



Middle East
Human Capital Trends 2025

Closing the experience gap: Reimagining readiness in a changing Middle East

Organizations struggle to find talent with the experience they need—just as workers struggle to find foothold roles where they can gain it. How can we bridge the gap?

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In many cultures, experience is revered. We honor it in elders, prize it in leaders, and seek it in those we trust to navigate us through complexity. Yet in today's world of work, "experience" has become paradoxical: it is the prerequisite for entry into professional life and, yet it is something that accrues only to those already within the ranks of gainfully employed.

This paradox is what Deloitte's 2025 *Global Human Capital Trends* report identifies as the "experience gap": the growing disconnect between the level of experience employers expect and the level of readiness that early-career workers can realistically offer¹. Across the Middle East, where national development programs – such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, and Qatar National Vision 2030 – demand workforce transformation at pace and scale, this gap is not just a hiring issue; it is a structural fault line that threatens the ambitions of governments in this region.

More than half (53%) of GCC employers faced moderate or extreme skill shortages in 2024, according to Hays². Deloitte's own research shows 66% of organizational leaders say their most recent hires were not fully prepared, with experience flagged as the most common shortfall¹. Compounding this, the World Economic Forum found that 61% of employers globally have increased their experience requirements in the past three years³. The bar keeps rising, with fewer and fewer step ladders for the younger generation to reach it.

Mind the gap: What's causing it?

Several intertwined forces have widened the experience gap:

1. The evolving nature of work. Tasks are becoming less routine and more exception-based, requiring judgment, adaptability, and systems thinking. These are precisely the capabilities that require context to develop.

2. Flattened hierarchies and leaner teams. Organizations are shedding traditional entry-level roles, managerial layers, and training investments in the name of agility and cost-efficiency as market competition becomes fiercer. The very jobs that once served as proving grounds are disappearing.

3. The erosion of early exposure to work. Teen employment has declined significantly. Formal internships and apprenticeships remain limited to a lucky handful. As such, many young people are simply not afforded the opportunity to build soft skills and workplace resilience in a relatively risk-free working environment.

4. Misalignment between education and employment. Curricula often lag industry trends. For example, in Saudi Arabia, nearly 50% of graduates are considered overeducated, with qualifications that exceed the requirements of their role — a clear signal of systemic mismatch between academic preparation and labor market demand⁴.

In this context, the traditional definition of experience—time spent in domain-specific or related roles—is no longer sufficient.

Examining experience: Capability applied in context

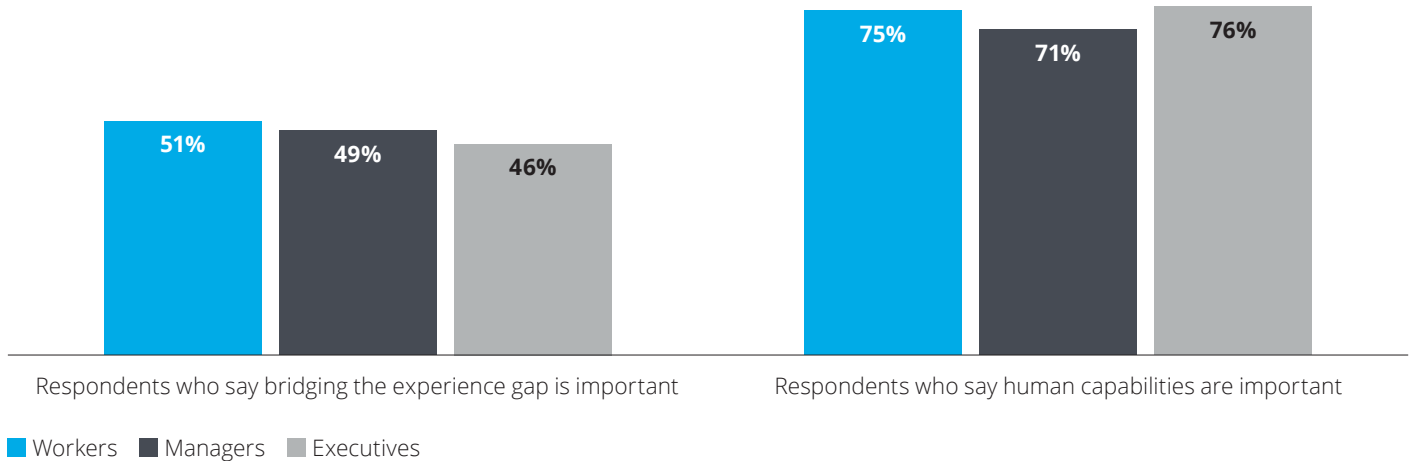
Considering this, embracing a more dynamic definition of this concept is long overdue:

Experience, in its broadest form, is the ability to apply skills, knowledge, and human capabilities in context—under real-world constraints—to produce productive and desired outcomes.

This more holistic framing shifts the burden of proof: instead of organizations asking, "Has the candidate done exactly this role or activity before?", recruiters are encouraged to ask, "Can this individual successfully step into the role, given the complexity of the task, the context of the hiring organization and the capabilities they've built to date?"

Prioritizing human capabilities ranks high in importance, but organizations are just beginning to understand their relationship to experience

Percentage of respondents answering "very important" or "of critical importance" to the question: "How important is prioritizing human capabilities (e.g., curiosity, emotional intelligence, etc.) in the organization's workforce practices?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2025 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Closing the gap: Three bridging strategies

Understanding the causes of the experience gap is only the first step. The real work lies in designing systems, environments, and expectations that allow individuals—particularly early-career talent and mid-career switchers—to gain experience in meaningful and scalable ways. Fortunately, many Middle Eastern organizations are already experimenting with promising solutions. The following three elements—sourcing differently, developing in context, and reimagining work—represent practical strategies to plug the experience gap.

Sourcing differently: Paving new pathways

If organizations want to hire differently, they must search differently. This means radically rethinking how they identify and evaluate talent.

- **Review recruitment algorithms.** Recruitment platforms and applicant tracking systems (ATS) are often configured to filter candidates based on traditional proxies for capability, such as degree qualifications or previous job titles. This can inadvertently screen out high-potential candidates from non-traditional backgrounds or without a degree. Adjusting these algorithms to 'screen in' rather than 'screen out' talent can remove artificial barriers and uncover a broader, more diverse pipeline of candidates.

A compelling example of this is illustrated by the UAE's Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MoHRE), which has partnered with local AI firms to explore the use of machine learning in revising recruitment platforms across federal agencies. These initiatives align candidate evaluation more closely with demonstrated capabilities rather than credentials alone and, through increased skill-based hiring, the culture at government entities is shifting toward inclusivity and long-term potential.⁵

- **Adopt corporate and vocational apprenticeships.** These extended 'earn-while-you-learn' schemes offer participants the chance to earn a recognized qualification while gaining hands-on experience in a specific trade or profession. This model also affords the organization the opportunity to observe the apprentice at close quarters and thereby make more accurate decisions on their career.

The benefits of apprenticeships prompted the Dubai College of Tourism (DCT) to launch the region's first Culinary Operations Apprenticeship in 2024. The two-year programme blends classroom learning with immersive culinary placements, producing graduates who are already equipped with industry-recognized credentials and competitive experience. Additionally, this program supports Dubai's broader hospitality excellence and talent agenda.⁶

- **Harness higher education.** Partnerships between academic institutions and employers allow curricula to evolve with real-time market demands. These models embed internships and industry mentoring into the academic experience, giving learners insight into workplace expectations and boosting their professional readiness before they formally enter the labor market.

In Saudi Arabia, *KAUST and the Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF)* have joined forces to develop training in AI, IoT, and deep tech. These hybrid programmes combine deep academic rigor with industry feedback and application, producing graduates who are viewed as highly employable in complex technical fields.⁷

2. Developing in context: Enriching experience

Experience is not developed passively in a vacuum; it emerges from the furnace of challenge, feedback, and iteration. Organizations need to invest in the type of visceral learning that mirrors the ‘messiness’ of real work.

- **Offer overseas placements.** These programmes enable employees to develop global fluency and cultural intelligence while enhancing technical expertise. Working in new environments accelerates problem-solving skills and resilience, especially in high-stakes or unstructured contexts.

