

Why Skilled Immigrants Are Leaving the U.S.

New research shows that highly skilled workers are returning home for brighter career prospects and a better quality of life

By [Vivek Wadhwa](#)

As the debate over H-1B workers and skilled immigrants intensifies, we are losing sight of one important fact: The U.S. is no longer the only land of opportunity. If we don't want the immigrants who have fueled our innovation and economic growth, they now have options elsewhere. Immigrants are returning home in greater numbers. And new research shows they are returning to enjoy a better quality of life, better career prospects, and the comfort of being close to family and friends.

Earlier research by my team suggested that [a crisis was brewing because of a burgeoning immigration backlog](#). At the end of 2006, more than 1 million skilled professionals (engineers, scientists, doctors, researchers) and their families were in line for a yearly allotment of only 120,000 permanent resident visas. The wait time for some people ran longer than a decade. In the meantime, these workers were trapped in "immigration limbo." If they changed jobs or even took a promotion, they risked being pushed to the back of the permanent residency queue. We predicted that skilled foreign workers would increasingly get fed up and return to countries like India and China where the economies were booming.

Why should we care? Because [immigrants are critical to the country's long-term economic health](#). Despite the fact that they constitute only 12% of the U.S. population, immigrants have started 52% of Silicon Valley's technology companies and contributed to more than 25% of our global patents. They make up 24% of the U.S. science and engineering workforce holding bachelor's degrees and 47% of science and engineering workers who have PhDs. Immigrants have co-founded firms such as Google ([GOOG](#)), Intel ([INTC](#)), eBay ([EBAY](#)), and Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)).

Who Are They? Young and Well-Educated

We tried to find hard data on how many immigrants had returned to India and China. No government authority seems to track these numbers. But human resources directors in India and China told us that what was a trickle of returnees a decade ago had become a flood. Job applications from the U.S. had increased tenfold over the last few years, they said. To get an understanding of how the returnees had fared and why they left the U.S., my team at Duke, along with AnnaLee Saxenian of the University of California at Berkeley and Richard Freeman of Harvard University, conducted a survey. Through professional networking site LinkedIn, we tracked down 1,203 Indian and Chinese immigrants who had worked or received education in the U.S. and had returned to their home countries. This research was funded by the Kauffman Foundation.

Our new paper, ["America's Loss Is the World's Gain,"](#) finds that the vast majority of these returnees were relatively young. The average age was 30 for Indian returnees, and 33 for Chinese. They were highly educated, with degrees in management, technology, or science. Fifty-one percent of the Chinese held master's degrees and 41% had PhDs. Sixty-six percent of the Indians held a master's and 12.1% had PhDs. They were at very top of the educational distribution for these highly educated immigrant groups—precisely the kind of people who make the greatest contribution to the U.S. economy and to business and job growth.

Nearly a third of the Chinese returnees and a fifth of the Indians came to the U.S. on student visas. A fifth of the Chinese and nearly half of the Indians entered on temporary work visas (such as the H-1B). The strongest factor that brought them to the U.S. was professional and educational development opportunities.

What They Miss: Family and Friends

They found life in the U.S. had many drawbacks. Returnees cited language barriers, missing their family and friends at home, difficulty with cultural assimilation, and care of parents and children as key issues. About a third of the Indians and a fifth of the Chinese said that visas were a strong factor in their decision to return home, but others left for opportunity and to be close to family and friends. And it wasn't just new immigrants who were returning. In fact, 30% of respondents held permanent resident status or were U.S. citizens.

Eighty-seven percent of Chinese and 79% of Indians said a strong factor in their original decision to return home was the growing demand for their skills in their home countries. Their instincts generally proved right. Significant numbers moved up the organization chart. Among Indians the percentage of respondents holding senior management positions increased from 10% in the U.S. to 44% in India, and among Chinese it increased from 9% in the U.S. to 36% in China. Eighty-seven percent of Chinese and 62% of Indians said they had better opportunities for longer-term professional growth in their home countries than in the U.S. Additionally, nearly half were considering launching businesses and said entrepreneurial opportunities were better in their home countries than in the U.S.

Friends and family played an equally strong role for 88% of Indians and 77% of Chinese. Care for aging parents was considered by 89% of Indians and 79% of Chinese to be much better in their home countries. Nearly 80% of Indians and 67% of Chinese said family values were better in their home countries.

More Options Back Home

Immigrants who have arrived at America's shores have always felt lonely and homesick. They had to make big personal sacrifices to provide their children with better opportunities than they had. But they never have had the option to return home. Now they do, and they are leaving.

It isn't all rosy back home. Indians complained of traffic and congestion, lack of infrastructure, excessive bureaucracy, and pollution. Chinese complained of pollution, reverse culture shock, inferior education for children, frustration with government bureaucracy, and the quality of

health care. Returnees said they were generally making less money in absolute terms, but they also said they enjoyed a higher quality of life.

We may not need all these workers in the U.S. during the deepening recession. But we will need them to help us recover from it. Right now, they are taking their skills and ideas back to their home countries and are unlikely to return, barring an extraordinary recruitment effort and major changes to immigration policy. That hardly seems likely given the current political climate. The policy focus now seems to be on doing whatever it takes to retain existing American jobs—even if it comes at the cost of building a workforce for the future of America.

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