



**HAYS** Recruiting experts  
in Human Resources

# DNA OF AN HR LEADER

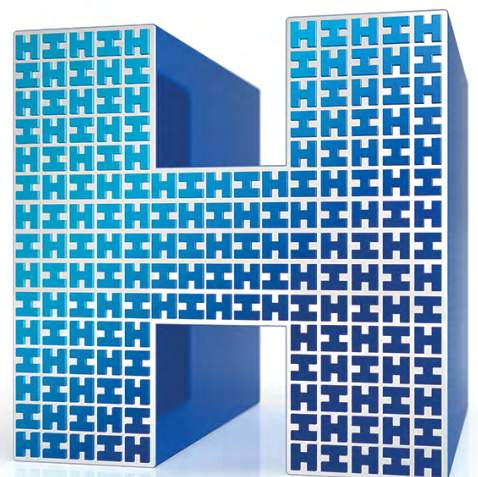
The makings of an HR leader

In association with:

**CIPD**

Chartered Institute  
of Personnel and  
Development

[hays.ae/dna-of-an-hr-leader](https://hays.ae/dna-of-an-hr-leader)



# THANK YOU

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## Methodology

Over 300 senior HR professionals operating in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region were surveyed online during 2016/17. They were asked about their educational background, qualifications, international experience, responsibilities, challenges and personal aspirations. The survey findings have been compiled into this comprehensive report, providing insight into what it takes to succeed at the top of the HR profession within the GCC.

# INTRODUCTION

## What does it take to become an HR leader?

**On behalf of Hays, I am pleased to launch the second guide in our DNA series – the DNA of an HR Leader.**

With an overwhelming response from our first report in the series, the [DNA of a Finance Leader](#), I am thrilled to be releasing this second chapter. The purpose of this report is to provide aspiring HR professionals in the GCC with insight on how they can propel their careers to reach the top of the profession. The research will also be of use to hiring managers for supporting their HR team in achieving their career goals, as well as other senior HR professionals interested in understanding how their peers have progressed in their career to date.

It has been incredibly insightful gathering information about HR leaders operating in the region. On the surface, there are skills and qualifications that are common to the role the world over, as well as personal attributes – such as being proactive and credible, that are shared with C-level executives from other disciplines. What is startlingly obvious is how the role of HR has broadened significantly over the past decade and continues to do so. Once a siloed function responsible for isolated administration activity such as payroll processing, HR is now an instrumental business partner, with growing representation at Board level within organisations. As such, businesses are realising the value HR can bring to the bottom line by strategically identifying means for minimising staff costs and maximising headcount capability – something widely acknowledged in Europe and growing rapidly in prevalence in the GCC.

As with all international experience, working in the GCC has its cultural challenges for HR leaders – understanding and keeping up-to-speed with local employment law, as well as being attuned to the business etiquette of the region and managing expectations of richly multi-national workforces, amount to a demanding and ever expanding remit for HR professionals. Positively, all of the HR leaders that we have spoken to in the research have found their experiences to date worthwhile to their careers and given the chance, they would do it all over again.

So what is the path to success for HR professionals? How do they reach the top of the profession? What does it take to transition from senior management to an executive role? What exactly is the DNA of an HR leader?

We surveyed HR leaders across the GCC to help us identify the key characteristics that HR professionals need to succeed. Over the following pages we identify the path to becoming an HR leader. First, we look at the need to build a solid technical foundation. Then, at the importance of international experience, stakeholder engagement and personal characteristics. We then explore top tips for the next generation and the challenges HR leaders are likely to face in the future.

We hope this report provides you with interesting and useful insights about the HR profession and we wish you the best of luck in your career.

**Chris Greaves**  
**Managing Director**  
**Hays Gulf Region**

# FOREWORD FROM THE CIPD

## CIPD

Chartered Institute  
of Personnel and  
Development

We are delighted to partner with Hays on their DNA series – and this report provides some interesting insights and commentary focused on the GCC region.

The backdrop is of course an environment where the dynamics of work, the workplace and workforce are changing at a relentless pace. The importance and business impact of great HR practice is increasingly a tangible driver of competitive advantage – and the capability, skills, influence and impact of effective HR leadership are now a critical business enabler.

At the CIPD – the professional body for HR and people development, we are the voice of a worldwide community of over 140,000 members committed to championing better work and working lives. We've been setting the benchmark for excellence in HR and L&D for more than 100 years and we have more than 3,000 members in the Middle East. The Dubai hub was launched in 2015 to support all levels of local HR

practitioners through delivering relevant content, options for development and a range of networks and events. We believe embedding world class HR capability is critical to the economic future as HR Directors and their teams play a crucial role in helping economic diversification through skills development, increased productivity, effective nationalisation programmes and driving change on important issues facing the region.

On behalf of the CIPD and our partnership with Hays, we hope you find the research findings both interesting and personally useful in planning your own careers and ongoing professional development.

**Matthew Mee, Managing Director  
Middle East CIPD**

# DECIPHERING THE DNA

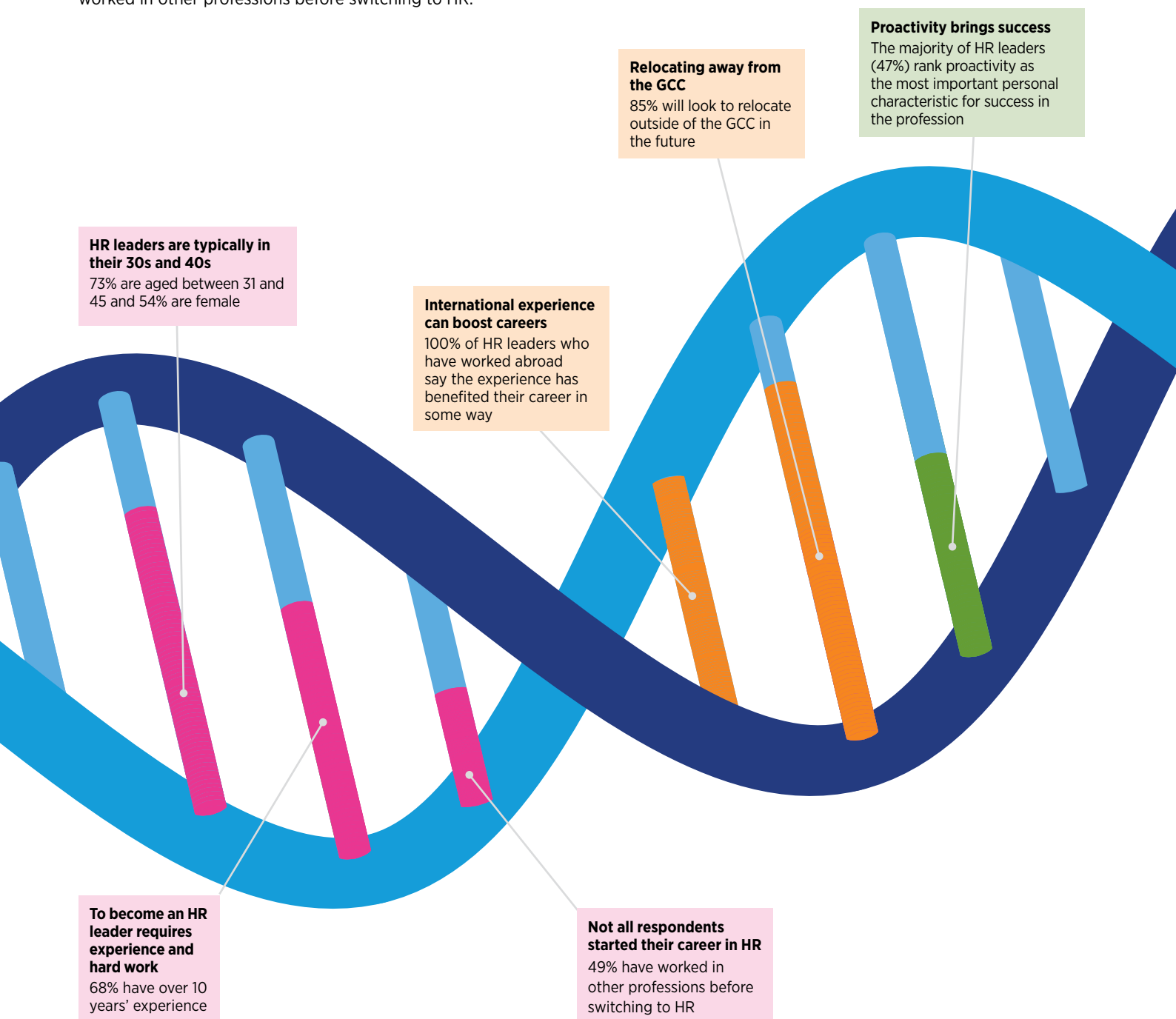
While the skills and backgrounds of HR leaders vary, they tend to share some common characteristics in terms of their training, outlook and responsibilities. The key findings of our survey, outlined below, help to explain just what makes up an HR leaders DNA.

