



EMPLOYER TOOLKIT:

HIRING & RETAINING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TALENT

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INTRODUCTION & DATA

International students are a talent pool employers cannot afford to overlook.

Over the past two decades, Philadelphia has led nationally in cultivating new, diverse, well-educated citizens to cultivating the region's civic life and economy. With over 50% of recent graduates choosing to stay in the region after graduation, there are now 181K+ more college graduates in Greater Philadelphia than in the early 2000s.

However, members of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2021) are fewer in numbers compared to the millennial generation. This has led to declining enrollments at many higher education institutions nationwide and will create significant labor shortages in our regional economy for the next decade. To address this challenge, our city and region must rely on a combination of strategies to boost talent attraction and retention, including maximizing the number of international graduates who choose to launch their careers in Greater Philadelphia.

In today's global marketplace, the pursuit of talent knows no borders. Employers seek individuals who bring diverse perspectives and possess the skills and ambition to drive innovation and growth. Enter international student graduates—a pool of dynamic, driven, and culturally adept individuals primed to enrich teams and propel businesses forward. Research suggests that the employment opportunities available on an F-1 Student Visa are a top motivator for an international student to select the United States over another country for study.

This employer guide will explore why tapping into this talent pool isn't just a good business decision, but a strategic imperative for companies looking to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world. Organized into five sections, this guide is designed to be an actionable resource for employers to demystify the process of hiring international talent.



"Philly is a great place to live and work after completing a degree: the city is vibrant, affordable, and buzzing with opportunity."

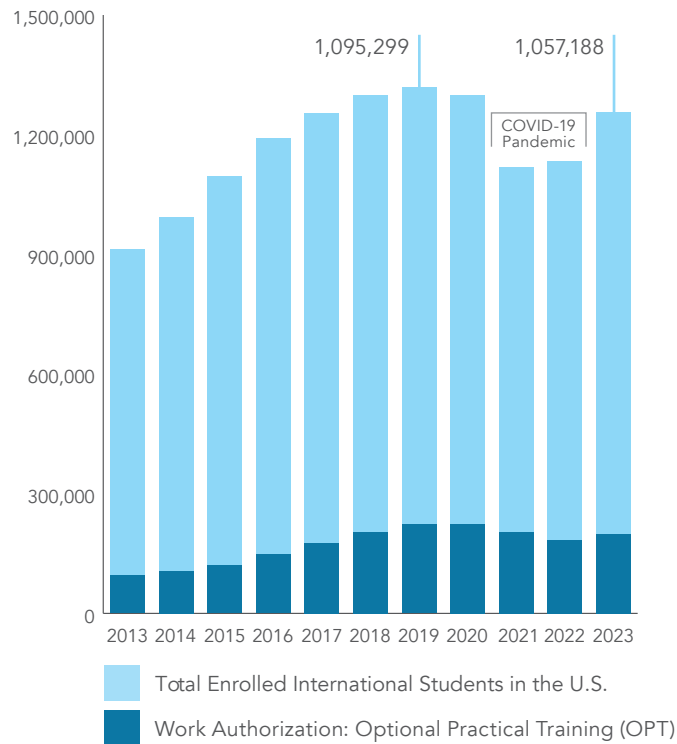
– Christopher Orme
USciences International Alumnus
Medicinal Chemist at SJU



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FIG 1: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT ACROSS THE U.S.

