CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT

GULF REGIONAL RESEARCH

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT

Jo Nayler

ABOUT CRF

Corporate Research Forum (CRF) is a research-led learning network dedicated to building the capability of HR leaders and their teams to drive organisational performance.

Through more than 30 years of research and practical expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes – what works, what doesn't and in what circumstances. We support our network of over 275 organisations through an evolving programme of evidence-based insights: delivering expert-led events, facilitated peer exchange, personalised and timely answers through our AI research tool and impactful technology-enabled learning – all informed by research and shaped by practice.

Our focus enables HR to become a more strategic, future-ready function delivering consistent and measurable value tailored to the needs of your organisation.

For more information on how CRF can support you and your organisation, please contact Michael Whelan, Director, at michael@crforum.co.uk. Alternatively, please visit our website at www.crforum.co.uk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JO NAYLER is responsible for publishing original research as well as adapting and developing CRF content for use across the website and member communications. She has worked on a range of research topics at CRF, including authoring research on team effectiveness and the changing role of HR Business Partners. Prior to joining CRF, she worked for over five years as a researcher and writer, gaining experience of a breadth of different research methods and publishing content in a variety of formats.

We acknowledge the expert contribution of Dua Al Toobi, the region's leading nationalisation and workforce transformation expert and a bestselling author on the topic, for the insights and perspectives she contributed to this report.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is executing one of the most ambitious socio-economic transformations in the world, yet many organisations in the Gulf are still using talent practices designed for steadier times. The ability to quickly develop and deploy talent to where and when it is needed will be critical to sustaining business growth and national agendas.

Practitioners in the region highlighted **how the scale of ambition in the Gulf creates an opportunity to speed up change through leapfrogging** legacy HR models.

Our research highlights that organisations often spread their approaches to talent too thinly. We advocate that organisations focus on the roles that create the most value (e.g. what are the top 20-25 critical roles that will deliver tomorrow's value, and how do you set up those roles for success? Which pockets of talent do you most need to accelerate?).

Talent planning in the Gulf must operate across multiple time horizons. Organisations need to balance long-term national strategies with multi-year visions (e.g. Vision 2030) alongside short-term market shifts, shifting business demands and ad-hoc adjustments. We set out CRF's framework for dynamic talent planning to support with this.

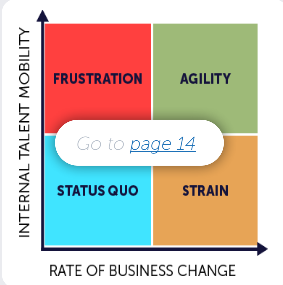
AI will fundamentally reshape jobs and work, with employers estimating that **42% of tasks will be automated by 2027** (*WEF, Future of Jobs 2023*). Jobs will need to be redesigned from the bottom-up, with talent teams anticipating, facilitating and incorporating any AI and tech-driven changes. .

CRF's future-ready talent matrix is a tool which organisations can use to identify the gap between their current and target approach to talent, helping to identify future talent risks and how you might mitigate them.

We highlight three key areas of acceleration in developing future-ready talent –

1. a culture of development,
2. internal mobility and supportive data
3. technology systems.

Internal mobility remains a largely untapped development engine and is part of the 'missing link' between implementing learning programmes and achieving sustained results. .



Large-scale development programmes should be seen as the start of the development journey, not the end. Creating a culture of development, exposure to senior management, support for self-driven learning and not overlooking existing talent processes can all help to ensure results are sustained once employees graduate.

A skills-based model is just one tool within an overall approach to talent management and should be approached cautiously. Our research highlights that layering AI or skills frameworks on top of weak foundations doesn't work. The organisations seeing impact start with clarity - a shared definition of what 'skills' mean, a small set of business-critical use cases, and the right management and employee behaviours to make skills matter in practice.

The biggest lever for improving talent agility isn't technology or new models - it's consistent execution of the basics. Prioritisation, small-scale experimentation, disciplined iteration, alignment to what the business needs now - these "perennials" underpin everything else. CRF has several resources on this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Don't focus on short-term, tactical fixes** at the expense of building the longer-term, future-ready workforce required by national visions or large-scale transformation programmes. CRF's dynamic talent framework can help you to respond to talent needs on multiple timescales.
2. **Consider how you might use the latest technology and AI tools to leapfrog cumbersome legacy systems** and speed up progress - but always start from the business need and remember that the human architecture (how people experience and adapt to the system) is as important as the technology architecture.
3. **Don't expect to tackle the whole workforce at once.** Reflect on your business strategy and focus on the three to five highest priority issues or opportunities that will have the greatest impact on revenue generation and growth and test and learn through small-scale experiments and proofs of concept.
4. **Reframe localisation programmes as a way to create sustainable value, rather than as a compliance exercise.** Rather than asking, "how do we promote more nationals?", ask "how do we create value? Which value-creating roles must be held by national talent over time, and what acceleration is required to get them ready?"
5. **Create a talent philosophy** which clarifies what talent means for the organisation in its context and what business outcomes talent practices should drive - and ensure everyone is aligned around it. What do you mean by performance? How important are behaviours versus performance? Which roles is it essential are held by nationals over time?
6. **Invest in back-office architecture,** ensuring it can keep pace with the scale of ambition and pace of change in the region. Get your house in order with good internal workforce information, including on costs, so you can extract and manipulate data quickly. However, don't get bogged down in pursuing perfect data. Start with a low-resolution picture, build momentum and refine as you go.
7. **Make internal mobility a development engine.** Treat talent as an organisational resource (rather than a line manager's asset), plan for how you will backfill position consider adjacent talent and - above all - keep linking mobility to value.
8. **Try out generative AI tools** to help you develop talent scenarios, test your assumptions and create career pathways.
9. **Make sure you have a bottom-up feedback loo**p so you understand how people are using technology in your business and the impact it is having on jobs. This will enable you to identify opportunities for redesigning work.
10. **Invest in reskilling** - reskilling plans are often limited in the Gulf, yet are a critical part of building future-ready talent. Focus on creating talent transition pathways to smooth out internal demand curves or redeploy people and carve out time for employees to conduct the necessary learning.

1.0 THE CONTEXT FOR TALENT

> *"National skills agendas across the Gulf are reshaping how organisations think about talent. The GCC is shifting from oil-based economies to knowledge-based economies, and that transformation is placing human capability at the centre of competitiveness"*
>
> **DUA AL TOOBI**, WORKFORCE STRATEGIST AND CEO, THE FUTUREPROOF ADVISORY

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is executing one of the most ambitious socio-economic transformations in the world. National visions such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, Oman Vision 2040 and Qatar National Vision 2030 are not just economic strategies - they are talent strategies. Diversification, giga-projects, sovereign investment in AI and advanced tech, and international expansion are all rapidly changing future talent requirements.

Talent is a strategic risk for business in the region; the ability to quickly develop and deploy talent to where and when it is needed will be critical to sustaining business growth and national agendas. Despite a growing labour force, there is fierce competition for skills and organisations still struggle to get the talent they need. In PwC's 2025 Middle East CEO survey, around 6 in 10 CEOs said skills gaps and talent availability are a top constraint on growth.

This is happening against a backdrop of rising uncertainty. Gulf-based businesses operate in a world of more frequent shocks - regional conflicts, supply-chain disruptions, rapid regulatory decisions and sudden opportunities such as new licencing or partnership prospects - which can change hiring needs overnight.

The AI-driven revolution adds another layer of uncertainty. PwC finds that 84% of Middle East CEOs plan to accelerate automation and digitalisation in the near term. Mercer also reports that roughly 80-85% of employees in the UAE already use AI tools weekly - far higher than most other markets. But the labour-market effects are still unclear: will automation compress certain entry-level and support roles, making it harder to build experience pipelines, or will productivity and new industries create enough higher-value work to absorb people? HR needs to be ready for either outcome.

The pace of change may create the impression that planning is impossible - however planning is essential to adaptability. That tension sits at the heart of talent in the Gulf. Mercer's latest research echoes this: many GCC organisations are doing short-term, tactical skills fixes - filling immediate gaps for AI, digital, project delivery - but not always building the longer-term, future-ready workforce that Vision 2030, UAE 2071 or large transformation programmes will require. Over-relying on tactical hiring *"not only undermines individual and team performance but also poses a significant risk to organisational resilience and adaptability"* (Mercer, 2025).

1.1

WHAT'S SHAPING THE TALENT MARKET IN THE GCC

"Every company has plans to expand, so there's always a narrative around expansion and growth."

STEPHEN LAYCOCK, HEAD OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND SUPPORT SERVICES, WAHA CAPITAL

A LARGER, MORE FLUID LABOUR POOL

- Relative political stability, large-scale projects and attractive residency schemes have deepened the talent pool; intra-GCC movement is far easier than five years ago and reforms to sponsorship and long-term visas in the UAE and Saudi have made it simpler to attract and keep high-skilled expats. The flow of blue-collar and semi-skilled workers into the Gulf also remains very strong, with the UAE and several neighbours signing and renewing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to secure pipelines of talent.
- Several GCC states still enjoy demographic tailwinds - Saudi and Oman in particular have large cohorts of young nationals entering the labour market - and women's participation in the labour market is rising.
- Gulf governments have enacted labour reforms to improve the overall functioning of the job market - benefiting both local and foreign talent. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have reformed the sponsorship (kafala) system to allow greater labour mobility and introduced new visa categories to attract high-skilled expats (e.g. the UAE has rolled out 5- and 10-year Golden Visas to attract global experts and investors, as regional competition for talent heats up).