## Background and qualifications

93% of HR leaders hold a degree, although their area of study differs. The majority's first degree was in Arts/Humanities (30%), only 5% was in HR. However, almost half (48%) have gone on to obtain an HR-related masters degree, 30% have CIPD qualifications and 12% are SHRM certified. Interestingly, 49% have worked in other professions before switching to HR.

## International experience

89% of HR leaders have worked outside of their home country, all of whom believe this to have benefited their career. 85% will look to relocate outside of the GCC in the future, the main reason to further their career development opportunities.



### Proactivity brings success

The majority of HR leaders (47%) rank proactivity as the most important personal characteristic for success in the profession

### Relocating away from the GCC

85% will look to relocate outside of the GCC in the future

### International experience can boost careers

100% of HR leaders who have worked abroad say the experience has benefited their career in some way

### HR leaders are typically in their 30s and 40s

73% are aged between 31 and 45 and 54% are female

### To become an HR leader requires experience and hard work

68% have over 10 years' experience

### Not all respondents started their career in HR

49% have worked in other professions before switching to HR

## Business partnering and personal characteristics

Over a third (39%) of respondents believe that the Finance department is the most important to partner with, followed by Operations (31%). Proactivity was considered the most important personal characteristic for career success and was closely followed by the need to be ethical (47%) and credible (44%).

### Partnering with Finance

39% of HR leaders believe Finance to be the most important discipline to partner with

### Focusing on talent management

46% expect talent management to be the most important area of focus for HR in the next two years

### HR leaders actively network

Over 60% have attended networking events and / or used LinkedIn to meet with other HR leaders in the past 12 months

### Top tips for the next generation

53% of HR leaders think the up-and-coming generation need to gain experience from different industry sectors

### HR leaders are sociable

71% like to socialise with family and friends outside of work

## Career development

Encouragingly, 87% say that if they had their time all over again, they would still choose the profession and most (88%) would either like to stay in their current post or take on a bigger HR role in the future. 65% meet and network with other HR leaders at industry events and conferences and 64% do so via social media (most commonly, LinkedIn).

## Upcoming challenges

41% of HR leaders think that staff retention and business influencing will be the biggest challenges for them over the next 12 months. This was followed by talent management (16%) and compensation and benefits (12%). The majority (46%) expect talent management to be the most important area of focus for HR over the next two years.

## Interests and inspirations

Outside of work HR leaders are generally sociable, with 71% choosing to spend time with family and friends. Over half (53%) enjoy being active by playing sport and exercising.

Looking ahead, HR leaders think the up-and-coming generation of HR professionals need to gain experience from different industry sectors (53%), be commercial (52%) and get international experience (49%).

# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with Abeer Al Sumaiti Director of HR, National Reference Laboratory – A Mubadala Company

### Did you always aspire to become an HR leader?

My commitment and enthusiasm for the field derives from my very first job, based within an HR department. I immediately realised that I wanted to work with people and I enjoyed being responsible for bettering employees' working experiences, all the way from selecting and onboarding, to helping people grow in the organisation. This early experience prompted my decision to complete my second master's degree in strategic HR management, which then opened up opportunities to assume HR leadership roles in different organisations.

### Compared to five or 10 years ago, how would you say the profession has evolved?

The advancement of new technology has largely shaped the HR department, which has evolved much beyond the

traditional model of hiring and managing administrative tasks. It has grown into a business-critical, dynamic and innovative function with a broad scope of activities and an increasingly strategic outlook. HR is the main driver of employee's engagement and the creator of a happy workplace, but also a guardian of the corporate culture and values.

### What technical skills do you think are integral to role?

In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, change management is a key skill required of any leader and even more for leaders of fast growing companies such as National Reference Laboratory (NRL).

Managing growth and change while planning strategically, executing tactical plans and at the same time ensuring business continuity, is a task that makes the HR field incredibly challenging and rewarding. Consequently, HR leaders are required to have a diverse set of skills.

As a strategic business partner to all units of the organisation and a driver to their success, they need to have a comprehensive understanding of business dialectic and logic, while at the same time, balance the business' interests with that of its employees. The ability to manage talent and create a culture that enables people to grow is crucial to the role. Furthermore, the HR leader needs to have a deep understanding of group dynamics and with that, be able to manage conflict to reach a win-win resolution for all parties.

### What personal characteristics do you believe are fundamental to the role?

It goes without saying that an HR leader should be "a people's person" meaning that they should be empathetic and approachable to all employees. The role frequently requires access to sensitive information and personal matters, therefore the HR leader should be trustworthy and always ready to help the employees with the tools they have at their disposal. Furthermore, in a country such as the UAE that houses more than 200 different nationalities, cultural sensitivity is a very important trait to possess.

### What do you enjoy most about your job?

I truly enjoy supporting employees in realising their career aspirations, ensuring that they reach their full potential while contributing to the business' overall success.

Simply put, HR is the creator of a 'journey' for employees, maintaining workplace culture and job satisfaction. I would therefore like to think of myself as the 'chief happiness officer' of my organisation.