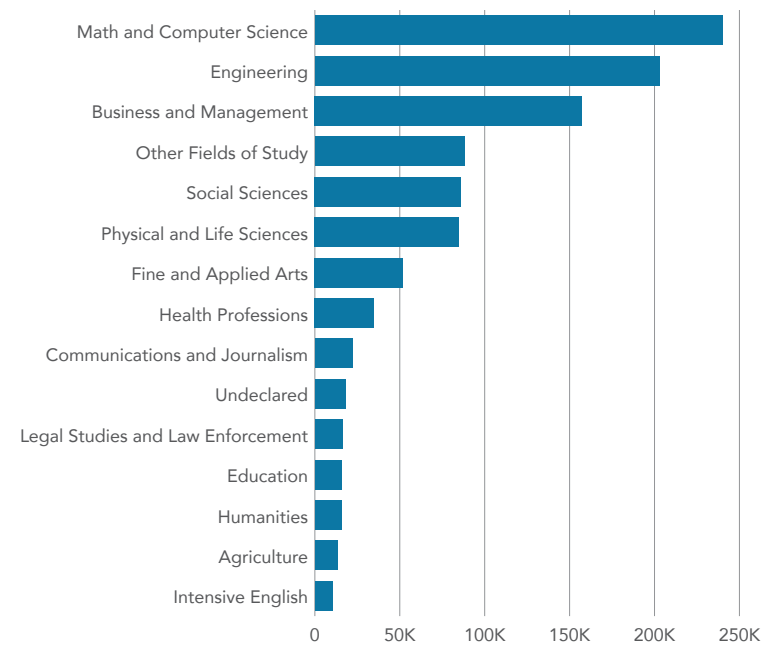
2013-2023



Source: *Open Doors*

FIG 2: ACADEMIC FIELDS PURSUED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

2023



Source: *Open Doors*

International student enrollment in the U.S. has doubled since the millennium, and is projected to increase significantly in the next half decade.





FAST FACTS: DID YOU KNOW?

87,000

fewer workers

anticipated in Greater Philadelphia's labor force over the next 15 years

Source: *Philadelphia Business Journal*

5.6%

of post-secondary enrollment in the U.S. are **international students**

Source: *Open Doors*

20,000+

international students in **Greater Philadelphia**

Source: *IPEDS*

1,057,188

international students in **the U.S. in 2023**

Source: *Open Doors*

FIG 3: DISTRIBUTION OF DEGREE FIELDS OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES FROM PHILADELPHIA-BASED INSTITUTIONS 2022

Degree Field	Bachelor's Degree	Percent	Advanced Degree	Percent	Total	Percent
Not Reported and Other	289	17%	1,118	33%	1,407	27%
Business, Management, Marketing	517	30%	656	19%	1,173	23%
Computer and Information Sciences	241	14%	588	17%	829	16%
Engineering	215	12%	395	11%	610	12%
Health Professions and Related	62	4%	237	7%	299	6%
Biological and Biomedical Sciences	95	5%	105	3%	200	4%
Social Sciences	128	7%	83	2%	211	4%
Visual and Performing Arts	105	6%	38	1%	143	3%
Mathematics and Statistics	63	4%	107	3%	170	3%
Physical Sciences	34	2%	110	3%	144	3%
Total	1,749		3,437		5,186	

Source: *IPEDS*

KEY TERMS & TIMELINES

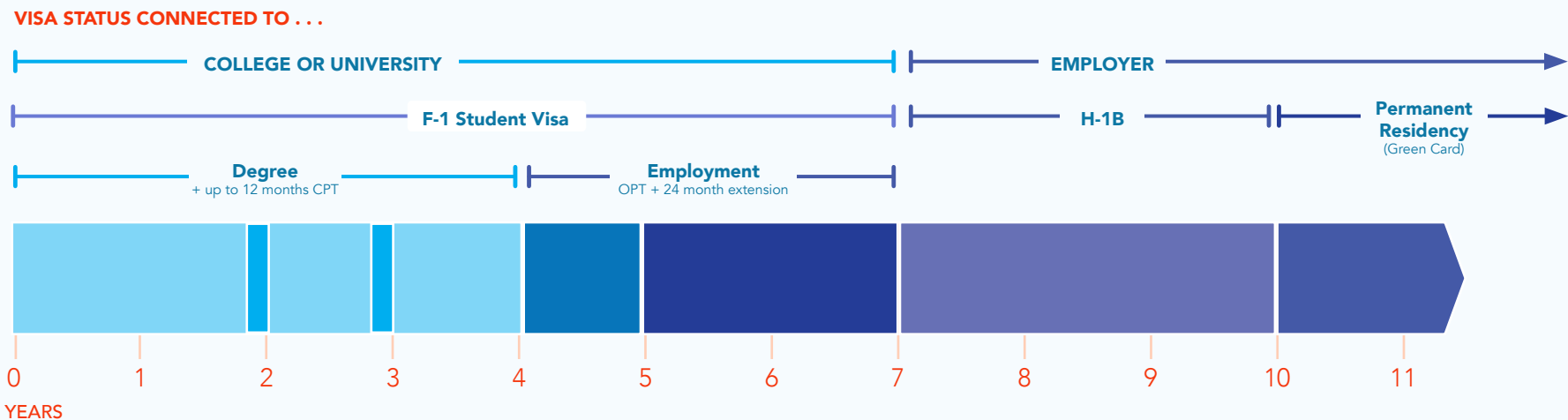
How does an international student pursue a career in the USA?



