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3 ways US employers can help foreign-born job seekers, according to international students and workers

Rachel DuRose 1 hour ago



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Last year, there were [nearly 1 million international students](#) studying in the US.

Insider spoke with foreign-born students and employees about living and working in the US.

They identified three ways employers could support international workers in the US.

Sumana Kaluvai has spent 22 of her 24 years living in the US. Yet, come August, she may have to leave the country.

Kaluvai is an international student and worker who moved to the US from India at 2 years old on an H-4 visa. It's the visa for dependents of an H-1B visa holder, but for children, it expires when they are married or turn 21.

Now, Kaluvai, a University of California, Los Angeles, graduate — who transferred from her H-4 visa to a student visa at 21 — faces a choice: She can either go to graduate school and retain a student visa or leave the country. This is because Kaluvai has not been selected in the highly competitive H-1B lottery. Since graduating, she had three years — and three attempts — to enter but is now out of chances and time.

"Kids on these visas, growing up, we couldn't work. We can't apply for a lot of scholarships," she said. "We don't qualify for FAFSA. I couldn't even get a driver's license until I was 21 because it was just so hard to convince the DMV to actually look at my visa paperwork.

"And then, at the age of 21, a lot of kids either self-deport or they also risk becoming undocumented."

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As of 2019, there were just over [600,000 H-1B visa holders](#) living in the US, but in the

2020-21 academic year, there were [nearly 1 million international students](#) studying in the country. As is Kaluvai's case, continuing to work often comes down to luck of the draw — last year, there were nearly [275,000 applicants](#) vying for just [65,000 spots](#) in the H-1B lottery.

In essence, international students are educated in the US and start their adult lives there but are then left with few options to stay and use that education in the American workforce.

While some parts of this process can be changed only through policy, the students and workers who spoke with Insider say employers do have some power to improve the lives of their foreign-born employees.

1. Provide resources



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With the pandemic making traveling to see family members nearly impossible, experts say one of the greatest resources for workers is employer-sponsored support.

"The effects of COVID have been strong and immediate on everything related to immigration," Irina Plumlee, a Russian immigrant and an immigration attorney with [Munsch Hardt Kopf & Harr P.C.](#), said. In addition to the stress of COVID itself, "it's also added stress for those individuals who can't see family for long periods of time," Plumlee added.

Employers should provide resources such as therapy and community groups to support their workers, Kaluvai said. Additionally, companies can partner with schools and organizations to connect with international students hoping to learn more about employment opportunities.

One such organization is [Mapis](#), a career platform for international undergraduate and graduate students studying at colleges, universities, community colleges, vocational schools, and technical schools in the US.

Started by Diana Vicezar, an international student and sophomore at Pitzer College, the platform offers one-on-one advising sessions, networking opportunities, and an opportunities board for internships, scholarships, and jobs for international students.

Vicezar started Mapis after she began college online from her home country of Paraguay and saw firsthand how difficult it was for foreign-born workers to navigate the hiring process, especially during the pandemic.

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purpose, and realize that they are not alone, that we are here for them."

2. Expedite decision-making



[Santiago Mejia/San Francisco Chronicle/Getty Images](#)

Along with making travel even more difficult for visa holders, the pandemic has increased the urgency of certain immigration matters, Plumlee told Insider. [Travel restrictions and limited consular services](#) have increased appointment wait times and lengthened visa-processing times.

For example, before the pandemic, some employers would wait to see how workers

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practice even less fair. Businesses need to expedite their processes, she added.

"For example, if the company is firmly deciding that it's not going to sponsor workers for this particular job," that's a "legitimate decision" if it's not discriminatory, Plumlee said.

"But a good employer is not waiting to spring the news on the foreign national who is hoping for sponsorship," Plumlee added.

While Plumlee said this was a controversial recommendation, providing an international employee advance notice about the termination of their position could help them immensely. H-1B visa holders can remain in the US for only [60 days](#) [without employment](#).

Kaluvai agreed that companies needed to be more transparent about their processing times.

"A lot of times, when someone's given an offer, the recruiter or the company will say, 'We're going to process a green card,' and then they won't touch the paperwork for another two years," she said. "You're essentially trapping the person at your company."

3. Support the dialogue



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[Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images](#)

The final action a company can take is to support policies that protect international students and workers, Kaluvai said.

"Companies have huge budgets for lobbying," Kaluvai said. "But from what I've seen, they don't take input from their employees on what bills their employees want them to support."

When issues such as the [green-card backlog](#), the [underfunding of the US Citizen and Immigration Services](#), and the [country caps](#) on visas and green cards are resolved, everyone can benefit, she said.

These issues are partially why Kaluvai founded [The Hidden Dream](#) after graduating from UCLA. What started as a Facebook page, [H4 Hope](#), in May 2019, has turned into an organization that provides free therapy vouchers, scholarships, and career-development opportunities to over 500 international students.

The Hidden Dream is also intended to "raise awareness of the countless struggles faced by visa immigrants," something any employer can help with, Kaluvai said.

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international fees, and they're getting educated here," she said. "And if they're getting educated in the US system, many production would support American educated

educated in the US system, upon graduation, wouldn't you want American-educated talent to stay here?"

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