In my current role as HR Director at NRL, I am focused on the provision of programs that help strengthen the capabilities of UAE Nationals who work in healthcare, in particular within the laboratory field, an area we have identified as being deficient in terms of numbers of Emirati professionals. Our comprehensive plan also aims to attract, develop and retain talented UAE Nationals interested in pursuing a career in the clinical laboratory arena. A critical component for the

success of the program is to increase collaboration with UAE Universities offering related academic programs. Under the mentorship of our team of highly qualified medical and scientific experts, NRL provides internships to students within key areas of specialization, as well as subsequent job opportunities within one of our state-of-the-art laboratories.

### What is the biggest obstacle you've faced along your career path?

Rather than obstacles, I make an effort to grasp opportunities and thrive on challenges. People have different expectations, backgrounds and points of view, and dealing with these on a daily basis makes the role of the HR leader very unique and requires a skill set which is not very common.

### What advice would you give to the next generation of professionals aspiring to become an HR leader?

HR is a peoples and a 'living' profession. It breathes the organisational culture and the organisation's values are its beating heart. If this resonates with you then HR is your right field and you should be ready to explore the dream job that touches people's lives.



# BACKGROUND AND QUALIFICATIONS

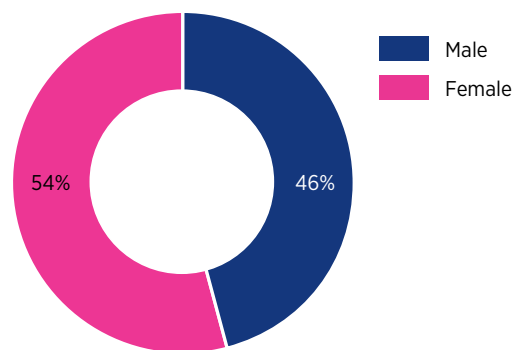
## HR leaders are typically in their 30s and 40s

73% of respondents were aged between 30 and 45

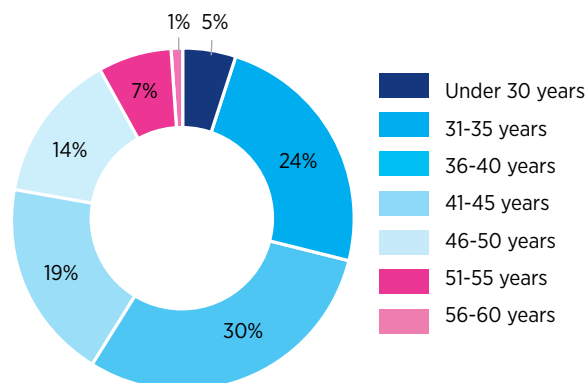
The results of our survey show that HR is an almost gender-balanced profession at senior level within the GCC, with women and men accounting for 54% and 46% of HR leaders respectively.

In terms of age, the largest proportion (73%) of survey respondents were between 30 and 45 years old. Only 8% were over 50, which is a comparatively smaller proportion than other geographical regions however, this is not surprising given the large proportion of expats in the GCC, who seek international experience here for part of their careers, before migrating away to settle more permanently in other locations.

### Are you male or female?



### What is your age?



## Tertiary education is part of the DNA

HR leaders have a tendency for continued professional development

All HR leaders possess at least one HR related qualification, almost half (48%) have a masters degree, 36% an HR degree and 30% have gained CIPD accreditations. A further 12% have SHRM qualifications and 10% are currently pursuing further learning opportunities within the field.

While HR leaders clearly have a tendency for continued professional development, there is some debate about which qualifications are most valuable to those working in the profession. As we have shown, HR leaders have studied varied disciplines but one that was cited as particularly useful was psychology.

**John Harker of Al-Futtaim, who holds a Bachelor of Social Science, supports this. He comments here on how a knowledge of human behaviour can build your credibility:**

“Having a scientific understanding of human behaviour and mind, as taught in Psychology, has had a profound influence throughout my career in helping me to understand why individuals and groups behave the way they do, and how this can be applied in the workplace.”

## A diverse career path

# Almost half (49%) of HR leaders started their career outside HR

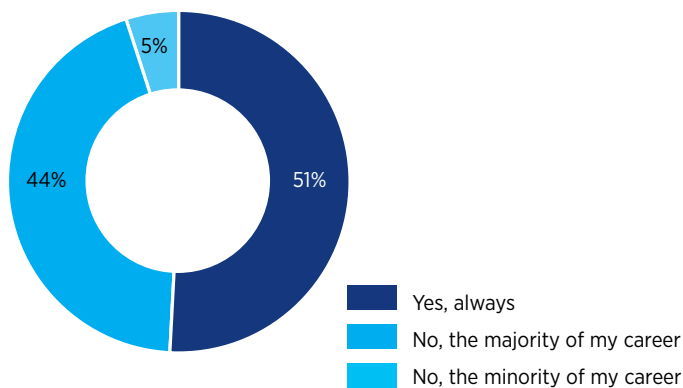
Interestingly, not all HR leaders start their career in HR. Forty-four per cent of our surveyed HR leaders have worked in HR for the majority of their career but started out in another function and a further 5% spent the majority of their career-to-date in another discipline altogether.

**Minelle Gholami, People Director at Emrill Services LLC, originally studied for a career in Law before switching into HR:**

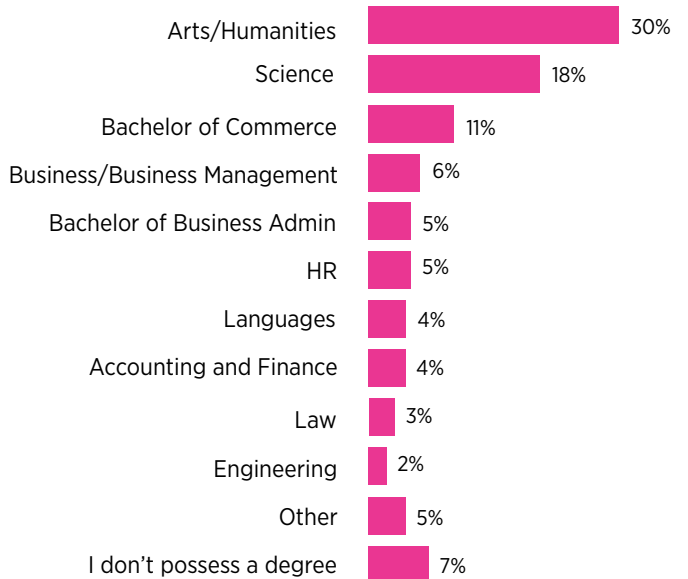
“I originally completed an undergraduate Law Degree however, after some insight into this profession, I knew that Legal was not the direction I wanted to go.

Instead, my interest in business led me to undertake an MBA and an MA in Human Resource Management, which fuelled my curiosity for a career in HR. Through these studies, I was able to see how critical people and talent management are to strategy and overall business success, and I was eager to get involved. For me, being able to shape and influence business culture and practice through fair, equitable and effective HR policy and process, presented an interesting challenge that I was keen to undertake.”