STRONG INVESTMENT

- GCC governments are investing in building skills ecosystems (e.g. national skills platforms, sector councils, large-scale reskilling) aligned to national priorities. For example, Saudi Arabia's National Skills Platform uses AI to classify skills and recommend training pathways.
- Private sector investment is also increasing. For example, large Gulf companies such as Aramco, ADNOC and Emirates Group are all building their own learning academies.

"The transition to AI is going to change the business models; the critical roles that will support forward movement on AI are really important. Leadership is a critical talent segment for the AI agenda, as well as understanding what future skills need to be adopted across the whole workforce"

LISA LYONS, REGIONAL TRANSFORMATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE LEAD FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND AFRICA, MERCER

INCREASING SKILL DEMAND

- The above-listed expansion has created an increased war for talent, with the same talent pool being spread more thinly - new strategies require new capabilities and often new roles that don't yet exist. Mega-projects amplify competition, creating a circular flow of scarce skills across borders and sectors.
- The emergence of fields like data science, cybersecurity, fintech and e-commerce in the Gulf economies has led to surging demand for specialised talent that outstrips local supply. There is a recognised digital skills gap - a Korn Ferry report estimated a potential shortfall of millions of skilled workers by 2030 in these high-tech domains. As Dua Al Toobi emphasised: *"While the region now enjoys an abundant supply of general talent, the demand for specialised and tech-focused skills remains acutely high; making digital, data, and AI capabilities the new competitive frontier for organisations across the Gulf".*
- Mercer's 2025 research shows that many of the core human skills the region will need to make AI work - creative and analytical thinking, curiosity, lifelong learning, motivation and self-awareness - have actually declined in prevalence since 2021.

The paradox is that planning is now both harder and more essential. The pace of business, geopolitical shocks and technology shifts make long-range forecasting unreliable. Yet national visions, mega-projects and localisation targets lock organisations into 5-, 10- or even 20-year horizons. Gulf employers therefore have to manage two planning cycles: long-term strategic visions as well as shorter operational cycles that deal with today's disruptions.

The good news is that there is an enormous opportunity to create future-ready talent in the Gulf region, with strong political will and executive sponsorship to invest in talent at scale, as well as the opportunity to leapfrog legacy systems. Employees are also very open to change: 52% expect their jobs to look very different within five years (compared with 36% globally); 61% say they already know how their skills must evolve; and more than half trust their employers to help them get there (PwC, 2023).

The best response to unpredictability is to build resilience and flexibility into our systems, and this is the key challenge for future-ready talent management. In this research we consider how organisations can develop approaches to talent planning and deployment that make them better prepared and more resilient to respond to the challenges their businesses will inevitably face.

The fundamental question is how to make talent management more adaptive - able to respond quickly to change - while keeping it aligned to business strategy and proactive in building necessary capabilities.

2.0 DYNAMIC TALENT PLANNING AS A RESPONSE TO UNCERTAINTY

This chapter emphasises that this dynamic talent planning should be an interactive process. Building the muscle of adaptability does not mean less planning. It means getting better at anticipating and planning for multiple scenarios and being ready to switch gears as needed. Dua Al Toobi, Workforce Strategist and CEO, The Futureproof Advisory, described it well: *"We also need to move away from annual workforce planning cycles toward a more rolling, scenario-based approach that evolves with national priorities, market shifts, and emerging technologies."*

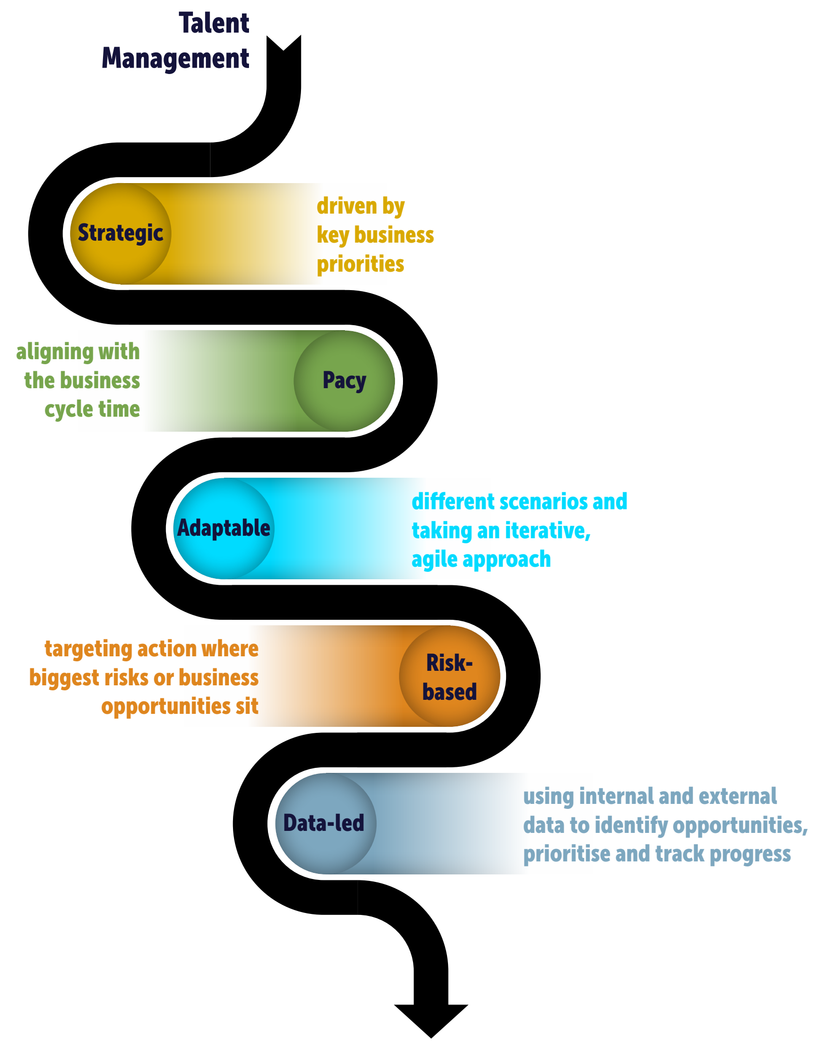
> *"Developing a more long-term view of talent management has been an ongoing challenge in the region, just because of the nature of the workforce and the fact that everything is changing really quickly, however there is now a greater emphasis on longer-term business planning."*
>
> **STEPHEN LAYCOCK,** HEAD OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND SUPPORT SERVICES, WAHA CAPITAL

Future-ready talent management starts with rewiring how we plan. Many organisations in the Gulf are still using talent practices designed for steadier times - annual reviews, long lists of "high potentials," generic leadership programmes - even though their business and external contexts are rapidly transforming. Too often these processes have become industries in themselves: heavy, top-down cycles that generate activity for HR but don't move people faster to the work that matters. As Andy Hill, Senior Director Talent Management, Al-Ghanim Industries, warned, it's easy to end up in an "industry" of talent reviews where you never quite get to action, even if you do them quarterly.

Faced with the levels of uncertainty businesses have to contend with, we may conclude that forward planning is impossible and we would be best served by simply responding to changing talent needs as they arise. However, we argue that having a planning framework for talent is essential.

FIGURE 1

How we approach talent management needs to shift to be more:



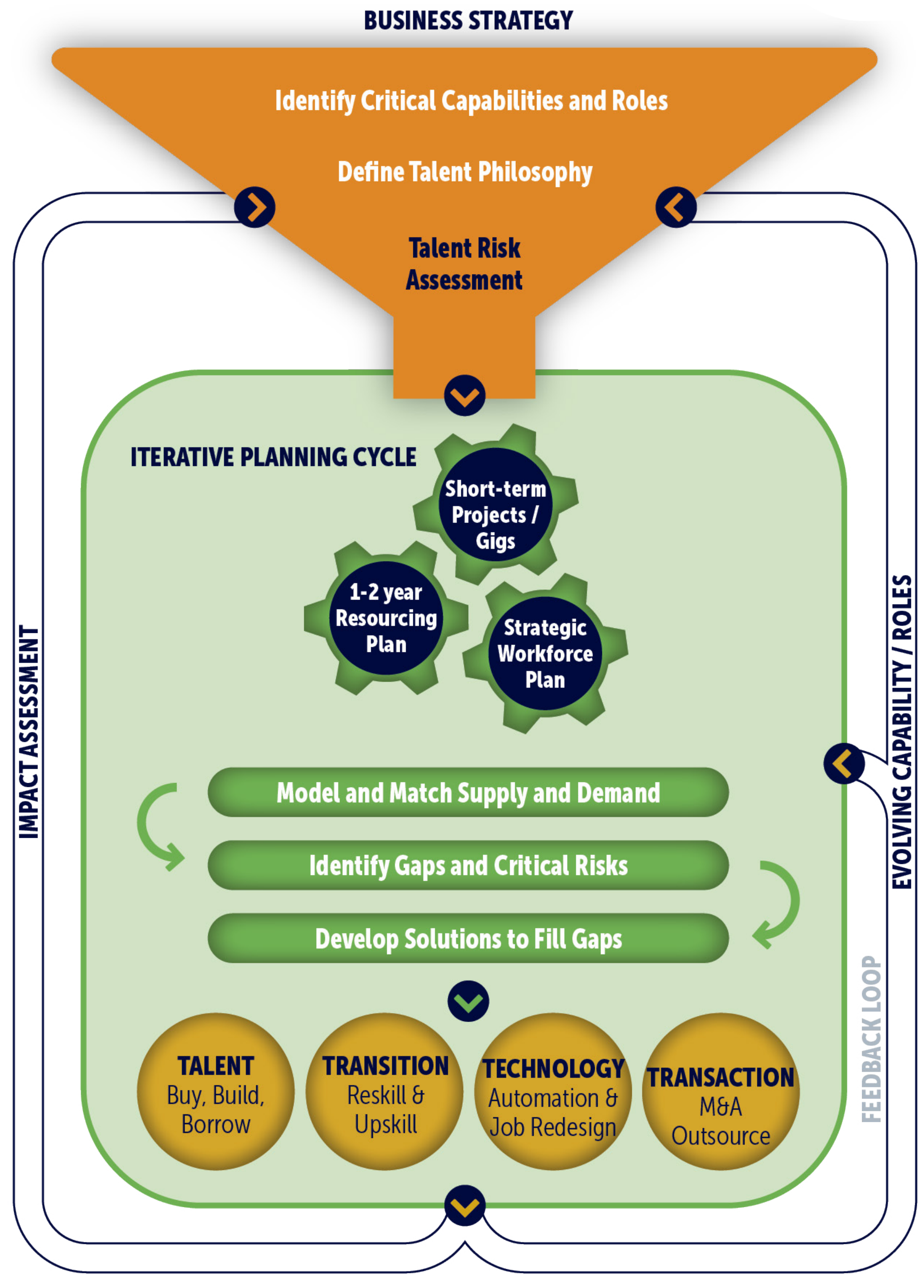
National visions and multi-year government programmes demand long-range workforce thinking - you have to know, for example, how many AI, tourism, healthcare or infrastructure roles you'll need in three to five years. At the same time, these plans need to be operationalised through annual resourcing plans and respond to immediate, unexpected events: a mega-project accelerates, a regulator changes course, a new investment vehicle is launched or an external shock – as with Covid-19 - forces rapid redeployment. CRF's framework for dynamic talent planning helps organisations to navigate this. In this chapter we outline this framework, which is formed of three parts:

