



H-1B Work Visa Trends

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Key Findings

The H-1B program is entering a new phase.

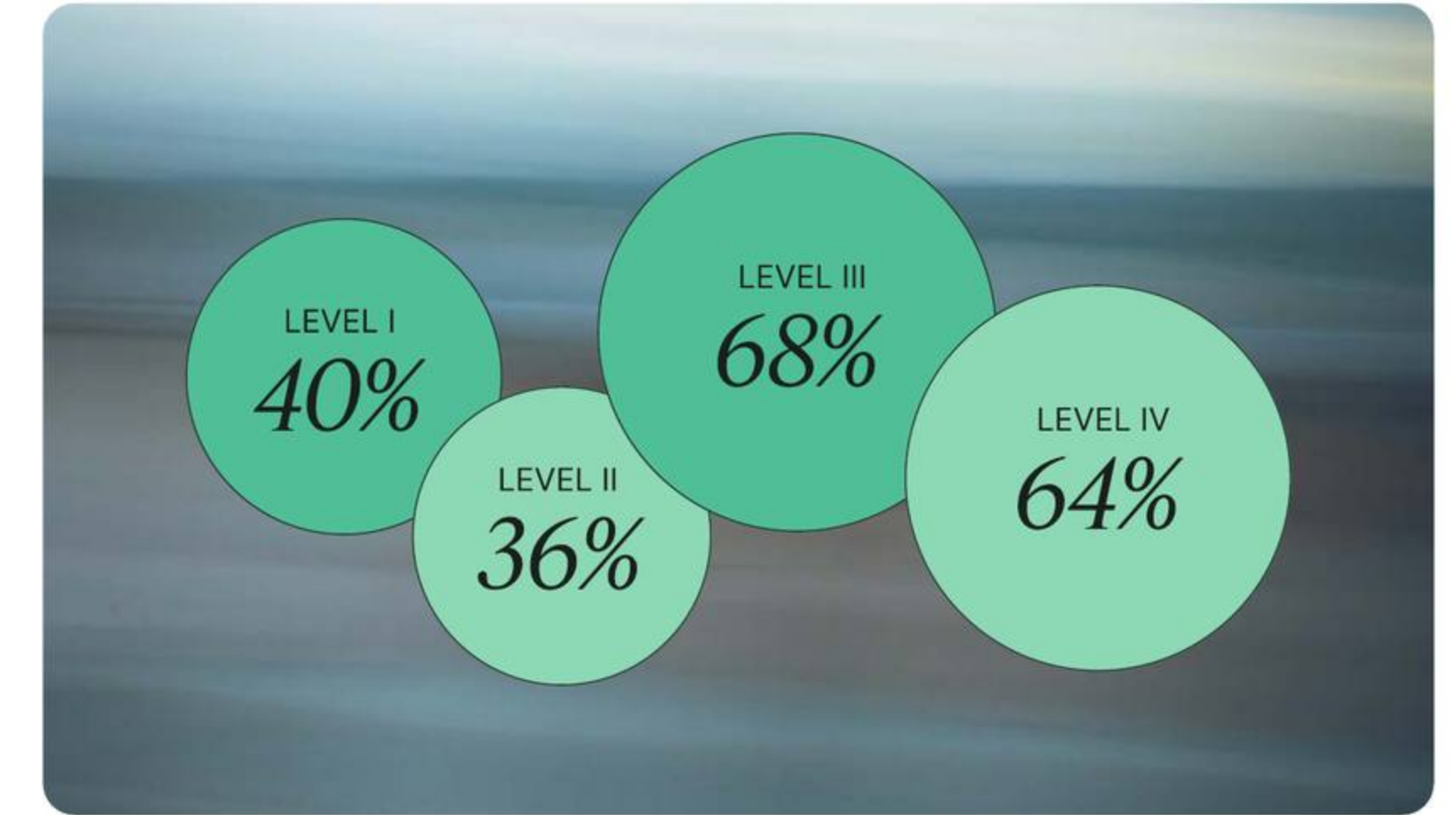
Two major policy changes took effect in late 2025 and early 2026: a \$100,000 application fee set by presidential proclamation in September 2025, and the replacement of the longstanding random lottery with a wage-weighted lottery system, effective February 2026. These changes are reshaping how employers access global talent.

Understanding H-1B cap season timing

The U.S. fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30. We are currently in FY2026 (October 2025 to September 2026). H-1B cap seasons are named for the fiscal year in which employment begins, not when registrations are submitted. For example, the March 2026 cap season is for jobs starting October 1, 2026, and is therefore called the FY2027 cap season. In this report, “2026 cap season” and “FY2027 cap season” refer to the same set of registrations.

This report combines two distinct data sources to provide a clearer view of what's happening now, and what may come next:

- 1 **USCIS data** shows how the program has evolved at a national level, including petition volumes, approvals, and workforce demographics, but largely represents a period before the recent policy changes took effect and **does not capture outcomes under the new system.**
- 2 **Boundless client data** provides the **first view of selection outcomes under the new wage-weighted system**, based on registrations from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026), the first cap season to operate under the new rules.



The central finding: Based on Boundless client data from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026), the first under the new wage-weighted lottery system, higher-wage H-1B candidates were selected at nearly twice the rate of entry-level applicants. Level III candidates were selected at 68% and Level IV at 64%, compared to 40% for Level I. This gap is consistent with how the wage-weighted system was designed to operate.

DHS projected Level IV selection rates of approximately 61% and Level I rates as low as 15% under the new system. Boundless client data shows outcomes directionally consistent with these projections, though all wage levels are running above projected rates in the first cap season — suggesting employer registration behavior and pool composition continue to adjust to the new framework.

456,725

**H-1B petitions filed in FY2025,
up 7% from FY2024**

USCIS, FEB 2026

328,185

**H-1B petitions approved in FY2025, a five-year
low, down 17.8%. Covers petitions adjudicated
within the fiscal year; late-filed petitions may
carry into FY2026 data.**

USCIS, FEB 2026

71%

**Of FY2024 approvals went to
workers born in India**

FY2024, MOST RECENT CONFIRMED

\$120K

**Median annual salary for all
approved H-1B workers**

FY2024, MOST RECENT CONFIRMED

64%

**Of FY2024 H-1B approvals were in
computer-related occupations**

FY2024, MOST RECENT CONFIRMED

\$100K

**New per-petition fee for new H-1B
petitions for workers entering from abroad,
Presidential Proclamation, September 2025**

APPLIES TO NEW EXTERNAL HIRES ONLY

Data sources and dates: Filing and approval figures are based on FY2025 data (October 2024 to September 2025) from the USCIS H-1B Petitions Annual Report to Congress, published February 11, 2026. Demographic figures, including salary, gender, age, and country of birth, are drawn from the USCIS Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers report for FY2024, the most recent edition publicly available. Lottery selection figures reflect Boundless client registrations for the 2026 cap season (FY2027 cap, the first season to use wage-weighted selection).

What the Data Shows

The following findings draw on both U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) national data and proprietary Boundless client data. Sources are noted for each finding.

Wage level is the strongest driver of selection.

Boundless data from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations) shows Level III candidates selected at 68% and Level IV at 64%, compared to 40% for Level I, a gap of 24 to 28 percentage points under the new wage-weighted rules.

The first wage-weighted cap season, based on Boundless client data, offers an early view of how the system is operating in practice.

The selection gradient across wage levels is in line with how the weighting is structured. This finding is based on one client dataset and is not a government-confirmed causal analysis.

Selection outcomes for bachelor's degree holders changed across cap seasons.

Selection rates for bachelor's degree holders rose from 28% in the FY2026 cap season (March 2025) to 38% in the FY2027 cap season (March 2026). This change reflects a higher share of registrations at upper wage levels, as well as differences in master's cap pool eligibility.

Master's cap pool eligibility provides the greatest advantage at lower wage levels.

Dual-pool access improves selection odds for Level I and II candidates. At higher wage levels, where selection rates are already elevated, the incremental benefit is smaller.

STEM OPT advantages are driven by candidate profile, not status alone.

STEM OPT holders had the highest selection rate (51.3%) in the FY2027 cap season, largely explained by higher master's degree rates and occupation mix rather than work authorization type itself.

Overall selection rates improved as duplicate registrations declined.

The Boundless selection rate rose from 43% in the FY2026 cap season to 48% in the FY2027 cap season, underscoring reduced competition in the national pool and a higher concentration of Boundless clients at upper wage levels.

Overview of the H-1B Visa

The H-1B visa is the primary pathway for U.S. employers to hire foreign nationals in specialty occupations. It covers positions across a wide range of fields, including engineering, computer science, mathematics, medicine, and finance, provided the role requires at least a bachelor's degree in a related specialty.

The program was established under the Immigration Act of 1990 and is administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Employers initiate the process by sponsoring a petition on behalf of the worker.

Critics argue the program displaces U.S. workers and suppresses wages. Research generally finds the opposite: H-1B workers tend to complement domestic workers, fill gaps in STEM occupations, and contribute to broader job creation through innovation and company formation.



Why it Matters in 2026

Two major changes are reshaping the H-1B program simultaneously, and both took effect within the past 12 months.

The \$100,000 per-petition fee.

In September 2025, Donald Trump signed a Presidential Proclamation requiring employers to pay \$100,000 per new H-1B petition for workers hired from outside the United States. New external applications dropped sharply following the proclamation. One widely reported estimate, based on a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) court filing and reported by Newsweek, put the decline at approximately 87%, though this has not yet been confirmed in official USCIS data. **The fee does not apply** to those already in the U.S. maintaining lawful status and filing extensions, amendments, or change of status applications such as F-1 students moving to H-1B.