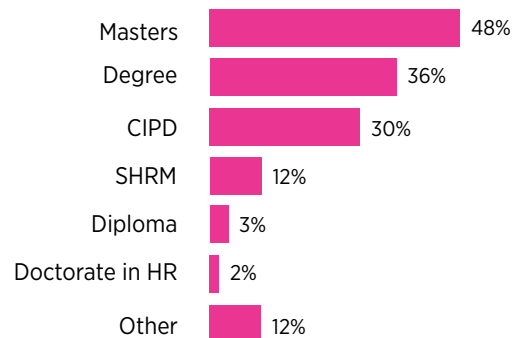
## Have you always worked in HR?



## What was your first degree in?



## What HR qualifications do you have?



## HR leaders have many years experience

# 96% have over 10 years' experience in HR

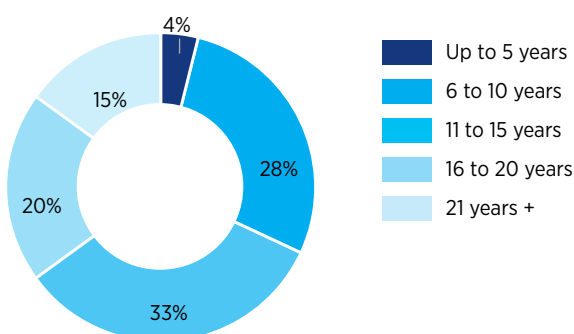
Generally speaking, HR leaders have amounted many years' experience by the time they are appointed to a senior HR position. Fifty-three per cent have between 10 and 20 years' experience and a further 15% have over 20 years, while just 4% have up to 5 years' experience.

Collectively, respondents have gathered experience from a range of different industry sectors and geographies. From Real Estate to Media, Oil & Gas to Education and Healthcare, there is no trend to which sector successful HR leaders are typically focussed. Instead, respondents believe broad industry experience to be incredibly valuable to career progression, with 53% encouraging the next generation to work in more than one industry sector.

### Based on these findings, Tania Dole, Human Resources Strategist at Kuehne + Nagel LLC, comments:

"It is definitely advantageous to your career if you can gain experience working in various sectors with a variety of people. My experience of over 15 years in the Gulf spans across many industries, including: Telecom, Travel and Hospitality, Real Estate and Construction, and Logistics and Supply Chain, all of which have provided a very interesting and fulfilling journey so far. Factors such as work-life balance, salary rates and career progression opportunities vary for each industry and the better you can understand how these matrixes work, the more credible you will be in your career, whatever industry you ultimately see yourself in. Every company needs an HR function but each has very different recruiting and employee management challenges. By gaining exposure in a number of different industry sectors, you will be better equipped and ready to adapt to a specific organisation's needs."

## How many years of experience do you have as an HR professional?



## Generalist HR experience is favoured over specialist

# The majority have gained experience in more than four different HR areas

The majority of HR leaders (92%) have built experience in a generalist role. More than half have been involved in learning and development, talent management, employee relations/internal relations, resourcing and recruitment and compensation and benefits.

### For Huda Ghoson, Executive Director - Human Resources at Saudi Aramco, this is indicative of the evolving role of the HR leader and its ever broadening and strategic remit:

"The turbulent marketplace demands that the role continues to evolve and as such, the DNA of the future HR leader will be, to some degree, different from a typical HR leader in today's business environment. The ability to anticipate future workforce trends, manage and communicate desired workplace culture, and build solid relationships with stakeholders and customers, will be the three core competencies of successful HR leaders in the future. This means that the HR leaders will need to capitalise on technology to predict workforce and labour market behaviours, and deliver agile and cost effective strategies and services; they will need to act as the architects of the organisation culture; and they will be required to fully align efforts and business strategies with all stakeholders."

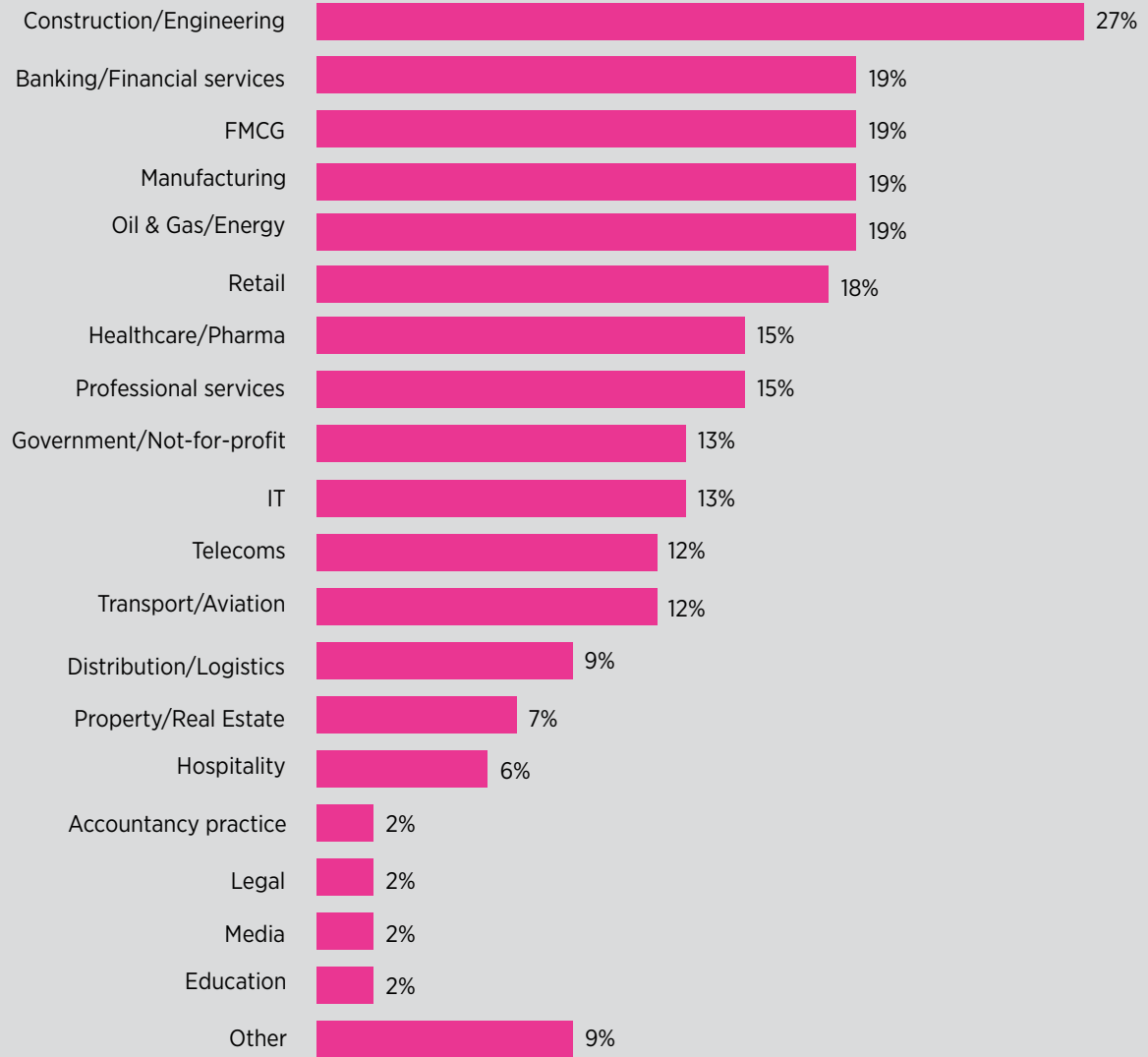
## Which areas of HR have you worked in during your career?



