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COMMENT

Bush 'guest worker' plan benefits business

When President George W. Bush announced his plan for immigration reform last week, he provided few details on its actual implementation but addressed a long-standing issue that not many politicians have been willing to tackle.

The president's plan attempts to provide greater tracking of aliens present in the United States, serve our economic needs for available labor, and provide incentives for temporary workers to return to their home countries without providing undue incentives to immigration law violators. His plan promises to allow millions of illegal immigrants to stay in the United States for three years if they are employed in positions that employers have demonstrated are unwanted by U.S. workers. In addition, foreign workers would be allowed legal entry to take these positions.

However, depending upon any "labor certification" requirements, small employers may struggle under the burden to justify these positions. Bush's program does not address what happens at the end of the three-year period; what mechanism ensures workers will depart the United States after the program has expired; or whether this influx to the labor pool will drive down wages. Nor does it provide an incentive for those who have lived undocumented in the United



GUEST COMMENT

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States for a long time and fear deportation when this program is over. To these individuals, it may not be worth the risk of coming forward. Historically, temporary programs have been renewed, and the immigration service has not used the information collected to round up otherwise law-abiding individuals.

Regardless of the final law, employers will be greatly impacted. Businesses have been left in the lurch for too long on the undocumented worker issue. On one hand, employers are currently forced to check the "genuineness" of immigration documents for every employee. On the other, they may have heard their employees were not "legal," but were averse to investigate because of anti-discrimination provisions or the need to maintain their work force. Furthermore, there is not a good temporary visa category to assist those employers who want to help employees do things legally.

ADDRESSING A NEED

Business leaders have long lobbied for immigration reform addressing the realistic need for workers to take jobs that

U.S. workers find undesirable. Of the millions of undocumented aliens in the United States, the number in Wisconsin is estimated to have quadrupled between 1990 and 2000 to 41,000. Many of these aliens are working without documents or with false documents.

If employers have experienced difficulty finding workers willing to take hard-to-fill positions, the company should already be thinking of how to take advantage of this opportunity to hire previously unavailable workers. Are you prepared for the workers who may approach you to confess they've been using their brother, sister, son or daughter's Social Security number and wish to come clean?

Some industries will reap immediate benefits: agriculture, construction, seasonal employment for landscape workers, snowplowers, and service workers. Employers with home health care, hotels, manufacturing and other "essential" jobs that currently do not qualify under current immigration regulations will finally have legitimate access to a new labor pool.

Politics aside, businesses must be prepared to take advantage of the Guest Worker Program.

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