The end of the random lottery.

In December 2025, DHS finalized a rule replacing the longstanding random H-1B cap lottery with a wage-weighted lottery system. Effective February 27, 2026, higher-wage positions receive proportionally more selection weight. The FY2027 cap season (registrations opened March 2026) was the first to operate under these rules.

Boundless client data from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations) captures selection rates under the new wage-weighted system. **The pattern is consistent with how the system was designed to work: wage level is the strongest predictor of selection.**

Historical Context & Timeline

The H-1B is the largest guest worker visa program in the United States and the most important channel for high-skilled immigration. To understand how it arrived at its current form, it's helpful to look back more than 70 years.

The foundation of the modern U.S. immigration system was laid by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which introduced H visa categories for temporary workers. Decades later, increased global competition and a shortage of STEM talent led to the Immigration Act of 1990, which formally established the H-1B program.

1952	Immigration and Nationality Act	The McCarran-Walter Act establishes the foundation of the modern U.S. immigration system and introduces H visa categories for temporary workers.	2017	Buy American, Hire American	President Trump signs Executive Order 13788, directing agencies to review the H-1B program and increase petition scrutiny. Denial rates begin rising sharply.
1990	Immigration Act of 1990	Signed by President George H.W. Bush. Formally establishes the H-1B visa program.	2020	COVID-19 Restrictions	The Trump administration suspends H-1B and L-1 visa entry and raises minimum wage requirements. Denial rates reach historic highs.
1991	H-1B Cap and Employer Obligations	Program launches with an annual cap of 65,000 visas. Employers are required to pay prevailing wages and attest they will not displace U.S. workers.	2021 to 2024	Biden Era: Liberalization and Modernization	Biden rescinds Trump-era restrictions. Denial rates fall to record lows. In January 2025, Biden finalizes an H-1B Modernization Rule updating specialty occupation definitions and site visit authority.
1998	ACWIA: Temporary Cap Increase	The American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act raises the cap to 115,000 for FY1999 and FY2000, and establishes funding for U.S. worker training programs.	2024	Beneficiary-Centric Lottery Reform	DHS issues a final rule anchoring each lottery registration to a unique beneficiary verified by passport. This ends the practice of multiple employer registrations for one individual. FY2025 registrations drop roughly 40% as multi-employer filings are removed.
2000	Cap Exemptions for Higher Education	The H-1B Visa Reform Act exempts workers employed by universities, affiliated nonprofits, and government research entities from the annual cap.	Sept. 2025	\$100,000 Fee Proclamation	President Trump signs a Presidential Proclamation requiring employers to pay a \$100,000 fee per new H-1B petition for workers entering from outside the U.S. New external applications immediately drop 87%.
2004	Cap Reduction and Master's Cap Created	Cap returns to 65,000. A separate pool of 20,000 visas is created for holders of U.S. master's degrees or higher. Anti-fraud fees of \$500 are introduced.	Dec. 2025	Random Lottery Abolished	DHS finalizes a rule replacing the random H-1B cap lottery with a wage-weighted selection system. Higher-wage positions receive up to four times the selection weight of entry-level roles. Effective February 27, 2026, for the FY2027 cap season (registrations opened March 2026).
2008	Random Lottery Introduced	Surging demand leads USCIS to introduce a random lottery to select petitions when applications exceed the annual cap.			
2016	Fee Increases	Consolidated Appropriations Act doubles H-1B fees to \$4,000 for companies with more than 50 employees where over 50% are H-1B or L-1 visa holders.			

How the Program Works

Annual Visa Limits

The H-1B program is subject to an annual cap. The cap is currently set at:

65,000 visas for the general pool

An additional **20,000** visas reserved for individuals with a U.S. master's degree or higher (the "master's cap pool")

Certain petitions are exempt from the cap, including:

Extensions for individuals already in H-1B status

Employer-to-employer transfers

Petitions filed by institutions of higher education, affiliated nonprofits, and government research organizations

The New Wage-Weighted Lottery

From 2008 through the FY2026 cap season, USCIS used a random lottery when registrations exceeded the annual cap, but that system has been replaced.

Beginning with the FY2027 cap season (March 2026), USCIS implemented a wage-weighted selection process. Each registration is assigned a weight based on the offered wage level, as defined by the Department of Labor's four-tier Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) prevailing wage system.

Wage Level	Position Type	Selection Weight
IV	Fully qualified or expert, often with leadership responsibilities	4x (highest odds)
III	Experienced, with specialized skills or knowledge; exercises judgment and may supervise others	3x
II	Qualified worker, with some relevant experience	2x
I	Entry-level position	1x (lowest odds)

Entry-level workers are not excluded from the lottery. However, they face lower selection odds than candidates at higher wage levels. The wage-weighted system may face legal challenges, though it remains in effect for the FY2027 cap season.

Applications, Approvals, & Denials

FY2025 data covers October 2024 through September 2025. The \$100,000 fee was introduced in September 2025, at the very end of this period. The full impact of the fee will be visible in FY2026 government data, which is not yet published.

Total petitions filed in FY2025 rose 7% year-over-year to 456,725, the highest volume since FY2022. This increase occurred largely before the fee took effect.

Approvals told a different story. At 328,185, FY2025 approvals reached a five-year low, down 17.8% from FY2024. Approvals dropped

45% year-over-year in Q1 FY2025 (October to December 2024), falling to 47,821 from 87,018 the prior year. This decline predates the \$100,000 fee by ten months and is likely a result of processing delays or backlog changes rather than a change in approval rates.

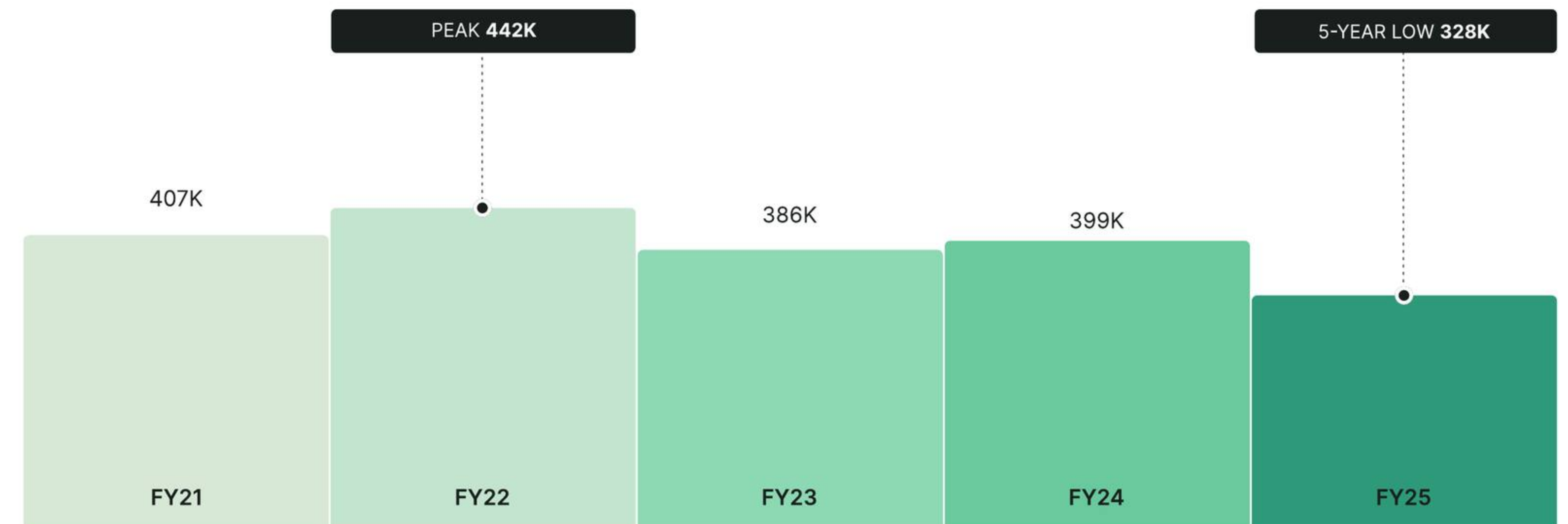
Q1 FY2026 (October to December 2025) data is not yet available in official USCIS reporting. New external applications were reported to have dropped sharply following the proclamation; one widely cited estimate put the decline at approximately 87%, though the exact figure has not been

confirmed in USCIS official data as of publication.

A separate structural change also impacted registration volumes. The 2024 beneficiary-centric integrity rule anchored each registration to a verified individual identity, ending the widespread practice of employers submitting multiple registrations for the same candidate. FY2025 eligible registrations dropped roughly 40% from the FY2024 peak of approximately 781,000.

