

Establishing an Effective Business Referral Program

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TO ALL DIPLOMATIC AND CONSULAR POSTS COLLECTIVE
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SUBJECT: ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE BUSINESS REFERRAL PROGRAM

1. Summary: Facilitating access to timely visa appointments for legitimate business travelers is one of CA's highest priorities. Posts throughout the world have established business facilitation programs to ensure that we are responsive to the needs of the U.S. business community while continuing to maintain the highest visa security standards possible. Many of these programs are conducted in coordination with American Chambers of Commerce overseas. While the comments that follow are specific to AMCHAM programs, the lessons learned can also be applied to business referral programs that do not function through an AMCHAM. End Summary.

AMCHAMs Surveys Its Members

2. The U.S. Chamber Of Commerce recently polled regional AMCHAMS on consular sections' business facilitation programs. The responses helped identify the most effective among the varied AMCHAM-specific business facilitation programs worldwide. Among survey questions asked were whether or not the AMCHAM had a business-related visa referral or a facilitation program in place, the details of the program, the AMCHAM's coordination with the consular section, as well as what worked and what didn't within each program. The majority of those that responded to the survey and did not have a program in place were eager to develop a program.

3. Successful business referral programs depend on mutual cooperation between the AMCHAM and the consular section. Programs with clearly written procedures, designated points of contact in both the consular section and the AMCHAM, and open lines of communication -- including training for AMCHAM members -- work best. Businesses are looking for a predictable way to factor the visa process into their travel planning. The survey results indicated that public outreach with AMCHAM officials is helpful because it provides much-needed training and information to AMCHAM member companies about the NIV process. Consular sections that allow for group appointments or set aside a specific day or block of time to handle business visa applications received some of the most favorable survey responses.

4. This advice applies equally to business facilitation programs that do not involve AMCHAMs. Business facilitation plans only work if

travelers know about them. Please make sure yours are well publicized and that the procedures are clear, predictable, and easy to follow. Prominently displaying processing times and other key visa data on post's website is especially important for business travelers applying at posts without a dedicated facilitation program.

Clearly Written Procedures

5. While posts work with AMCHAM in a variety of ways, the survey results showed that clearly written procedures and established channels of communication are the most important factors in establishing a successful business facilitation program. Some AMCHAM members have complained that programs seem to shift with the arrival of each new section chief, and that the changes are not always communicated clearly and promptly. The survey respondents were most satisfied with programs that provided easy-to-understand written procedures that were reviewed regularly with their AMCHAM contacts, which could in turn review the procedures with their members.

Designated Points of Contact

6. Having a designated point of contact - either an officer or LES member -- in the consular section is essential. The POC must/must be reachable; this may include establishing a special e-mail box or phone number, perhaps with designated hours, to address specific questions and provide information on the business visa process. Likewise, some AMCHAMs have designated a specific AMCHAM liaison to work exclusively with the consular section POC. This helps ensure effective and accurate communication and increases accountability.

Scheduling and Predictability

7. Appointment scheduling can be tailored to fit your post's needs, but works when those schedules are predictable. Group appointments or Time Block Set-Asides are examples of scheduling tools where specific time slots are allotted weekly or daily to allow business visa applicants to appear without an appointment. Some small posts with minimal wait times have set up clear procedures with their local AMCHAMs on how to schedule expedited appointments if necessary, often by e-mailing the designated POC within the consular section. Scheduling can also be handled through post's call center, if standardized procedures are established. A predictable scheduling system, whether formal or

informal, is essential in providing consistency for both post and the local AMCHAM.

Uniform Practices Throughout a Country

8. In large countries with multiple consular sections, it is best to establish uniform practices for all AMCHAMs and posts. Open accessibility for any AMCHAM member at all posts in a country helps foster consistency and convenience for applicants.

Posts with no Formal Program

9. Posts without lengthy waits for appointments may have no need for a formal AMCHAM or other business facilitation program. Some posts have developed individual business facilitation plans to address the specific needs of the business communities in their country, without involving AMCHAM. For those posts with an AMCHAM and no formal program, the consular section can still work with the local chapter so that AMCHAM letters to applicants can serve as useful and meaningful tools for officers. Post can work with AMCHAM to devise agreed-upon procedures -- for example, post might accept letters from one designated AMCHAM official, or work with AMCHAM to develop a web-based function that would allow post to confirm information about business applicants.

Public Outreach

10. Effective programs involve active outreach between the consular section and AMCHAM. Posts should organize regular meetings with AMCHAM representatives. This will not only help AMCHAM establish contacts and clear procedures with post, but also allow post to provide AMCHAM with information and training.

Model Programs

11. At AMCHAM Buenos Aires, each company designates its own specific officer to communicate with the Chamber's Visa Office. In order to participate, each member must be registered with the AMCHAM Visa Office.

AMCHAM ensures the visa application is arranged in a standard format, provides a job letter showing the applicant's position, salary, and length of service, and provides remote data entry. AMCHAM holds regular meetings with the member-company coordinators and provides training to new and current members. AMCHAM stresses the need to study each applicant strictly before scheduling appointments, noting its productive relationship with post stems from maintaining daily contact with the consular section and the call center.

12. AMCHAM Shanghai's Corporate Visa Program (CVP) not only lessens the interview wait times for business applicants, but also establishes effective communication channels between AMCHAM and post. One NIV officer is specifically dedicated to the CVP. As in other successful programs, AMCHAM provides training for member companies and collaborates with the consular section via a dedicated e-mailbox.

13. Embassy Bratislava and Embassy Vilnius are two examples of small posts with successful AMCHAM programs. In Lithuania, all AMCHAM members receive a comprehensive checklist with all necessary information for applicants. The AMCHAM office directly contacts the Embassy for its applicants and the consular section sets aside Fridays for AMCHAM appointments. In the Slovak Republic, the AMCHAM provides the Embassy with a list of companies it has prescreened for participation in the AMCHAM program. Through this program, any applicant from a member company can have a visa interview arranged within 24 hours.

Future Efforts

14. Business conditions and interests vary from post to post, and programs vary worldwide. Posts should evaluate their AMCHAM or other business referral programs and adopt an approach that is most suited to their needs. Some posts have developed individual facilitation plans to address the specific needs of the business communities in their country. In other areas, there may be no AMCHAM presence, or the local AMCHAM may not be interested in setting up a special program. Many AMCHAMs are pleased with their current communication with our consular sections, but think they would benefit from a business visa application process with clearer procedures.

15. All posts should use the above guidance to engage in outreach with their local business communities in order to establish better facilitation procedures.

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