Qatar’s Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) launched in 2024 an Overseas Development Programme aimed at placing early-career ICT professionals in leading international firms such as Microsoft and Cisco. This program equips participants with first-hand experience in fast-evolving global contexts, which they can leverage when contributing to Qatar’s digital transformation vision, both within MCIT and beyond⁸.

- **Deploy AI-enabled development tools.** When used thoughtfully, AI systems can provide continuous feedback, analyze skills gaps, and offer personalized learning journeys for employees. This enables real-time development at scale—especially powerful in large, dynamic organizations.

Ooredoo, Qatari multinational telecommunications company, in partnership with Microsoft, integrates AI to monitor workflow data and recommend performance-enhancing actions. This not only improves worker productivity but helps emerging professionals identify and close skill gaps autonomously, contributing to their career confidence⁹.

3. Reimagining work: Growth by design

The structure of the work itself can either narrow or widen the experience gap, which means career paths need to have stretch and growth built in.

- **Fit feeder roles into the hierarchy.** These roles are designed to serve as stepping-stones into higher-level positions, typically with defined performance expectations, developmental feedback, and structured exposure to senior stakeholders.

At DCT, the Culinary Apprenticeship does not stop at technical proficiency. It maps progression from line cook to sous-chef, with checkpoints along the way tied to mentorship, project leadership, and peer coaching. This intentional design ensures that apprentices grow continuously through their role and have clarity on the advancement opportunities that reward their efforts.⁵

- **Turn tacit knowledge into tangible resources.** Much of an organization’s most valuable knowledge is unwritten—it lives in habits, intuition, and the unspoken practices of experienced professionals. Making this “tacit knowledge” more explicit through tools, like playbooks and peer shadowing, allows junior employees to leverage ‘tried-and-tested’ institutional wisdom.

In the UAE, Emirates Group has invested in codifying critical operational knowledge through its internal “Emirates Aviation College” and digital learning platforms. Veteran staff are encouraged to document decision pathways, process insights, and operational nuances—transforming invisible expertise into intentional content for new joiners. This has improved onboarding times and reduced dependency on the dwindling legacy of experts, while fostering a collective learning culture¹⁰.

Conclusion: From deficit to design

The experience gap is not a failure of young people—it is a failure of system design. When pathways into professional life become narrow, opaque, or conditional on prior access, it is unsurprising that the newest generation of workers arrive unprepared. However, across the Middle East, forward-looking organizations are already piloting and scaling different approaches that redefine workplace readiness.

Bridging the experience gap is achievable, especially with targeted strategies to:

- **Source differently:** rethink how talent is found and evaluated—by broadening entry points, recalibrating recruitment filters, and creating earn-while-you-learn pathways.
- **Develop in context:** Shift from passive training to experiential development—using real-world exposure, challenge-based learning, and smart technologies to accelerate growth.
- **Reimagine work itself:** Design jobs that do more than extract value—they should grow talent by surfacing institutional wisdom, encouraging mentorship, and embedding learning into the role.

The more we treat experience not as a gate, but as a co-designed and co-owned journey, the more we will build systems that develop human potential at scale—and in doing so, transform readiness from an exclusive privilege into an inclusive possibility.

Research methodology

The survey for the Deloitte 2025 Global Human Capital Trends report polled nearly 10,000 business and human resources leaders across many industries and sectors in 93 countries, including across the Middle East region. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research this year with worker-, manager- and executive-specific surveys to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 25 interviews with executives from some of today’s leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

Endnotes

- ¹ Deloitte (2025), Global Human Capital Trends Survey.
- ² Hays (2024), 'Skills Over Experience in the Middle East'. <https://www.mitsloanme.com>
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Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the phenomenal support and contributions of our Middle East Human Capital team, in particular: **Dara Latinwo, Hassan Rimmani, Asim Mohamed, Dana AlMadbak, Michel Abu Nabhan, Charlie Casella, Saly Wehbe and Osama Alkhayyat**. Each team member's unique skills and perspectives were crucial to the creation of this comprehensive report. Their collective efforts have not only enriched the content but also underscored the collaborative spirit that is essential to understanding and advancing human capital in the Middle East.

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