H-1B Petitions Filed and Approved

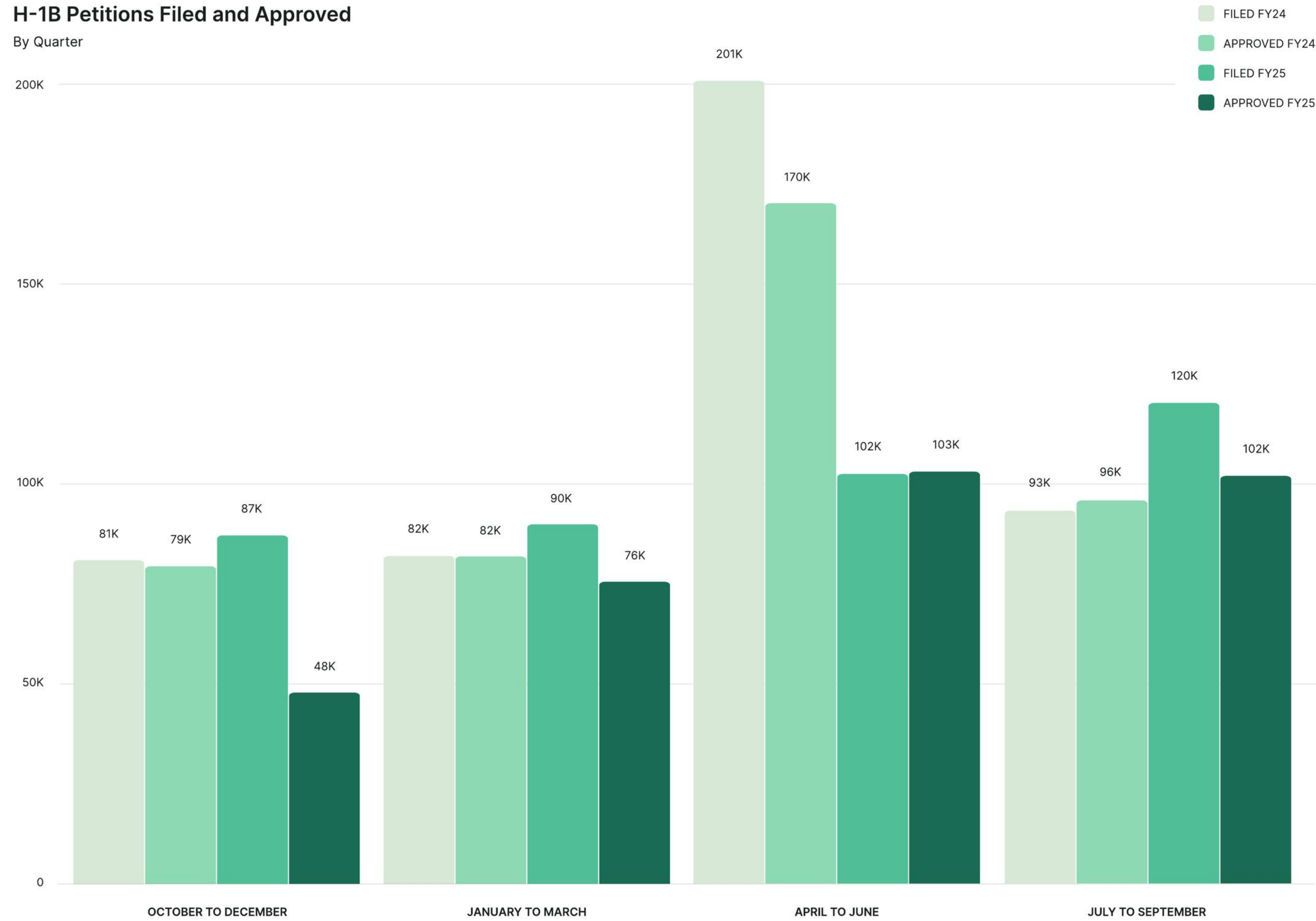
By Quarter



Source: USCIS H-1B Petitions Annual Report to Congress, February 11, 2026

H-1B Petitions Filed and Approved

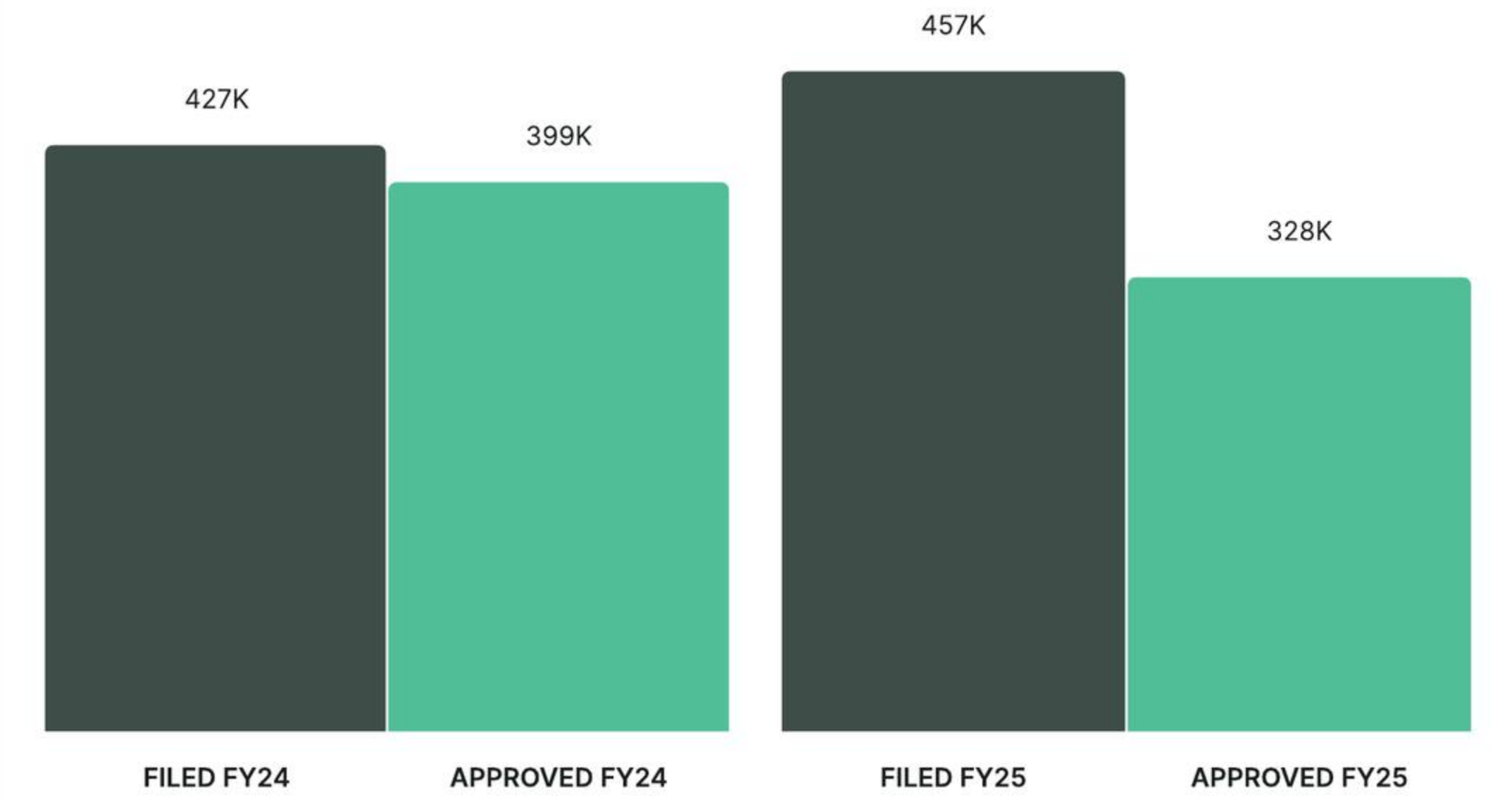
By Quarter



Source: USCIS H-1B Petitions Annual Report to Congress, February 11, 2026; Note: The Q1 FY2025 approval collapse (Oct to Dec 2024: 47,821 vs 87,018 the prior year) predates the \$100,000 fee; possible contributing factors include shifts in processing speed and how USCIS worked through its backlog. The full impact of the fee will be visible in FY2026 data.

Total H-1B Petitions Filed and Approved

FY2024 vs FY2025



Sources: USCIS H-1B Petitions Annual Report to Congress, February 11, 2026

H-1B Cap Registration History

FY2021 to FY2026

■ SELECTED PETITIONS □ TOTAL PETITIONS



Source: USCIS H-1B Registration Statistics

* Total submitted registrations exclude submissions with failed payments, invalid documentation, or other integrity issues. See USCIS H-1B Registration Statistics for eligible figures by year.

** The drop from 780,884 registrations in FY2024 to 358,737 in FY2026 is a result of the near-elimination of multi-employer registrations. It does not necessarily represent a decline in genuine employer demand.

Denial Rates

H-1B approval rates remained historically high in FY2025, at 97.1%, down slightly from 97.3% in FY2024.

Both figures represent a significant improvement from the first Trump administration, when initial-employment denial rates peaked at around 24% in FY2018, compared to just 2.7% for initial-employment petitions in FY2024.

The improvement comes after a Biden-era move toward more permissive specialty occupation standards. Formal regulatory action to reverse those standards has not been implemented as of publication.

Data source: USCIS H-1B Employer Data Hub



H-1B Demographics

Country of Birth



India remained the dominant country of birth for H-1B workers in FY2023, accounting for 72% of all approved petitions.



China was second at approximately 12%. This distribution has been stable for over a decade.

Boundless client data from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations) shows a similar pattern but with a more diverse country mix. India accounted for roughly 50% of registrations, compared to 72% nationally, while China accounted for 8%, compared to 12% nationally. The Boundless client mix is more diverse than national averages, reflecting a broader range of employer types and industries.

Age

These numbers tell a clear story: H-1B workers are predominantly early in their careers, with many transitioning from F-1 OPT status.

