most insulting part was being forced to train her unqualified replacement. **“I was told that I’d only get my severance if I agreed to train my replacement, who was far less qualified than I was, and if I promised not to sue. It’s an insult.”** She said that she didn’t think that after 20 years in her career she’d still be constantly scared of lay-offs, and doesn’t want her own kid to go into STEM now.
4. Person 4 is from New Jersey, and is in her 50s or 60s. She has worked in IT for 30 years. **“I’m a mom to two beautiful girls, and I told them not to go into technology because there is no future for them. We have been taken over and sold out to cheap foreign labor from India.”** She despises the phrase “shortage of American workers” because she says it is simply untrue. **“It’s all a lie. There’s no shortage. I watched my friends and colleagues get pushed out of this industry. We’re always scared.”**
5. Person 5 is a single mother and the sole provider for her family who has worked in IT since the H-1B program began. She has a bachelor’s in computer science and a master’s in computer engineering. She has been unemployed since July. **“At first, foreign labor was used to compliment the U.S. workers. They performed on the off-hours. Then they brought in the next wave of workers, but this time it was to replace us.”** She said that these foreign workers are not high skilled, and that even American high school graduates have a higher skillset. Layoffs have repeatedly forced her to move her kids to a new state, and she worries about how that will impact them. **“My family lived in five states in six years. It’s not okay for school-aged children. Their development keeps getting interrupted.”** She took an apprenticeship workshop for women in STEM looking to get back into the industry. Out of 30 attendees, only five were from America — and there was another workshop being held by the same group in India. She also pointed out

the security risks associated with letting foreigners control America's largest data sources in industries ranging from healthcare to banking to airlines.

6. Person 6 worked for a major aerospace company in Texas for over a decade until he was laid off for cheap foreign labor. **“If recruiters find out you’ve been out of work for over three months, they won’t even look at you,”** he said. He interviewed for a job in his old department, which has now been outsourced to Bangalore, where he would have to move if he wants the job.
7. Person 7 is from Seattle and says that the displacement has spread from just STEM to all white-collar jobs. **“99% of people with H visas are totally underqualified. No skills. I worked with so many of them from Infosys. There are millions of Americans who could do this work.”** He pointed out how poorly the universities in India from which many of the workers come are ranked relative to American universities.
8. Person 8 is a mother and a tech worker. **“We have no voice in Washington. There are 500 lobbyists for Big Tech, for cheap labor via the H-1B, L-1, OPT, and H4 EAD programs. Who wants to hear from us?”** She says we are compromising our education and national security by placing foreign workers in these roles. She is disappointed that the government is prioritizing foreign citizens over its own, even though she has done everything right. She says that foreign workers have also raised the expectations for work hours, because they’re so desperate to become American citizens that they’ll work 15-hour days and through the weekend. She says there is no work-life balance at all anymore.
9. Person 9 worked in tech for a major department store until he was forced to train his replacements from Infosys and Wipro. **“Their work was such a mess that they had to hire me back to fix it after laying me off, only to then outsource me again. IT overhead was 2-3 percent when it was all Americans, and is 4-5 percent now. They’re not even saving money because the guestworkers make so many mistakes.”** He said that there are now far more data breaches and fines that the companies must pay given the rising number of IT errors. He said the data would be safer in American hands.
10. Person 10 worked at a large insurance company, where she faced harassment and discrimination. She said she had to train people with “no skills, starting from scratch”. If any employees spoke up, she said, they’d be slandered by management. **“If we said anything, they’d accuse us of being racist, using the company’s anti-discrimination policies. They tout women in STEM, only to replace us with foreign men who sexually harass us. I remember one man complained that there were ‘too many queens, not enough kings’ in our office.”**
11. Person 11 is from Ohio, and she got laid off by a major insurance company. **“Decade by decade, India completely took over,”** she said. Now, guestworkers are also in leadership positions where they hold shadow meetings with other foreigners, and exclude the Americans. She said her firing has taken a serious financial toll on her.

Conclusion

The stories above are anecdotal, but they are corroborated by data. In nearly all of the workers’ stories, one commonality is that they describe their foreign replacements as under-qualified or unspecialized. Indeed, foreign-educated immigrants significantly underperform on literacy, numeracy, and computer skills relative to native-born Americans. Similarly, the workers said that Americans were often discriminated against. There have in fact been many such cases in the courts, where Americans say that the managers, recruiters, or corporations themselves favored foreign nationals and/or discriminate against women.³ Their stories are not anomalous — they mirror the negative experiences of millions of Americans who either currently or used to work in STEM.

The single most common frustration that all of the people in these stories expressed was the feeling that they simply are not being heard by lawmakers. President Trump campaigned on putting American workers first, and signed an executive order in July 2018 establishing the National Council for the American Worker. The president should bring some of these displaced STEM workers onto his council in order to hear their perspectives and their stories. Doing so would be an important first step toward passing legislation that puts American workers first.

End Notes

¹ Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler, [“Is There a STEM Worker Shortage? A look at employment and wages in science, technology, engineering, and math”](#), Center for Immigration Studies *Backgrounders*, May 19, 2014.

² Jason Richwine, [“Foreign-Educated Immigrants Are Less Skilled Than U.S. Degree Holders”](#), Center for Immigration Studies *Backgrounders*, February 24, 2019.

³ David North, [“H-1B Discrimination in the Courts: One Case Moves, Two Do Not”](#), Center for Immigration Studies blog, August 16, 2018.