Am I underpaid because I am an immigrant? Exploring the Lived Experiences of the Skilled Temporary Worker Visa Holders in STEM occupations in the American Workplace

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Am I Underpaid Because I am an immigrant? Exploring the Lived Experiences of Skilled Temporary Worker Visa Holders in STEM Occupations in the U.S. Workplace

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Abstract

The growing demand for skilled workers in the U.S. economy has attracted thousands of immigrants with STEM skills. However, skilled immigrants face criticism for allegedly causing wage depression and displacing U.S. workers. This study explored whether skilled immigrants in STEM jobs experienced earning disadvantages and how their immigration status affected salary negotiations. Using the neoclassical microeconomic theory framework, the study connected theoretical subsystems to the challenges faced by skilled immigrants in STEM occupations. The study analyzed the life experiences of six skilled immigrants in STEM occupations using a qualitative approach. Initial job-hunting challenges included finding employers willing to hire immigrants and longer visa processing times. Visa-related challenges involved limited job mobility, and hesitance to negotiate higher salaries. Most participants believed their earnings were fair, but they were hesitant to negotiate salary offers, and visa sponsorship limited job mobility. All participants were willing to upgrade their status from temporary visa to permanent residency for better job security, reduced visa-related paperwork, increased job mobility, and access to federal jobs.

Keywords: skilled immigration, wage negotiation, STEM employment, VISA sponsorship, job mobility
Am I Underpaid Because I am an immigrant? Exploring the Lived Experiences of Skilled Temporary Worker Visa Holders in STEM Occupations in the U.S. Workplace

For several decades, the United States has been a favored destination for skilled immigrants in many fields due to its strong economy, reputation for entrepreneurship, and highly ranked educational institutions (Carnevale et al., 2011). Skilled immigrants have played a crucial role in expanding the country's workforce, driving innovation and promoting economic growth (Bound et al., 2018). Abramitzky and Boustan (2017) reported that hundreds of thousands of skilled immigrants have entered the United States in the past 20 years, contributing to the skilled labor force. Evidence shows that skilled immigrants have positively impacted the economy by creating employment opportunities, starting businesses, and filling critical roles in industries with a scarcity of domestic talent. Consequently, the number of high-skilled immigrants admitted has increased significantly in the last three decades, particularly in the STEM sector (Bound et al., 2015; Depew et al., 2017; Lowell, 1999). This increase is driven by factors such as the growing demand for skilled workers in the U.S. economy and the country's reputation for top-notch educational institutions. Immigrants with STEM skills have been particularly sought-after by employers because they often possess the skills and knowledge necessary to drive innovation and growth in various industries.

Review of the Literature

This study focuses on temporary worker visas in the H-1B and L-1 categories. These employment-based visas have become increasingly popular among American employers seeking to hire skilled foreign workers, particularly in the tech sector (Bound et al., 2018). According to data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2019), nearly a million foreign nationals worked in the United States with H-1B and L-1 visas in 2019. Most H-1B visas were issued to
workers in computer-related fields, such as software development, computer systems analysis, and computer programming, among others (NFAP Policy Brief, 2018). This trend has persisted over the years, indicating the importance of foreign talent in filling skill gaps in the U.S. technology industry. While the H-1B and L-1 visa programs have been criticized for allegedly displacing American workers and driving down wages, proponents argue that they help U.S. businesses remain competitive by hiring the best talent globally. These visa programs also provide a pathway for highly skilled workers to obtain permanent residency in the United States, ultimately benefiting the country's economy and workforce.

The H-1B visa program has faced criticism for various reasons, including concerns over wage depression and displacement of U.S. workers. (Hira, 2004; Matloff, 2004). Allegations of abuses in the program include employers exploiting foreign workers by paying them less than their American counterparts (Mithas & Lucas, 2010; Ottman, 2017). These concerns have fueled debates over the need for reform to ensure the program does not harm American workers.