34

Median age of H-1B workers approved in FY2024

62%

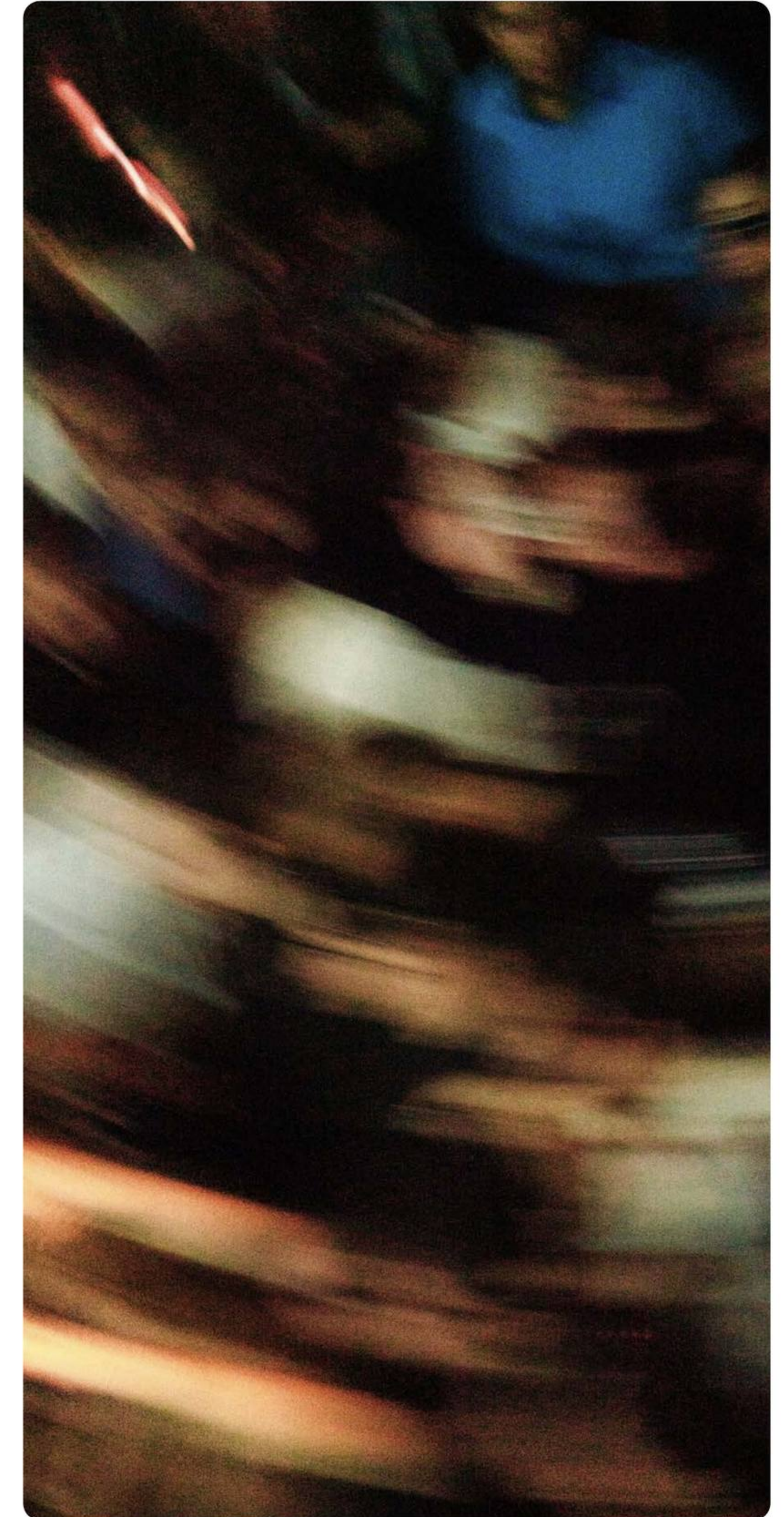
of approved workers were between the ages of 25 and 34

Gender



Approximately 30% of H-1B specialty occupation workers approved in FY2024 were women. This share has increased gradually over the past decade but remains well below parity. Women represent a larger share of H-1B workers in healthcare and life sciences than in computer-related occupations

All demographic figures in this section are drawn from the USCIS Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers report for FY2023, the most recent edition publicly available as of April 2026. Where Boundless client data offers a useful comparison, it is noted explicitly.



Top Occupations

64%

Computer-related occupations accounted for 64% of FY2024 H-1B approvals, consistent with prior years. Systems analysts, software developers, and computer programmers were the three largest individual occupation categories.

Boundless client data shows a somewhat different mix. Software Developers are the top occupation by filing volume, followed by Biological Technicians and Data Scientists. The concentration of Biological Technicians is distinctive to the Boundless client base and accounts for the above-average share of Life/Physical Science registrations in the cap data.

10%

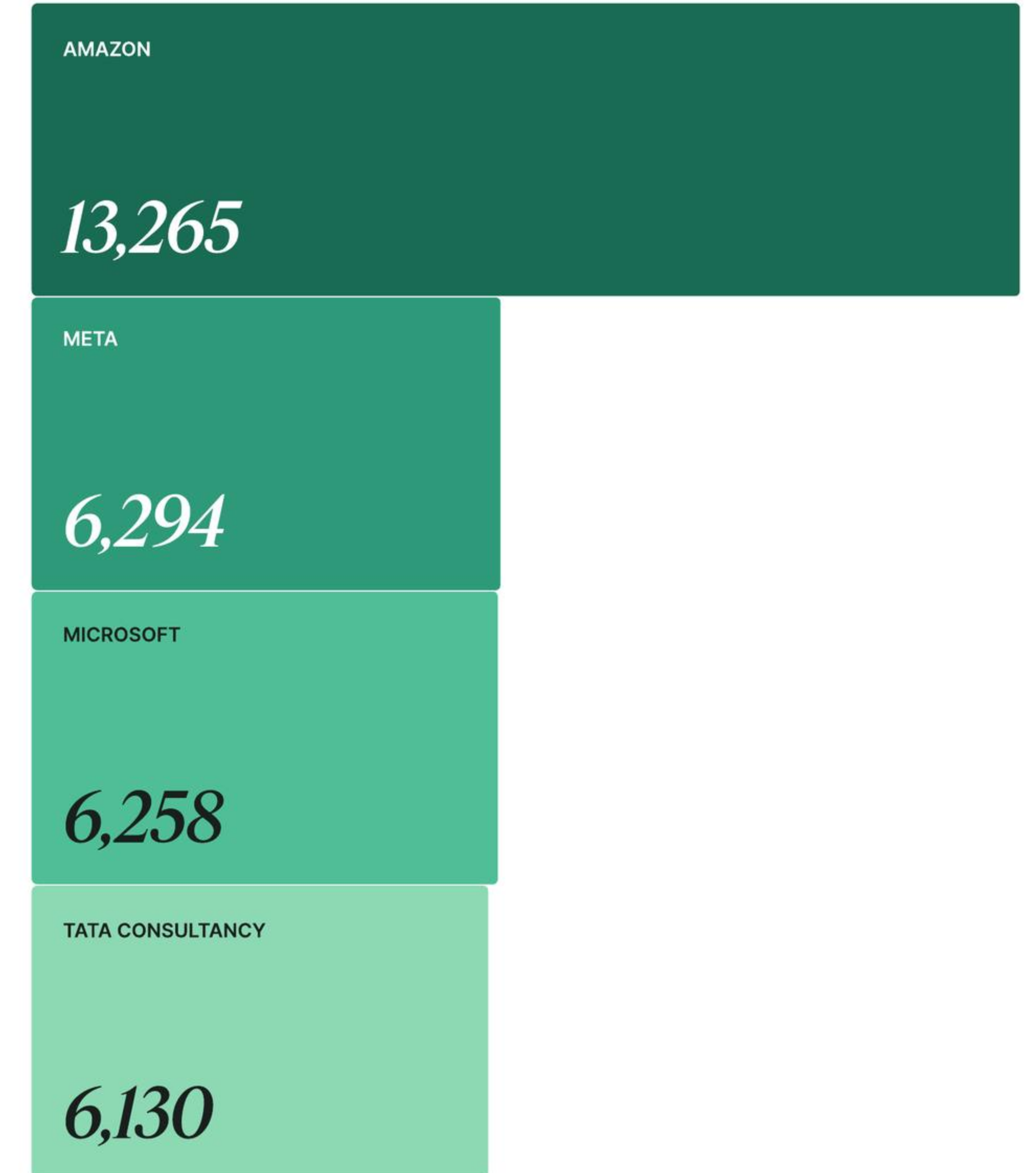
Architecture, engineering, and surveying accounted for roughly 10%.

Top Employers

In FY2025, Amazon led all employers with 13,265 beneficiaries approved, followed by Meta (6,294), Microsoft (6,258), and Tata Consultancy (6,130). The top four reflected the ongoing split between U.S. technology giants and Indian IT outsourcing firms that has defined H-1B employer rankings for years.

Ranking of Top Employers

BENEFICIARIES APPROVED, FY2025



Source: USCIS data, FY2025. Figures show initial employment approvals as well as extensions, transfers, or amendments. See USCIS Employer Data Hub for complete rankings: uscis.gov/h-1b-employer-data-hub

H-1B Salary Overview

\$120K

The median annual salary for all approved H-1B workers in FY2024 was \$120,000, according to the USCIS Characteristics report.

Department of Labor (DOL) Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC) Labor Condition Application (LCA) disclosure data for FY2026 Q1 provides a more recent salary proxy. The median offered wage across all H-1B LCA filings was approximately \$132,330 for IT and Math roles. LCA figures tend to be slightly higher than USCIS Characteristics figures because they reflect offered wages at filing, which skew toward higher-paying positions.

Salary by Occupation Group: Boundless Clients vs DOL National Averages

Boundless clients in IT and Math earn above the DOL national median. Management, Business and Finance, Architecture and Engineering, Life/Physical Science, and Healthcare fall below, with the largest gaps in Management and Architecture and Engineering. The Architecture and Engineering gap likely reflects a concentration of earlier-career positions in the Boundless client base.

