



Kent Hoover Washington Bureau Chief
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Immigrant tech entrepreneurs primarily came here to study

Most immigrants who founded technology and engineering companies in the United States received degrees from U.S. universities, according to a new study released by the Kauffman Foundation.

The study, which was conducted by researchers at Duke University and the University of California, is a follow-up to an earlier report that found immigrants started 25 percent of new U.S. technology and engineering companies over the past decade.

Fewer than 2 percent of foreign-born founders of U.S. tech and engineering companies came to the United States for the sole purpose of starting a business. A majority came to study, while 40 percent came because of a job opportunity, according to the report.

But after a few years of living in the United States, these immigrants "catch the American dream," said Duke's Vivek Wadhwa, the study's lead researcher.

"You start thinking like an American; you start thinking like an entrepreneur," he said.

India, by far, is the leading source for these tech entrepreneurs, followed by the United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, Japan and Germany.

Wadhwa said he was surprised at these immigrants' educational levels: 96 percent had at least a bachelor's degree, and 74 percent had advanced degrees.

"Our research confirms that advanced education in science, technology, engineering and math is correlated with high rates of entrepreneurship and innovation," Wadhwa said.

Problems obtaining visas, however, could lead many immigrant entrepreneurs to return to their native countries.

"This is an issue for the USA," Wadhwa said. "With the visa backlog that's building, entrepreneurs are getting frustrated ... and moving back home. We've got to get our act together."

For more information, see www.kauffman.org/immigrants.