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As you dive into this topic, it is helpful to understand the terms and concepts that define the pathway for international students into employment. The F-1 student visa allows an international student to work after completion of their degree for a period of 1-3 years before employer sponsorship is required.

Example long-term pathway for an undergraduate international student in a STEM field



Glossary

Student Visa

F-1 visa

F-1 visas are issued at the discretion of the U.S. government to students from overseas who are accepted into full-time academic programs at approved schools in the USA.

I-20

The I-20 form is a document held by every international student that reflects details about their visa status including their college or university, field of study, and periods of employment authorization.

International Student Work Authorizations

CPT

Curricular Practical Training (CPT) allows international students to get work experience during their studies if academic credit is awarded. This authorization is granted by a student's college or university.

OPT

Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows international students to work for up to 12 months after completion of a degree program. A student applies for this authorization with the U.S. government after receiving approval from their college or university.

STEM OPT

The "STEM extension" allows eligible international graduates currently employed on post-completion OPT to apply for a 24-month extension of their work authorization. A candidate applies for this authorization with the U.S. government after receiving approval from their college or university.

See detailed ICE definitions here: [CPT](#), [OPT](#), [STEM OPT](#)

Additional Immigration Terminology

EAD

An Employment Authorization Document (EAD) is a card issued by the U.S. government that indicates the nature and duration of a nonimmigrant's permission to work in the USA. EADs are issued for a number of visa holders, including F-1 visa holders with approved OPT and STEM OPT.

Green Card

A green card is officially known as a Permanent Resident Card. It allows the holder to live and work permanently in the United States and provides a pathway to citizenship.

H-1B visa

The H-1B is the most commonly used employment-based visa category. Employers can apply for highly educated foreign professionals to work in "specialty occupations" that require at least a bachelor's degree or the equivalent.

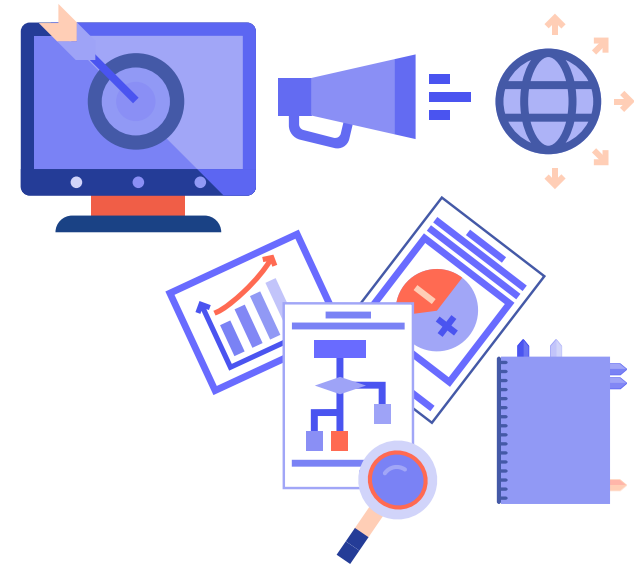
Nonimmigrant

F-1 and H-1B visas are considered "nonimmigrant" visas, as they are intended for temporary work or study. However, each may lead to permanent residency.



Step 1

DECIDE



Reasons to Hire International Talent



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Key Takeaways

A U.S. college or university remains responsible for an international student's visa for **1-3 years post-graduation**.

Employer sponsorship is **not required** during this period.

There are **no set salary requirements** for the first year post-graduation.