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**Which sectors have you worked in as an HR professional in the past (select all that apply)?**

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# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with John Harker Chief HR Officer, Al-Futtaim

### Did you always aspire to become an HR leader?

From my early days I had an interest in both human behaviour and economics which led me to study industrial psychology at University. I became fascinated with how psychological theories and principles could be applied to organisations and individuals in the workplace. I was intrigued with how businesses could improve their performance by understanding and investing in areas such as employee training, motivation, job satisfaction, and occupational health and safety. The path into HR was then set.

### What technical skills do you think are integral to the role?

An HR leader needs to be well versed in all the areas which fall under the traditional HR domain, including: talent acquisition, talent development, succession planning, engagement, rewards, organisation design and effectiveness, performance management, HR systems, measurement and metrics and communications. Outside

of these core technical skills, an effective HR leader also needs to have a sufficient understanding of other business processes relevant to the sector in which they operate. This will ensure that they are able to apply their technical HR expertise within the relevant business context.

### What personal characteristics do you believe are fundamental to the role?

First and foremost you need to know what the strategy is, what drives organisational success and then help develop the HR strategy to address the talent priorities of the organisation. An HR leader needs to be a strong relationship person with the ability to collaborate and influence at all levels. Another important characteristic is the ability to deal with ambiguity and give advice and make decisions on the best available information. HR leaders are often called to deal with very sensitive situations or information and the need to act with the utmost discretion is important. I also think HR leaders need to act as role models in reference to the norms and values of the organisations they represent. They will often need to be courageous and have the self-confidence to stand up and take a stance when they become aware of unethical or bad practices, even when they may be unpopular for doing so. Good HR leaders are change agents and need to be willing to act to make the necessary changes.

### Is there any part of your job that you spend a disproportionate amount of time on?

Being a leader of people is a big part of my job and ensuring that we have a high performing HR team. Selecting the right team with the right skills who are always engaged, makes my job no different to any other leader in the organisation.

Another area I spend a lot of time on is developing clear business cases for any significant HR projects and then measuring progress of these.

### How important is social media in HR?

Social media is becoming more important every year and plays a fundamental role in our ability to communicate our employer brand and engage with prospective future employees. LinkedIn for example is a cornerstone of our talent sourcing approach.

Internally we also have communities who are active users of social media tools. The project teams in particular use the channel to report progress, stay connected and share content and ideas.

### What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love seeing the sense of accomplishment and pride that members of an HR project team share when they deliver a successful solution to an important business issue.

### What is the biggest obstacle you've faced along your career path?

The biggest obstacle I have faced is when I made a wrong hiring decision on my team and was then forced to exit that person. This is never easy.

### Compared to five or 10 years ago, how would you say the profession has evolved?

Thanks to the emergence of new technologies much of the work traditionally done by HR professionals can now be automated to ensure more consistent delivery at a lower cost. New technologies are enabling more robust measurements of key metrics around talent acquisition, development, engagement and retention. This in turn frees up HR resources to focus energies on more strategic aspects of talent, leadership and culture.

### What advice would you give to the next generation of professionals aspiring to become an HR leader?

Really get to understand the business that you are working in and more specifically, understand the real value drivers. Look for ways to connect talent to value to ensure that HR efforts are focused on the right priorities.

### How do you unwind after a stressful day?

As a former competitive swimmer, I enjoy doing my laps in the pool and it helps me to unwind.

“ An HR leader needs to be a strong relationship person with the ability to collaborate and influence at all levels. ”

# INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

## International experience can boost careers

89% of HR leaders based in the GCC have worked outside of their home country

All of those who have built up international experience believe that this has added value to their career. Going forward, the single biggest reason that 85% of HR leaders will relocate outside of the GCC is down to further international experience being considered a 'must for career development'. Specific to the GCC and in consideration of the large expat community, the next most common reason for leaving the region is due to work-life/family reasons – as many professionals will look to settle close to their home country/families.

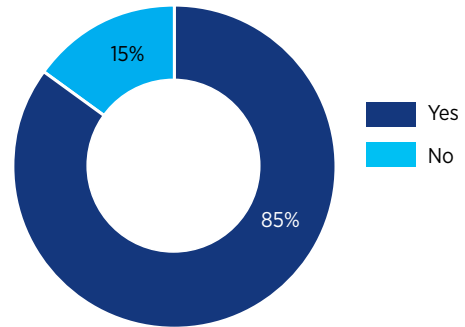
### In support of gaining international experience, David Myerscough of Cape PLC comments:

“Working in the GCC has been very enriching to my career as it has enabled me to develop my cultural intelligence. In my seven years in the region, I have worked with and managed individuals from different backgrounds and cultures. It has meant that I am even more attuned to the fact that different people from different cultures and backgrounds view situations and challenges from different perspectives. Capitalising on this diversity has enabled me to create a high-performing HR team, with a mix of local nationals and expats who work very well together.”

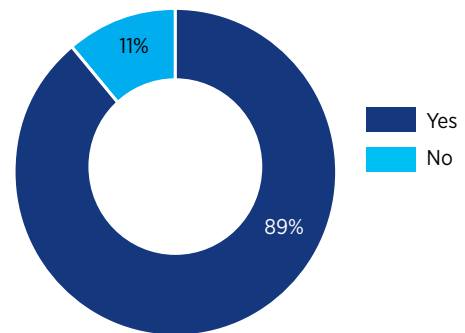
### Matthew Mee of CIPD Middle East, adds:

“International experience is enormously valuable for HR professionals. It can help to foster a ‘think global act local’ mind-set where HR can better understand the needs of different areas of the business. However, we are mindful it doesn’t suit everyone and these opportunities aren’t available to all. It fits with the CIPDs view of a growth-based career culture where career growth is in the round rather than traditional hierarchical progression, and employees are given opportunities with a breadth of diverse experiences that help to maximise their employability going forward and meet business needs. With newly established hubs in Asia and the Middle East the CIPD is starting to create a growing international network of HR professionals.”

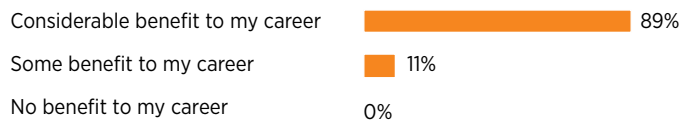
## Do you think you will consider relocating outside of the GCC in the future?



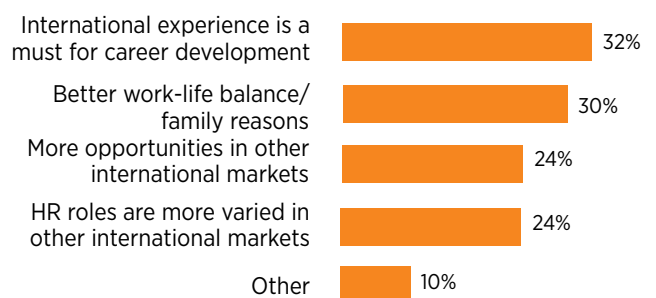
## Have you worked outside of your home country at any point in your career?