Occupation Group	Boundless Median	DOL LCA Median (FY2026 Q1)
Management	\$175K	\$186K
IT and Math	\$145K	\$132K
Business and Finance	\$110K	\$123K
Architecture and Engineering	\$89K	\$123K
Healthcare	\$95K	\$97K
Life, Physical, and Social Science	\$75K	\$77K

Boundless clients in IT and Math earn above the DOL national median. Management, Business and Finance, Architecture and Engineering, Life/Physical Science, and Healthcare fall below, with the largest gaps in Management and Architecture and Engineering. The Architecture and Engineering gap likely reflects a concentration of earlier-career positions in the Boundless client base.

Salary is more closely tied to selection outcomes under the new system. Boundless client data from the FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations) shows a clear salary gap between selected and not-selected candidates. Across all occupations, selected applicants earned a median salary of \$88,000, compared to \$81,000 for those not selected. The gap was largest in Business and Finance (\$137,000 vs \$99,000).

Job Market & Economic Factors

H-1B workers are concentrated in industries with persistent labor shortages, particularly technology, healthcare, and engineering. Research consistently finds that H-1B workers complement rather than displace domestic workers. They fill roles that would otherwise go unfilled and generate downstream employment through innovation and company formation.

Approximately 55% of U.S.-based billion-dollar startup companies were founded by immigrants, many of whom first came to America as international students on F-1 visas. The program has been a significant channel for entrepreneurial talent, not just direct employment.

Source: National Foundation for American Policy, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs and U.S. Billion-Dollar Companies," 2022.

The \$100,000 fee has introduced significant cost pressure for employers hiring workers from outside the United States, particularly in industries such as IT consulting that rely heavily on external recruitment. For affected employers, total costs per new H-1B hire can exceed \$110,000 to \$130,000 when attorney fees are included. Employers hiring from within the U.S., including F-1 students changing status, are generally not affected.

The \$100,000 fee has accelerated an already-visible trend: the program is now dominated by large technology companies with the financial capacity to absorb the additional cost. In FY2026, Amazon led initial H-1B approvals, followed by Tata Consultancy Services, Microsoft, and Infosys — a mix of U.S. technology giants and Indian IT outsourcing firms that has defined the top employer rankings for years. Smaller employers and startups face a much higher barrier to external international hiring.

2026 H-1B Lottery *Insights*



USCIS national data captures what happened across the program through FY2025, a period that largely predates the two major policy changes. It does not capture how individual candidates fared under the new rules, or why. That is where Boundless client data goes some way to filling the gap.

The Boundless dataset covers the FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations), which opened in March 2026 and was the first cap season to operate under the new wage-weighted selection system. This is the first real-world evidence of how the new system is working in practice.

This section analyzes Boundless client registrations with confirmed lottery outcomes, meaning we know whether each candidate was selected. It examines selection rates by wage level, education, work authorization, occupation, and country of birth.

The central finding: Higher-wage candidates were selected at higher rates than entry-level applicants, in a pattern consistent with the new selection weights. The full explanation, and what it means for employers, is in this section.

Two features of the Boundless client mix differ from national averages and are noted where relevant:

A higher-than-average share of Biological Technicians and Life/Physical Science workers

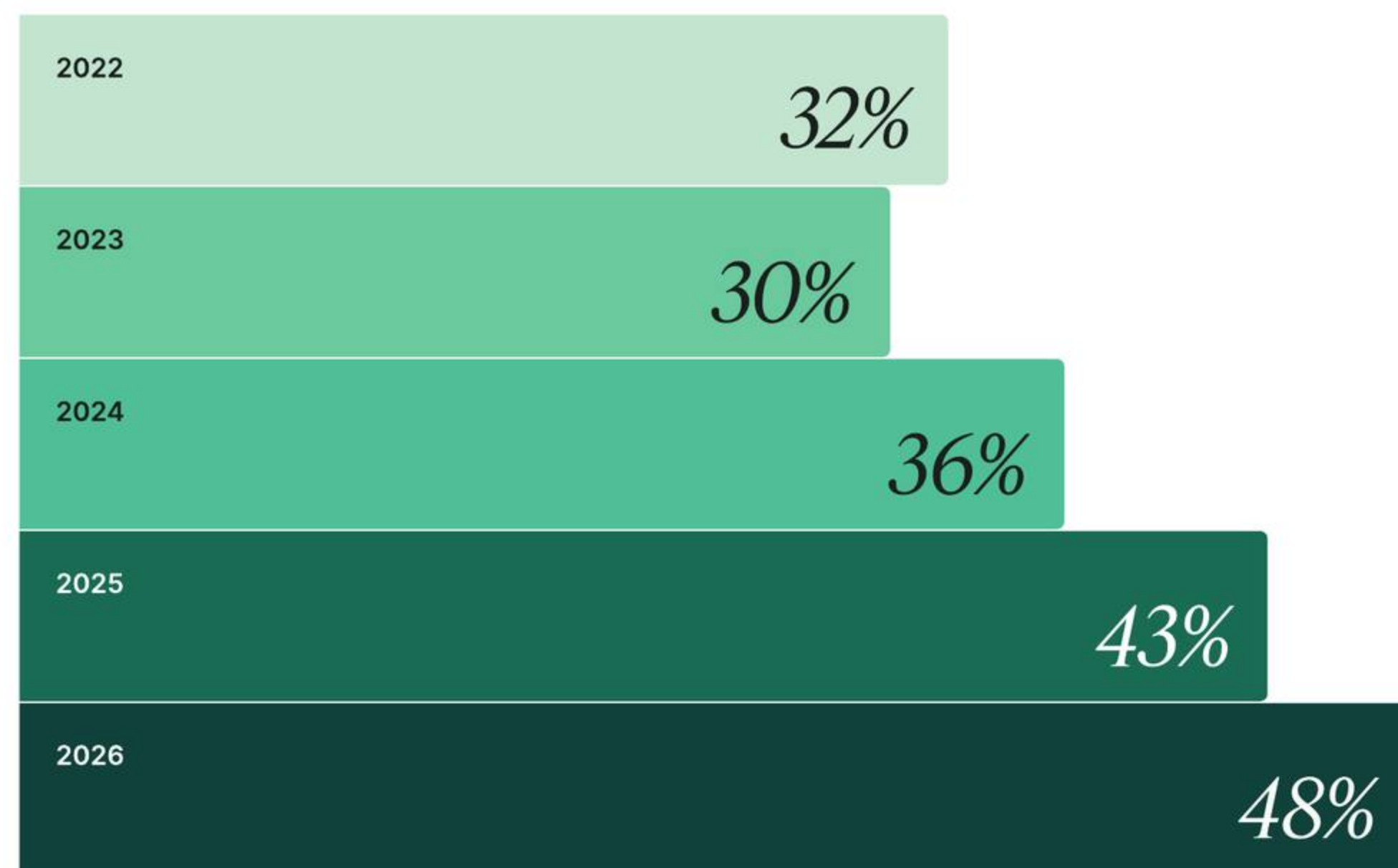
Geographic concentration in California, New York, and Texas

Overall Registrations and Selection Rate

For Boundless clients, the 2026 overall selection rate was 48%, the highest in the five-year period tracked.

Boundless H-1B Cap Registrations and Selection Rate

2022 to 2026



Source: Boundless internal client data

Note: Changes in the Boundless selection rate are directionally consistent with national trends, though not directly comparable due to differences in dataset composition.

The steady improvement from 32% in 2022 to 48% in 2026 can be explained by two factors: the beneficiary-centric rule's continued removal of duplicate registrations from the national pool, which reduces competition for all legitimate applicants; and a growing concentration of Boundless clients at higher wage levels. Because the Boundless dataset does not include duplicate registrations, the broader reduction in duplicates improves selection odds by reducing overall competition.

Wage Level: The Strongest Predictor of Selection

This is the clearest pattern in the data. In 2025, when the random lottery was still in effect, selection rates varied across wage levels, ranging from 32% to 49%, but showed no consistent pattern. In 2026, the first season under the wage-weighted system, a clear gradient emerged.

Level III (Senior) candidates were selected at 68%

Level IV (Expert) candidates were selected at 64% (slightly below Level III, likely reflecting sample size variation in Boundless client data rather than a structural disadvantage; this relationship will be worth monitoring in future cap seasons)

