

Employment LawScene Alert: H-1B Season is in Full Swing

As Wisconsin slowly awakes from the deep freeze of the polar vortex, employers are busy preparing applications for the H-1B filing season. Wisconsin employers seeking non-immigrant foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise should consider contacting legal counsel to begin preparation of their visa petitions. All paperwork must be submitted during the application period, which begins on **April 1, 2019** and typically runs only until **April 5, 2019**.

What is an H-1B Visa

An H-1B visa allows U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require specialized knowledge or an advanced degree. H-1B visas are typically approved for positions in finance, engineering, mathematics, science, computer programming, or medicine. However, many positions requiring a bachelor's degree or higher will qualify.

H-1B visa holders allow the foreign worker to remain in the United States for a maximum of six years. While the application period starts on **April 1**, the visa is valid for the 2020 fiscal year, meaning that recipients of the visa may not begin working before October 1, 2019.

There is a cap on how many H-1B visas may be issued for each financial year: the government will issue 65,000 regular H-1B visas, which require specialized knowledge or a bachelor's degree, as well as another 20,000 visas for applicants with a U.S. master's degree or higher. Typically, however, the government receives two to three applications for every available quota position. Although application numbers have decreased in recent years, the 2019 H-1B fiscal year saw 190,098 H-1B applications during the first five days of the application period. Consequently, it is essential that employers are prepared to submit their petitions within the application period to avoid missing an opportunity to have the petition adjudicated.

This quota does not apply to certain institutions of higher education, related or affiliated nonprofit entities, nonprofit research organizations, or government research organizations.

Who is Eligible for an H-1B Visa?

Any foreign worker who meets the required educational requirements may have an employer petition on her behalf for an H-1B visa. Non-immigrants who are already in the United States on other valid visas may also qualify for the H-1B visa. These applications generally come from F-1 Student Visa holders who have completed their studies at an American university and are seeking to enter the workplace. Other visa-holders, such as L-1 Intracompany Transferee Visa holders and, in some cases, B-1/B-2 Visitor Visa holders, may also qualify.

Once a foreign worker has obtained an H-1B visa, she may be eligible to adjust her status to a Legal Permanent Resident through an employment based green card adjustment.^[1] Additionally, H-1B visa holders are eligible to bring their spouse and children under 21 years old with them to the United States under the H-4 dependent visa.

H-1B Visa Application Process

It is important to note that the U.S. employer is charged with submitting the H-1B petition on behalf of the foreign worker. There is a two-step process to this petition:

First, the employer must apply for a Labor Certification Application (LCA) with the U.S. Department of Labor. The LCA is an attestation by the employer that it adheres to certain labor requirements regarding wages, working conditions, and, if applicable, labor unions. The LCA is filed using the Department of Labor's online iCERT system and can take between one to two weeks to receive approval.

Second, the employer will submit the approved LCA along with the USCIS form I-129 and other accompanying documents for H-1B consideration. Because the number of H-1B applications greatly outnumbers the statutory quota, USCIS uses a lottery system to randomly select applications for adjudication. Applications that have not been selected will be returned to the employer with the appropriate filing fees.

Practical Tips

Whether you are an employer looking to sponsor an employee or an employee seeking to adjust to an H-1B, there are several practical steps you can take to facilitate the burdensome H-1B application process.

- Initiate the dialog early. Because the H-1B application is driven by the employer and not the employee, it is important that both sides communicate early and often regarding the capacity and willingness of the employer to petition.
- Check the prevailing wage requirement. The LCA application requires information on the prevailing wage for the open position. This process can be extremely time consuming and complex. However, if the prevailing wage is found to be Level 1 (e.g., an entry level wage), more information, such as an expert opinion letter may be necessary. Because any additional steps to show eligibility may delay the application, it is best to understand what needs to be done early.
- Understand what documents will be needed for the petition. These likely include degree certificates, transcripts, a job description, and other corporate documents. Remember, if any documents are in a foreign language, you must provide a copy of the original as well as a certified translation.
- Update the employer's *Validation Instrument for Business Enterprises* (VIBE) entry with USCIS. VIBE is a program that allows USCIS to retrieve commercially available information about the employer. Although not required, employers are permitted to update the VIBE entry to facilitate the H-1B adjudication process.

With the H-1B visa, early planning is essential to identify any potential issues. For example, additional time may be needed to translate documents, independently assess foreign credentials, or to determine whether the applicant may be eligible for a more efficient path to employment, such as through an O-1 visa, an L-1 visa, or other investment-based applications.