Critics argue that the dual-intent nature of the H-1B visa program, which allows workers to apply for permanent residency while on a temporary work visa, incentivizes some to stay in the United States permanently, despite the temporary nature of their visa (Mayda et al., 2018). This situation raises questions about the visa program’s intended purpose and whether it is being used appropriately. Some anti-immigrant groups criticize guest-worker programs such as the H-1B visa for allegedly contributing to higher unemployment rates among native-born workers and enabling exploitative labor practices in certain industries. These criticisms have led to calls for more stringent regulations and oversight of the guest-worker programs to protect both foreign workers and the American workforce.
Although many policymakers and anti-immigrant movement supporters focus on the negative aspects of the presence of temporary skilled immigrants, attention should also be directed to the temporary visa policy that allows the exploitation of temporary workers regarding wages, non-wage compensation, job stability, and job mobility. Prior research (Lowell & Avato, 2014; Matloff, 2004; Steigleder & Sparber, 2017) has shown that some employers use the guest-worker programs to hire workers at lower wages than American workers, offer fewer benefits, and less job security. This hiring policy creates a situation where temporary workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, without the protections and rights that American workers enjoy.

While there is a growing body of research on the impact of skilled immigrants on the native workforce, more studies are needed to specifically examine wage inequality between skilled immigrants and native workers (Cortes et al., 2018). Additionally, more research is required to determine whether temporary work visa holders are paid in accordance with regulations set by Congress (Doran et al., 2014). Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions: How do skilled immigrants in STEM occupations perceive and experience earnings, visa-related challenges, salary negotiations, and visa sponsorship processes? What motivates them to upgrade their legal status?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in neoclassical microeconomic theory, which emphasizes the decision-making process and behavior of individuals and firms within the economy. According to this framework, individuals and firms make rational decisions based on their self-interest, and market prices are determined by the interaction of supply and demand (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2009). In the context of international migration, neoclassical economics posits that individuals
decide to migrate based on a cost-benefit analysis, where they expect to receive a positive net return on their investment (Todaro, 1969; Todaro & Maruszko, 1987). Migration is viewed as an investment in human capital (Massey et al., 1993), and individuals tend to move to places where they can be the most productive based on their qualifications. The theory also acknowledges that potential immigrants face significant costs associated with increasing their labor productivity, including expenses related to travel, education, living, language, and cultural learning, and adjusting to a new labor market (Borjas, 1990). These costs are weighed against the benefits of relocating, and individuals typically choose to migrate to locations where they expect the highest positive net return (Borjas, 1990). According to Korpi & Clark (2015), migrants tend to choose destinations that offer the highest net economic advantages.

Additionally, neoclassical economics asserts that

(a) international migration is predominantly motivated by disparities in salaries and employment rates between countries, (b) social conditions, technologies, and individual characteristics that decrease migration costs boost the likelihood of international migration, (c) international migration persists until anticipated earnings are equalized globally, (d) the magnitude of the expected returns differential influences the volume of the international flow of immigrants, and (e) labor market imbalances are the primary driver of migration, with other markets having minimal direct influence on migration decisions except that of governments. (Borjas, 1990)

Governments can regulate immigration by implementing policies that decrease the likelihood of employment or raise the risk of underemployment through employer sanctions.
Methodology

Given the need to uncover the phenomenon being investigated, the study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews to examine the lived experiences of skilled immigrants in STEM occupations. Phenomenology emphasizes lived experience within a particular group (Creswell, 2013; Churchill, 2022), enabling researchers to capture raw and authentic data (Maxwell, 2013). The snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study. Six participants were recruited for the study, a suitable number as suggested by Creswell (2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, allowing for open exploration of the phenomenon and enabling participants to express their ideas and opinions in their own words, as outlined by Esterberg (2002) and Churchill (2022).

Participants

This study focused on foreign-born professionals employed in STEM occupations in the United States, categorized into three immigration status levels: temporary worker visa holder (H-1B or L-1 visa categories), legal permanent resident (LPR), and naturalized U.S. citizen. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) holding at least a bachelor’s degree, (b) currently working at least 40 hours per week in jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher in engineering, science, math, or natural sciences, and (c) belonging to one of the three specified immigration statuses. Before the interviews, participants were e-mailed a cover letter containing language approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee. These communications explained the purpose of the research, the fitness of the participants for the study, the interview duration, and IRB approval.
Data Collection

According to Creswell and Clark (2017), purposefully selected participants aid researchers in better understanding the problem and research questions. Therefore, a snowball sampling approach was employed to recruit participants for this study. Snowball sampling is a non-random technique used to locate a hidden population by relying on referrals from initially sampled participants to other individuals with similar characteristics (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Initially, the researchers recruited two willing participants who met the inclusion criteria. There was one round of interviews for this study, and each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes.

