



# NERVOUS TECH

Chicago technology entrepreneurs worry about effects of Trump immigration stance

BY SANDRA GUY  
For the Sun-Times

Chicago technology entrepreneurs who depend on highly skilled engineers, strategists and software developers from overseas say they're troubled about President Donald Trump's tough stance on immigration.

"America is sending a signal that it does not welcome all immigrants, and, for a country that historically has been a beacon of tolerance, it's a slap in the face," says Samir Mayekar, co-founder and chief executive officer of SiNode Systems, a Bronzeville manufacturer of chemicals to make batteries run longer and charge faster.

He points to a brilliant Iranian Ph.D. student — one of eight Northwestern students who created SiNode Systems as part of a classroom assignment — who played a key role in getting the company started.

Mayekar says Trump's executive order banning immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries — and Trump's adverse reaction to a court ruling overturning it — is "completely prejudicial and takes no account that people who have a green card have already been vetted and want to work hard, build businesses and build a life here."

Though SiNode Systems' 15 employees hail from countries

other than those under the ban, Mayekar says he is always on the lookout for talent from throughout the world. Half of the company's employees are immigrants or first-generation Americans.

Jacob Babcock, founder and CEO of wireless-charging electronics maker NuCurrent in the West Loop, says nine of his firm's 15 engineers are foreign-born. Four of the nine have Ph.Ds essential to the company's success, Babcock says, and have visas to work here.

Though none of the foreign-born engineers is from the seven countries affected by the travel ban, Babcock says he worries that if he sent them to a conference overseas, they might be blocked from returning to Chicago amid the chaos.

"Personally, I feel it is immoral," Babcock, who has a law degree from Northwestern University, says of the travel ban. "I practiced law for five years. I think it's unconstitutional and an illogical way to

make our borders safer.

"From a business perspective, it creates a lot of uncertainty and concern and takes the focus off of building our company."

Javad Khazaeli, the Iran-born co-founder of the Chicago-based immigration-streamlining technology platform Road to Status [www.roadtostatus.com](http://www.roadtostatus.com), says calls for help have doubled since Trump took office.

Khazaeli, an immigration attorney in St. Louis, spent nine years working for the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to find and deport criminals who posed a safety risk, as well as prosecuting terrorists, their financial backers and others. He says the order's broad approach will further squeeze the United States' already-beleaguered enforcement resources.

"We do much better with targeted approaches rather than casting large nets," Khazaeli says.

His company — which uses technology to help people find



Samir Mayekar



Javad Khazaeli



Sindhu Rajan



JAMES FOSTER / FOR THE SUN-TIMES

**"I THINK IT'S UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND AN ILLOGICAL WAY TO MAKE OUR BORDERS SAFER. FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE, IT CREATES A LOT OF UNCERTAINTY AND CONCERN."**

JACOB BABCOCK (above), founder and CEO of NuCurrent, on President Trump's executive order on immigration

the correct immigration forms and fill them out once instead of multiple times — is advising foreign-born people who are permanent U.S. residents to apply for U.S. citizenship immediately.

"We don't know if the rules will change, so they need to act quickly before any rules change again," says Khazaeli, whose widowed aunt in Tehran had her visa revoked under the ban.

Khazaeli and others say they also worry about possible efforts to thwart or end the H-1B visa program — which tech companies rely heavily on to hire scientists, technicians, engineers and others who are in short supply among American-

## USA TODAY COVERAGE

Trump administration files appeal to restore immigration ban. **Page 32**

## SUN-TIMES EDITORIAL

Trump's view of Chicago filtered through tainted lens. **Page 28**

born citizens. Trump and some Republican congressmen have criticized the H-1B program, calling for American workers get priority for such jobs.

Sindhu Rajan, CEO of HabitNu, a startup inside the MATTER health-care incubator at the Merchandise Mart, says restrictions on H-1B visas would make it hard for small firms like hers to hire skilled

talent because they can't afford the wages that the likes of Google and Microsoft pay.

Rajan, a native of India who spent nine years getting her green card and permanent U.S. resident status, applied for U.S. citizenship the day Trump got elected, fearing she otherwise might not be able to remain here with her husband, a computer science professor at the University of Chicago, and their daughter.

"This is the only country where I have worked and paid taxes," she says. "To suddenly say I am not welcome and not allowed to travel here is not legal, won't prevent terrorism and is not what I thought America was."