Level I (Entry) candidates were selected at just 40%

Selection Rate by Wage Level

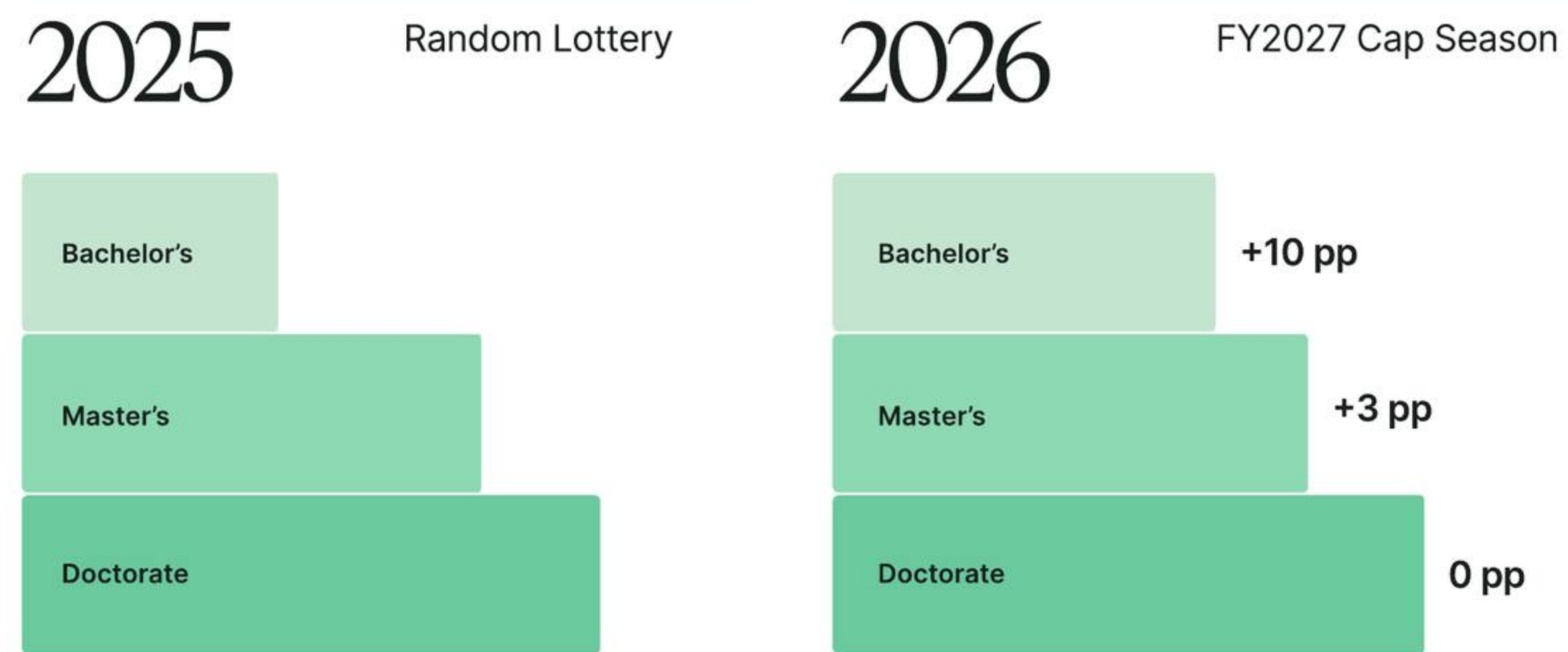
In 2025, selection rates were essentially flat with no clear directional pattern. In 2026, the gradient is clear and significant, consistent with the wage-weighted system's design. Level III and Level IV candidates received proportionally more selection weight and were chosen at substantially higher rates. Level I and II candidates, with fewer selection entries, were chosen at lower rates than in the prior year. Selected applicants also earned higher median salaries than those not selected: \$88,000 versus \$81,000 in 2026. In 2025, there was virtually no salary gap (\$89,000 vs \$90,000). The widening in 2026 is consistent with the wage level pattern.



Source: Boundless internal client data

Education Level and Selection Rates

Doctorate holders had a selection rate of 58%, broadly in line with master's degree holders, who share access to the master's cap pool. The most notable change was among bachelor's degree holders, whose selection rate rose from 28% in 2025 to 38% in 2026.



Source: Boundless internal client data

The bachelor's improvement is explained by composition, not rule changes alone. In 2026, more Boundless clients with bachelor's degrees were filed at Wage Level III or IV, where selection rates reached 70% or higher. The change appears to be driven by the composition of the applicant pool, including a higher share of bachelor's degree holders at upper wage levels.

Master's degree holders benefit from access to the master's cap pool, a separate 20,000-visa allocation reserved for U.S. master's degree holders (note: this is a separate visa pool, not a cap on master's degrees). They enter both the regular 65,000-visa cap and this supplemental pool, providing a meaningful second chance at selection. Master's-eligible candidates were selected at 51% overall in 2026, compared to 39% for regular-pool-only candidates.



Master's Eligibility and Wage Level Interaction

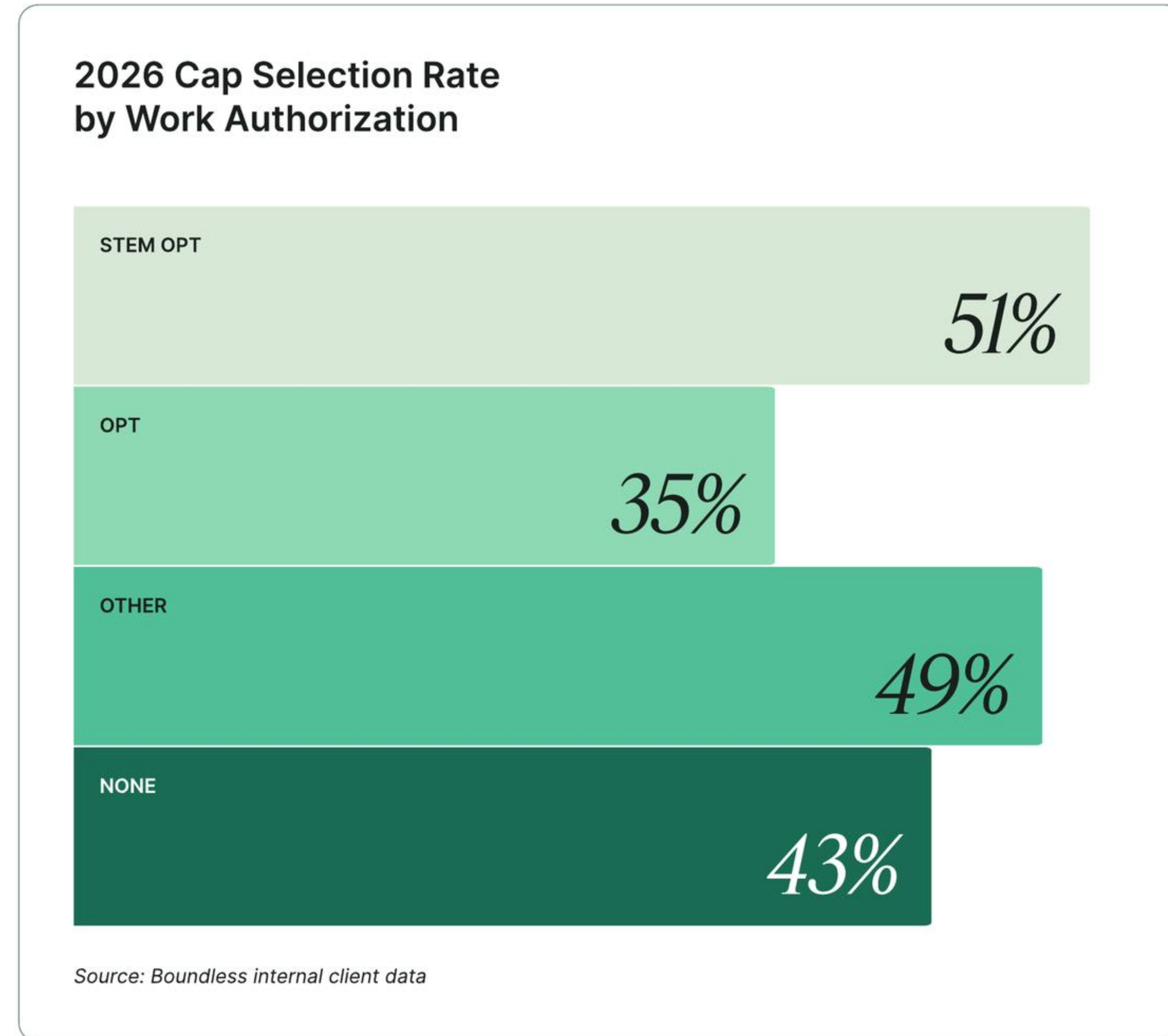
When controlling for wage level, master's cap pool eligibility adds a significant advantage at lower wage tiers. At Level I, master's-eligible candidates were selected at 47%, compared to 26% for those in the regular pool only. At Level II, the gap was 52% versus 36%.

At Level III and IV, the master's advantage narrows or disappears, because selection rates are already high for all candidates under the wage-weighted system. The dual-pool benefit is most valuable at lower wage levels, where additional lottery entries have the greatest impact on odds.

Education Level	Master's Cap Pool Eligible	Regular Pool Only
Level I	42% (62/148)	32% (13/41)
Level II	52% (60/115)	36% (24/66)
Level III	67% (10/15)	69% (11/16)
Level IV	75% (9/12)	54% (7/13)

