How Young Engineers and Our Economy Are Betrayed

by Phyllis Schlafly May 1, 2009

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The Georgia Dome, home of the Atlanta Falcons football team, was recently crowded with cheering fans and adrenaline-filled competitors. A thrilling competition crowned new champions.

But this was not a football game. It was a robotics competition for high school students interested in engineering, a program that now attracts about 200,000 student-competitors and nearly 100,000 volunteers.

Known as FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), this program demonstrates that there is no shortage of American engineering minds. Started nearly 20 years ago by Dean Kamen, the inventor of the clever Segway that officials scoot around on, this competition develops future American engineers.

The students are extraordinarily diverse, coming from public and private schools and homeschools, rich and poor, urban and rural, athletic and disabled. Colleges provide up to $10 million in scholarships.

Obviously, there is no shortage of teenage interest and aptitude in engineering. But their prospects for good American jobs are very limited.

Large corporations prefer to use H-1B visas to hire foreign engineers and computer technicians. H-1B workers increased threefold during the Clinton Administration,

and CEOs are constantly demanding that the number be increased or even unlimited.

Large corporations prefer H-1B foreigners because they work for lower wages with fewer rights. A recent study by researchers at top business schools reported that H-1B visas depress wages for software engineers and programmers by as much as 6 percent.

The cumulative effect, as described by another study, depresses wages even more. Many U.S. engineers even lost their jobs just after they were required to train their foreign replacements.

"In this paper, we simply sought to dispel the myth that globalization generates no losers," wrote the researchers of this latest study. Their credentials are impeccable: one author, Lorin Hitt, is a Wharton professor of operations and information management, and the other, Prasanna Tambe, is an assistant professor at New York University's Stern School.

Their study meticulously reviewed worker data from nearly 7,500 U.S. companies. The researchers studied how job hiring practices in companies that use H-1B visas, and also offshore other jobs, are different from companies that do not.

The Americans hardest hit by H-1B visas, according to these researchers, are recent college graduates and those who want to change jobs. One of the reasons why big corporations prefer to hire H-1Bers is that foreign workers are restrained, almost like indentured servants, from changing jobs and competing with their original employer.

Americans used indentured services in the 1600s when plantation workers were brought to Virginia to work for seven years in exchange for a free voyage to the New World. Later, this practice was supplanted by African slavery.

That's certainly not a model to imitate today. H-1B visas disrupt the free enterprise system that has yielded tremendous wealth to America and the world.

It is estimated that more than 400,000 foreigners are working in our country on H-1Bs, because there is no accountability for the requirement to seek U.S. workers first, and thousands of H-1B workers are exempt from the so-called cap. At least 100,000 American programmers are unemployed, and it is probable that many times that number are underemployed (driving trucks or bagging groceries) rather than using their technical skills.

President Obama has already named Indian Americans to two positions that will make decisions about which government jobs are filled by H-1Bs and outsourced to India: Aneesh Chopra as Chief Technology Officer and Vivek Kundra as Chief Information Officer.

The major factor in American economic leadership of the world has been our primacy in innovation, which has always produced far more benefits than the rest of the world combined. Thomas Edison, named the most influential man of the last thousand years by Life Magazine, personified Yankee ingenuity and its prodigious benefits.

The large corporations that demand H-1B visas do not really want future Thomas Edisons or Wright Brothers because they will bring competition. Microsoft, for example, has every incentive to discourage innovation by young minds that might compete and challenge its profitable status quo.

The argument that foreigners brought here under H-1B visas are smarter or more productive than Americans is simply false. The prestigious ACM Software System Award recognizes innovation, but Professor Norm Matloff showed that only two out of 54 of its awards through 2001 were to foreign-born recipients.

Our military superiority depends heavily on technological advances, and we cannot rely on foreign engineers for that. Advanced robots are essential for saving lives of servicemen as we combat terrorism.

The 200,000 bright minds who competed in the FIRST robotics program could take our economy to new heights just as did American inventors of the past. But if they continue to be displaced by H-1B visas and end up in non-engineering jobs, the result will be disappointing to them and devastating to our economy.