## How much value do you put on this experience outside of your home country?



## Why are you currently considering working outside of the GCC?



# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with Amanda Grose Head of HR - AIME (Asia, India, Middle East), BuroHappold Engineering

### When did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in HR?

It was by default rather than design really. Whilst working in Marketing & Advertising, I became intrigued by people's resilience in such a competitive, fast paced and highly stressful industry. This led me to the decision to go on and study Organisational Psychology to better understand people's behaviours and motives and I have never looked back.

### What is the one thing you have to have to succeed as an HR leader?

Vision! You have to be able to create clarity of purpose for individuals. It starts with your own team and working through business leaders to help them clarify the business' vision for themselves and then for others in their teams.

### What is the best thing about your role?

I get to work across all levels of the business but working mostly in the leadership space allows me to positively contribute and/or influence how we shape our business and our people for a better future.

### Is there anything you would have done differently looking back at your career path?

I don't focus on the past with regrets as my experiences have positively shaped who I am today. Having said that, I would have liked to start my HR career seven years earlier than I did.

### How important do you think international experience is to building a successful career in HR?

Diversity is important and working abroad gives any professional, not just HR, a broader outlook on life, cultures, sensitivity etc. I always encourage my team to consider a stint overseas for at least three years. It has certainly made a difference in my own career.

### How do you keep up to date with the latest HR laws and best practices?

I do this through a combination of ways, including:

- Fostering good relationships with a trusted Employment Law practice and making sure I am on their mailing list/attend relevant seminars provided by them
- Making time to stay in touch with and/or broadening my own HR network

- Using my coaching networks - I am a Co-Active Life Coach and an ORSC Coach (Organisational Relationship Systems Coach), both of which provide me with ample opportunities to stay up to date with the wider people industry.

### How do you see the profession evolving going forward?

HR has grown organically as a profession over the last 20 years and I am excited to see how much more we are trusted and sought out by business leaders today. This growth will continue as the profession develops and I do not think it will ever reach full maturity - the world is far too complex for HR to stagnate.

### What is your advice to someone who is moving up the ranks and wants to reach the top of the profession?

Remember to take people on your journey with you - don't step on others and never overstep your authority!

### Is there anyone that you look up to as a role model for your career?

I worked with an incredibly professional HR Director over 12 years ago - she continues to inspire me and over the years, I have had the pleasure of acting as a sounding board to her. We all need a professional 'go-to-person' whom we trust implicitly.

### What are your main interests / hobbies outside of work?

I try to stay balanced by exercising regularly. I juggle between cycling (in the cooler months) and attending Barre classes. I hail from Cape Town and love to spend time in our beautiful home at the slope of Table Mountain with my husband and daughter, as often as we can. I am definitely an outdoors person, I prefer sunsets over sunrises, long brisk walks and entertaining, preferably al fresco at home.

“ Working mostly in the leadership space allows me to positively contribute and/or influence how we shape our business and our people for a better future. ”

# BUSINESS PARTNERING AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

## Cooperation with Finance

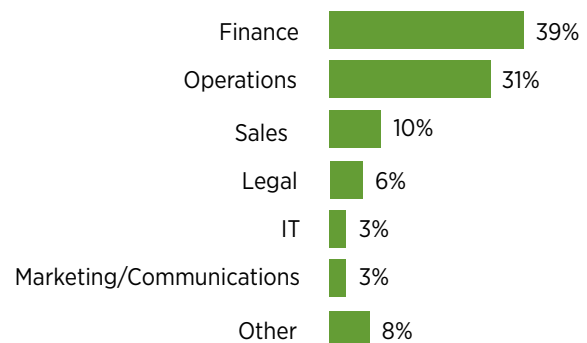
22% are key business decision-makers who sit on the Board of Directors at their company

The relatively challenging market conditions of the last two years in the GCC have seen HR leaders becoming increasingly instrumental in decision making for organisations as a whole. Long gone are the days when the remit covered isolated administration activity such as payroll processing. Instead, by identifying and reviewing strategies for minimising staff costs (one of the biggest overheads for any company) and maximising headcount capability, HR leaders are partnering more closely with other core business functions. Finance was identified as the most important function to partner with, according to the majority of respondents (39%), closely followed by Operations (31%).

**Nearly a quarter (22%) of HR leaders now sit on the Board of Directors at their company and in response to these findings, Emma Seymour of Al Naboodah comments:**

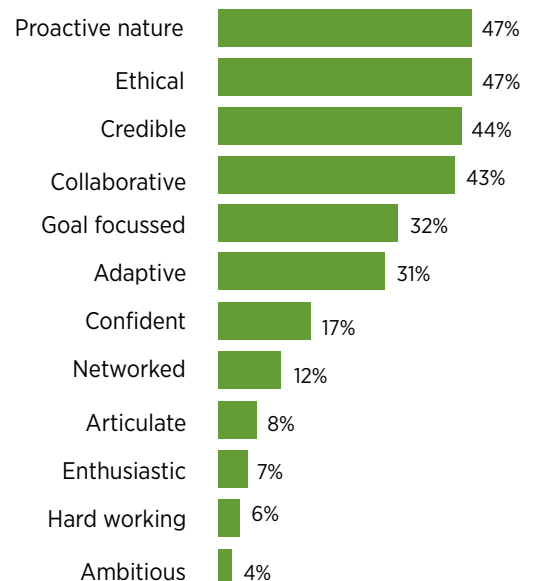
“The role of HR in every organisation is becoming far more strategic with the focus on people engagement, culture and productivity now key to the success of the business. The GCC has started to recognise this and more HR Directors are securing their places on the board and emphasising the need for organisations to move with the times and embrace new technologies and working practices. I believe that more and more HR Directors will attain Board membership and that the industry will continue to become more prolific with greater emphasis on qualifications, experience and creativity.”

## Which department do you partner the most with in your organisation?



When it comes to personal characteristics, 94% of respondents say being proactive and ethical are the two most important attributes for HR professionals to possess. This was closely followed by being credible (44%), collaborative (43%), goal focussed (32%) and adaptive (31%).

## Which personal characteristics are the most important for a successful HR leaders (select up to three)?





# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with David Myerscough Regional HR Director, Cape PLC

### Did you always aspire to become an HR leader?

No! I knew I wanted to work in a company environment but was not sure in which function. It was whilst I was doing an MBA that I realised that HR was the career I wanted to pursue. I spoke with fellow students, who were working in HR, about the opportunities it could provide for my career and subsequently selected HR related electives as part of my MBA.

### What technical skills do you think are integral to the role?

I think that it is fundamental to have good business acumen; to be able to understand organisational objectives and strategy. A solid grounding in the core areas of HR, as well as employment law, are also essential. As you progress your career in HR, it becomes increasingly important to understand how HR decisions and initiatives impact business results.