Work Authorization and Selection Rates

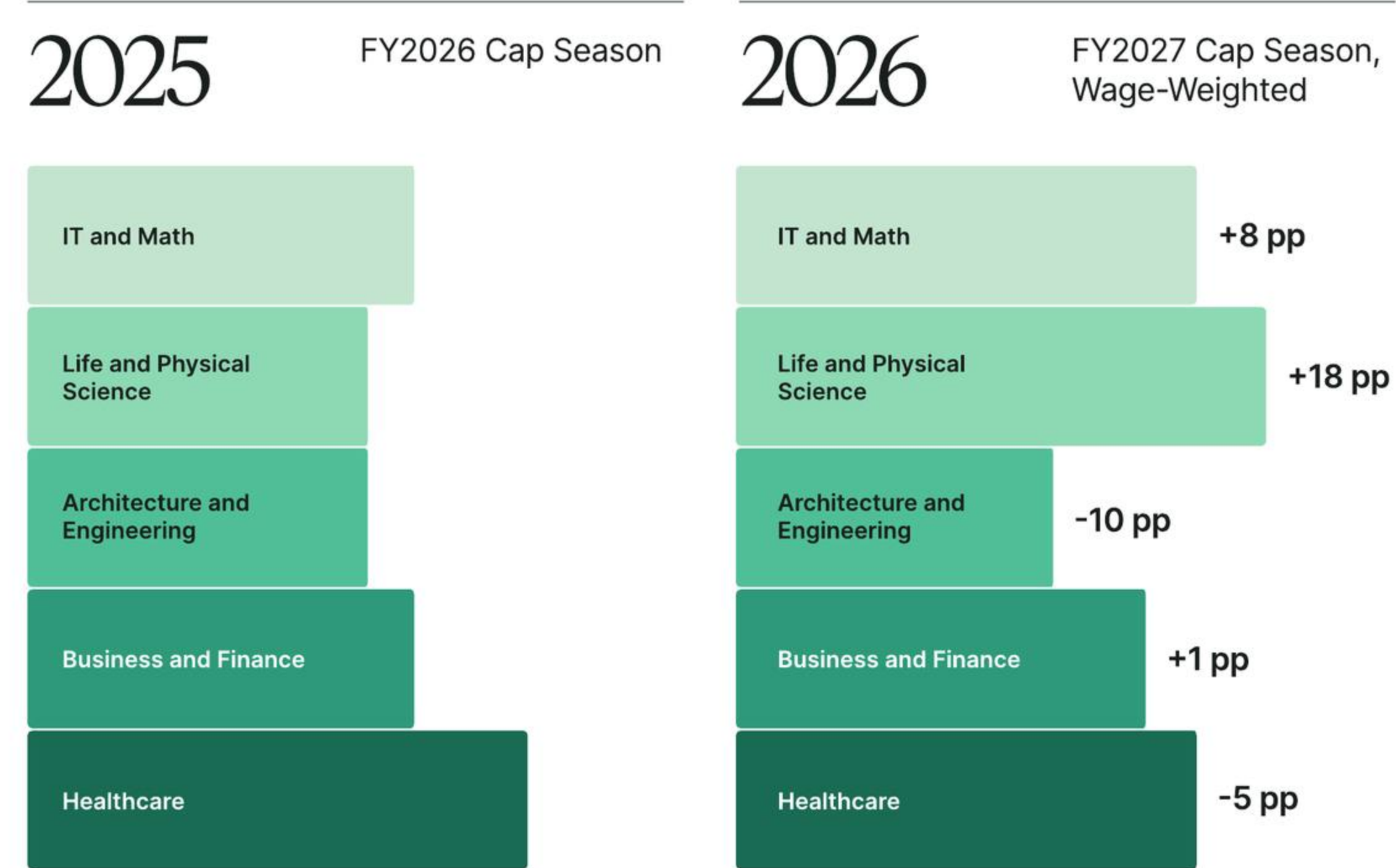
STEM OPT holders had the highest selection rate in the 2026 cap at 51.3%. Regular OPT holders had the lowest at 35.4%. This gap is primarily explained by differences in master's cap pool eligibility rates and occupation mix, not by work authorization status itself.



STEM OPT holders are concentrated in Life/Physical Science and IT, both of which have high master's cap pool eligibility rates. When controlling for master's eligibility, the STEM OPT advantage narrows to 54% versus 41% for master's-eligible candidates across all work authorization types.

Occupation Groups: Gains and Losses in 2026

IT and Math saw the largest improvement in selection rates, rising from 43% to 51%. Life/Physical Science also improved broadly. Architecture and Engineering was the only major group to decline, falling from 41% to 31%.



Source: Boundless internal client data

What drove each result:

IT and Math benefited from wage level improvements. Level III and IV candidates in this group reached 69% to 85% selection in 2026.

Life/Physical Science benefited from its high master's cap pool eligibility rate (89%, the highest of any group), which boosted selection even at lower wage levels.

Architecture and Engineering declined because it is heavily concentrated at Level I, where 2026 selection rates fell to 40% under the wage-weighted system.

Selected applicants earned more than those not selected across nearly every occupation group.

\$137K vs \$99K

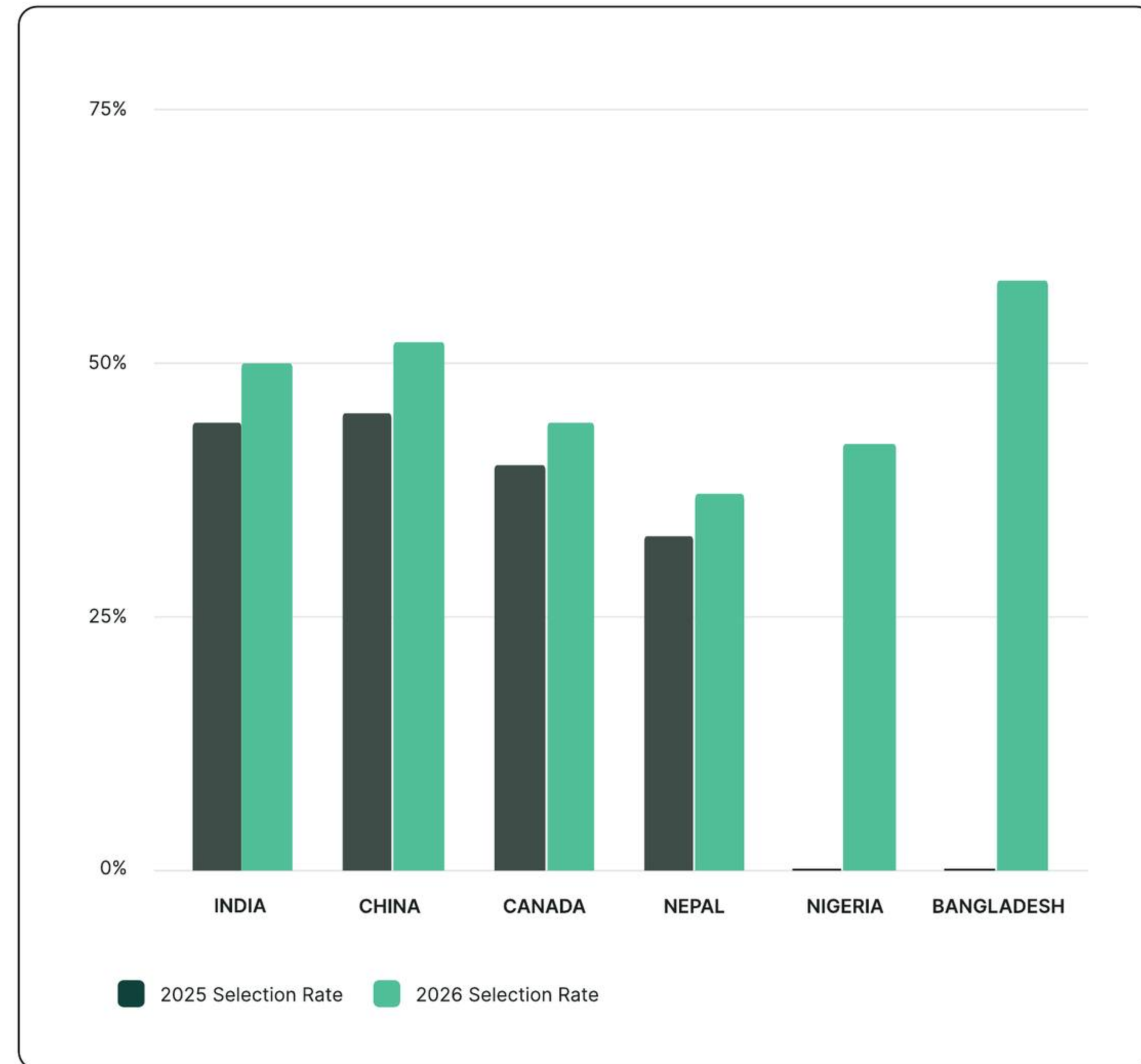
The salary gap was largest in Business and Finance.

\$58K vs \$54K

Life/Physical Science showed a smaller gap, because that group's advantage comes from master's cap pool eligibility rather than higher offered salaries.

Country of Birth

Country-level selection rates show modest variation. Statistical reliability declines for smaller groups. India, the dominant group by volume, saw rates improve from 44% in 2025 to 50% in 2026.



Key Takeaways

Higher-wage candidates were selected at higher rates.

Level III candidates were selected at 68% and Level IV at 64%, compared to 40% for Level I — a gap of 24 to 28 percentage points, consistent with the wage-weighted system's design.

Selection outcomes for bachelor's degree holders shifted in the first wage-weighted cap season.

Selection rates rose from 28% in the FY2026 cap season (March 2025) to 38% in the FY2027 cap season (March 2026). This change points to a higher share of registrations at upper wage levels, as well as differences in master's cap pool eligibility.

Master's cap pool eligibility matters most at lower wage levels.

The dual-pool advantage provides the biggest benefit for Level I and II candidates. At Level III and above, selection rates are already high enough that additional entries matter less.

STEM OPT holders outperform primarily through occupation and degree mix.

At 51.3%, STEM OPT holders have the highest selection rate. Controlling for master's cap pool eligibility narrows the gap. The structural advantage is real but indirect.

Overall selection rates improved from 2025 to 2026.

The Boundless rate rose from 43% to 48%, a result of both reduced national pool competition and a higher concentration of clients at upper wage levels.



International Students & the *New Rules*



International students on F-1 visas represent one of the most important pipelines into the H-1B program. After completing a degree, F-1 students typically work under Optional Practical Training (OPT) for 12 months. Students in STEM fields are eligible for a 24-month OPT extension, known as STEM OPT, for a total of up to 36 months of work authorization before an H-1B is required. The new rules create a mixed picture for international students.

Fee Exemption

F-1 students changing status to H-1B from within the United States are exempt from the \$100,000 fee. The fee applies only to workers petitioned from outside the country. This makes F-1 pipeline hiring more cost-effective for employers relative to external international recruitment.