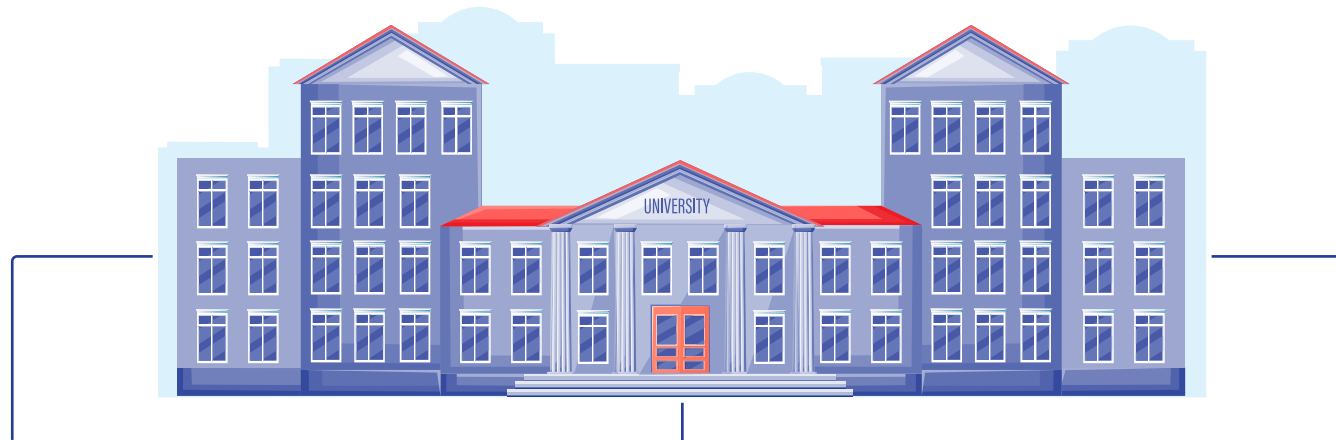
Employers often report hesitancy around hiring international students or graduates due to the presence of a nonimmigrant visa status or concern about turnover. However, over the past couple of decades, findings show that a majority of new graduates left their first jobs within one year.

Meanwhile, international students have a vested interest in persisting in the workplace to demonstrate their worth to sponsoring employers. And—fortunately for employers—it is straightforward to hire international graduates, and schools ensure students are prepared when they enter the job market.

"Hiring a student on OPT has never been a barrier to employment; in fact, it has been a win-win for both the students and for us."

- Adetoun Adeniji-Adele
Talent Acquisition Manager
Integral Molecular

Colleges and universities are intentional in how they recruit international students and prepare them for success in the workforce.



International Admissions

Meeting candidates all over the world
 Selecting qualified candidates
 Advising on career tracks by major

International Student Support Offices

Immigration advising and oversight
 Employment authorization and related training
 Post-graduation support

Career Services Offices

Career skills training
 Job application guidance
 Employer-facing partner for internships and post-grad employment



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More Than Just a Visa Status

It is important to recognize the full spectrum of attributes that international graduates of U.S. colleges bring to bear in their work.

- ▶ Moving across the globe to complete a degree requires a person to be **highly adaptable**.
- ▶ Finding your feet in a new country involves **perseverance** and next-level **problem-solving** abilities.
- ▶ People who come from different cultural contexts hone their **critical thinking** skills to thrive in the USA.
- ▶ International candidates may be **bi- or multi-lingual**.

"International students are often among the top performers in their home countries, and bring ambition and high motivation to the U.S. workforce."

- Chawan Qadir
 SJU International Alumna
 Deloitte

Step 2

RECRUIT

How to Find and Tap Into This Talent Pool



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Key Takeaways

Demonstrate **access** and **inclusivity**. Let international students know that you are interested in hiring them.

Build trust with the international student population by being responsive during the recruitment process. Many students value their peers' experiences and opinions. If a student has a good experience with your organization, they usually share that with others.

Strengthen connections with higher education institutions and **share about your opportunities for international students**.



"Simply put, the organizations who dedicate staff and resources to a strategic university recruitment process and visit campus to engage, have a better brand with our students, see more applicant flow, and have better retention rates."

– Kelly Hart
Director of Student and Employer Engagement
Temple University Career Center

With a well-planned recruitment strategy, employers can locate ideal candidates—and save time and resources in the process.

Attract International Student Talent

Be transparent about policies for hiring and sponsoring international candidates from the start.

