

SOURCE STUDY TITLE AND AUTHOR

H1-B versus J-1 Visa: Choosing the Right Option for You, SHRM, 2025

J-1 Visa Rules, Requirements, and Applications, Shorelight, 2026

SUMMARY

Exploring the J-1 Exchange Visitor Program to Fill Critical Skills and Knowledge Gaps

DESCRIPTION

Navigating the U.S. visa landscape has become increasingly complex under the current federal administration. At the same time, persistent shortages of qualified domestic talent across a variety of sectors compel many companies to rely on foreign professionals to fill critical skills gaps, sustain operations, and drive innovation.

Over the near and long term, foreign-born professionals have been a major economic driver in the United States. The National Foundation for American Policy estimates that one-third of U.S. economic growth between 1990 and 2010 was attributable to immigrants in science and engineering. Nearly half of the 2025 Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children with these companies generating \$8.6 trillion in revenue and employing 15.4 million people worldwide - making the recent decline in the United States of 1.1 million foreign-born workers since January 2025, as shown in data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a notable concern.

While the H1-B visa has long been the primary route for U.S. companies to hire highly skilled foreign workers, recent regulatory changes make securing an H1-B increasingly difficult and costly. The new weighted lottery system for awarding H1-B visas reduces the probability of selection for entry- to mid-level workers.

The J-1 Exchange Visitor Visa is emerging as a strategic pathway for international workers to join U.S. companies on time-limited projects and to train domestic workers in specific skillsets. While the J-1 visa is not designed to fill an existing position, it can provide benefits for the visa holder and the organization with which they are training or working.

KEY FINDINGS

The Exchange Visitor Visa is part of the BridgeUSA program managed by the Department of State and is designed for individuals participating in work-and study-based knowledge exchange programs. Participants come to the U.S. to teach, study, conduct research, receive training, or demonstrate special skills. Businesses use the J-1 program for rotational leadership development, research collaborations, and bringing in specialists for specific projects. A J-1 visa holder is only in the U.S. for the duration of the proposed activity, and does not intend to immigrate to the U.S.

For employers, a J-1 visa program is an excellent choice if your goal is to provide structured training or bring in specialists for a defined period to advance a specific initiative. It offers a more predictable, cost-effective, and flexible alternative than most other visa pathways.

However, immigration restrictions announced by the federal government across 2025 and 2026 – including bans on immigration from 39 countries, halting visa reviews in 75 countries, stricter reviews on visa applicants including social media audits, and expanding timelines at consular offices to review applications – apply to the J-1 process and will constrain opportunities.

Applicants to the J-1 visa must fall within one of the specific categories listed on the Department of State's Exchange Visitor Visa website. Currently these categories include:

- Professor and Research Scholar
- Short-term Scholar
- Specialist
- University Student
- Physician

The recent Early Career STEM Research Initiative by the Department of State aims to increase the use of J-1 visas for professionals in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.



The duration of stay under a J-1 visa depends on the program category (i.e., scholar, specialist, researcher, etc.). Businesses interested in pursuing a J-1 visa should review current rules and regulations as these are rapidly changing.

Additional benefits of the J-1 visa include:

- Currently no caps on the number of visas awarded each year.
- Spouses of J-1 visa holders are eligible for a J-2 visa, which provides a pathway for work authorization in the U.S. for the duration of the J-1 visa.
- Companies, such as SHRM, are 'designated sponsors' for specific categories of J-1 and can manage the eligibility forms and process for a fee, reducing the burden on businesses to gain this expertise and capability.

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