### What personal characteristics do you believe are fundamental to the role?

There are a number of personal characteristics I think are fundamental and my top three are:

- A drive to deliver
- An ability to communicate well with people, whatever their level of seniority
- The courage to challenge and to facilitate change

### Is there any part of your job that you spend a disproportionate amount of time on?

I try to proactively manage my time to balance my schedule across different tasks. In the world that we live in, it would be easy to get too distracted by emails but instead, I manage this by setting specific times for dealing with emails. I have my own rule, which is to ensure that I do something every day that is contributing to a project or initiative that will add value to the business.

### How important is social media in HR?

It's increasingly important in my view. It's a way for a company to communicate information to potential recruits and clients, and a very important way for a company to reinforce its brand.

In a more direct way, it has become a very powerful tool for sourcing and recruiting talent into the company.

### What do you enjoy most about your job?

I enjoy the fact that no two days are the same within HR and that you have to deal with much more than you have planned for.

I also enjoy coming up with ideas for initiatives that have a positive impact on the business and working with people to make these happen, while driving positive change.

### What is the biggest obstacle you've faced along your career path?

The biggest obstacle I thought I had faced was being turned down for the role of HRD at a London-based subsidiary of a large construction group, where I had been the second in command in the HR function.

At the time, I thought this was a big blow but it opened the door to the opportunity of moving to the Middle East to further my HR career here.

### Compared to five or 10 years ago, how would you say the profession has evolved?

There has been a realisation of the benefit that companies can reap by having good HR professionals who understand the business, can think strategically and are able to evaluate the financial impact of decisions. I think that this shift has meant that an increasing number of senior HR professionals have a seat at the top table and really contribute to the business.

### What advice would you give to the next generation of professionals aspiring to become an HR leader?

I would advise them of the following three things:

As well as developing a good HR brain, develop a good business brain. Adopt the good habit of keeping close to the business numbers and forecasts to get a good feel of how the business is performing.

Seize the opportunity to work and live in another country. The workplace is becoming increasingly diverse and working in other countries, in other cultures, will help you become more culturally intelligent.

Get accredited by a professional body such as the CIPD. As well as helping to increase your credibility, this will open the door to useful resources and will help you build a good network, enabling you to benchmark with fellow HR professionals.

### How do you unwind after a stressful day?

I make sure that most days I go for a brisk 30-40 minute walk when I get home. This helps clear the head and evacuate any stresses of the day. I also enjoy spending time with my wife and children and if there's time left, playing a few songs on the Ukulele!

“ There has been a realisation of the benefit that companies can reap by having good HR professionals who understand the business, can think strategically and are able to evaluate the financial impact of decisions. ”

# UPCOMING CHALLENGES

## Focus on staff turnover

Employee retention is to be the biggest challenge to HR leaders over the next 12 months, according to 21% of respondents

The relatively relaxed employment conditions of the GCC result in a typically high turnover of labour compared to other geographical regions. Employee retention therefore remains high on the list of challenges for HR, with employers intent on keeping the best talent in order to meet business objectives. Hand in hand with this is talent management, the third biggest challenge cited by 16% of respondents and together, retention and talent management are predicted to be the biggest areas of focus for HR leaders over the next two years.

The second greatest challenge in the shorter term, is HR's ability to influence the business. This is not surprising based on earlier findings which recognised the functions evolution; from an isolated supporting service, to a more transparent business partner with an ever-growing presence amongst the Board of Directors at organisations.

### When asked about upcoming challenges for HR professionals in the GCC, David Mysercough of Cape PLC comments:

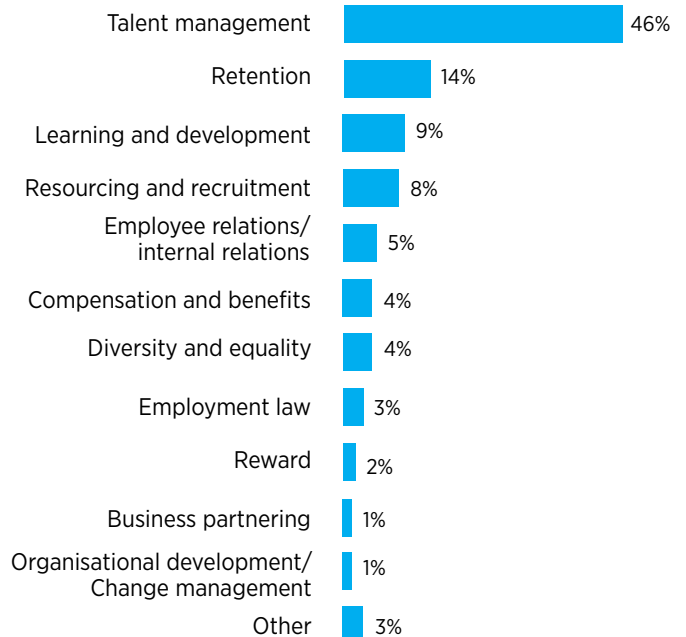
"I think that the challenge at the moment is more about retaining the right people within an organisation. In the current context, for a company to do well, it cannot afford unnecessary overheads, and therefore it needs to ensure it has the right people in the right roles, which in turn, will make sure they remain engaged with what they are doing and continue to add value. What makes a company perform well are the people working for it - retaining key capabilities therefore clearly gives a company a competitive edge.

The topic of Localisation is also an important consideration within the region. Attracting, developing and retaining high quality local talent has become increasingly critical to the success of many companies in the region, including the organisation I work for."

## Which of the following areas do you think pose the biggest challenge to HR leaders in the next 12 months?



## Which area of HR do you think will become the most important over the next two years?



# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with Emma Seymour HR Director, AI Naboodah

### When did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in HR?

I was offered a role as HR Assistant at Gordon Ramsay Holdings after graduating from university and after my first day, I was hooked! The opportunity to work with so many different people was fascinating and I discovered a real interest in behaviours, personalities and ultimately strategic organisational culture and development.

### What is the one thing you have to have to succeed as an HR leader?

I believe the one thing you have to have is interest. Interest in the people you work with and for, interest in continuous development and innovation, interest in your internal and external stakeholders. If you have an inherent interest in learning and listening to others you will continue to learn the skills needed to succeed.

### What is the best thing about your role?

At AI Naboodah Group Enterprises, we have such a diverse organisation that the best thing about my role is that I get to experience new innovations every day. I love working with people and we have a great organisation empowered by the AI Naboodah family to work towards the UAE's sustainability vision and its ongoing development.

### Is there anything you would have done differently looking back at your career path?

In my very early days I managed to put through a whole restaurant's payroll twice – paying everyone double! I would have definitely avoided doing that!

### How important do you think international experience is to building a successful career in HR?

We live in such a global economy now and working in the UAE has given me access to so many different markets. I believe international experience is extremely important, it has certainly aided my career and I would definitely recommend it.

### How do you keep up to date with the latest HR laws and best practices?

I am a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD and attend many forums and conferences. I also maintain a strong network of HR professionals across the territories I've worked in and regularly engage with them. I have an open door policy and like to engage with as many external stakeholders as possible.

### How do you see the profession evolving going forward?

I see HR continuing to be central to every organisation and becoming extremely involved in Sustainability.

There will be greater focus on organisation design, development, welfare and culture. Ultimately we are becoming much more transient and every organisation will need to work hard to attract, develop and retain their people.