These initial participants were asked to refer other individuals they knew who met the inclusion criteria. Additionally, the researchers reached out to immigrant communities in the United States via e-mail to introduce the purpose of the research. The inclusion criteria were foreign-born professionals working in STEM occupations with one of three immigration statuses: temporary worker visa (H-1B or L-1), green card holder, or naturalized U.S. citizen, with two participants in each category. The researchers developed a consent form, which was e-mailed to all potential participants. Participants were asked to sign the consent form and return it via e-mail. Once the researchers received the signed consent forms, Zoom interviews were scheduled. The researcher contacted all participants who volunteered to participate in the interview process via Zoom meetings.

Data Analysis

The qualitative component of this study employed a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through personal experiences and reflections (Honebein, 1996). Given the purpose of this study was to reflect on the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of foreign-born STEM professionals
in the U.S. workforce, the constructivist paradigm was an appropriate approach (Creswell et al., 2003). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocol developed from the four research questions.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data collection and analysis, the researchers employed rigorous techniques and methods (Johnson, 1997; Patton, 1999). Triangulation, which involves using multiple sources and methods to validate the findings, was utilized. The researchers employed primary and secondary salary sources and reviewed relevant immigration policies (Patton, 1999). Additionally, member checking was used, allowing participants to review their interview responses to ensure the accuracy of the data, thereby increasing reliability. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity when analyzing and reporting the data (Allen & Wiles, 2016).

The constructivist paradigm highlights the importance of the social construction of reality and the subjective interpretation of experiences by individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researchers aimed to comprehend the experiences and perceptions of foreign-born STEM professionals in the U.S. workforce from the viewpoint of the participants. The researchers refrained from imposing any preconceived notions or assumptions onto their responses, allowing for a deeper understanding of their subjective experiences and perspectives. This approach yielded valuable insights into issues related to temporary work visas and skilled immigration policies in the United States.
Table 1

*Participant Demographic Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Type of Employer</th>
<th>Immigration Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Medical Technician</td>
<td>Not-for-profit Healthcare</td>
<td>H-1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Senior Software Developer</td>
<td>Private for-profit</td>
<td>LPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Electrical Engineer</td>
<td>Private for-profit</td>
<td>LPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Network Engineer/IT</td>
<td>Private for-profit</td>
<td>H-1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Software Engineer</td>
<td>Private for-profit</td>
<td>U.S. Citizen Naturalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born F</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>Senior Data Scientist</td>
<td>Private for-profit</td>
<td>U.S. Citizen Naturalized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Participant Degree Type and Location*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Highest Degree Completed</th>
<th>Location of Highest Degree Completed</th>
<th>Currently Employed in STEM?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born A</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Outside of the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>In the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born C</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>In the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born D</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Outside of the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born E</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>In the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born F</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>In the U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that allowed them to provide detailed responses based on their personal experiences. The length and depth of the answers varied depending on factors such as job type, country of origin, level of education, and immigration status. To identify themes and sub-themes, the researchers employed several techniques, including the word-based method, considered the quickest and most effective way of identifying themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Additionally, the researchers scrutinized the text to identify themes related to the research questions guiding the study. Table 3 displays the primary themes and sub-themes that emerged, each further discussed based on the participant interviews.

Findings

The key findings of this study are summarized in Table 3, organized by themes and subthemes.

Table 3

Identified Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Job-Hunting Process</td>
<td>Visa-Related Challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earnings from the Main Job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salary Negotiations with the Prospective Employer</td>
<td>Visa Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives to “Upgrade” Legal Status</td>
<td>Salary Expectation Upon Status Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of the Immigration Status Change</td>
<td>Confidence with Salary Negotiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-monetary Benefits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Job Flexibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial Job-Hunting Process

The study aimed to gain insights into the job-hunting experiences of foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs in the U.S. workforce. Participants shared their detailed recruitment experiences as immigrants. Some were recruited while residing in the United States with a student visa, whereas others were recruited directly from overseas. Most applied for STEM jobs while residing in the United States and completing their degrees. Only two participants were recruited while living abroad.