If you are interested in utilizing the H-1B process to strengthen your workforce, please contact Attorney **Chris Keeler** at O'Neil, Cannon, Hollman, DeJong & Laing S.C. to discuss how we are able to assist you in your immigration needs.

[1] Employment based green card adjustments require extensive documentation and may take months or years to finalize. Please contact the attorneys at O'Neil, Cannon, Hollman, DeJong & Laing S.C. to determine whether such a step is viable.

Employment LawScene Alert: Should I Use E-Verify or Not?

E-Verify is an internet-based system that is operated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in conjunction with the Social Security Administration (SSA). In theory, the program simplifies the process of ensuring new employees have the appropriate work authorization. After registration, employers enter sections 1 and 2 of the new employee's I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification Form into the system, allowing the system to cross-reference the employee's information with information stored by the SSA. After entering the information, employers would receive either an initial confirmation or a "tentative non confirmation" in seconds. The program sounds like an easy way to navigate the dark waters of unintentional unauthorized employment; however, the program, with many advantages and disadvantages is not for everyone.

The question then becomes—should I use E-Verify or not?

In some cases, the answer is simple. All federal contractors are required to use the program. Similarly, Arizona and Mississippi have passed laws requiring all employers to use the program while South Carolina "encourages" but does not mandate its use. Colorado, Georgia, Missouri, Nebraska, Rhode Island, and Utah have passed legislation that required the use of E-Verify for all public contractors and state agencies while Idaho, Minnesota, and North Carolina require state agencies to use the program.

If your company falls into one of these categories, you must use the program, regardless of the well-documented downfalls. If, however, you live in any other state or are not otherwise required to use E-Verify, each employer must balance the pros and cons of the program before deciding whether to enroll.

Benefits of E-Verify

Simply put, E-Verify is a quick way of receiving an initial determination of a new employee's authorization to work. By entering information from the employee's I-9, the employer receives an automatic reference which provides the employer protection against inadvertently hiring an individual without work authorization. Although the program does not provide complete immunity, it does create a rebuttable presumption that the employer has not violated INA section 274A(a)(1)(A) ("Unlawful Employment of Aliens").

Moreover, if an employer hires a foreign national who recently received a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (i.e., the STEM fields), voluntary usage of the E-Verify program may make those new employees eligible to work an additional 17 months before the employer is required to file an H1-B petition on their behalf.

Finally, there have been efforts on the federal level to make E-Verify mandatory nationwide. Should these proposed bills turn into law, those employers who have already been using E-Verify will already be familiar with the program. If E-Verify becomes mandated nationally, the program would likely experience technical issues and the error-rate would likely expand. Being familiar with the program would thus be an advantage.

Downfalls of E-Verify

DHS claims that E-Verify is free to use; however, there are some built in costs to consider. First, E-Verify is an "all-or-nothing" program. In other words, employers may not use the program intermittently. Rather, signing up for E-Verify represents an organizational shift that may require extra time, money, and effort to train and supervise staff on how to properly use the system. Depending on the size of the company, this shift may involve significant costs.

Importantly, e-Verify is far from perfect. There have been many reports of e-Verify providing tentative or final non confirmation notices to employees who have proper work authorization—even to U.S. Citizens. Moreover, the issuance of a tentative non confirmation notice requires the employer to provide adequate notice to the new employee, allowing them the opportunity to challenge the determination. Failure to provide adequate and timely notice may open the employer up to legal action by the new employee. Additionally, the system can be cumbersome and difficult to manage, particularly for smaller businesses. For example, with E-Verify, employers may only accept an I-9 List B document if it bears a photograph and employees must possess a social security number. Neither of these requirements is needed to prepare an I-9 outside of the E-Verify program.

Moreover, the government is able to use E-Verify to ensure that employers are timely filing I-9s on behalf of new employees and to correct any errors in a timely fashion. E-Verify provides the government with a swath of information about employers and employees and allows the government to mine this information for employer violations. Voluntarily entering information into this database, in other words, increases the risk that the employer may be investigated and fined for intentional or unintentional violations.

Finally, many immigration reform advocates criticize the program as a means of shifting the burden of immigration enforcement from the government to private employers. Immigration enforcement has always been the responsibility of the federal government. As with the debate behind the implementation of 287(g) agreements by some local law enforcement agencies, critics of the program argue that E-Verify shifts one aspect of enforcement from the government onto private businesses.

In conclusion, employers should weigh the benefits and disadvantages of enrolling in E-Verify before doing so. What may seem like an easy way to ensure the proper work authorization of employees may actually create significant human and financial costs.

For more information on the E-Verify program and to discuss whether enrollment is right for your business, please contact **Christopher Keeler** at chris.keeler@wilaw.com.
