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Wired Berlin may import tech experts

Schröder's Feb. 23 proposal to bring in foreign computer workers raises hackles.

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A dearth of qualified computer specialists is prompt-ing Germany to confront a pillar of its national identity: that it is not "a country of immigrants."

In a case of global business interests challenging parochialism, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder touched off a furor this past week when he said that a temporary, American-style "green card" for foreigners could help fill Germany's desperate need.

The booming high-tech industry says it risks falling behind if it relies only on homegrown German professionals. The US, it notes, is tapping the talents of thousands of Indian software engineers to bolster its Silicon Valley workforce.

But with Germany's 11-percent unemployment rate, the proposal to fill tens of thousands of high-tech jobs with foreigners immediately drew heated reaction.

The Labor Ministry and unions distanced themselves from the idea, even as captains of industry and the Ministry for Education and Research welcomed it. And conservative politicians raised the worn specter of impoverished masses streaming across the border in search of social assistance.

The debate has highlighted Germany's hesitation to accept the new realities of a global economy. But more than that, it has shed a harsh light on the country's lack of a coherent immigration policy. Officially, Germany has long denied that it is a destination for immigrants. Yet today 9 percent of the population is foreign, and the number of migrants coming to Germany is among the highest in the industrial world.

Citizenship is traditionally based on German ancestry, and only this year have naturalization requirements been substantially eased.

"Germans are well-known for believing that foreigners are only able to run specialty restaurants and collect garbage," says Klaus Bade of the Institute for Migration Research at the University of Osnabrück. "It's been forgotten that if you are not capable of having the best people in industries that develop very quickly, either the industry will go bust or the best companies will go abroad."

That is exactly the fear of Education Minister Edelgard Bulmahn. Her ministry estimates that the high-tech industry will soon require 60,000 specialists annually to remain competitive. Yet only 10,000 computer-science students graduate each year. Up to a quarter million new jobs could open up in the German information-technology industry in the coming years.

Many German software companies are bending over backward to use of the unwieldy Anwerbestoppausnahmereordnung, the loophole that allows citizens from outside the European Union to work in Germany. While large companies can afford to hire the lawyers and agencies to bring in foreign specialists, other firms are finding it easier to relocate abroad.

"Germany is basically losing its whole pool of international people because it doesn't really try to attract them," says Vijay Sondhi, co-chairman of the Munich software firm Ixos. Born in Kenya of Indian parents, raised in Canada, and educated in the US, Mr. Sondhi is a rare global citizen in a German boardroom.

While unions claim that the computer industry is trying to drive down wages by bringing in foreign specialists, Sondhi says that actually the contrary is the case. "Wage dumping will happen only if foreigners are not let in," he says. "Companies will then set up ... outside the country - which we don't like to do because it's not effective. I'd rather have my workers in Germany and pay them full German salaries."

The Labor Ministry is insisting that unemployed German specialists get priority in filling empty jobs. Yet often their qualifications don't match the needs of the industry. "If you need a pianist, you can't just hire a piano tuner," says Economy Minister Werner Müller at the annual CeBIT fair, in Hannover, one of Europe's largest high-tech trade shows. "But when you employ a new pianist, you'll also need additional piano tuners."

A pitfall of the Schröder proposal is the assumption that foreign computer specialists will serve only as temporary *Gastarbeiter*, or guest workers.

German politicians thought the same thing in the 1960s, when hundreds of thousands of southern Europeans were "temporarily" employed during Germany's economic miracle. Their children and grandchildren have been born here - yet often are not German citizens.

"Germans shouldn't think that they can fish out the best people from the international labor market only to rotate them into a job for three to four years until a German appears who could take over," says Mr. Bade.

While Bade welcomes the initiative to accept foreign computer specialists, he says that the step is no substitute for an overall immigration policy. "You can't take isolated measures and forget that they must be built into a larger context," he says. "Many people haven't yet grasped that globalization also means international competition within national borders."

Four ministries are now hammering out the details of a high-tech green card and will present the results to the chancellor in the middle of March.

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