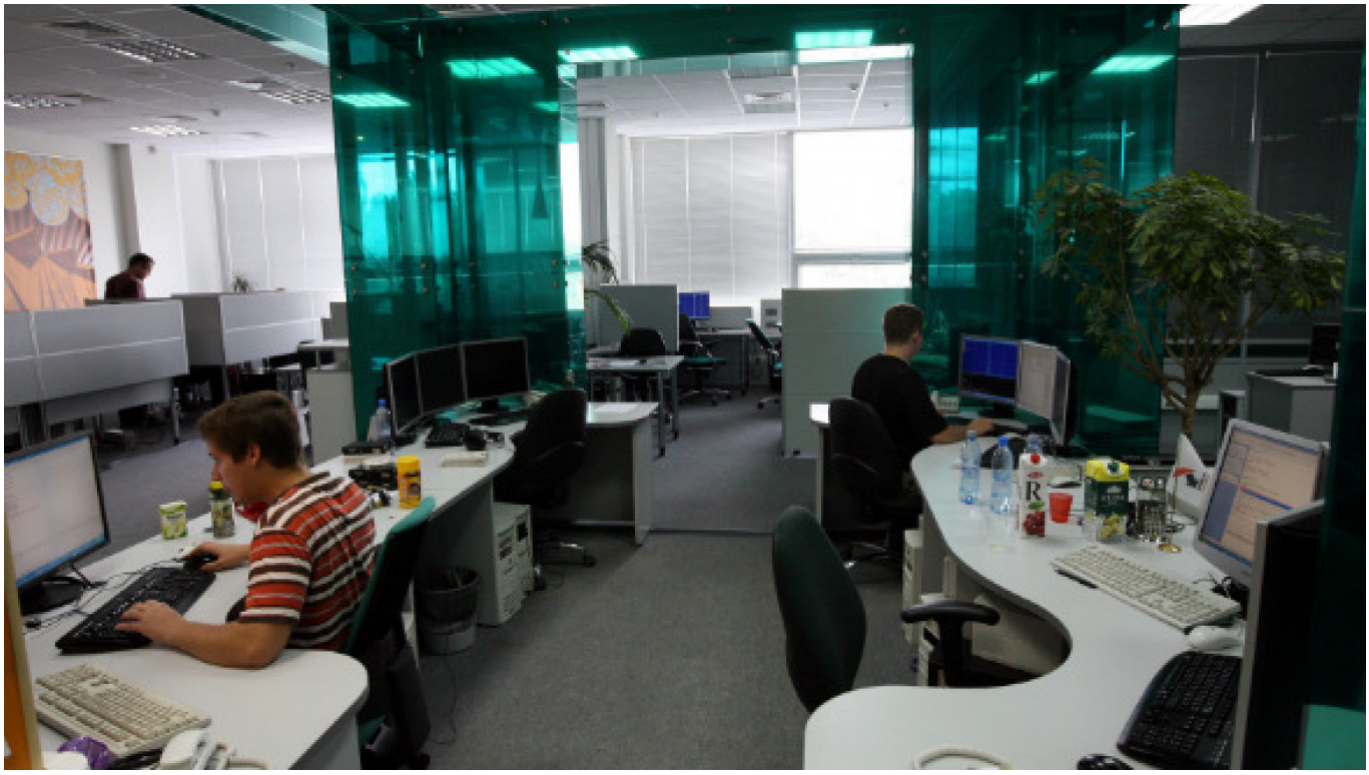
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New Bill to Ease Rules for Foreign IT Pros

By Anatoly Medetsky

July 29, 2013



Programmers at Kaspersky Lab.

The government is mulling legislation that would open the door wider for foreign IT specialists that seek a job in the country.

A brainchild of the Communications and Press Ministry, the bill would allow IT companies to skip some of the burdensome foreign labor rules.

Currently, Russian law gives some leeway to all companies that offer their potential hires dubbed as "high-skilled foreign employees" at least 2 million rubles ($64,000) in annual compensation.

If the ministry-sponsored bill becomes law, it will amend the legislation to reduce the threshold by half for IT companies.

"The ministry wants to make it easier for high-skilled foreign employees to land a job

in Russia's IT industry," a ministry spokesman said Monday. "That requires a change in the protective barrier."

The ministry believes the labor market for mid-level IT specialists is too tight, which hampers the development of high-tech businesses.

Now reviewed by the Federal Migration Service, the measure could hopefully attract software developers, system architects and other computer specialists both from the former Soviet countries, who speak Russian, and, to a lesser degree, some of the workforce that is floundering in the sluggish Western economies.

The bill could become law and take effect as of Jan. 1 next year. It would drop the requirement for IT companies to seek government permits to employ foreign staff if the employers are happy to pay higher salaries.

Anastasia Savina, human resources director at software developer ABBYY, said Western markets were not exactly brimming with available IT staff.

"The IT market has an acute shortage of high-skilled employees," she said. "They are really sought after both here and in the West."

Russia's cumbersome foreign labor regulations have not helped in the cause of recruiting staff from Europe and the U.S., she said. The ministry's proposal would take some of the torture out of foreign headhunting — but not too much, she added.

"The amendment does simplify the work a bit, but the general amount of the procedures remains prohibitive," Savina said. Companies also have to arrange for work permits and visas for foreign staff.

Russia and the EU could start talks next year to introduce mutually visa-free travel, a Foreign Ministry official said Monday, raising the specter of a further relief for corporate human resources departments.

Russian Ambassador-at-Large Anvar Azimov warned, however, that some European countries might stumble because of their prejudices about Russia.

"Most member countries of the European Union favor a speedier advance toward a visa-free regime," he said, Interfax reported. "However, there's a number of states that, unfortunately, preserve certain political bias regarding Russia. There's a need to rid of these anti-Russian sentiments if we indeed want our partnership to be strategic."

At ABBYY, a significant number of employees receive remuneration of more than the Communications and Press Ministry's proposed new level of $32,000, Savina said.

Violetta Abramova, deputy human resources director at Kaspersky Lab, said the computer security company preferred homegrown specialists at senior positions — both in Russia and abroad. It adopted the policy after going through the experience of hiring foreign IT executives, who "were supposed to know better about business development," she said in an e-mailed comment.

Yandex said it was constantly hungry for "strong" employees, annually hiring at least 500 new staff.

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Original url:
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