

H-1B visas: The Bay Area's non-tech employers seek foreign workers, too

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From astronomers and teachers to therapists and artists, H-1B permeates economy



MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA – JAN. 14: Michael Evans, a planetary researcher at the SETI Institute, talks about his career at his office in Mountain View, Calif., Monday, Jan. 14, 2019. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Mike Evans isn't the kind of worker most people would associate with an H-1B visa. He's British. He's got a Ph.D. in astronomy and worked on the Cassini project. And he's employed by Mountain View's SETI Institute.

Evans is among hundreds of Bay Area H-1B workers who aren't employed by Google, Facebook or outsourcers in the tech industry, which is closely associated with a visa that has become a flashpoint in the immigration debate.

More than 5,600 Bay Area companies applied for H-1B visas in fiscal year 2018, according to data from the Department of Labor. And though the majority were tech companies seeking engineers, developers and programmers, including more than 70,600 software developers, the department's data shows that dozens of other local employers sought foreign workers, from soccer coaches and marriage and family therapists to accountants and lawyers.

Pixar, in Emeryville, applied for a story artist and a character designer. The Gap, in San Francisco, wanted a couple of fashion designers, a senior designer and a vice president of design for its Old Navy brand. And the San Jose Unified School District sought five special education teachers for preschool, kindergarten and middle school.

THE OTHER H-1B JOBS

Bay Area companies applied to hire thousands of H-1B workers in fiscal 2018, including more than 70,600 software developers. Here are the 10 most common occupations not related to mathematics, engineering and computers.

Occupation	Total workers
Logisticians	1,909
Market research analysts and marketing specialists	1,900
Financial analysts	1,701
Information security analysts	1,670
Accountants and auditors	1,455
Marketing managers	1,190
Graphic designers	987
Managers, all other	977
General and operations managers	551
Commercial and industrial designers	532

Source: Department of Labor

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The data, analyzed by this news organization, shows how the H-1B visa touches nearly every corner of the Bay Area economy. The data comes from applications that companies hoping to hire an H-1B worker must submit to the labor department, with a job title and a proposed wage. Once that's certified, the company applies to the Department of Homeland Security for the actual visa.

In fiscal year 2018, the Department of Labor certified almost 1.2 million H-1B applications nationwide, but it's not clear how many of those resulted in visas. Some applications were for visa extensions, or to hire workers already in the country on an H-1B visa with a different employer. Other companies abandon the process before

getting to Homeland Security, and even those that do aren't guaranteed one of the 85,000 H-1B visas given out each year.

At the Mountain View-based SETI Institute, whose mission includes searching for new planets and exploring the possibility of extraterrestrial life, the H-1B visa is a way to bring in foreign scientists like Evans for highly specialized work. While SETI officials understand that some see the visa as a mechanism for supplanting American workers with cheaper foreign labor, they say that's far from what they're doing.

"I think we feel very comfortable in the fact that if somebody comes to the institute with a specialized degree and capability, we haven't hired them at the expense of some other poor astronomer in the U.S. not getting a job," said Bill Diamond, SETI's CEO. "There's just not enough of the kinds of scientists we want to bring in."

Diamond estimated that about 6 percent of the institute's 70 to 80 astronomers and researchers are on H-1B visas.

Evans, who joined SETI late last year, has been in the U.S. for more than nine years, first on an academic J-1 visa and since 2014 on an H-1B. The U.S. was attractive, he said, because it spends so much more money on astronomy than any other country.

"If I went back to Europe, it's possible that I could get a similar job," he said. "But it's easier in the U.S. just because there's much more funding, so there's more opportunities."

As a nonprofit research institution, SETI is exempt from the 85,000 visa cap. It's also unique because it only hires astronomers and researchers who already have funding for specific projects, for example through private or government grants. Armine Saroian, SETI's director of human resources, said the institute is focused on applicants' qualifications and funding, not their visa status.

Evans' background is on the Cassini mission, a joint program from NASA and two European space agencies that sent a probe to orbit Saturn for more than a decade before it was intentionally crashed into the planet in 2017. Evans had worked on Cassini for 19 years — his entire professional career. At SETI, he's working on archiving the probe's observational data.

He estimated that maybe five people in the world have the kind of experience he has. "And all five are working in the U.S.," Evans said.

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, computer-related fields accounted for about 70 percent of all H-1B recipients in 2017. Another eight percent work in architecture, engineering and surveying, and slightly less than 6 percent work

in administrative specializations, such as accounting. The majority of all H-1B visas are granted to workers from India.

San Jose Unified has about a dozen teachers here on H-1B visas, according to a district spokeswoman. In its applications to the Department of Labor last year for five special education teachers, the district said it expected to pay between \$55,000 and \$97,000.

In an email response, a district spokeswoman said the goal was, in part, to hire for high-need STEM and special education positions. Roughly 5 percent of H-1B visas nationwide are to workers in education.

Despite their close association with tech companies, researchers say the original intent of the H-1B visa was much broader.

Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst with the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute, said H-1Bs are part of a long tradition of making it easier to bring in skilled workers who aren't being produced within the U.S.

"The first exemption for skilled professionals was for professional actors, nurses, ministers, professors and musicians of distinguished merit and ability," she said. "That was in 1917."

When the H-1B visa was created in 1990, it was healthcare, not technology, that saw it as a way to bring in skilled foreign labor. By 1995, half of all H-1B workers were physical therapists, according to a 2003 study from Ronil Hira, now a professor at Howard University.

"It really wasn't until the late 90s, when the tech industry became more visible as the face of the visa," Hira said. By 1998, computer specialists were receiving 57 percent of H-1Bs.

Both Pierce and Hira said that today, employers like Pixar or The Gap with just a few H-1B employees are at risk of being crowded out by large tech outsourcers such as Cognizant, which received more than 29,900 visas in 2018, or Tata Consultancy, which got about 14,700 visas.

Without H-1B visas, Diamond, the SETI CEO, said he wouldn't have the researchers he needs to do the work the institute was set up to do. He said there's also a benefit to the exchange of ideas that happens when scientists from around the world work together.

"You want to bring as many new sources of knowledge and information and understanding as you can on the kind of work we do," he said. "To restrict that in any way would be problematic, both to us on a micro-scale, but more broadly to science."