Lottery Disadvantage

F-1 students are typically early in their careers and are disproportionately filed at Wage Level I or II. Under the wage-weighted system, their registrations carry lower selection weights. Boundless client data is consistent with this: OPT holders had the lowest 2026 selection rate (35.4%), while STEM OPT holders fared better (51.3%), primarily because of their higher master's degree rates and occupation mix.

Master's Degree Advantage

Candidates holding a U.S. master's degree or higher enter both the regular 65,000-visa cap and the separate 20,000-visa master's cap pool. This effectively gives them two chances at selection. International students who earn a U.S. master's before transitioning to H-1B have a structural advantage that partially offsets the wage level disadvantage.

Future Outlook

FY2027 cap season (March 2026 registrations) is the first real-world data point under the wage-weighted system. The selection gradient it produced is consistent with what the system was designed to create, and Boundless client data demonstrates how it plays out in practice.

LEVEL III CANDIDATES
SELECTED AT

64%

LEVEL IV CANDIDATES
SELECTED AT

68%

Level III and IV candidates were selected at 64% to 68%. Level IV candidates received four times the selection entries of Level I candidates, and Level III candidates received three times as many.

DHS projected Level I selection rates as low as 15% under a mature wage-weighted system. With Level I currently running at 40% in the first cap season — based on Boundless client data — entry-level candidates are likely to face steeper odds in FY2028 and beyond as employers recalibrate their registration strategies and wage offers to compete under the new framework.

For employers, the takeaway is straightforward: wage tier now drives lottery outcomes in a way it never did before. Employers who previously filed entry-level positions as a pipeline strategy will need to reconsider that approach as selection odds at lower wage levels continue to narrow.

The \$100,000 Fee's Ongoing Impact

As written, the Presidential Proclamation establishing the \$100,000 fee is set to expire in September 2026 unless extended. The administration has said it intends to extend or make the fee permanent. Legal challenges are ongoing.

The fee has accelerated an already-visible trend: the program is now dominated by large technology companies with the financial capacity to absorb the additional cost. Smaller employers and startups face a much higher barrier to external international hiring.

Political Uncertainty

The fate of the H-1B program under the current administration remains fluid. Some within the Trump administration favor ending or dramatically curtailing the program. Others, including the president, have emphasized attracting foreign investment and the best and brightest. The wage-weighted lottery is consistent with that framing: a program that remains open, but tilted toward higher-skilled, higher-paid workers.

What is clear is that the era of the low-cost, randomly allocated H-1B petition is over. For employers, the program now demands greater investment, earlier planning, and more rigorous position analysis. For candidates, success depends more than ever on securing offers at competitive wage levels from employers willing to absorb substantially higher costs.

Despite these headwinds, the H-1B work visa remains the primary pathway through which high-skilled foreign nationals can build long-term careers in the United States. Its continued vitality will depend on how the competing pressures of economic competitiveness, worker protection, and political will are ultimately reconciled.



Frequently Asked Questions: The New H-1B

Who has to pay the \$100,000 fee?

Employers sponsoring H-1B workers who are currently outside the United States and applying for a new petition. The fee does not apply to: extensions of existing H-1B status, amendments or change-of-employer petitions, or petitions for F-1 students already in the U.S. changing status.

Is the \$100,000 fee permanent?

As written, the Presidential Proclamation is set to expire in September 2026 unless extended. The administration has signaled intent to extend or make it permanent. Legal challenges are ongoing. At least one federal judge has upheld the fee as within the president's statutory authority.

How does the new wage-weighted lottery work?

Starting with FY2027 cap registrations (March 2026), each H-1B registration is assigned a selection weight based on the offered DOL wage level. Level I receives 1 entry, Level II receives 2, Level III receives 3, and Level IV receives 4 entries. Higher-paid candidates have better odds, but entry-level workers are not excluded entirely.

Does the lottery change affect F-1 students?

Yes, and not in their favor. F-1 students are typically filed at Wage Level I or II, giving them lower selection odds under the new system. However, F-1 students are exempt from the \$100,000 fee, which partially offsets the disadvantage by making them more attractive to cost-conscious employers.

What happened to the random lottery?

The random lottery was formally abolished by a DHS final rule published December 29, 2025, effective February 27, 2026. The FY2027 cap season (March 2026) is the first to use the wage-weighted system. Cap-exempt petitions, including extensions, amendments, and those filed by universities and nonprofits, are unaffected.

Why did FY2025 registrations drop so sharply from FY2024?

The FY2024 peak of 780,884 was heavily inflated by multi-employer registrations. Some beneficiaries had dozens of registrations submitted on their behalf to game the lottery. DHS's 2024 beneficiary-centric rule, which limits each individual to one registration verified by passport identity, eliminated this practice almost entirely.

Do I need to pay the \$100,000 fee for an H-1B extension or transfer?

No. The fee applies only to new petitions for workers currently outside the United States. Extensions, amendments, second or subsequent extensions, and petitions for workers already in H-1B status in the U.S. are all exempt.

What are the biggest employers using H-1B visas right now?

In FY2026 (quarter 1), Amazon led all employers with 2,008 initial H-1B approvals, followed by Tata Consultancy Services (1,518), Microsoft (1,179), and Infosys (1,139). The top four reflected the ongoing split between U.S. technology giants and Indian IT outsourcing firms that has defined H-1B employer rankings for years.

How do employers determine the correct H-1B wage level for a position?

Wage levels are determined by cross-referencing the position's Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) code, the geographic work location, and DOL's Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) data. Level I is the entry wage for the occupation in that area. Level IV is the fully experienced worker wage. USCIS may deny petitions where it finds the wage level was misrepresented to inflate lottery odds.

What should employers know if an H-1B employee is laid off?

H-1B workers who are laid off have a 60-day grace period (or until their status expires, if sooner) to have a new H-1B petition filed by a new employer, change status, or depart the United States. During this period, employers are no longer required to maintain employment but remain responsible for complying with H-1B obligations, including proper termination procedures and withdrawal of the petition. Workers who secure a new sponsor may transfer their H-1B status through a change-of-employer petition, which is not subject to the \$100,000 fee.

Data Notes & Appendix

USCIS publishes two distinct annual H-1B reports to Congress. They are often confused with each other. This report draws on both. Understanding the difference is important for interpreting the figures correctly.

The Two USCIS H-1B Annual Reports

	Report on H-1B Petitions	Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers
What it Covers	Quarterly and annual petition volume, employer fee exemptions, and approval counts by quarter.	Country of birth, age, gender, education level, occupation, compensation, industry sector, and premium processing.
Most Recent Edition	FY2025, published February 11, 2026. Used for all filing and approval numbers in this report unless noted as Boundless internal data.	FY2024, published April 2025. Used for all demographic figures in this report. FY2025 edition is not yet publicly available as of publication.
Does NOT Cover	Salary, gender, age, country of birth, or occupation breakdown.	Quarterly breakdowns or petition-level volume data.

About the Boundless Client Dataset

The Boundless client analysis in this report is based on internal registration data covering the 2022 to 2026 cap seasons. The 2026 cap season (FY2027 cap) data covers registrations with confirmed outcomes, representing the first full season under the wage-weighted selection system.

The Boundless client mix has two features that differ from national averages: a higher-than-average share of Biological Technicians and Life/Physical Science workers, and geographic concentration in California, New York, and Texas. These differences are noted where relevant in the analysis.

A Note on Cap Season Naming

H-1B cap season naming can be confusing. The “FY2027 cap season” refers to registrations submitted in March 2026, for positions beginning October 1, 2026 (the start of fiscal year 2027). In this report, “the 2026 cap season” and “the FY2027 cap season” refer to the same season. When USCIS refers to “FY2026 cap data,” that covers registrations submitted in March 2025 for positions beginning October 1, 2025.

Where to Find Primary Data

Resource	What it Contains	URL
USCIS H-1B Characteristics Reports	Annual demographic breakdowns: salary, gender, age, country, occupation	uscis.gov/reports-and-studies
USCIS H-1B Petitions Annual Report	Quarterly filing and approval volumes, fee exemption data	uscis.gov/reports-and-studies
USCIS H-1B Employer Data Hub	Approvals by employer, filterable by fiscal year	uscis.gov/h-1b-employer-data-hub
DOL OFLC LCA Disclosure Data	Full-year LCA filings with offered wages by employer, occupation, and location	dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/performance
NFAP H-1B Policy Briefs	Annual denial rate analysis and employer trends	nfap.com
Federal Register	Full text of all regulatory changes	federalregister.gov

Data Caveats

Approved petitions vs. approved workers. USCIS approval figures count petitions, not unique individuals. One worker may have multiple petitions approved in a single year.

Initial vs. continuing employment. The majority of H-1B approvals in any given year are for continuing employment, including extensions, amendments, and transfers. In FY2024, 65% of approvals were renewals.

Registration vs. petition vs. visa. These are three distinct steps. Registration is the electronic lottery entry. Selected registrations become eligible to file petitions. Approved petitions allow the worker to apply for a visa or change status.

Fiscal year. The U.S. government fiscal year runs October 1 through September 30. FY2025 covers October 1, 2024 through September 30, 2025. The H-1B cap season for FY2027 (registrations opened March 2026, during FY2026) covers jobs beginning October 1, 2026.

Demographic data lag. USCIS publishes two separate H-1B reports on different timelines. The H-1B Petitions Annual Report, which covers filings and approvals, is typically released within a few months of the fiscal year closing. The Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers report, which includes demographic and salary data, is published much later. As of May 2026, the FY2024 Characteristics report remains the most recent publicly available edition with full demographic breakdowns.



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About this Report

This report combines USCIS national data with proprietary Boundless client data from the FY2027 H-1B cap season to examine how recent policy changes are reshaping H-1B selection outcomes.

About Boundless

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