- ▶ Create a formal plan that details how recruiters should identify, hire, and onboard international candidates. Ensure student-facing recruitment staff understand the basics of policies for hiring and sponsoring.
- ▶ Indicate openness to international candidates in job postings and digital platforms such as Handshake, LinkedIn, and Indeed.
- ▶ International students seek out companies that express their willingness to hire. Include searchable keywords in job descriptions about willingness to hire for OPT, CPT, and/or sponsor for H-1B visas.
- ▶ Many companies use a checkbox asking: “Do you now or will you at any point in the future require sponsorship?” Consider how you use this question, and the additional transparency you could provide in the job description.

If you hire interns, seek out international candidates. They will want to get a foot in the door and make a good impression. According to the [2024 NACE Internship and Co-Op Report](#), internships and co-op experiences with a company are proven to extend employee retention and success.

Build Brand Awareness

Utilize a campus recruiting strategy to maintain a consistent and continuous campus presence. This will create employer brand awareness that attracts a larger hiring pool.

- ▶ Establish relationships with university career services offices, and share your willingness to recruit and hire international students and graduates.
- ▶ Invest in an on-campus presence by participating in career fairs or hosting information sessions.
- ▶ Engage your audience using social media and provide career centers with marketing materials to share. Host and promote virtual information sessions open to all schools.
- ▶ Partner with [International House Philadelphia](#) and [Campus Philly](#) to attend career events and grow your reach to current students and recent graduates. Together we engage with close to 10,000 international students in Greater Philadelphia.
- ▶ Join [The Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia](#) or other local economic development organizations to keep up with recruitment trends.



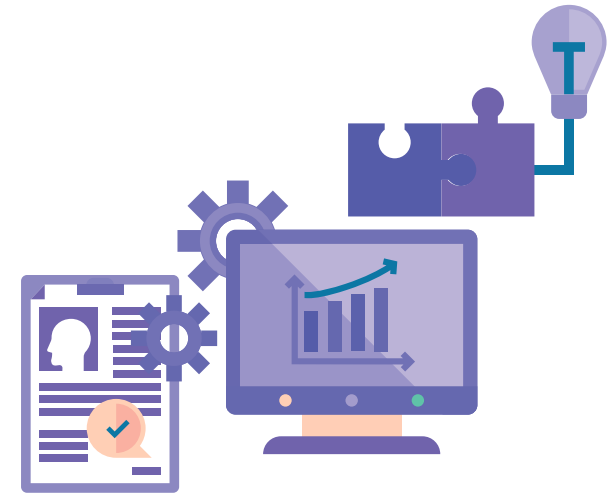

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Step 3

HIRE

Get Set Up to Onboard International Graduates



Key Takeaways

There is **no extra cost** to hire candidates on an F-1 visa, and administrative processes are almost entirely the same as for a U.S. candidate.

☞ Note only that documents presented during I-9 process may differ slightly from U.S. candidates ([see list here](#)).

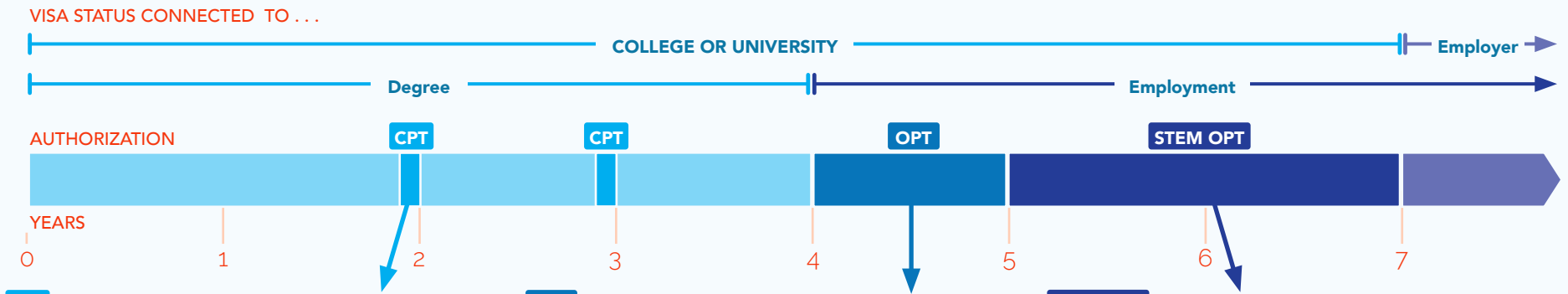
Candidates must report details of their employment to their schools to maintain their visa status; this is **not** a duty of their employers. The candidate is also responsible for applying for their own work authorization and social security number.