1. **Aligning the business and talent strategy**
   - Identify critical capabilities and roles
   - Define the talent philosophy
   - Talent risk assessment
2. **An iterative approach to planning and experimentation focused on developing solutions to critical business priorities**
   - Model and match supply and demand
   - Identify gaps and critical roles
   - Develop solutions to fill gaps
3. **A data-driven feedback loop that allows for course-correction along the way**
   - Have our actions been successful in reshaping the business?
   - Mapping changes to jobs affected bottom up as people adapt and deploy technology
   - Course correcting for emerging business scenarios

While this framework is built on the principles of strategic workforce planning (SWP), it seeks to avoid the trap that SWP has often fallen into: becoming overly cumbersome and tactical. Our intention is that this framework can be used as a thinking tool to help HR leaders prioritise and develop actionable plans and practical scenarios.

FIGURE 2

Dynamic Talent Planning



STAGE **1**

ALIGNING BUSINESS AND TALENT STRATEGY

> *"Organisations need to be clearer about where they are going. There needs to be more clarity on the goals of the transformation, the financial and non-financial KPIs, the business case and how they'll realistically monitor value from these transformations. That will keep people focused."*
>
> **NISHANTH KRISHNAN,** DIRECTOR - PEOPLE ADVISORY & BUSINESS CONSULTING, , GRANT THORNTON

1. What critical capabilities and roles are needed to deliver the strategy?

Before getting into detailed planning around critical roles or talent pools, it's important to identify the key organisational capabilities required to build or sustain competitive advantage.

Teasing out the critical capabilities is a stepping stone to get from business strategy to talent actions. This stage seeks to answer questions such as:

- What are the 4-6 major business objectives that the business needs to achieve?
- What organisational capabilities will need to be developed to achieve the objectives?
- What is the work that needs to be done for that value to arrive? Note that the actions required to develop capabilities might relate to talent but could include other elements such as entering a new market, investment in new technology or automation, developing new partnerships or acquiring another business.
- What new work will the organisation need to be able to do, and where do we need to develop capability for the future?

Connecting Talent to Business Value through Critical Roles

> *"Organisations face difficulties in identifying and moving their best talent into tomorrow's value. They need to balance identifying current value with where value might be created in the future."*
>
> **LISA LYONS,** REGIONAL TRANSFORMATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE LEAD FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND AFRICA, MERCER

The next step is to focus on critical roles and/or capabilities that have outsized impact on business outcomes. As Prateek Sinha, Partner, CEO.works, points out, when business strategies change, financial capital tends to move quickly but talent often doesn't. This means organisations often find their best talent is tied up in roles which are important to delivering today's business results but may not represent future critical sources of value to the business. The talent system must enable the organisation to allocate its best talent to delivering tomorrow's value and to move that talent around as strategies change. This is especially relevant in the GCC, where national programmes, giga-projects and AI buildouts create new, non-negotiable roles at speed.

This approach can also be adopted for nationalisation and local talent development agendas. The question is not simply "how do we promote more nationals?" but "how do we create value? Which value-creating roles must be held by national talent over time, and what acceleration is required to get them ready?" That reframes localisation from a compliance exercise into creating sustainable value. Waha Capital's approach is instructive: *"talent is talent. Development is based on what that individual needs and what the business needs"*, whilst still accounting for how they have made *"a commitment to our board that we want to develop UAE national talent because it's the right thing to do for the country"*.

According to Sinha, a common problem is that companies move straight to talking about the supply side of talent (Who do we have and what can they do?), without giving sufficient attention to the demand (What's the work that needs to be done? What capabilities do we need to get that work done?). *"A lot of the risk of non-delivery of the strategy comes from the demand side because I may not be clear what I want from the role and stakeholders are not aligned about what the role is there to do,"* said Sinha. *"You then can end up with roles being set up in a way that means the individual will never succeed."*

Sinha advocates a Talent to Value© process that begins with identifying the 4-6 big bets that drive disproportionate value. These value hotspots often sit at organisation seams (product, markets, functions, capabilities) and are the elements within a strategy that bend the performance curve. For each of these hotspots, the approach defines the work to be done for the value to arrive (including new work) and then determines the new capabilities or roles required to deliver that work.

The process helps answer questions such as:

- What are the 20-25 most critical roles that will deliver 80% of the value?
- Is the organisation designed to enable delivery for these roles?
- What are the 1-2 new capabilities that we need to invest in to deliver the strategy and how do they show up in our critical roles?
- Are these critical roles designed for success? Are we clear (and is the organisation aligned) on the jobs to be done within each of these roles? Do they have the decision rights and authority to execute these jobs to be done? Does the role have the right capacity (time, team, resources, budgets)? Is there likely to be resistance to what the role is delivering?
- Do the incumbents 'fit' these roles? Does their experience, skills, professional and personal capabilities give me the confidence that they can deliver the jobs to be done and manage the risks associated with authority, capacity and resilience? Does their track record inspire confidence? Do I have a retention risk for the people in these critical roles?
- Are my best talents sitting in these most critical roles?

This forensic analysis for 20-30 critical roles identifies the greatest areas of organisation and talent related risks and enables the definition of a precise, minimally invasive intervention plan to mitigate risks. Interventions could include reconfiguring roles, complementing role holders, coaching individuals or changing the talent. These interventions have been shown to reduce time to value, thereby positioning talent as a strategic value accelerator.

2. What's our Talent Philosophy?

Aligning the business and talent strategy starts with defining an explicit talent philosophy that clarifies what talent means for the organisation in its context and what business outcomes talent practices should drive. This is important work that sets out the principles guiding talent practices.

It is essential to have the CEO and executive team lined up around the talent philosophy, as they ultimately hold accountability for following through on the talent strategy. Without contextualising talent within the business strategy, executives are likely to lose interest as the processes feel generic and are disconnected from business realities. Marc Effron, President, Talent Strategy Group, who developed the Talent Philosophy framework discussed here, said: *"In most companies, HR has never asked the executive team to define their shared beliefs about the best way to manage talent to achieve the strategy. HR ends up rolling a series of ideas up to the executive team to ask if they like them. The executive team is overwhelmed because they don't understand how all these things fit together and the business loses track of exactly what they are supposed to do and what's most important."*

Creating a talent philosophy requires the executive team to develop a point of view on the best way to manage talent to achieve the strategy by addressing questions such as:

- **Performance:** What do we mean by performance? How important are behaviours versus performance?
- **Differentiation:** Do we believe everyone has talent worth developing or only certain high potentials? Are we focused on building broad-based capability or just filling critical roles? Where do we devote our limited resources? How much of the development 'goodies' such as money, projects, exposure and development opportunities do we give to high performers only versus making them available to everyone?
- **Transparency:** How transparent are we with people about their performance, potential and capacity to progress?
- **Internal versus external orientation:** Do we primarily seek to develop and retrain our resources or acquire new resources to meet future challenges, with consequences for restructuring?
- **Individual versus Company:** To what extent do we believe that individuals should develop their own careers versus company-led development and talent management?
- **Accountability:** How accountable should a manager be to build the quality and depth of his or her team. What rewards and consequences apply?

Questions that organisations based in the Gulf may specifically need to grapple with include:

- **Balance of national and expatriate talent:** What is the long-term role of expatriate talent in our organisation - are expats here to transfer knowledge and exit, or can high-performing expats build full careers alongside nationals?
- **Speed of developing local talent:** How quickly do we want to accelerate national talent into value-creating roles, and where is it essential that those roles are held by nationals over time?

The answers must flow directly from the business' strategic aims and challenges. It provides a framework for decision-making, resource allocation and prioritisation and creates a 'north star' for the talent function. The talent philosophy is determined by the CEO and executive team through conversations facilitated by the CHRO or talent leader. Often this takes time. It's then HR's responsibility to ensure talent practices align with the philosophy. Who gets access to development programmes, developmental projects, differentiated rewards, international assignments and so on must derive from the talent philosophy.