The job-hunting process presented several challenges, including finding an employer willing to hire an immigrant, sponsoring a work-related visa, and navigating longer visa processing times. Foreign-born C expressed concern about finding jobs that sponsored her visa, stating, "I needed to know that the company will apply at least for my H-1, not even for my green card." Foreign-born A found the waiting period for her visa challenging: "You are at the mercy of the U.S. government, so the waiting was the challenging part; you can't plan other things until you hear back from them." In one case, a company offered an alternative working location when encountering a problem due to a work-related visa. Foreign-born B faced difficulties related to their work permit, and the company offered employment at their Zurich office as a solution. The participant was later transferred back to the U.S. office under the L-1 visa category after completing one year of continuous employment with the same employer.

Political, economic, and immigration-related issues significantly impact the job-hunting process of foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs in the U.S. workforce. The 9/11 attacks had a profound impact on the United States, including its immigration policies and politics. Additionally, the economic downturn following the attacks may have made it more challenging for foreign-born professionals to find job opportunities. While most participants believed their
job-hunting process was less stressful and relatively smooth, one participant, Foreign-born F, encountered major challenges after the 9/11 attacks, stating, "It was actually a difficult time, I got my OPT in August 2001, and the next month, 9/11 attacks happened. So, it was a very challenging time to find a job."

**Visa Related Challenges**

Challenges related to temporary visas affect earnings highlight the potential limitations that foreign-born STEM professionals may face due to their immigration status. Limited job mobility, as discussed by several participants, can significantly impact their ability to negotiate higher salaries or seek better job opportunities. These limitations may result in lower earnings and slower career advancement compared to their American counterparts.

The requirement to stay with a company for a specific period in exchange for visa sponsorship can also be challenging. This obligation can limit their ability to pursue better job opportunities or negotiate higher salaries, as they may feel obligated to remain with their current employer to maintain their visa status. This is particularly challenging if their current employer does not provide adequate compensation or opportunities for growth and development.

Two participants explained that their employers required them to stay with the company for a specific period of time in exchange for visa sponsorship. Foreign-born A mentioned, "The disadvantage is non-monetary, it's more like a commitment. . .like, ‘You can't leave us.’,— something like that." Foreign-born F experienced limited job mobility when the company decided to sponsor his legal permanent residency:

They asked me to sign a commitment to stay in the company for another five years when they sponsored my green card, which I actually did, but it was not because they asked me to sign, it was because I really liked what I did.
One primary concern expressed by foreign-born STEM professionals regarding their temporary worker visas was the lack of flexibility. This subtheme emerged frequently during the interviews, with participants discussing various challenges related to their immigration status. Specifically, they mentioned that the H-1B visa tied them to a specific company and position, limiting their job mobility. As Foreign-born A noted, "When promoted to a leading role, they have to amend your visa because you are changing positions." Similarly, Foreign-born D shared his experience of feeling "hooked" to his position until he received his green card, stating, "All of your documents are tied to this position." Foreign-born C expressed concern that the H-1B visa ties them to their field of education, preventing them from pursuing other job opportunities.

Overall, the challenges related to temporary visas highlight the importance of immigration policies that support the job mobility and career development of foreign-born STEM professionals in the U.S. workforce. Another significant limitation of temporary work visas is the barrier to promotion. Unable to take on new responsibilities or projects, these workers find their opportunities for professional growth and advancement limited within their current company.

*Earnings from the Main Job*

The subtheme of earnings is important when exploring the job-hunting process of foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs in the U.S. workforce. Most participants believed they received fair salary offers based on their education, work experience, and other credentials compared to their American counterparts. This outcome suggests that the salary negotiation process for foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs may not significantly differ from that of American professionals in similar positions.
Notably, all participants mentioned that their companies offered them a fixed salary based on prevailing wage regulations, which may vary depending on the company’s size and location. Foreign-born C shared her experience, stating that while she received a good salary, it was the minimum starting salary for her job description, and it was fixed. Since this was her initial job offer as a foreign-born employee, she had to accept the position to maintain her residency in the United States. Another participant, Foreign-born F, shared that his salary negotiation occurred before prevailing wage regulations for H-1B visas existed, but that his salary was reasonable. Foreign-born B noted that in the tech industry, salary offers are standard unless there are competing offers from other companies.

