Many international students are interested in exploring short-term and long-term work opportunities in the United States. Current U.S. immigration laws permit international students to be employed in the U.S. during and after a course of study. However, these regulations have specific requirements and restrictions.

If you wish to work in the U.S. you must plan ahead and be prepared to be persistent. First, it is important for you to understand under what circumstances you may apply for work authorization on your student visa. In addition, unfamiliarity and discomfort with the American job search process may put an international student at a disadvantage when competing for a job. The following information is intended to help you understand and, thereby, overcome some of the obstacles associated with seeking employment in the United States.

When and How to Start?

It is crucial to start your job search process right away by learning about the types and regulations of employment (i.e., part-time jobs, summer jobs, internships, work-study programs, assistantships) both on-campus and off-campus according to the specifics of your student visa and program area of study. You should obtain the most up-to-date information about your employment eligibility (e.g., work or internship authorization) from the Office of Global Programs (http://www.global.psu.edu/international_students/) or the appropriate office on your campus. Start early to explore opportunities to gain experience, which may or may not be related to your area of study, by actively networking (see page 14) with your academic advisors, faculty, peers, alumni, college internship offices, on-campus work-study program coordinators, student clubs and activities, and various employers visiting the campus career fairs and providing information sessions. It is also very important to maintain and improve your existing network in your native country and/or other countries to explore multiple options and plans for your career in the global job market.

In general, not being a U.S. citizen or permanent resident adds a level of difficulty to a job search, but there are employers who are willing to hire foreign nationals. It will depend on the industry and the employer. In general as a foreign national you cannot work for the U.S. federal government, for most other U.S. state and local government entities, or for private employers who receive government contracts. Avoid companies dependent upon contracts from the U.S. Department of Defense. Your visa status will be less of an absolute barrier with other types of employers. You should start searching and learning about potential industries or employers of interest by using the resources available through Career Services and the Career Information Center (see page 8). Although you do not need work authorization for non-paid internships and other volunteer positions, you will need to educate many employers about your employment options such as Curricular Practical Training (authorization for work experience in your area of study when you are a registered student) and Optional Practical Training (authorization of work experience in your area of study after your graduation; or after your thesis/dissertation defense for graduate students). You can obtain and bring brochures about the CPT and OPT process to career fairs and job interviews to help employers overcome the perceived burden of work authorization paperwork. To be proactive, you should also use social media networks and develop an online profile and/or portfolio to network (e.g., searching and learning from professional profiles of individuals and companies on LinkedIn) to gather further tips and strategies.

Approaching the Topic of H1-B Visas with Employers

Many employers are intimidated by the U.S. immigration process and are reluctant to sponsor H1-B visas, or simply have a policy against it. If you attended school in another country and you don’t say on your resume or in your cover letter that you are a citizen or permanent resident of the U.S., a savvy employer will probably assume that you have a student visa. On an employer's formal application, if there is a blank for visa status, you need to fill it in with the correct information. On your resume, you may either make no mention of your visa status or make the most positive statement that you can truthfully make. For example, “Visa allows 12 months U.S. work permission” or “Permanent residency to be awarded within the next four months.” If you are already a permanent resident, be sure that your resume says “U.S. permanent resident” in a spot where it cannot be overlooked, because it will mean that your employer will not need to worry about work permission. Needless to say, you should only say things that are true, and you should be prepared to document them.
When You Should Bring Up the Issue

Do not begin an employment interview with an inquiry regarding H1-B sponsorship. In general, you may want to raise the issue sometime near the end of a positive first interview, or, perhaps, at the time of being invited in for a second interview. You should definitely talk to a potential employer about your status before you are offered a job. Some employers aren’t necessarily aware of work permission issues, and if someone offers you a job and only then learns that they’ll have to apply for an H-1 visa in order to keep you, the person may be angry that you didn’t provide this information up front.

What Can You Do to Maximize Your Chances?

Begin your job search early, and be prepared to devote extensive time to it. Learn everything you can about the process through which an employer can obtain an H-1 visa for you. In some cases, you’ll need to be the one to explain it to an employer. Don’t vaguely tell an employer that it’s “no problem.” Rather, be prepared to explain exactly what steps are involved. Refer to The Department of Labor’s site at www.foreignlaborcert.doleta.gov for instructions for both candidates and employers. There also may be some advantage to having the paperwork handled by a lawyer who is thoroughly familiar with the process. If you’d be willing to pay any associated fees, let the employer know that. You can also tell an employer that they can consult with the staff at the Office of Global Programs for more information about the process. As an independent third party, Office of Global Programs may have more credibility than you will in explaining the process.

To seek out companies that have a history of H1-B sponsorship consider the following sources.

1. GoingGlobal provides a database of US H1B Plus visa-sponsoring employers; in-depth information for the international job search; as well as employment information for major U.S. cities and states. Penn State Career Services has a subscription to this service which can be accessed through the Career Information Center online at http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/career/cic

2. ForeignMBA.com is reportedly the #1 Internet community for M.B.A. students from around the world. The site includes a list of more than 70 employers that have a history of hiring foreign M.B.A.s.

3. H1VisaJobs.com is a website housing 10 databases listing companies that have sponsored H1-B visas within the past several years as reported by the federal government. There is an access fee for each database for a six-month period. Penn State Career Services does NOT have a subscription to this service.

Other Links for International Students

The following links give more information on living and working in the U.S., as well as job announcements.

www.phds.org – Covers all levels of students: bachelors, Masters, PhDs, and Post-Docs

www.istudentcity.com

www.h1base.com

Career Services counselors are familiar with the special situations you face and can help you at all stages of your job search. We also strongly recommend that you work with the Office of Global Programs (410 Boucke Building, University Park) or the appropriate office on your campus to learn more about work permission and immigration regulations. The Office of Global Programs can acquaint you with current requirements and help you avoid being offered a job but having no legal basis upon which to accept it. Besides such information and guidance, you should remember the importance of being persistent, especially with networking, and follow up contacts in a professional manner.

The Office of Global Programs has Employment Information and Resources available online at www.global.psu.edu/international_students/employment.cfm