FIGURE 3

Talent Philosophies

Philosophy	Core Beliefs	Talent Practices	Employee Deal	Strategic Alignment
Performance-Driven Meritocracy (e.g. McKinsey)	Success depends on attracting exceptional people and enabling them to perform at their best. Excellence and impact are the key differentiators.	Hire for intellect, drive and potential; rigorous performance management; accelerated promotion for high performers; feedback-rich, stretch assignments.	*"If you're exceptional, we'll accelerate you."*	Supports a high-performance, client-impact model where differentiation comes from superior talent and execution.
Growth and Learning Culture (e.g. Microsoft)	Everyone has the capacity to learn and improve. Curiosity and collaboration fuel performance.	Managers as coaches; focus on learning agility; encourage experimentation.	*"We grow when you grow."*	Enables cultural transformation, innovation and adaptability in fast-changing markets.
Skills-Based and Fluid Workforce (e.g. Standard Chartered)	Skills, not roles, determine opportunity and value. Mobility and reskilling drive adaptability.	Build skills taxonomy; enable internal mobility and project-based deployment; continuous learning and reskilling.	*"We'll help you build skills for the future – inside and beyond our organisation."*	Builds a future-ready, flexible workforce that can respond to evolving business priorities and technologies.
Entrepreneurial and Agile Talent (e.g. Spotify)	Innovation thrives when talented people are empowered to act, experiment and learn from failure.	Hire for creativity and initiative; small, autonomous teams; reward innovation; low bureaucracy.	*"You own it – and you'll grow fast."*	Fuels rapid innovation, speed to market and responsiveness in competitive, fast-moving industries.
Long-Term People Stewardship (e.g. Shell)	Sustainable success comes from developing leaders and investing in people for the long term.	Structured career paths; rotational assignments; mentorship and leadership pipelines; long-term retention focus.	*"We'll invest in your career for the long haul."*	Ensures leadership continuity, organisational stability and deep institutional knowledge.

3. Complete Talent Risk Assessment

Having identified the critical capabilities required to deliver the strategy and critical roles, a Talent Risk assessment can be completed, identifying which talent categories pose the greatest risk to the delivery of the strategy, or indeed, the greatest opportunity if it is correctly targeted. Risk can be quantified in terms of revenues lost or potentially gained, market share growth or erosion, customer services deterioration or improvement, rate of innovation and new product development etc.

Factors to consider are:

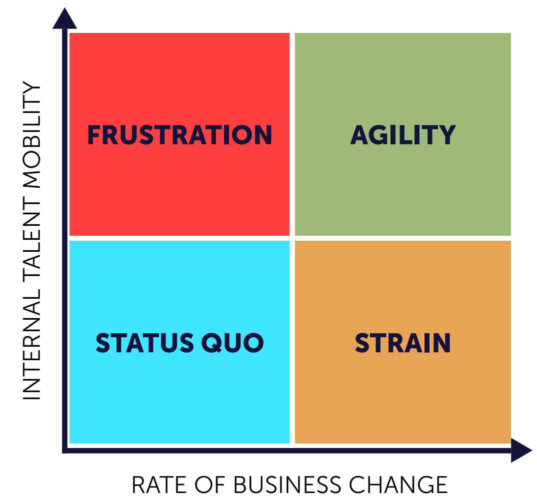
- **Novelty of the critical talent categories** - is this a new or emerging area or is it well established and understood?
- **Internal supply** - is there an existing pool?
- **External availability**
- **Competitive factors** - is the market for such talent 'hot' or otherwise?
- **Attractiveness of the talent area** to potential new hires.

Finally, a prioritisation exercise should be conducted based on the levels of risk and likelihood of occurrence.

> *"In many Gulf companies, talent planning is still seen as an HR process rather than a strategic lever for growth and that mindset has to change. 'The most future ready organisations are those where HR sits alongside finance and operations to shape long term decisions around growth, digital transformation, and capability investment. Talent conversations need to happen in the same room where business models are being redesigned."*
>
> **DUA AL TOOBI,** WORKFORCE STRATEGIST AND CEO, THE FUTUREPROOF ADVISORY

FIGURE 4

Future-Ready Talent Matrix



Click each quadrant to go to the detail

Use this matrix to spot the gap between your current state and your target state - and to decide the moves that will shift you to a stronger quadrant. Start by placing your organisation today, and where you need to be in 12 months to deliver the plan. Then, consider the talent risks in your target quadrant, as well as how you will mitigate them.

The following reflection questions can help determine which quadrant best fits your organisation:

- In the last 12–18 months, how often have our priorities materially shifted (e.g. quarterly, annually, rarely)?
- What share of revenue (or mission outcomes) will come from new offerings, markets or operating models in the next 24 months?
- How frequently do external factors (regulation, national programmes, competitors, mega-projects) force us to replan talent needs?
- How many roles will be redefined by tech/AI, digitisation or organisational redesign in the next 12–24 months?
- When a new priority emerges, how fast can we move proven people into it (e.g. weeks, months, or "not really")?
- What % of vacancies do we plan to fill by internal moves/secondments vs. external hires?
- Do we have clear, current success profiles (outcomes, skills, context) for critical roles, or just generic job descriptions?

Return to **Future Ready Talent Matrix**

FRUSTRATION

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- People move, but work may not. Movement is not always pointed at value and mobility sometimes equals churn.
- Rotations and internal marketplaces may be busy, but do not lead to progress.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Convert movement into value (e.g. tie every move to a clear business outcome) and limit rotations that don't build priority capabilities.
- Introduce a mobility business case (what value, what skill gained, what backfill plan) and evaluate.

AGILITY

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Ability to move people quickly to the work that matters, faster time-to-value.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Maintenance to avoid backsliding.
- Consider ways of leveraging technology and AI to further support talent mobility (e.g. skills inference and matching, internal talent marketplaces, career pathing, etc.)

STATUS QUO

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- A focus on maintaining a steady state, slow succession and few lateral moves.
- Risk of stagnation, talent hoarding and long time-to-fill internally.
- Business is exposed if market or regulation shifts.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Tighten up basics (e.g. clear job architecture, ensure 'back office' is supportive)
- Take steps to gently increase mobility (e.g. post all vacancies internally by default)

STRAIN

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Business transformation (e.g. new businesses launch, programmes scale) but people do not.
- Risk of firefighting, external hiring spikes and employee burnout. Critical roles may go unfilled.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Quickly increase internal mobility (e.g. identify 15-25 critical roles tied to near-term value, remove policy blockers and tie leader KPIs to deployment speed).

STAGE 2

ITERATIVE PLANNING CYCLE

This stage involves an iterative process for the critical capabilities identified, developing options to address gaps between today's position and a desired future state. This uses the principles of Strategic Workforce Planning (SWP) to build and deploy action plans. However, SWP is often criticised for being a data-heavy and onerous process that can easily lose sight of the business outcomes it is trying to achieve. The key is to put pragmatism ahead of precision to avoid getting bogged down.

Ironically, building the muscle of adaptability does not mean less planning. It means getting better at anticipating and planning for multiple scenarios and being ready to switch gears as needed. This makes SWP more important than ever, but it needs to become less a comprehensive process that happens on an annual or biennial timeframe, and more a mindset or discipline that underpins how HR interacts with the business. In that regard, SWP is not just a function within HR; it is a mindset and toolkit that HR business partners bring with them to any discussions about business strategy and performance.

In practice, this means adopting an agile planning ethos that enables SWP to adapt and respond to changing circumstances:

Decide What Really Matters

- **Pragmatic, priority-based planning.** Rather than attempting to model every role and every skill five years out, focus on identifying a few critical talent issues that will have the greatest bearing on the business. This might mean a move away from corporate, top-down planning towards a more organic approach that applies the principles of SWP on a smaller scale to address local needs. The key is to home in on the critical capabilities, roles or talent segments without which the strategy will falter.
- **Segmenting the workforce to identify parts that disproportionately drive value or risk.** This may result in multiple smaller workforce plans running in parallel according to different business needs. For example, Ericsson's Edwards has identified some micro-segments affecting only a few roles where a large proportion were approaching retirement and would therefore pose an outsized talent risk if not addressed. This approach can also be applied to developing a sustainable pipeline of local talent.

Plan Iteratively

- **An iterative process across multiple time horizons.** Companies are finding they may need different cadences for different elements, such as a two- or three-yearly long-term strategic review running alongside a one- to two-year tactical resource plan. There may also be regular (quarterly or ad hoc) check-ins on 'hot jobs' or project-driven deep dives, such as when entering a new market or making a business change.
- **Treating SWP as an ongoing business conversation, not an annual event.** Edwards has pushed to integrate workforce planning into regular strategy discussions, joining regular strategy review meetings *"although it took a year for me to get invited."*
- **Lining up HR and business planning cycles.** SWP should not be run as a separate HR process. It needs to be integrated with the organisation's strategy development and business planning processes and run to the same timetables.
- **Consider multiple scenarios.** Preparing for multiple scenarios means the business is more likely to be prepared to pivot quickly when circumstances change. While some managers resist what they perceive as extra work, companies are increasingly considering multiple scenarios and asking: for each, what would our talent needs be? This encourages readiness for a range of outcomes. Generative AI tools are making it easier to model multiple scenarios without the need for specialised planning systems. In one example, an interviewee fed publicly available information, including the company's annual report, into ChatGPT and came up with several realistic business scenarios.