Despite concerns about discrimination based on immigration status, most participants did not believe that they were paid less due to their immigration status. Their confidence in their educational achievements, language skills, and work experiences may have contributed to their beliefs that they were fairly paid. Foreign-born F added that although he felt he was paid the same as someone born in the country, he had no way of verifying this as salaries were not disclosed. Foreign-born A explained:

I think they [employer] considered the years as experience, and I did not felt [sic] that because I was an immigrant I was paid less, no. In some instances, I am paid more compared to Americans and that is because of the level of education and years of experience.

Participants also commented that salary variation and confidentiality provide insights into the complexities of salary negotiation and determination in the job-hunting process of foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs in the U.S. workforce. Salaries could vary depending on the employer or even between teams within the same organization, which suggests challenges in
determining fair and equitable compensation for all employees, regardless of their immigration status. Since salaries were not disclosed, participants relied on other sources such as industry-wide salary ranges, conversations with peers in the same field, prevailing wage determinations for their jobs, and online resources that provide salary data.

Overall, exploring the earnings subtheme provides important insights into the U.S. job-hunting process for these foreign-born professionals in STEM jobs. While there may be challenges related to political, economic, and immigration issues, the salary negotiation process and prevailing wage regulations appeared to be fairly equitable for the target population of this study. It is positive to learn that the majority of participants did not believe they were paid less due to their status, but the lack of salary transparency in the workplace remains a concern.

**Salary Negotiations with the Prospective Employer**

The topic of salary negotiation with employers was discussed with all participants, with several noting that there was little room for negotiation as most accepted the initial salary offer. Despite this, most participants had positive experiences regarding their salaries.

Participants such as Foreign-born D, shared that he did not negotiate his salary offer, stating "I took whatever they gave me. Honestly, it was not a real negotiation." Participants generally agreed that their salary offers were standard based on their qualifications and job descriptions. Foreign-born B shared that his employer rarely negotiated salary offers, and while he attempted to negotiate vacation days, he didn't negotiate his salary. Similarly, Foreign-born A stated that she did not negotiate her salary offer as it was reasonable and competitive for the position.

Another participant explained that there was not much negotiation between him and his employer regarding the salary: "I don't think I had much negotiation the first time if I remember
correctly. To be honest, I don't think it is associated with the fact that I am an immigrant.”

Overall, the salary negotiation process was similar for many participants. Most accepted the initial salary offer from their employers, considering it reasonable and fair based on their qualifications and previous work experience. Although there was little room for salary negotiation, participants did not necessarily feel that they received low salary offers. The limited room for negotiation may be due to various factors such as prevailing wage regulations and fixed salary structures.

**Visa Sponsorship**

The importance of employment-related visa sponsorship for foreign-born STEM professionals cannot be overstated. Many rely on employer-sponsored temporary work visas to work in the country, which impacts their career development, job mobility, and earning potential. Visa sponsorship issues were discussed with every participant during the interview. While some, like Foreign-born D, felt that visa sponsorship was not a significant factor in their negotiations and was more of a complimentary discussion, others, such as Foreign-born C, shared positive experiences with visa sponsorship. According to Foreign-born C, the company offered her a fixed salary and agreed to sponsor her visa without any negotiation or reduction in salary. She expressed satisfaction with the salary offer. However, some participants mentioned hearing of cases where companies reduced the salary offer if the immigrant required sponsorship, but none of the participants in this study reported such an issue.

Another participant (Foreign-born A) explained that when the company agreed to sponsor her work visa, they required her to work with them for at least three years before she could change her employer: "It was mentioned in my contract that I have to go through a certain process. Because we are sponsoring your visa, you have to stay with us for three years.”
Conversely, Foreign-born D mentioned that he did not feel pressured by his employer when they agreed to sponsor his work visa: "I felt like they were doing me a favor [by hiring and sponsoring work visa]." In general, the foreign-born STEM professionals discussed their experiences regarding salary negotiation and employment-related visa sponsorship with their employers. While some had to sign a commitment to stay with the same employer for a certain period, others did not experience any commitment issues with their employers. Experiences regarding employment-related visa sponsorship varied among the participants.

