

“When in the Hiring Process do I Reveal that I’m an International Student?”

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One of the most frequent and difficult questions that I am asked in my position as the Director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at Boston College is “When and how should I tell a prospective employer that I am an international student?” There is certainly no easy or correct answer to this question. For example, I once heard a representative from the Human Resources Department of a multinational company state that she actually likes to see this information listed on the person’s resume so that she knows right from the start. I have to admit that I found this response quite surprising as it is not what I usually recommend to students! However, it just demonstrates that there are many approaches to how to handle this situation.

I’d like to take a few moments to share some of the advice that I tell my students on this subject. Let’s start with the “when”. I personally feel that it is not necessary to list your nationality on your resume. An astute employer may in fact deduce that you are a foreign national based on where you received your education or the location of past work experiences, but you do not necessarily want to draw attention to this fact at this early stage of the process. Your goal, of course, is to get past the initial screening and be invited for an interview. Some employers have a policy of not hiring foreign nationals and strictly adhere to it, but many start with that attitude but may be convinced otherwise when given the chance. You need to give them that chance.

On the other hand, you also do not want to wait until your third or fourth interview to bring it up. I personally know of a student who lost a job offer because he waited too long. American employers value honesty and directness, and if they feel you have been hiding something from them, they won’t trust you. They also might then come to think that your immigration status is a bigger “problem” than it actually is, and therefore not want to bother. I usually recommend that students address the issue in either their first or their second interview, once they have had the opportunity to “sell themselves” and feel that the employer is potentially interested in hiring them.

As for the “how” to bring it up, this is absolutely critical to your success in securing a position. As I mentioned earlier, there are employers who absolutely won’t hire foreign nationals, there are employers who do it routinely, but the majority fall somewhere in the middle. They simply do not know what is involved in the process and it is your responsibility to “educate” them. It is therefore crucial that you have complete and accurate knowledge of your options and can communicate them to an employer in a clear and confident manner. If you simply say “I don’t really know what has to be done”, most employers are not going to take the time to find out.

Most international students on F-1 student visas are eligible for at least 12 months of “practical training” upon completion of their studies, without any job offer or letter from an employer. Therefore, you can start by explaining to your potential employer that you have a one year employment authorization which requires absolutely no work on their part.

As for discussing the H-1, I do not want to turn this into an immigration lecture, but what I can tell you is that there are many myths and misunderstandings out there on the part of employers about the H-1 visa. They often confuse it with the process of applying for permanent residency and getting a “green card”. Once again, it is your responsibility to dispel those myths. I tell students to avoid using the word “sponsor” when talking about an H-1 because this term is often associated with green cards. Instead, use the phrase, “petition” for an H-1. You should also explain that employers are NOT required to show that there are no U.S. citizens available who can do the job, but simply that you meet their minimum qualifications. This small fact will often open the door to further discussion.

If the employer does not have someone on staff who is familiar with the H-1 process, it is generally advisable to hire an immigration attorney, not because it is required, but because s/he processes these applications routinely and knows exactly what the Immigration Service is looking for. A minor mistake can cause delays of weeks or even months in the process during which you will be losing salary. The legal fee associated with applying for an H-1 visa usually runs (in the Boston area) from \$1,800 to \$2,500. You can often negotiate with your employer who will pay the lawyer's fee (filing fees must be paid by the employer). If necessary, offer to pay it yourself. It is an investment in your future, and you will make up the money in no time.

Lastly, don't forget that you should not try to hide the fact that you are an international student, but rather you should be proud of it. It is an asset, not a burden! International students bring with them many skills and experiences that set them apart from American students. They often know more than one language, have been exposed to other cultures and systems, are mature, flexible, adaptable, and deal well with change and ambiguity, just by virtue of having come to the U.S. to study. These are all qualities that are sought after by employers. Highlight your special and unique background! It will make you stand out from the crowd.

Please remember that all of this is simply one person's advice from having worked with international students for the past 25 years. Ask another advisor, and you will probably get other opinions! If you haven't already, I strongly recommend that you visit your own international student office and learn as much as you can about practical training and H-1s. Good luck!