Leverage Data

- **Balance qualitative and quantitative data.** Focus on what's changing most rather than trying to count everything. By identifying a narrow and manageable scope of action, HR can show impact quickly while avoiding getting bogged down in analysing the workforce in minute detail. Skills-based talent tools (discussed in chapter 4) are making it easier to access data to diagnose key capability gaps. One senior learning & development professional in the region we spoke to outlined how they are 'always gathering data' and the wide range of sources of information they tapped into, including internal SMEs, leaders, individual contributors, employee surveys and Employee Relations and Ethics and Compliance teams (to see what challenges and core themes need addressing). They also leverage data collected via a QR code in their learning facilities for employees to scan and provide feedback on skills gaps that need to be addressed.
- **Framing talent needs in the language of risk.** At Ericsson, David Edwards, Head of Workforce Planning, is shifting the emphasis towards identifying and mitigating talent risks that could derail the business. He produces risk assessment reports that highlight talent hotspots. The risk-oriented framing grabs executives' attention more than abstract headcount plans. Flagging business vulnerabilities is more likely to lead to actions in areas such as succession planning, knowledge management or targeted hiring.

Turn it into Action

- **Focus on actions and outcomes.** Adam Gibson, author of Agile Workforce Planning, noted that SWP is often criticised for *"resulting in analysis without clear outputs that people can do something about."* The goal is a set of clear initiatives around recruitment, learning, reskilling, role redesign, succession or talent pools for key positions, with clearly identified owners.
- **Test and learn.** Starting with small-scale experiments creates the opportunity to develop a proof of concept and iron out problems before scaling.

In practice, talent planning (whether it's labelled SWP or something else) needs to consider the following questions:

1. What internal capability do we have?

   (e.g. current workforce profile, expected major talent flows, talent management information regarding the future internal supply of talent).

2. What does the external labour market look like?

   (e.g. broader workforce, demographic and technological trends that may affect the availability of talent, followed by developing models to match supply and demand).

3. What's the gap?

   (e.g. identify gaps between future need and current supply and highlight areas for action, at an individual, workforce groups, or skills-based level).

4. Where are the critical risks?

   (e.g. reviewing the gap analysis through a risk lens, considering A key aim is to identify the few critical things that could trip up the business and should be priority focus areas for action).

5. How do we fill the gaps?

   (e.g. recruitment, grow talent internally, improve retention and engagement, increase workforce flexibility, redesign work etc.).

Potential solutions – the 4 T's: Talent, Technology, Transition, Transaction

TALENT – Buy, Build or Borrow

- **Buying in talent through recruitment.** Distinguishing between 'build' roles which are developed from within; and 'buy' roles, which are brought in from the external market.
- **Growing talent internally** through both formal on-the-job skills and career development, and deployment of people through developmental experiences. Harnessing talent marketplaces and learning platforms to alert employees to skills gaps and nudge them towards preparing for in-demand future roles (see chapter 3). Using skills-based incentives to reward employees for developing new skills.
- **Increasing workforce flexibility** tthrough 'borrowing' talent from the contingent workforce (temporary and agency staff, self-employed contractors, consultants). See the case study on the next page on Unilever's U-Work programme.

TRANSITION – Reskill, Upskill and Retain

- **Create talent transition pathways,** which can be facilitated by the algorithms within digital learning platforms and talent marketplaces, to smooth out internal demand curves or redeploy people from parts of the business where demand for talent is reducing, while avoiding blanket workforce reductions. This can result in lower restructuring costs through better planning of redundancy or retrenchment programmes. Dua Al Toobi, Workforce Strategist and CEO, The Futureproof Advisory, explained how reskilling plans *"are still limited in the Gulf but will be essential to futureproofing. As industries transform and automation accelerates, reskilling ensures that existing talent can transition into new, high value roles rather than being displaced by change."*
- **Improving retention and engagement.** Analysis may indicate 'leaky' parts of the talent pipeline that need to be addressed through understanding and responding to the reasons for turnover.
- **Adjusting the employment proposition to ensure that critical roles and skill areas are made attractive to potential employees.**
- **Developing differentiated EVPs.** Where the organisation is looking to hire skills it previously did not require (such as developing a new technical capability or hiring talent from outside its sector), it may be necessary to make changes to the employer brand and employment value proposition. This could include offering more flexible patterns of work (especially part-time working), rethinking career pathways, developing mentoring schemes or updating reward and benefits packages.

TECHNOLOGY – Automation and Job Redesign

- **Automation of work.** Identifying opportunities to automate tasks or roles with AI.
- **Redesigning work** to meet changing business needs more effectively. For example, developing multi-skilled teams to increase resource flexibility or designing a new function or job role to focus on a new capability to be developed.

TRANSACTION – Outsourcing and M&A

- **Outsourcing** of non-core activities.
- **Targeted mergers and acquisitions** or acquihiring, where a business is acquired for the purposes of securing its talent. For further detail, refer to CRF's research *Driving Change, Accelerating Growth*.

For a more comprehensive review of SWP, including CRF's detailed methodology, see our research *Strategic Workforce Planning: Unlocking Future Capabilities*.

CASE STUDY **UNILEVER**

U-WORK – BUILDING A FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE

Unilever's U-Work programme is an innovative example of a new working model designed to increase flexibility in talent practices. Changing workforce demographics, shifting expectations of employees about how they ideally wanted to work and a business need to improve access to skills were drivers for implementing the programme.

The U-Work model gives participants the freedom and flexibility of contract roles with the security and benefits associated with permanent roles. U-Work employees receive a monthly retainer and benefits, whether they are working on an assignment or not, and are paid for assignments when they do work. Originally, the programme was about retaining older workers as they approach retirement. But it soon became clear that people across life stages wanted to work in more flexible ways, for example those juggling families or wishing to travel or study without losing their job.

The following were key success factors:

- **Small-scale piloting helped build sponsorship for a wider roll-out.** The programme began as a pilot across two sites. *"People seem to think pilots need to be bigger than is actually required to have a strategic impact,"* said Lynagh, who led the U-Work programme.
- **Put in the ground work around attitudes and behaviours.** Unilever created a Contact Manager role who was responsible for working with leaders and line managers, sourcing projects, recruiting people into the talent pool and matching people to work. It was important to have a human interface, not just technology, to get buy in and maintain momentum. Part of the Contact Manager's role was to help managers think about how they could frame assignments differently, shifting their mindset from 'this must be my resource, my team' to being open to alternative ways to resource work.
- **Don't let perfection get in the way of progress.** *"It can be tempting to say we can't do this because we don't have a system to support it, but we did a lot with basic tools such as spreadsheets."* Now tools are being retrofitted, for example developing an AI agent to infer skills from the assignment description and match people's skills and availability to opportunities.

STAGE **3**

EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

The final stage involves evaluating the business impact of actions and identifying opportunities for improvement. It starts with having objectives set up-front, with business metrics and a baseline against which to measure progress.

Specific measures will be determined by the actions arising from the talent plan. For example, an objective related to reskilling might be measured by reduced recruitment and restructuring costs in the skills segments affected. An objective to increase internal succession for critical roles could be measured by the percentage of roles filled by internal succession.

The ultimate measure is whether the shape and size of the workforce is adjusting in line with the business' future strategic direction. For example, if a company sees its future in added value services as opposed to product sales, can we measure, in resource terms, the extent to which this is being achieved? This would require resource modelling.

AI will have major impacts on roles. To some extent, this will happen from the bottom-up as individuals or teams experiment with and adopt AI tools or other technologies. They will, in effect, redesign their own jobs by employing AI. The feedback mechanism needs to identify these bottom-up changes and build them into future planning as they will change the talent or resource landscape.

Questions to consider in constructing the evaluation process include:

- What are the key objectives of the talent plan and how do they connect to the organisation's strategic priorities? What outcomes would constitute 'success'?
- What baseline are we measuring against? How is this baseline changing through job level adoption of AI/technology, effectively leading to people redesigning their own jobs? This must be tracked and fed back into the planning scenarios.
- What data do we need to measure? Do we have access to the relevant data and if not, how would we collect it? Do the measures give us insight into business impact in areas such as reduced cost, improved profitability or increased speed to market?
- How do we use lessons learned as feedback to improve the process?
- Who needs to know about the results and how do we engage them? What do they think about the results achieved relative to the costs incurred or effort involved?

3.0

KEY ENABLERS FOR FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT

This chapter outlines some of the underpinning factors in operationalising your talent philosophy, followed by three focus areas of accelerating talent management identified by our interviews - a culture of development, internal mobility and supportive data and technology systems.

"I think talent management needs to decide when you step in and when you drive general readiness and core skills. We can get confused with skills-based organisations and talent management. I think there are two things - one is "inclusive" talent management where you consider direct intervention to advance succession in critical roles and hi-potential leadership talent to de-risk the organisation. The other is talent as a holistic view where you build broad skills and breadth of experiences for all to ensure business continuity and act as the feeder for organisational growth, thereby building the "Talent pipeline"."

ANDY HILL, SENIOR DIRECTOR TALENT MANAGEMENT, ALGHANIM INDUSTRIES

The outputs of the talent planning stage need to link to tangible actions. However, companies - both globally and in the GCC - often struggle with connecting the planning cycle to implementation. In many ways, the core features of talent management haven't changed. As one practitioner put it: *"We've tweaked and updated, but the overall approach and practices - not so much."* What has changed is the speed of business change and the requirement to create and implement a talent strategy to respond to this.

