

# 10 Things you need to know about: Temporary Worker Visa Programs

**Under U.S. immigration law**, approximately 21 visa categories are classified as “temporary workers.” These visas allow people to work in the United States for a specific period of time. The categories generally determine what type of work can be done on the visa.

- 1 About 840,000 foreign temporary workers live in the United States.** Nearly half are ages 25–34, and about 60 percent are men.
- 2 The most commonly discussed temporary worker programs are H-1B specialty occupation workers, H-2A agricultural workers, H-2B seasonal workers, and L intracompany transferees.** The letters and numbers refer to the sections of immigration law that authorize each program. Other examples of temporary worker categories include athletes, foreign media, and religious workers.
- 3 The United States’ first temporary worker program was the Bracero Program for agricultural workers, which existed from 1942 to 1964.** The H category for temporary workers and trainees first admitted workers in 1953, and subsequent changes in law split it into the categories described above.
- 4 The H-1B visa for specialty occupation workers is the best-known temporary worker program.** It requires the worker to have a bachelor’s degree or equivalent in a particular specialty that is necessary for their job. There is a cap of 65,000 visas per year on the category, which was set in 1990. An additional 20,000 visas per year for advanced degree holders were added in 2005.

**5 Most H-1B visa holders (65 percent of new approvals in FY 2014) work in computer-related occupations, and smaller percentages work in occupations in engineering, education, health, and science.** More than half of current H-1B workers hold advanced degrees, and nearly three-quarters are ages 25 to 34.

**6 The H-2A program for seasonal agricultural workers was created in 1986, replacing the defunct Bracero program.** Despite the lack of an annual numerical cap, utilization in the category has historically been low, which is often [blamed](#) on the program’s process difficulties for employers and the availability of unauthorized immigrant workers.

**7 The H-2B program was also created in 1986.** The program admits up to 66,000 workers annually to work in jobs that are temporary in nature. To sponsor a worker, employers must demonstrate that the need for the worker is either a “one-time occurrence” or a “seasonal,” “peakload,” or “intermittent” need.

**8 Though no skill level is officially associated with the H-2B category, it is primarily used for jobs requiring less than a bachelor’s degree.** Most H-2B visa holders [work](#) in landscaping and grounds keeping, forestry, and amusement parks and recreation.

**9 L visas allow multinational companies to transfer executives and managers (L-1A) or workers with specialized knowledge (L-1B) to their business operations in the United States.** There is no specific degree requirement for the category, although because of the nature of the positions, most L-1 workers do have degrees.

**10 Because the permanent immigration system provides more green cards to higher-skilled workers, more H-1B and L-1 temporary workers eventually settle in the United States permanently than other workers.** About 77 percent of all employment-based green cards go to H-1B or L-1 visa holders, including their spouses and children. By comparison, less than 0.1 percent of employment-based green cards go to H-2A or H-2B visa holders.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> USCIS data obtained by BPC under Freedom of Information Act