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News

- Home
- Arts & Entertainment
- Commentary
- Community
- Entrepreneurs
- Horoscopes
- Job Bank
- Marketplace
- Money
- News
- Sports

Give Me Your Tech-Savvy and Computer Literate: Immigration Goes Online

BY RICARDO VAZQUEZ

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Jairo Garcia has nothing but praise for the World Wide Web. Then again, the 34-year-old Colombian found his wife, legalized his immigration status, and is getting a Master's degree in engineering -- all by letting his fingers do the on-line walking.

He is just one of thousands of tech-savvy Latinos who are getting on-line before waiting in line at the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) office.

"I was just browsing the web and I found this site called Visalaw. I was totally shocked and surprised to find so much useful information, especially because I had so many questions," said Garcia.

That was back in 1995, when Garcia was working in New York for a company that did business in South America, and was looking to extend his work visa. Through Visalaw, Garcia said he found out exactly what he needed. "Not only that. I was able to download, fill out, print and send the INS forms, and they answered any questions I had via e-mail. There was a lot of information and it was free."

The information is at no cost, of course, unless clients hires a lawyer to represent them.

In fact, these days one may find just about anything on-line ranging from who qualifies for the U.S. visa lottery to the latest changes in immigration policy. It

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...to the latest changes in immigration policy. It seems that the complicated and often confusing coterie of statutes that make up immigration law have given rise to an increasing number of websites dedicated to helping immigrants cope with their migratory migraines.

Such websites include:

- Siskind, Susser, Haas & Devine
<http://www.visalaw.com/>
- Attorney Carl Shusterman
<http://www.shusterman.com/>
- American Immigration Center <http://www.us-immigration.com/>
- U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service
<http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/>

And it isn't the poor and tired, but rather the computer literate who are flocking to these portals with the hope of improving their chances at getting a green card. Still, the percentage of Latinos using these services is small compared to Asians or Europeans, said Gregory Siskind, an attorney and founding partner of the Memphis immigration law firm that launched Visalaw.com.

"I do consultations with a lot of Latinos that find us through the website. But like their Russian or Chinese counterparts, they tend to have college degrees and are already working. Some are teaching at universities, or are involved in the new communications technology field," Siskind said.

He added that the number of Latinos coming to his site has increased lately, and that the Internet population is starting to resemble the ethnic and racial diversity of the general population.

[Next page](#)/MORE OPTIONS FOR IMMIGRANTS

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- Community
- Entrepreneurs
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[Continued from page 1](#)

In addition to commercial sites, INS spokesperson Sharon Rummery said her department's own webpage can help applicants find useful information. The site has been recently revamped, and according to INS Commissioner Doris Meissner, it represents "a quantum leap in our ability to provide critical immigration information that our customers need in a user-friendly, timely manner."

Call him a nitpicker, but attorney Carl Shusterman said although the INS has clearly improved its site, it still lags behind in certain critical areas. "They still have 54 forms that one can download. I have more than 100.

Another problem is they don't post the waiting times for the cases that are being processed," said Shusterman, who added that his newsletter alone has more than 27,000 subscribers, among them news reporters and representatives from congressional offices.

In the end, only a small percentage of the people who come to the site actually need to hire a firm to represent them in their immigration cases, explained Visalaw's Siskind. "There are a lot of immigration procedures for which one doesn't need a lawyer," he stressed. But "clients want to be well informed and our goal is to provide as much information as possible."

This made the difference for Garcia. "I got such good information from Visalaw that...when I actually needed an immigration lawyer, I went back to them."

Not all sites that provide information on immigration issues are law firms. As immigrants, Ellie Azulay and her husband Walter Marin created U.S.-Immigration "hoping to help others who are going through the same experiences."

Azulay describes the site as a "virtual immigration bookstore." She concurred that the number of Latinos on-line has been increasing steadily. And as far as her website, the overwhelming majority of Latino visitors are "interested in buying courses that prepare them for the citizenship exam," she said.

Examples like these show how technology is revolutionizing the immigration process. For the tech-savvy, getting to the United States may just be a few clicks away.

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