3.1 OPERATIONALISING THE TALENT PHILOSOPHY

Professionals emphasised the importance of getting the basics right first, rather than simply creating further talent processes. As Marc Effron, President, Talent Strategy Group, outlined:

"Organisations have still not mastered the fundamentals of talent management, which is decent performance management (goal setting and coaching), decent talent reviews (identifying people with potential and developing people towards it), and decent individual development (helping people grow at the pace they can). If you aren't doing the fundamentals right, doing things that are new or different or throwing a layer of AI on the top, none of that is going to work unless you're doing the foundational elements."

One core element is designing the context for talent to succeed. A recurring message from the CEOs and HR leaders we interviewed was simple: talent doesn't fail on its own – it fails in context. Andy Hill said: *"You need to focus on organisational capability as a whole. And I think talent reviews are not - though for me they should be - organisational capability reviews"*.

Investing in the back office architecture is also critical, particularly given the size of ambitions in the region. As Nishanth Krishnan, Director - People Advisory & Business Consulting, Grant Thornton, put it: *"The front office is moving very fast towards the region's ambitions - which are probably the biggest in the world - yet the back office is really lagging"*. Below, we discuss how to leverage AI and data as a supporting tool.

Below we list four critical enablers of talent management processes. For further information on ensuring the underpinning 'basics' are in place, please refer to CRF's 2016 research Rethinking Talent Management.

FIGURE 5

Critical Enablers of Talent Management Processes

Leadership alignment

- How committed are senior leaders to engaging with talent? Do leaders understand that they are the culture-carriers for the mindsets and behaviours we want to scale?
- What does HR do to 'sell' the talent agenda to leaders? Is there a particular hotspot within the business, or a particularly supportive leader, who can give you an 'in'?

Line Manager support

- Do our managers know the difference between identifying today's high performers and someone with potential for the future business needs?
- What role does HR play in holding leaders to account and ensuring they follow through on talent commitments?
- Do policies and guidelines encourage the right behaviours?
- How are you investing in line manager capability? How are you recognising and rewarding managers who do this well?

Communication with the workforce

- Do you have a workforce communication plan? Does it outline the benefits of individuals providing their talent information?
- Do we have a clear policy about what we tell people in talent pools or succession plans, and why? How transparent are we with the rest of the employee population about our talent programmes?
- Do business leaders know enough about the plan to be able to support it? Are leaders clear what's expected of them? Is the plan communicated to employees?

Integrated talent process

- Are talent management processes integrated and consistent with other people processes?
- Does the frequency of talent review meetings meet the needs of the business?
- Are talent reviews consistent with the cycle times of other business processes such as financial and strategy development processes?
- Are roles designed in a way that sets up talent for success?

3.2
TALENT ACCELERATORS

Below we focus on three levers for accelerating talent, as identified through interviews with talent professionals in the GCC:

A CULTURE OF DEVELOPMENT

The best talent plans in the world are useless unless they lead to action and follow-through. This is where having a development-focused culture is critical, one in which leaders, when faced with difficult decisions around balancing short-term results and long-term development, are prepared to make tough calls to prioritise development.

The best organisations have development built into the corporate DNA, so individuals are expected to develop themselves and the requirement to develop others is built into managers' and leaders' roles.

Managers also need to have development explicitly built into their KPIs and be held to account if they fail to take the actions required. However, this is uncommon. *"In most companies there are no consequences for managers either being good or bad at managing performance and developing people,"* said Talent Strategy Group's Marc Effron. *"The message is 'get to it if you can'."*

LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

In the Gulf, large-scale development programmes are a popular way of developing and accelerating certain high-priority sectors of talent. Across the GCC, most sizeable employers now run at least one large-scale development stream - typically leadership, high potential, national talent or digital/AI.

These programmes are important, especially where nationalisation or rapid growth is a priority. But they should be seen as the start of the development journey, not the end. Running a flagship programme does not remove the need for other actions discussed elsewhere in the research, like supportive line management, job architecture and moves that keep people growing. As stated above, start from your talent philosophy and strategy and invest where value is created.

However, a common problem is how results are sustained after graduation. In the words of Dua Al Toobi, Workforce Strategist and CEO, The Futureproof Advisory: *"Many programmes end at the classroom door, focusing on content delivery rather than capability deployment. Real impact happens when leaders are supported to apply what they have learned in the context of their organisation's biggest priorities."*

WHAT HELPS AFTER THE PROGRAMME?

Exposure and rotation. Reed Sylvester, Former SVP, Talent Management, e&, described inviting programme participants to sub-board meetings so they could see how the organisation is run and what senior leaders focus on. He also stressed the value of cross-country or cross-business rotations: *"Being technically brilliant here won't necessarily equal success over there. By giving them those rotations, those experiences... you enable yourself to mould somebody who's better ready to progress and fulfil the potential that has been identified."*

Support for self-driven learning. *"Let people curate their own programmes, form their own learning groups, and take things forward - with support from mentors and leaders. The region is big on sponsoring programs for international travel and study, but there isn't as much of a culture of self-led chapters and groups, which would really help embed the learning"* explained Nishanth Krishnan, Director - People Advisory & Business Consulting, Grant Thornton.

Leverage existing talent processes where possible. This is particularly important in smaller organisations which may not have the resources to create specific pathways for programme graduates. As one senior talent professional at a regional bank put it: *"We'd need a separate consulting team to design it, because it includes development, org design, workforce planning, the whole rewards framework and culture. How does that work in a small company where you'd have special pathways for grads just because they came through the programme, while you also have plenty of skilled UAE nationals and expats joining through other routes?"*

Joined-up HR. Development, talent and rewards need to talk to each other. *"We ensured a linkage between our talent data, our talent-pool data and the compensation/rewards team... We should be using things like LTI to ensure we retain key talent in our top talent pool,"* said Reed Sylvester. If you invest in people, you need to be able to retain them.

Evaluate properly. One organisation measured learning not just on completions but on whether users felt it helped them do their jobs. Others used control groups: *"That gives you another data point: is there a correlation between those who are trained and the amount they're generating versus those who are not trained?"* said Sylvester.

CASE STUDY **WAHA CAPITAL**

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

- **Waha Capital worked with external providers to define what they wanted from leadership in the company.** Then, they built a hybrid programme in which emerging leaders attended off-site sessions focused on those key leadership behaviours. The goal was to bring the cohort together, strengthen the group and teach practical skills. Participants also received executive coaching to develop their own leadership brand in line with organisational needs and to address any barriers or enablers they wanted to explore.
- **The content was not vastly dissimilar to standard offerings,** but it was tightly tailored to organisational need - shorter and sharper than, for example, sending someone to a four-week Harvard General Management Programme.
- **The programme ran over four days with three coaching sessions,** with the option for coaching to continue in small chunks over time. Rather than a single extended block of learning, it emphasised on-the-job application through smaller, more frequent interventions.
- **Tracking progress and ROI was straightforward because the emerging-leader population was small (seven or eight people).** This allowed for in-depth talent discussions about each individual - what was expected, current performance and where they needed to be.
- **As a result, the impact of the programme was quickly tangible.** They were able to track outcomes through feedback, 360s and direct observation, and - given the small scale - see changes in action.

INTERNAL MOBILITY AS A DEVELOPMENT ENGINE

> *"There is a need for more movement around the organisation to provide flexibility and to provide people with development opportunities. Organisations can't just send everyone on training courses - we need internal mobility to also be a talent development engine."*
>
> **LISA LYONS,** REGIONAL TRANSFORMATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE LEAD FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND AFRICA, MERCER

Practitioners we spoke to emphasised the need to move and deploy talent more quickly. As Andy Hill, Senior Director Talent Management at Alghanim Industries put it: *"The potential of generative AI tools for development is vast. But what's missing is the organisation has to commit to enabling people to make those developmental moves."* However, internal mobility tends to be low in the region, with one practitioner putting it around 10-15% in the region. Below we outline practical ways of supporting internal mobility, which should always begin by determining the purpose and linking to your talent philosophy, rather than doing it for its own sake.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DRIVING INTERNAL MOBILITY

Reframe ownership of talent. Position people as an organisational resource, not a line manager's asset.

Factor in organisational shape. Large, multi-country organisations have more room to move employees internally, whereas smaller organisations are less likely to need ornate talent mobility processes. As one practitioner described, is there enough space in a small organisation to move those successors into those roles that you identified them for?

Plan the backfill. Every internal move creates a gap. *"There's going to be a gap somewhere. So how do you fill that gap? How do you oversee all of this?"*said one senior talent professional based in the region.

Use mobility as a leadership development lever. *"To be a leader in the organisation you can't just be an SME in one area; you have to understand how the whole machine works,"* said Stephen Laycock. Rotations, short-term assignments and cross-entity moves became the route to that enterprise view.

Carefully consider underpinning infrastructure and technology. Mobility needs the right supporting infrastructure, including HR policies that enable cross-unit moves and financial recharge mechanisms that ensure costs are reflected correctly across a dynamic workforce.

Leverage technology - but keep humans in the loop. AI and skills platforms can surface hidden talent, suggest non-linear career paths and keep skills data current. But, as several Gulf HR leaders warned: tech won't solve talent hoarding and AI recommendations still need human judgment.

Secure leadership support. Visible CEO support was described as the biggest accelerator. Organisations should also create the expectation for line managers to actively enable mobility – and reward them for doing so.

Consider adjacencies. *"When we're looking at key positions in the company I think it's important to have a plan B; there's probably another person who has adjacent - if not exactly the same - skills and with some support can step into the role. So if things change - if there's high attrition, or if we start losing people to the market, or if we are suddenly pressed on cost - we have those skills already within our workforce"* Siddharth Chaturvedi, Regional HR Lead - MEA and APAC, IDEMIA

Keep linking mobility to value. Internal movement shouldn't just tick localisation boxes but feed critical roles.