Employers **do not need to demonstrate** that they could not find a U.S. citizen or permanent resident for roles for which they hire international graduates.

Quick Guide for F-1 Work Authorizations

	Type of Work Authorization		
	CPT	OPT	STEM OPT
Candidate needs job offer to be eligible for work authorization	X		X
Candidate must be physically present in the U.S.A.	X	X	X
Application involves school	X	X	X
Application involves U.S. government		X	X
EAD card required to work		X	X
Wage required by regulations			X
Employer enrollment in E-Verify required			X

The Nitty Gritty: Most-Utilized Work Authorizations for F-1 Visa Holders*



CPT	OPT	STEM OPT
To hire an international student during their studies (e.g. for an internship, externship, or co-op)	To hire an international student post-graduation	To retain or hire candidates for the 2-year STEM extension of OPT

- The student will apply for **Curricular Practical Training (CPT)** work authorization through their school.
- For I-9 purposes, a candidate should provide a copy of their I-20 document indicating an authorized period of CPT at the company on the second page.
- The candidate may **only** work within the date range shown on the I-20.

Employer Best Practices

- Provide an official offer letter to the student for their records. Typically an offer letter should provide the details shown in [this template](#).

What the Candidate Should Know

- Employment or training must be an “integral part of an established curriculum” and “directly related to the student’s major area of study.”
- CPT must be authorized by schools in advance and cannot be retroactively applied.
- School policies will vary. Some authorize CPT only for highly structured internship or co-op programs, and others are more flexible.
- Using 12 months or more of full-time CPT (20+ hours per week) makes a student ineligible for OPT.

- The candidate will apply for up to one year of **Optional Practical Training (OPT)** work authorization through their school and the U.S. government.
- For I-9 purposes, a candidate must demonstrate they have an EAD (work authorization card).
- The candidate may only work within the date range shown on the card.

Employer Best Practices

- Provide an official offer letter to the student for their records. Typically an offer letter should provide the details shown in [this template](#).
- Be flexible with start dates. OPT processing times are hard to predict, and a student can only apply within 90 days before graduation. Students must pick an arbitrary employment start date even without a job lined up.

What the Candidate Should Know

- Employment or training must be “directly related to the student’s major area of study.”
- “Students may not accrue an aggregate of more than 90 days of unemployment” while authorized for post-completion OPT.
- Applying for premium processing can reduce the wait time for the government to process an OPT application from several months to just a few weeks.

- A candidate who is already employed on OPT will apply for an extension of two years through their school and the U.S. government. This extension is referred to as **STEM OPT**.
- For I-9 purposes, a candidate must demonstrate they are **either** in possession of a current EAD **or** that they are within 180 days of expiration of their previous EAD and have an application pending for a replacement card.

Employer Best Practices

- Employer must be enrolled in E-verify.
- Enrollment is free, but staff should be trained appropriately.
- The hiring manager must be willing to sign off on the I-983 “Training Plan” for the candidate.
- Provide an official offer letter to the employee for their records. Typically an offer letter should provide the details shown in [this template](#).

What the Candidate Should Know

- The candidate must be eligible for the STEM extension based on a prior major field of study.
- Employment or training must be “directly related to the degree that qualifies the student” for STEM OPT.
- An employee “may not accrue an aggregate of more than 150 days of unemployment” during a total OPT period, which is inclusive of both their time on OPT, and during the 2-year STEM OPT extension.



*Less common types of authorization include pre-completion OPT, and authorization based on severe economic hardship.

