

Report: Legal, cultural barriers make hiring international students a challenge in St. Louis

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By TIM LLOYD

Hanging on to more international students they graduate from university could help large companies grow in St. Louis, but an obstacle course of legal and cultural hurdles often stand in the way.

That's a key takeaway from a [new report](#) from researchers at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) and the St. Louis Mosaic Project, an organization that aims to make the region the fastest growing metro area for immigrants by 2020.

"We have great education in our local universities that international students are experiencing," said Jennifer Morton, a co-author of the report. "What a shame it is not to welcome that talent that we cultivate into our workforce community. Instead, we're sending that talent often times not even to that person's country of origin, but to other cities in the U.S. where these individuals can find employment."

Morton, a doctoral student in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at UMSL, interviewed executives at 15 of St. Louis' largest companies, including Centene, Monsanto, Sigma-Aldrich and World Wide Technology, Inc. She found human resource managers frustrated by a hiring timeline that can stretch out for more than a year.

Among the legal frustrations facing local companies interviewed for the report are limits on the number of H-1B visas, which allow foreign-born people with training in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) to stay and work in America.

The U.S. government allows a total of 85,000 H-1Bs each year; 20,000 of those are only available for international students who have a master's degree or higher. However, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) received almost 233,000 [applications during fiscal year 2015](#). Ultimately a lottery is used to determine international students' fates. That can leave hiring managers stressed out as they navigate students through what can be an emotional process, according to the report.



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The H-1B visa process has been at the center of the national debate on immigration reform. A [group](#) of Silicon Valley tech-executives, led by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, has been pushing congress to up the number H-1Bs approved every year. At the same time there are [concerns](#) that some tech companies are gaming the system to undercut equally qualified American workers for cheaper foreign workers. Meanwhile, there are [questions](#)

about whether a widespread national shortage of STEM workers has been exaggerated.

Yet even before an H-1B visa is granted to an international student with a STEM degree, those looking for work in the St. Louis area can face other obstacles. For instance, the report found a lack of cultural awareness training for human resource professionals in some of St. Louis' companies.

"There are some employers and some interviewers who can't see past the accent," said Kathy Steiner-Lang, assistant vice chancellor and director of Washington University's Office of International Students and Scholars. "I think part of that is exposure to people who have accents and taking a little more to time to understand what they are saying.

Here are a handful of responses cited in the report.

CEOs don't set the tone. You need to focus on entry and mid-level HR professionals in recruitment ... hiring managers are more important than top management ... Is your HR organization comfortable with the process of what it takes, are they comfortable with international diversity.

HR needs to be more open. Interview times will be longer. They need to listen more closely. Make sure you have the right level of HR people trained in screening international applicants.

Entry level screening is generally done by people who don't necessarily appreciate international diversity. If an international applicant is not fluent, or has a strong accent, first level screeners will knock them out. They will not go past the initial phone (screening).

Once on the job, the report notes, foreign born employees can struggle to integrate into the workplace. The result is that even when international students do land a job, they often don't climb the management ladder.

Using data from regional colleges and universities, including the University of Missouri Columbia and Missouri University of Science and Technology, the report found that most students are coming from China, India and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile local employers interviewed for the report say there's a greater need to hire more workers from Latin America and other emerging markets.

Possible solutions

While the report documents a number of challenges that local companies often face when hiring international students, it also offers possible solutions. Based on interviews with executives, the report lays out [seven recommendations](#) for the St. Louis region.

- Workshops for hiring managers on immigration laws and regulations
- Workshops for HR professionals on cultural and global HR skills
- An annual regional conference for HR professionals that provides updates on immigration laws

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- Workshops for international students to address cultural skill gaps
- Increased partnerships in internship and co-op programs, more access to the student talent pool and more input in curriculum design based on industry talent needs
- Diversification of the international student population in the region
- Creation of a regional talent database that schools and businesses can use to identify what international students are studying and what the skill gaps are among regional employers

A year ago, St. Louis area universities launched a program of their own to help international students find work at local companies after graduation. Called the International Student Global Talent Hiring Program, it now includes eight universities that share best practices for helping international students find work in St. Louis. It also includes a mentoring program and regional training initiative to help international students polish their interviewing skills.

Melissa Harper, Monsanto's vice president of global talent acquisition and diversity and inclusion, said diversifying St. Louis' business community will ultimately help attract top talent to the region.

"They're looking for companies that are diverse, that support inclusion and that have leaders at the top who look like them," Harper said. "To continue to grow and prosper as a region, we're going to have to understand what it means to compete for talent globally."