

Is IEEE-USA facing an ethical dilemma?

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IEEE-USA has vigorously opposed the expansion of the H1-B visa program, which allows high-tech workers from outside the U.S. to work in the country for up to six years. (The U.S. Congress recently voted to increase the number of available visas to 115,000 a year for the next two years and to 107,500 in 2001. The quota returns to its past level of 65,000 in the year 2002.)

DISCRIMINATION? Some IEEE members are upset by IEEE-USA's position, arguing that it constitutes discrimination against engineers on the basis of national origin, thereby violating the IEEE Ethics Code.

First, note that IEEE-USA's efforts are not intended to discriminate against engineers on the basis of national origin. Rather, they address factors threatening the careers of engineers of all national origins who work in the U.S.

Furthermore, IEEE-USA has never opposed immigration; the H1-B visa program is not an immigration program. H1-B visas are in fact nonimmigration visas that allow workers to stay for a few years. These workers, if not sponsored for permanent immigration, must leave the U.S. when their visas expire.

I would argue that IEEE-USA has an obligation to investigate and take positions on issues affecting the engineering profession in the U.S. In this case, it has responded to a growing body of evidence suggesting that the current H1-B program contributes to wage depression and age discrimination in the industries employing IEEE members. IEEE-USA has voiced concern that, in many cases, H1-B workers are treated like indentured servants and are being paid substandard wages.

Investigations by the U.S. Department of Labor have found evidence of both. Reported victims of age discrimination include engineers in their 40s.

Proponents of increasing the number of H1-B visas argue that U.S. companies are growing faster than the supply of qualified workers. In order to protect the U.S. pre-eminent position in technology, they believe the U.S. has to have more workers — with the right skill sets — to forge ahead. There is little doubt that there has been

an increased demand for engineers with certain skill sets, and that salaries for those possessing these skills have increased. IEEE-USA, with its mandate to promote the professional interests of its members, would obviously be in error if it discouraged the growth of U.S. industry.

We have in past years heard warnings of engineer shortages that proved to be nonexistent or very short term, and there are indications that this may also be true today. There is evidence that current claims of a shortage are largely based on the idea that a company should be able to hire people with precisely the skills needed to go to work immediately on their projects.

For example, companies not hiring capable, experienced programmers because they are not familiar with Java, often claim that there is a shortage of programmers, even though people familiar with, say C, can quickly become proficient in Java.

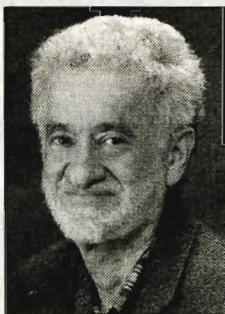
Thus, while agreeing that there is increased demand for certain skill sets, IEEE-USA has argued that many experienced U.S. engineers, victimized by the vicious cycles that typify our profession, can easily acquire the necessary skills and thereby play an important role in the expansion of the U.S. high-tech industry.

In my opinion, IEEE-USA does not face an ethical dilemma by questioning the impact of the H1-B visa program on the U.S. workforce. I believe that the underlying ethical issue here is whether high-tech workers — or any workers, for that matter — should be treated as commodities, used as tools and then discarded when cheaper tools become available.

Apart from its effects on individuals, it should also be pointed out that treating engineers as commodities is not in the long-term interest of industry. This has been recognized by the leaders of many forward looking companies that eschew this approach.

Finally, while this debate has been focused on the U.S., the same issues arise in all industrialized countries. Less developed countries are affected in other ways.

The IEEE Ethics Committee maintains a Web site at "www.ieee.org/committee/ethics". The author can be reached via e-mail at "s.unger@ieee.org".



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