CASE STUDY **REGIONAL BANK**

INTERNAL MOBILITY

One Gulf-based bank set out to overhaul its approach to internal mobility and formalised this through creating a new policy. Previously, internal movement was slow, tightly controlled by tenure and grade rules, and recruiters were discouraged from approaching internal candidates.

WHAT THEY CHANGED

- **Removed tenure restrictions**, such as the requirement to remain in role for two years before moving. The new principle was: *"If you're the right person for the job, you're the right person for the job."*
- **Normalised and encouraged internal recruiting across departments** and codified in policy that internal candidates should be prioritised over external hires.
- **Made progression more agile by removing grade limits.** Previously, employees could not apply for roles more than two grades above their current level. They also published project-work opportunities on their internal marketplace, each with a formalised, time-bound commitment. This democratised access to opportunities, with all internal opportunities (apart from confidential ones) openly advertised.
- **Set the expectation that line managers should not only approve but actively enable cross-functional moves**, including when this meant releasing good performers.

CHALLENGES

- **Managing a large, outsourced population:** how do you balance what you offer to full-time employees versus contractors, and do you apply the same policy?
- **Resistance within HR,** driven by concern that offering development and project opportunities would create expectations for promotion and generate conflict in teams with limited capacity. This was addressed by framing the initiative around talent readiness, skills-building and creating a cross-skilled workforce to reduce risk.
- **Systems and accountability:** how to source and post gig projects consistently; how to make managers accountable for releasing talent; and how to avoid a confusing matrix where an employee reports to both a line manager and a project lead. Questions also arose around whether to compensate for additional project responsibilities.

Overall, the new approach strengthened the culture. It also became part of the employee value proposition and how the bank presents itself to future hires - effectively creating a brand position of *"this is what we offer."* Lessons learned included that talent belongs to the organisation, not to individual managers, and the importance of framing and communication - positioning internal mobility as a way to build readiness and retain talent helped gain buy-in.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY, AI AND DATA

Technology - particularly AI - has the potential to revolutionise how organisations plan, attract, develop and deploy talent. Over the past few years, a wave of platforms including skills inference engines, internal talent marketplaces, learning experience platforms, AI coaching tools and AI-driven recruiting tools, have appeared. More recently, generative AI offers glimpses of how technology might be used to solve many of the problems that dog talent systems. For example, helping create line-of-sight between business strategy and individual goals or automating follow-ups around development planning to check agreed actions are followed through.

> *"Companies who are using the technology well tend to start from a place of relating it to specific business problems that require hiring more talent, different talent or talent that's difficult to source."*
>
> **TERESA WYKES,** SENIOR DIRECTOR, TALENT-CENTRED TRANSFORMATION, EIGHTFOLD

We find, however, that most organisations are still finding their footing in using technology effectively in the talent space. There is a significant opportunity in the Gulf to accelerate progress through leapfrogging more cumbersome legacy systems. *"There is time to invest in technology, which is happening in some pockets, and the opportunity to skip a few loops and reach the highest level of maturity from a tech-supported HR strategy perspective"* Nishanth Krishnan, Director - People Advisory & Business Consulting, Grant Thornton.

AI will also lead us to rethink how we define talent, potential and performance, including ensuring the business has the talent required if AI shifts the business model. For example, Vincent Bouw, Head of Talent and Performance Management Learning and UAE National Development at Cleveland Clinic highlighted how his organisation is *"looking to become an AI company that delivers healthcare, rather than a healthcare company that does AI."*

As we discuss further below, technology itself does not address some of the human challenges that hamper talent initiatives, namely a lack of management accountability for talent development and poor strategic alignment of talent initiatives. We observe the most forward-thinking organisations leveraging AI in the following ways:

FIGURE **6**

Ways Organisations Can Leverage AI

CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

TECHNOLOGY: EMERGING USES

1 Workforce insight and scenario modelling

AI can pull together internal data (e.g. strategy, skills, attrition) and external signals (e.g. labour-market, competitor hiring) to show where talent risks are and test *"what if?"* options. You can now ask, *"Given our strategy, what are three ways to secure AI/engineering talent in the next 18 months?"* and get a workable first draft. While still emergent, these examples hint at an AI-augmented planning process where humans collaborate with agents to develop and stress-test plans.

2 Talent matching and personalised career development

AI is becoming more widely embedded in connecting employees to opportunities such as jobs, projects or learning, as well speeding up the creation of talent pools and helping companies tap into hidden talent pools. As tools become more sophisticated they enable employers to better join up talent planning, learning and developmental moves. They also offer the prospect of democratising access to career development tools by putting them in the hands of individuals and their managers, for example by surfacing opportunities to increase talent mobility.

Some practitioners are using AI agents to build personalised development solutions fast and at low cost. An example from Standard Chartered below demonstrates that AI-driven matching, combined with supportive policies, can improve internal mobility.

3 Automating HR processes and tasks

AI is being applied to streamline and enhance various HR processes. However, many use cases are at the basic stage - speeding up the writing of job descriptions, for example, or being used to reduce cost rather than increase the strategic impact of HR interventions. An emerging frontier for HR is 'task intelligence', where HR can use AI tools to identify opportunities for job redesign through task automation. This will require HR professionals to build new skills to get more deeply embedded in work content. It will also have a knock-on effect on talent as it affects the future roles and skills for which employees will need to be prepared.

AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

While technology offers many possibilities for improving talent practices, there are challenges to be addressed:

- **Integration of systems.** While best-of-breed talent systems can offer better functionality than core HR systems, organisations can easily end up with a patchwork of systems that don't talk to each other and require data to be pieced together manually.
- **Humanising the technology experience.** The human architecture (how people experience and adapt to the system) is as important as the technology architecture. AI agents are beginning to show potential as an integrating layer across HR applications, improving the user experience, but it is still early days. Employees need clear communication and explanation of why using a particular system benefits them - how it enhances their career or makes their job easier, for example. The user experience must be intuitive, engaging and easy to access.
- **Avoid learning overwhelm.** Focus on understanding what AI-enabled learning platforms will give you the best return on your priorities over time. *"There are so many offerings, but what's needed are curated pathways. Focus on select offerings, in a specific sequence and get managers to sit down and talk to employees about it"* said Lisa Lyons, Regional Transformational Centre of Excellence Lead for the Middle East, India, and Africa, Mercer.
- **Data quality and ethics.** Many tools rely on inferring employees' skills or experiences from various inputs, but these can be hit-and-miss. To avoid this, HR must be prepared to question how the data and algorithms are trained and apply human oversight to AI-generated insights. AI should inform, not make decisions.
- **Regulatory limitations.** HR leaders will need to balance careful governance with keeping pace with business needs and employee expectations around AI-augmented work. This is particularly important in a region with strict laws concerning data processing.
- **HR skills and mindsets need to evolve.** HR professionals need new skills in data literacy, asking the right questions of AI, critical thinking and understanding how to integrate technology into work design. We also need to support senior executives in developing their skills in understanding and deploying AI.

CASE STUDY **AL GHANIM INDUSTRIES**

ACCELERATING TALENT REVIEW WITH AI TOOLS

Andy Hill, Senior Director Talent Management, at Al Ghanim Industries outlined how the organisation transitioned their talent processes and leveraged AI to support talent readiness, the creation of success profiles and rapid development.

- **The team used AI to create talent-review dashboards** - a straightforward process that would have taken months to consolidate without AI enablement. This made rapid profiling at scale possible: *"We wrote 97 success profiles in two and a half hours."*
- **They can now generate insights in real time:** *"At the end of this talent review I will be able to capture all the data on succession by level, by readiness, by high potential, and I will be able to tell my organisation exactly where the risks are."*
- **Because the data sits in the system, it can be analysed and reported on** (for example, to identify where the real risk is) and then used for scenario planning. *"Then I can actually do simple workforce planning—these things that in big, long-winded organisations with heavy tech stacks make it almost impossible to do. We can do it really quickly and agilely, get to an 80/20 view, and make decisions. So I'm super excited about the agility that GCC companies can show if they set up in a simple way."*
- **The result is real-time data points tied to real business context, with AI adding precision.** The system will be updated daily.

ENABLING FACTORS

- **Started with simple AI tools** (e.g. ChatGPT or Copilot); a complex system is not necessary to achieve results.
- **Kept their approach simple** - rather than overcomplicating it with heavy, process-driven layers - the implementation has been successful. They have deliberately avoided over-analysing the data.
- ***"You've got to be really, really clear what you feed in, challenge what comes out, and then build beyond that."***
- However, **results are only as good as the job architecture.** *"A job architecture needs to be updated—and frequently. How do you do that?"*
- **Keep data clean through strong governance.**

TECHNOLOGY STACK

The core platform is SAP SuccessFactors. Andy emphasised the importance of linking its AI capabilities to a robust job/competency set, critical roles, and pulling this together quickly.

A key use case was helping people see career pathways, even when roles are shifting faster than individuals can progress. Technology was used to surface potential moves and development steps as the organisation evolved.

LinkedIn learning provides the ability for an individual to upload their job profiles and the tool triangulates external and internal skills data to suggest roles.

4.0 SKILLS-CENTRED TALENT STRATEGIES - FAD OR GAME CHANGER?

> *"Organisations run the risk of skills taxonomies and tools dying on the vine unless they invest in the culture and management behaviours needed to make them work."*
>
> **TANIA LENNON**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC TALENT LAB, IMD

There is growing interest in the region in becoming more skills-based - reflecting an increasing global interest. Stephen, Head of Human Capital & Support Services, Waha Capital described how *"The conversation around skills is becoming more and more sophisticated in terms of narrowing down what development needs are and what the organisation needs moving forward"*.