Step 4

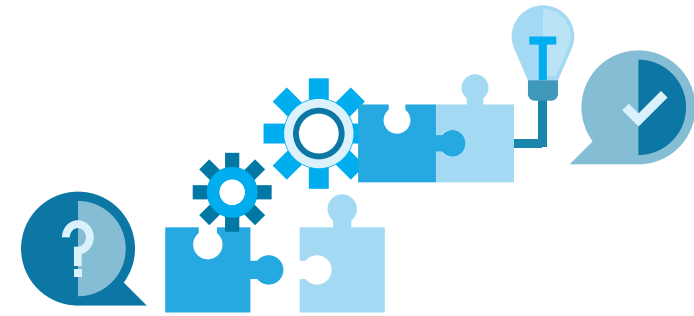
SUPPORT

How to Integrate International Student Talent Into a Company and Foster Success



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It is important to support all employees through their tenure with your company. While most international talent is flexible and adaptable, international hires require clear support and expectations to help with their integration into the workplace.



Mentorship

75% Retention rate for employees who participate in a mentorship program.

Workplace mentoring is a learning partnership between employees that involves sharing knowledge and skills to help a mentee grow professionally.

Mentorship can take place in a one-to-one format or a group format. It provides employees with support outside of the employee's direct supervisor and team.

Retention rates for mentees are 72 percent compared to 49 percent for employees who do not participate in a mentorship program.

Wharton study 2007

ERGs

54% Increase in employee sense of belonging and community.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are employee-led groups based on identity that promote inclusivity, community, and representation at work. ERGs build community and trust relationships that increase employee retention.

Companies with ERGs have seen a 35 percent increase in size, and employees report a 54 percent increase in their sense of belonging and community.

*McKinsley & Company
Workplace Survey 2022*





Create a specialized and comprehensive onboarding process

- Intentionally introduce employees to the mission, values, goals, and culture of the organization.
- Review the organizational chart and hierarchy, and explain the roles and responsibilities within the company (e.g. HR, manager).
- Provide introductions to key team members.
- Provide an overview of company policies and expectations.
- Be clear about the dress code.
- Provide expectations around hybrid or remote work.
- Supply employees with key tools utilized for work.
- Be transparent about career development, assessment, and promotion eligibility.
- Set expectations about sponsorship and timeline.
- Review necessary paperwork and benefits processes thoroughly (e.g. tax forms, benefits elections).



Involve your domestic workforce

- Ensure your workforce has opportunities for intercultural competency training.
- Ask them to support the welcoming of international talent through after-work social opportunities, invitations for coffee, or staff engagement initiatives.



Provide continuous employee engagement

- Companies should designate a liaison for international employees who can be a resource for questions and help troubleshoot any issues.
- Set up a standing check-in with all employees to ensure they stay engaged and empowered.
- Invest in in-person team-building activities. Team-building fosters a sense of community and team spirit among employees.
- Support employees with informal check-ins such as coffee chats or checking in over lunch.
- Provide formal programs such as mentorship or ERGs.

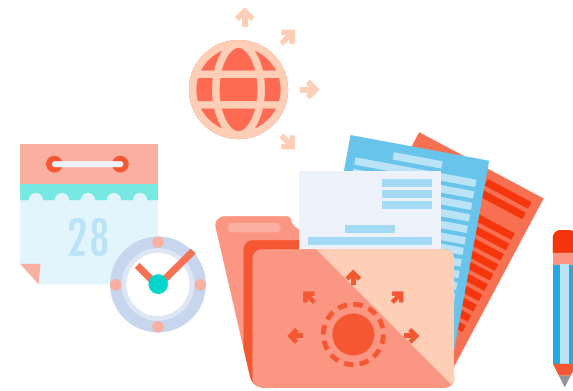


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Step 5

RETAIN



How to Keep International Talent



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Key Takeaways

Most H-1B visas are issued via a **lottery** system.

Employers are responsible for filing the H-1B application and covering **most** of the associated costs.

For international graduates in STEM fields, three years of OPT = three chances to get picked in the H-1B lottery!

H-1B status can serve as a **bridge** to sponsoring an employee for permanent residency.

To retain an international graduate for the long-term, it is likely they will need to be sponsored for an employment-based visa. The H-1B visa is **by far** the most common option for retaining international graduate talent.

Note: We are focusing on the H-1B for purposes of this guide, but there are other employer-sponsored visa statuses. Find a comprehensive breakdown [here](#).

