

Temporary and Permanent Entry of Engineers and Scientists to the USA

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When US employers hire foreign-born engineers they are much more likely to hire workers with temporary visas than those with permanent status in the US.

Workers with temporary visas, by law, are tied to their employers. Immigrants with permanent visas are able, like US citizens, to move around freely in the labour market and thus can better fend for themselves economically.

In the last fiscal year (1995) US employers caused the admission of 55,860 alien engineers with temporary (non-immigrant) visas. That was at least the eighth consecutive year that the number of alien engineers with temporary visas had increased; in fact, there were almost three times as many of them in the fiscal year 1995 as there were in the fiscal year 1988. (See Table 1.)

Meanwhile, for the fourth consecutive year, the number of newly admitted alien engineers with permanent visas fell. There were 9,104 such admission in the fiscal year 1995.

Admissions of immigrant engineers has never stirred controversy, but there has been a vigorous debate in Congress, and in the industry, about the alleged exploitation of technical workers with temporary visas, particularly in computer programming and other engineering fields.

The US Immigration and Naturalization Service counts the numbers of arriving immigrants by occupation, and routinely issues statistics on the subject (see Table 2 on next page). It also secures hard counts on the admission of non-immigrants by visa category, but only obtains occupational data on a sampling of them.

Table 1: Admissions of engineers: immigrants and non-immigrants, fiscal years

- 1988-1995

	Immigrants	Non-immigrants
1988	8,081	19,939
1989	9,520	22,522
1990	10,417	26,040

1991	10,676	35,619
1992	15,629 ^a	36,826
1993	12,084	39,786
1994	10,799	43,778
1995	9,104	55,860

^a The Immigration Act of 1990 took effect at the start of the fiscal year 1992, and it caused a surge of employment-based immigration that year because one of its provisions eased a backlog situation.

Sources: These are hard counts of immigrants and estimates for non-immigrants based on data from the Division of Statistics, US Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington. For the methodology used for the non-immigrant estimates, see the explanation at the bottom of Table 2.

Note: There is an unknown but significant overlap between the two columns, as people admitted as non-immigrants often convert to immigrant status several years after their arrival in the US. Someone recorded as an non-immigrant in the 1988 data, for example, may also be recorded as an immigrant in 1990 or 1991 data.

The non-immigrants covered by this table are primarily H (temporary workers), J (exchange visitors), L (multinational corporation employees), and those admitted under the free Trade Agreements with Canada and (to a much lesser extent) Mexico. Neither foreign students (F-1) nor visitors for business (B-1) are included.

Table 2: Admissions of scientists and engineers on temporary working visas, fiscal year 1995 (estimates by occupational group and visa category)

Visa class/ occupational group	H-2B				NFTA & TC (trade agreements)	Misc. visa classes	Totals
	H-1B	and H-3	J-1	L-1			
Engineering	27,176	732	3,061	20,766	3,621	504	55,860
Computer & Maths	8,940	24	286	1,980	2,636	49	13,915
Natural sciences	3,502	21	4,534	1,301	1,310	93	10,761
Total	39,618	777	7,881	24,047	7,567	646	80,635

Source: Estimates made by the author, based on INS admissions data (printout 614) for these visa classes; while the total number of admissions in each of these classes is a count,

occupational data are collected only on a sample of those admitted. For more on the estimating techniques used, see the appendix to David S. North, *Soothing the Establishment: The impact of Foreign-born Scientists and Engineers on America*, University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, MD, 1995

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