**Incentives to “Upgrade” Legal Status**

Incentives to “upgrade” legal status were discussed in every interview with the participants. Upgrading immigration status from temporary to permanent has significant benefits for many foreign-born STEM professionals in the United States. Motivation includes greater job security, reduced visa-related paperwork, and increased job mobility. One significant benefit of upgrading to legal permanent residency (green card) is the increased job mobility it provides. Green card holders are not tied to a specific employer and are free to pursue job opportunities and career growth without the constraints of temporary work visas. This increased job mobility can lead to higher salaries, better job opportunities, and overall career advancement.

Another benefit of green card status is the ability to switch careers more easily. Green card holders are not restricted to a specific job or industry and can pursue career opportunities in fields that may not be available under temporary work visas. It also provides more flexibility for dependents and families. Foreign-born D explained, "Holding a green card gives you flexibility; even if you lose your job, you have some sort of security to stay in the country and look for something else." Similarly, Foreign-born C said, "I wanted to feel more secure. You can change jobs more easily; You can do whatever you want once you have a green card."
One important benefit of changing immigration status was having access to a wider range of job opportunities, including those in the federal government. Participants who became naturalized U.S. citizens reported that holding a U.S. passport made traveling easier, eliminating the need for visa applications. Moreover, U.S. citizenship allowed foreign-born STEM professionals to pursue employment in the federal government and federal grant opportunities. Participants believed that upgrading their immigration status provided greater job security by allowing them to stay in the country permanently without being tied to a specific employer or position. This, in turn, accelerated the recruitment process, provided greater flexibility to work in different fields, and increased access to a wider range of job opportunities without the need to worry about work visa sponsorship. Furthermore, becoming a permanent resident or a U.S. citizen allowed foreign-born STEM professionals to bring their families to the United States and reunite with loved ones. Overall, upgrading immigration status was seen as a significant step in achieving greater economic and social mobility.

**Salary Expectation Upon Status Change**

During the interviews, participants discussed their salary expectations following a change in immigration status. Their perceptions varied. Half of them reported that their immigration status did not affect their salary expectations, while one-third shared that a change in status had a positive impact, allowing them to negotiate salaries with more leverage. According to Foreign-born C, work experience and achievements had a greater influence on salaries, rather than their immigrant status:

No. I guess the expectations change by the years of experience you spent in the company, but not with my status. After I went to a green card, my salary stayed the same. So, you have to go and ask for a raise, the company would not increase your salary because you
got a green card. There was no reason for them.

Foreign-born E believed that the change in immigration status did not add any special value in terms of earnings: “To be honest, it did not. I have seen a steady increase in my pay which I was pretty satisfied with. And when my status changed, I didn't think I was more special or anything like that”. Foreign-born B also agreed that his expectations regarding his earnings did not change when he upgraded his immigration status, and this change did not play a big role for the company he worked for "In the tech industry, that is not a huge effect, my personal experience”.

The participants in this study did not believe that acquiring legal status automatically entitled them to a salary increase. They mentioned that changes in their immigration status were confidential, and their employers were often unaware of the changes. Foreign-born STEM professionals believed that salary negotiations were merit-based, and employers did not treat them differently after their immigration status changed. Additionally, participants did not feel they deserved a salary increase simply because they upgraded their immigration status. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that acquiring legal status offered them more job security and better job flexibility.

Confidence with Salary Negotiation

Confidence in salary negotiation upon a change in immigration status was discussed in every interview with the participants. Overall, having legal status can provide a sense of security and stability, which can translate to increased confidence in negotiations with employers. Two participants mentioned that obtaining legal status gave them a certain level of confidence to initiate salary negotiations. Foreign-born F expressed that holding a green card or citizenship made her feel more comfortable taking risks in applying for different jobs or discussing salary
increases with her employer. Foreign-born D also shared that the immigration status change brought more confidence in terms of salary negotiation and allowed him to compare different job offers.

However, Foreign-born C stated that her immigration status was never part of her salary negotiation and that her salary increase was based solely on her accomplishments and tenure in the company. One participant shared his experience regarding the effect of immigration status change on earnings:

U.S. citizenship just gave me more freedom to pursue an opportunity to take risks and get a higher pay job, but I don't think the company had the mindset of "If this guy is getting a green card or becoming a citizen and he is no longer H-1B." It does not matter to the company.