While the idea of having an accurate skills profile of the organisation and planning for skills is not new, technological advances are making it easier for companies to build and maintain skills taxonomies that underpin talent planning, learning platforms, talent marketplaces and performance management systems. The technology that enables more accurate prediction of talent supply and demand and matching of people to opportunities is becoming more sophisticated.

Increasingly we hear that skills are the critical currency of the future of work and companies are exhorted to become 'skills-based organisations'. Is 'skills-based' the future of talent management or is it simply the latest HR fad?

It's important to begin with the question: what is the business issue for which a skills-based approach could be the best solution? Be clear about the relevant use cases and how they will add value to your organisation, recognising that skills are only one tool in a broader approach to talent management. For those organisations going 'all-in' to become skills-based, we would urge caution:

- To make skills-based organisations work, you have to connect talent structurally with other aspects such as KPIs, compensation and performance management. For most organisations, that involves changing the way they operate and this is not feasible. Pay-for-skills is particularly challenging as most organisations lack good data on both pay and skills.
- Skills-based recruitment is also a key prerequisite, where people are hired on the basis of their skills, experience and mapping to a role profile rather than on the basis of qualifications or a previous job title.

Achieving this is not easy. As one senior talent professional in the region outlined: *"Even if the system has capability, you still need someone to create the data, source the data, input the data and do the skills work. We all talk about skills-based organisations and skills-based development. But you need really strong governance and change management to make that happen"*.

Our research suggests the potential benefits of skills-based talent approaches are more likely to be realised when certain conditions are met:

- **Clear definition of what 'skills' means for your organisation.** How do skills differ from competencies, values or behaviours for your organisation?
- **Skills are focused on a small number of critical capabilities that make a difference to a specific business outcome** or are linked to the organisation's competitive advantage, rather than taking a 'boil the ocean' approach that covers every aspect of what the organisation does. Beware the danger of creating rigid taxonomies that lose sight of real business problems.
- **Focus on 'why' the technology will benefit individuals and the business.** Have a clear business case and make sure the benefits for individuals of sharing and updating their skills data are well communicated and understood. Give people a reason to share their information and keep it up to date, for example making sure that opportunities to learn and practise new skills are clear or there are incentives for becoming proficient in new skills.
- **Start with tangible business use cases**, such as when a role is being redesigned for automation or to support reskilling initiatives.
- **Develop a single source of skills data that feeds all talent systems.** Off-the-shelf skills taxonomies may help you get started but will most likely need to be augmented with your own data relevant to the skills that are unique to your organisation.
- **Have a plan for keeping the data current.** There need to be incentives for individuals to keep their skills data up-to-date, for example, better access to career development opportunities through a talent marketplace, clear learning pathways that lead to things of value such as accreditations or badges and skills-based reward. Have a single-entry point for employees to complete and make it easy for them to update their data.
- **Build the right culture and management behaviours.** As discussed in 3.1 above, often organisational maturity lags behind the capability of systems. Invest in developing a learning culture (see the Standard Chartered case study on page 30), supporting talent mobility, upskilling managers to be better career coaches and have a clear communication plan for sharing the outcomes of the workforce plan with the organisation, so people understand what skills the business is likely to value in future.
- **Role modelling and storytelling are important.** Get senior leaders to visibly use and update the systems themselves to encourage others to follow suit and share success stories.
- **Develop a plan for validating the accuracy of the skills data.** For example, asking employees to validate data that's generated automatically by the system. Treat inferred skills data as a start point for discussion. AI tools may give you a first cut of data but it is important to validate the accuracy of the skills data that emerges. Some organisations use focus groups involving functional leaders, subject matter experts and HR to validate skills data that's generated by AI.
- **Create a point of ownership for specific skills within the business.** Some companies have appointed senior subject matter experts who are accountable for identifying future skills needs and developing and leading a skills development plan.

CASE STUDY **STANDARD CHARTERED**

BECOMING A SKILLS-BASED ORGANISATION

Multinational bank Standard Chartered is currently well-advanced on a multi-year journey to become a skills-based organisation. It began with a commercial business case based on the strategic workforce plan. This highlighted jobs which would no longer be relevant due to changing client expectations or technological change ('**sunset**' roles) and new jobs that would be created as a result ('**sunrise**' roles). More broadly, the plan anticipated changing demand for skills as junior roles would be displaced by technology. It demonstrated a positive business case for prioritising a '**build**' versus '**buy**' strategy.

Standard Chartered breaks down skills into three buckets::

- **Human Skills** (what you need to perform at your best)
- **Behavioural Skills** (what you need to behave appropriately in different circumstances)
- **Technical Skills** (what you need to perform a particular task). The Bank has various reskilling programmes focused on identifying and developing critical future technical skills.

The transition to becoming a skills-based organisation involves three phases:

1. Phase One: **Build the Learning Habit.** Focused on ensuring clarity about what it means to be a skills-based organisation and creating self-motivation to learn new skills:
   - Launched a digital learning platform and future skills academies with learning pathways targeting priority skills identified by the business and leveraged AI to suggest personalised learning pathways.
   - Focused on improving learning content and increased the volume of bespoke learning through investing in internal content development capability. Average learning days have doubled since the programme was introduced.
2. Phase Two: **Nurture the Priority Roles.** Designed and deployed experiments with targeted upskilling and reskilling journeys for priority roles:
   - A talent marketplace gave employees access to relevant work experiences.
   - Prior to launch, each journey had to have a business sponsor who would guarantee that sufficient experiences would be made available in the marketplace, and that candidates would have access to mentors and work shadowing.

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3. Phase Three: **Embed Learning and Skills into the Bank's DNA.** After ensuring the infrastructure was in place to support the skills strategy, the next phase is about connecting skills supply data with work design. This uses 'task intelligence' to unlock productivity through identifying which aspects of roles require human touchpoints and which can be automated.
   - The bank's talent marketplace is a key tool for engaging the workforce. Initially the focus of the bank's talent marketplace was to advertise internal gig opportunities that people could take on alongside an existing role to build skills. As it matures it is becoming about managing peaks and troughs in talent supply and demand by helping people working in agile teams 'flow' to work that reflects their skills, and to open up reskilling opportunities to allow people to build their skills.

   So far, 3,000 gigs have been matched and completed, creating $8.5M in unlocked productivity. The rate of internal hiring has increased from 33% to around 50% and managers report a 94% satisfaction rate with internal hires.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Talent marketplaces work best where they are focused on specific skills areas and roles**, rather than trying to be all things to all people.
- **It's important to be transparent with people** about areas where automation will impact jobs and require reskilling.
- As well as communicating with employees, i**t's important to educate managers in how to source skills from the marketplace.** The bank has updated its leadership development programmes to educate leaders on what's expected of them to support this work. Leaders are asked to sign a leadership agreement which sets out expectations and clarifies accountabilities.
- **Have the right controls to support desired behaviours.** Managers must obtain additional levels of approval to hire into sunset roles. *"It helps people think differently about how to get the work done,"* said Will Brown, Group Head of HR, Standard Chartered.
- **Linking up the learning journey and gigs helps connect skills development and practice** in a way that's meaningful and immediately applicable on the job, not just about consuming ever more digital content.
- **You need to agree what policies and rules apply to use of the talent marketplace.** For example, is a hiring manager required to show that they have exhausted the possibilities of meeting their skills needs through the talent marketplace, before they are able to recruit externally? How do performance management and development processes recognise the work people do through the marketplace?

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

> *"I find it interesting that we adopt a different lens to talent supply to any other form of supply in the organisation. In any other area you're going to secure a strong supply chain and make sure you have access to what you need, but it's interesting that we don't think about people in the same way."*
>
> **TANIA LENNON,** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC TALENT LAB, IMD

In the Gulf region, **planning is now both harder and more essential**. Organisations must anticipate change across multiple timescales: national visions, giga-projects and localisation targets set a long horizon, while immediate and unexpected events (a new investment vehicle or a geopolitical shock) can rapidly shift short-term priorities. In a world where uncertainty is the only constant, future-ready talent management is about preparing for a range of possible futures. **The organisations best placed to thrive treat talent planning as a business-focused, dynamic, data-driven and human-centred process.**

This is not about layering on more and more talent processes. As Prateek Sinha, Partner at CEO.works, puts it: *"Whatever you do, please don't create another talent process. Use what you have - but within it, go beyond hierarchy and talk about critical roles that will drive future value to shift from talent supply to talent demand. And when you talk critical roles, don't only talk about the talent - but also identify and mitigate the role risk in terms of decision rights, personal capacity and team capability.."*

The research highlights that while technology and AI are transforming what's possible, **impact depends on mindset and execution**. Future-ready HR functions act as strategic partners, defining clear talent philosophies, aligning talent priorities with commercial realities and facilitating ongoing conversations about risk, capability and opportunity. They use technology selectively - to generate insight, increase speed and accuracy and simplify processes - while keeping people, culture and leadership accountability at the core.

Organisations must start small, test and learn, and build momentum through practical action. The goal is not perfect data or exhaustive modelling, but faster feedback loops that inform smarter decisions.

Finally, **sustained impact depends on a culture where development and mobility are expected, managers are held accountable for talent outcomes and employees are supported to grow in line with business needs.** The talent we need is often already in the organisation; the challenge is to mobilise it.

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A number of interviewees also chose to remain anonymous.