Employer Best Practices

Develop clearly defined internal policies on who is eligible for sponsorship and on what timeline (to ensure equity and prevent subjectively driven decisions).

Finalize internal decisions on sponsorship by the start of March in order to register candidates in a timely manner (see timeline on the next page).

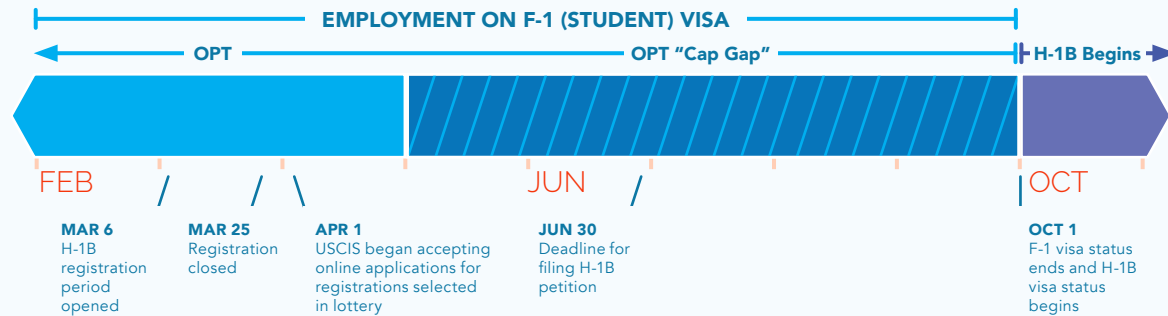
Seek legal counsel: Many immigration attorneys are willing to offer free advice in the hope of providing billed services. The [American Immigration Lawyers Association \(AILA\)](#) is a good resource to find experienced attorneys in good standing.

“H-1B sponsorships have yielded for our company many technically talented candidates we otherwise would have missed out on.”

– Wendy Gabriele
SVP & Principal
Econsult Solutions, Inc.

Example Timeline in FY2025 (calendar year 2024)

For an international graduate selected in the lottery whose OPT ended in May—note the "Cap Gap" extension of OPT.



The Nitty Gritty

An employer can sponsor **any** candidate (from anywhere in the world) who has a bachelor's degree or higher, provided the role requires the "theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge."

- Typically the H-1B visa allows a maximum duration of six years in the USA in two 3-year increments.
- Employees in H-1B status can be full- or part-time.

There are two types of employers under H-1B: those subject to an annual cap in numbers ("cap-subject"), and those for which there are no limits in place ("cap-exempt"). The majority of H-1B jobs are subject to the **annual cap**.

What is a cap-exempt employer?

The H-1B cap (i.e. the lottery) does not apply for the following types of employers:

- Institutions of higher education
- Nonprofit entities related to or affiliated with an institution of higher education
- Nonprofit research organizations
- Governmental research organizations

Odds of Lottery Selection

There are far more lottery registrations every year than the available number of H-1B visas. In FY25 (calendar year 2024) there was a 28% chance of being selected in the lottery.

So the basic question is: is it worth \$215 for a chance to retain a talented employee?

The H-1B Lottery

Cap-subject employers register candidates in an annual **lottery** for H-1B status.

Currently the number of H-1B visas issued each year is capped at 65,000, with an additional 20,000 set aside for people who have earned a Masters or Doctoral degree in the USA.

Starting in March 2025, it will only cost an employer **\$215** to register an employee or candidate in the lottery.

Additional fees for sponsorship only apply **after** applicants are picked in the lottery. These fees can vary significantly based on employer size and type. Use the USCIS fee calculator [here](#) (search for form type **I-129**).

- An international graduate can continue working until their H-1B application has been adjudicated if the application is submitted while their OPT is still valid. The OPT is automatically extended to bridge any gap in work authorization—this is called the "**Cap Gap**" (see timeline above).
- Extensions of H-1B status are **not subject** to the lottery.

Registering an employee or candidate for the lottery and filing H-1B applications can be done **online**.

The registration period does not follow fixed dates every year, but generally starts in early March. If selected in the lottery, a candidate's H-1B application can be submitted on or after **April 1**.

H-1B visa status begins on **October 1** for candidates whose applications are approved.



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International House Philadelphia

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