Although some participants believed that legal status updates gave them more confidence with salary negotiations with their current employers, others believed that it never played a part in their negotiations, and their salary increases were directly related to their accomplishments and achievements within the company. However, they noted that upgrading their immigration status provided them with non-monetary benefits, such as job security and greater flexibility in their career options.

**Benefits of the Immigration Status Change**

Throughout the interview process, participants talked about the benefits of acquiring legal status. While legal status acquisition did not necessarily bring direct monetary benefits, it offered more job security and flexibility. This was especially important because it eased worries about potential changes to U.S. immigration policies that could affect their ability to work and stay in the country. Participants also mentioned that obtaining legal status, such as a green card or
citizenship, gave them a sense of belonging and allowed them to integrate fully into American society.

Non-monetary Benefits

Most foreign-born STEM professionals interviewed in this study stated that their immigration status did not directly affect their salary. Many participants shared sentiments such as, “My immigration status was never a part of how much money I earn, it [status change] had non-monetary benefits,” “I would not say that my status increased my salary, no, just flexibility,” and “My salary remained the same after I upgraded my immigration status, and the company did not even know that I changed my status.” Foreign-born D added, “I don't think there is any benefit in terms of salary.”

Participants discussed how legal status changes facilitated the recruitment process by removing the need for work visa applications or transfers. Legal status changes also removed some of the restrictions imposed by temporary work visas, such as the risk of unemployment, vulnerability to layoffs, and ineligibility for social security benefits. Additionally, changes in legal status offered better job mobility and fewer paperwork hurdles. Foreign-born B noted, “Legal status change brings non-monetary benefits. It speeds up recruitment. If I find a new job, I know that I can start to work from next week. But before, I could not.”

Most participants believed their employers cared more about their job-related skills than their immigration status. Furthermore, two participants mentioned that their immigration status was confidential, and their employers were not even aware of their legal status changes. Foreign-born D shared:

I think people who accept you for the job, like your manager, know[s], but other people do not know. If you are talking immigrant to immigrant, let's say your manager is
originally from India, he might know your status. But if your manager is a U.S. citizen, they don't even think there is an issue and they treat you the same, whether you are holding a working visa or a green card.

Overall, acquiring legal status also offered peace of mind regarding any changes in U.S. immigration policies and regulations.

**Job Flexibility**

All participants agreed that acquiring legal status resulted in better job flexibility and security. While some observed an increase in salary over time, they attributed this to their achievements and work experience rather than their legal status. However, all participants experienced improved job mobility and flexibility after changing their legal status. Those who received green cards experienced even more flexibility than naturalized U.S. citizens. Foreign-born STEM professionals mentioned gaining more flexibility in their current jobs and their daily lives, and being able to change employers and industries, start a new business, or take a sabbatical leave. In summary, participants found that their legal status change did not bring significant monetary benefits but provided them with better job security and flexibility.

**Discussion**

The presence of skilled immigrants in STEM fields is particularly significant to the innovation and competitiveness of the U.S. economy (Hanson & Slaughter, 2016). Immigrants have made important contributions to American innovation and entrepreneurship, including founding numerous successful technology startups. Meanwhile, concerns remain about the impact of skilled immigration on native workers and wage inequality.

This study found qualitative evidence that skilled immigrants in STEM occupations are not at any earning disadvantage. During the semi-structured interviews, all foreign-born STEM
professionals believed they had received adequate or fair salaries based on their job descriptions. Participants confirmed that their salary offers were based on their education level, work experience, and other industry-related skills, with no discrimination based on their immigration status. One of the most significant findings was that legal status acquisition did not affect the salaries of foreign-born STEM professionals in the U.S. workforce. Several participants mentioned that changes in immigration status, especially from temporary work visas to legal permanent residency, resulted in better job mobility, more job flexibility, and access to more jobs without any monetary gains. Additionally, further changes in immigration status, from legal permanent residency to U.S. citizenship, allowed access to federal jobs but did not necessarily provide any monetary benefits.

