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## Amazon's second HQ: Why U.S. immigration policy makes Canada a frontrunner

by Monica Nickelsburg on September 8, 2017



*Vancouver, B.C. (BigStock Photo).*

Amazon's wishlist for its second headquarters in North America includes "a stable and business-friendly environment," "locations with the potential to attract and retain strong technical talent," "a diverse population, excellent institutions of higher education, local government structure and elected officials eager and willing to work with the company."

As officials have been quick to point out, many cities across the U.S. fit the bill. But of all those domestic suitors, none are impervious to the unpredictable immigration agenda that the Trump administration is pursuing.

If Amazon selects a Canadian city, it can check the boxes on its list, protect its immigrant employees, and benefit from the country's pro-immigration policies that are an explicit play to attract international tech talent.



*Immigration attorney Lola Zakharova. (Photo by Cass Redstone)*

“The HQ2 plan seems to accommodate the expanding workforce of the company, and it seems that incentives offered by the new locality will play some role,” said Lola Zakharova, a Seattle-based immigration attorney who works with corporate clients.

“Still, if the choice falls on a Canadian city, it would indicate that immigration considerations probably weighted heavily in driving that decision, and it is hardly surprising,” she added. “The tightening of immigration rules under Trump’s ‘Buy American, Hire American,’ ... not only impede corporations ability to hire and retain the best talent, but also results in additional legal costs. [Wednesday’s] announcement on rescission of DACA does not help either — companies rely on their Dreamers

to continue driving innovation in tech.”

Toronto is a strong candidate, known for producing top technology talent. It was ranked as the second-best city for the quality and value of its technology workforce in a 2017 CBRE report. The lakeside city produced Shopify, Kik, and Wealthsimple, and it supports a vibrant startup ecosystem.

Toronto Mayor John Tory is already making a play for Amazon’s HQ2. “We should be bidding for this and be very, very competitive and I’m in the midst of talking to the other governments to make sure that’s what we do,” he told Toronto publication The Star.

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“Bezos’ and Amazon’s world view on immigration and globalism fit well with Canada — which has recently negotiated important free trade deals with Europe and Asia,” said John Boyd, a consultant specializing in corporate relocation and site selection. “This contrasts with the current ‘America First’ policy under the Trump administration. Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau has emerged as the leading standard bearer for globalism among leading Western nations. Toronto’s Pearson International Airport is world-class and easily links the city with major U.S. and overseas business centers. Toronto’s proximity to New York City and New England would also provide a new center of gravity for the company to recruit talent and innovators that do not wish to live/work in Seattle.”

Amazon already has a Toronto outpost with a staff of 600 and is looking to add an additional 200 employees to the office, according to The Star. But despite those compelling factors, Boyd doesn't think Toronto will be the ultimate choice. Still, even discussing Canada as an option could advance Amazon's political agenda.

"Even if Toronto is not selected as the new HQ, (and I *don't* believe Toronto will ultimately will be chosen), just by virtue of it being on the short list provides Bezos a platform to talk about immigration reform, an issue near and dear to his heart," Boyd said.

Vancouver, B.C. is also a viable candidate, a mere three-hour-drive from Amazon's original Seattle headquarters. Amazon already has a satellite office there, as do Microsoft, Facebook, and Twitter; and Vancouver is the birthplace of billion-dollar companies like HootSuite and Slack — the latter moved its HQ to San Francisco but still has a big presence in B.C. It also offers many of the West Coast lifestyle benefits that attract members of the tech world.

Amazon has been actively engaged in legal challenges to the Trump administration's immigration policies, filing briefs in lawsuits over the president's controversial travel ban and more recent DACA repeal. The company says it has employees that were impacted by both actions and that a hostile climate to immigrants hurts its recruiting efforts and business operations.



*Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tests out a HoloLens at Microsoft's Vancouver office.(Microsoft Photo)*

Canada, on the other hand, has a number of policies that encourage skilled international talent to immigrate to the country. The government offers tax incentives to encourage research and development, provides funding and support for technological development, and has a specific immigration avenue for international investors. Canada also recently launched a Global Skills Strategy visa program to make it easier for companies to bring in skilled talent from other countries, according to Axios.

Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau was already extolling the benefits of tech investment in Canada at a Microsoft Summit in Seattle earlier this year. As Amazon looks for a new city to plant its flag and hire 50,000 workers, the stars may be aligning for Canada — and it could lead to an entire country vying for HQ2.