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Coming to America: Some Practical Advice for Startup Entrepreneurs



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Entrepreneurs

I cover biz, tech and entrepreneurship.

My last few posts have all dealt with [visas and immigration matters](#), but now I wanted to share some general advice which I've picked up on practical matters like getting a bank account, building your credit score, leasing a car and getting a sim card for your mobile phone.

Social Security Number (SSN)

It used to be the case you could talk your way into getting a Social Security Number even if you didn't qualify, but not any more. You will only be able to get one of these once you have a work visa. The SSN is like a personal ID number, and you get asked for it a lot so it's important to get it as soon as you can. Without one you're definitely a second class citizen, you won't get any credit and may even find it difficult renting a property. Once you do have your SSN you can start building your credit rating....

Getting a Credit Card

Get one as soon as you have an SSN, so you can start building your credit. However, you need a credit score to get one, usually. Catch 22? In fact there's a few options I've discovered. If you've been an American Express cardholder in another country for long than a year you can apply to transfer your account to the US, and they'll give you a new card with a credit rating based in part on your overseas credit worthiness. Other banks including Citibank and Bank of the West will also provide credit cards to non-immigrants with a work visa, but you'll need proof of income and a job offer letter as well.

1 or 2 paystubs. The initial credit limit will be very low, but will help you build your score.

Opening a Bank Account for yourself

This is actually really straight forward; you don't need a work visa or an SSN to open a bank account. Just go into any bank with some identification (passport and one other form of ID), and you can usually open an account on the spot. It may be easier to open an account with a bank that also operates in your home country. So for me, either Citibank or HSBC were good options and I went for Citibank as they have a much bigger branch network in the US, have low (or no) monthly fees and will do free international money transfers between the US and a Citibank account overseas.

Leasing a Car

Getting a lease is one of the cheapest ways to drive a car, but normally leases are only available to people with great credit ratings. The vast majority of manufacturers will not touch you as a new arrival with no credit rating, but Ford, Toyota and Volkswagen all have special assessment criteria for people with new work visas, and you ought to be able to get a lease as long as you have proof of income (a job offer letter for example).

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Health Insurance

If you're doing your own startup then you likely won't have the option of a company health plan. In that case it's not as expensive as you might fear to take out your own plan. I won't go into all the details, but I found a great resource in this blog from [SimplyInsured](#), as well as using this comparison site: [eHealthInsurance](#). If you can't get coverage from traditional insurers (because you don't have an SSN maybe), then try [InsuBuy](#). Don't ignore this, get health cover in place!

Mobile Phones

The US mobile phone market is less competitive than most other markets, and because networks use technology incompatible with most foreign bought mobile phones (Veriz

and Sprint), then the choice of network provider is limited to only two GSM compatible ones: [AT&T](#) and [T-Mobile](#). Getting a prepaid plan that includes data use is now a lot easier than it used to be, and instead of going to the network direct, I'd recommend one of the virtual network operators than run on their networks. You can get unlimited calls text and data for only \$45 a month, which by US standards is VERY cheap. Try [Simple Mobile](#) (uses T-Mobile), [Straight Talk](#) (used to use AT&T but now seems to have switched to T-Mobile) or [h2o wireless](#) (uses AT&T).

Employer Identification Number (EIN)

An EIN is issued by the IRS for every American company. It's the equivalent of a social security number, and you'll get asked for it often, for example, when opening a company bank account. If you read the advice on the IRS website it suggests that you cannot get one of these without an officer of the company being in possession of a Social Security Number, and you can't get one of those without having a work visa. This stumped me for weeks as I asked different people for advice, but in the end I called the IRS, and got it over the phone after a short call!

Company bank account

Once you have your company's EIN you can open a company bank account. Any high street bank will do, but if you're a startup I'd recommend Silicon Valley Bank. Having dealt with the big name banks in the past, they just don't understand startups. They're used to traditional bricks and mortar businesses. If you decide to go with another bank consider HSBC and Citibank because both have a good international presence.

What tips can you share? Leave a message in the comments!



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I'm a Scottish technology entrepreneur, current CEO of Teamly. After spending over a year in Silicon Valley I moved to Downtown Las Vegas following closing investment fr... [Read More](#)