Employment-related visa sponsorship is a critical factor in the recruitment and retention of foreign-born STEM professionals, as it allows them to legally work in the United States and contribute to the economy. Without visa sponsorship, many foreign-born professionals would not have the opportunity to work in the U.S. workforce and contribute to U.S. innovation and competitiveness. Although foreign-born STEM professionals did not report any monetary disadvantages with their current employers, their main concerns associated with holding temporary worker visas included limited annual cap, the lottery process, long visa processing time, relative vulnerability to deportation, less job flexibility, and layoffs. Therefore, this study suggests that temporary work visa holders face additional challenges in the U.S. workforce compared to native employees due to their immigrant status.

**Policy Implications**

The H-1B visa program has been the subject of ongoing debates and discussions about its effectiveness and fairness in providing U.S. employers with skilled foreign workers while also
protecting the interests of American workers. Reforming and enforcing employment and immigration regulations can help address these concerns by ensuring that temporary workers are not being exploited and that they have access to the same rights and protections as American workers. This includes regulations around wages and benefits, as well as protections for workers against discrimination and retaliation. It is important to consider both the benefits and potential drawbacks of guest-worker programs and to work towards policies that prioritize the well-being and rights of all workers, regardless of their country of origin or employment status.

The reliance on employers for visa sponsorship can also create challenges and limitations for foreign-born STEM professionals. These limitations can impact their career development, mobility, and earning potential. There is a need for policies that allow for better job mobility, merit-based work authorization, and opportunities for permanent residency and citizenship for skilled immigrants.

While there are benefits to both the U.S. economy and the foreign workers who participate in guest-worker programs, it is also essential to ensure that these workers are not exploited by employers seeking to take advantage of their temporary status for profit. Regulations are designed to protect temporary workers and ensure that they are not exploited, but if these regulations are not enforced, it could lead to further exploitation and contribute to wage inequality. Balancing the attraction of skilled immigrants to fuel economic growth with ensuring fair treatment and access to good jobs and wages for all workers requires careful consideration of immigration policies and their impact on the labor market.

**Implications for Practice**

Ensuring pay equity in the workplace is crucial for upholding fairness, equality, and transparency among all employees. This study proposes several policy implementations based on
its findings, including the establishment of fair pay practices, revisions to pay policies, training and awareness initiatives, collaboration efforts, and adherence to legal compliance. In practical terms, organizations can integrate these best practices and recommendations to effectively promote and sustain pay equity within their workplaces. By emphasizing the importance of fairness, transparency, and equality, organizations should ensure that all employees receive fair compensation regardless of their protected characteristics. Achieving internal pay equity will necessitate collaboration among HR professionals, stakeholders, and employers to ensure that policies and practices are implemented consistently and fairly.

Moreover, the findings of this study can inform the development of training programs aimed at educating HR professionals, stakeholders, policymakers, and employers about the significance of pay equity and strategies for its effective implementation. Additionally, these insights can contribute to raising awareness about the legal obligations of pay equity and the ramifications of non-compliance. Human resource development professionals must comprehend the legal requirements of pay equity to assess the legality of their organizations’ pay practices and undertake requisite corrective measures if necessary. By taking proactive steps to address pay disparities and foster an inclusive work environment, organizations can strengthen their commitment to fairness and equality for all employees.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that individuals holding temporary worker visas (specifically in H-1B and L-1 categories) within STEM occupations did not perceive themselves as facing earning disparities in the U.S. workforce. Despite longstanding criticisms of these visa categories for potentially depressing U.S. wages and displacing local employees (Hira, 2004; Matloff, 2004), participants did not report feeling underpaid compared to U.S. workers in similar
job roles. Rather, participants firmly believed that their compensation was fair, determined by their level of education, industry experience, and relevant skills, rather than their immigration status.

Interestingly, the study also revealed that changes in legal status, such as transitioning from temporary worker visas to permanent residency or citizenship, did not significantly impact participants' salaries. However, it did result in improved job mobility, greater job flexibility, and enhanced access to federal-level employment opportunities. This suggests that while legal status may not directly influence salaries, it offers additional advantages that enrich the overall professional experience of temporary worker visa holders in STEM fields.

These findings challenge the prevailing perception that skilled immigrants with temporary worker visas are exploited as a low-cost labor force, at least from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. Instead, they underscore the necessity of considering various factors beyond immigration status when analyzing earnings and opportunities in the U.S. workforce, especially within high-demand sectors such as STEM.

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