### What is your advice to someone who is moving up the ranks and wants to reach the top of the profession?

Seize the moment and look for every opportunity. Embrace change and always seek to learn and identify ways of creating greater networks, knowledge and visibility of your skills. Always ask a question and always put your hand up. If you're not sure how to do something, you can always learn as you go!

### Is there anyone that you look up to as a role model for your career?

I have been privileged to work with some great people who have invested their time and knowledge in my development so I couldn't single out only one person. I attended a forum recently with Peter Cheese, the Chief Executive of the CIPD who has an amazing knowledge of the profession and a real passion for HR.

### What are your main interests outside of work?

I have recently taking up long distance running and completed the 2017 London Marathon in April. We also have an AI Naboodah cycling team which gets extremely competitive. When I'm not putting myself through those activities I also do yoga twice a week.

“ I believe international experience is extremely important, it has certainly aided my career and I would definitely recommend it. ”

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## HR leaders are invested in their own career development

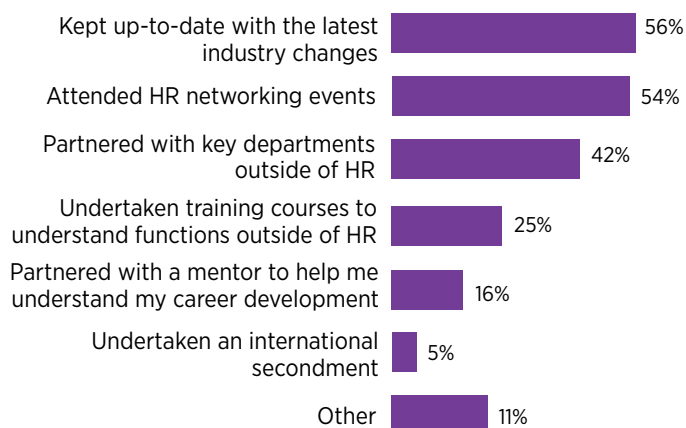
54% attended an industry event in the past 12 months for personal development

On commencing their HR career, all HR leaders have committed to their ongoing development in the field in some way. As noted earlier, the majority (95%) have completed postgraduate qualifications or certifications specific to HR and hold one or more of the following accreditations: CIPD, SHRM, Diploma, Doctorate. Aside from studying, in the last year, 54% of HR leaders have attended HR networking events and 25% have undertaken training courses to build their understanding of functions outside of HR, gaining more rounded business acumen skills.

### In support of this, Huda Ghoson of Saudi Aramco comments:

“It is necessary that HR leaders build knowledge and experience in finance, business strategy, economics, in order to succeed in the future work environment. The changing nature of work and the rapid evolution of the job market commands the attention of HR leaders across every sector of the economy to ensure their HR strategies remain robust, innovative, cohesive and dynamic to create people advantage for their companies.”

## What personal development activities have you undertaken over the last year (select all that apply)?



When it comes to networking, 65% of HR leaders choose to network with peers at industry events / conferences, as well as 64% doing so via social media, most commonly LinkedIn.

## How do you meet and network with other HR leaders?



### Find a mentor

## Aspiring HR leaders can benefit from mentoring, support and guidance

Over a third (39%) of respondents have a mentor and many encourage the next generation of HR leaders to find someone who can guide them through their career journey.

#### In response to these findings, Matthew Mee of CIPD Middle East comments:

“It’s good to see figures indicating HR leaders are finding more time to network and get an ‘outside in’ perspective to bring back into their own workplace. Historically our experience has been that HR leaders in the region are too busy in their day jobs to do this – and I think the holistic benefits of having strong external networks and a good understanding of the economic and commercial environment can only improve the strategic impact of the function. It’s also good to see a significant number of HR leaders are investing time in their own development through mentorship – which in time will help to raise capability, credibility and impact of the function.”

### HR leaders are happy with their career choice

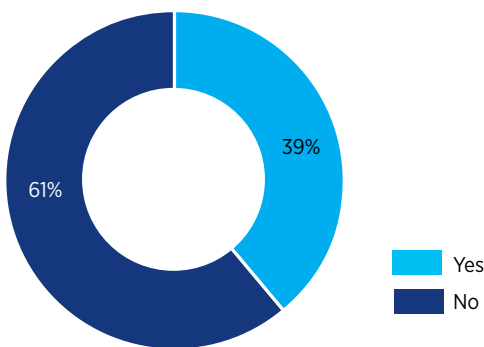
## 87% would still choose to work in the HR profession if they had their time over again

Encouragingly, if they were to start their careers again, the vast majority of HR leaders would choose the same profession. Looking ahead, 24% would like to stay in their current level of seniority, while 64% would like to take on a bigger role within HR.

#### Emma Seymour, of Al Naboodah, is not at all surprised by these statistics:

“Working with and developing people is the best job ever. I am constantly motivated by encouraging others to grow and by embracing the continuous growth opportunities of this region. Every day is a new day; with new challenges and learning opportunities. Supporting an organisation with its strategic objectives and seeing the change in a company’s culture is exceptionally rewarding. For me, L&D is critical to the role; you aren’t a leader until you have developed a leader, who themselves has developed another leader, and so on.”

### Do you have a mentor?



### What position do you plan to hold in the next three years?



# INDUSTRY INSIGHT



## Q&A with Bregje Meuwissen EMEA HR Director, Travelport

### When did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in Human Resources?

I initially looked to a career in general business management as I have always been interested in the broad business environment. However, I have also always been fascinated by people's behaviour and what makes them tick in the work environment. I felt that a career in HR would nicely combine these two interests and therefore chose to go down this path. As HR professionals, we are tasked with reaching business objectives through working with, what is for most companies, their most important (and costly) resource - people.

### What is the one thing you have to have to succeed as an HR leader?

Curiosity. Curiosity into people and how to get the best out of them, and curiosity into the business; understanding the processes, the objectives and the landscape of the

organisation. I strongly believe that HR cannot operate in isolation and should always, in every activity/task, be looking to solve business challenges.

### What is the best thing about your role?

The diversity of working with so many different cultures and people in a role that is closely aligned with business strategy. I can clearly see how my work links to the company's overall objectives.

### Is there anything you would have done differently looking back at your career path?

With hindsight, I might have stayed in role too long at times because I was enjoying it so much. From a career perspective, it's important to keep challenging yourself and to never get complacent.

### How important do you think international experience is to building a successful career in HR?

It is crucial. We live in a globalised world where operating in a silo is impossible and embracing global perspectives and opportunities are critical to success. International experience opens your eyes to different types of leadership with different ways of getting work done. You cannot learn this from textbooks or through training, you have to experience it first-hand. Living abroad also forces you to step out of your comfort zone as you will need to build everything up from scratch in a new country. It is hugely developmental on a personal basis.

### How do you keep up to date with the latest HR laws and best practices?

Typically through publications and by networking with peers. If I have time, I like to go to networking events that have a specific theme and where someone shares their best practice in this. I find this a great way to stay up-to-date and network at the same time. You also get to ask direct questions to someone who has implemented this practice in real life.

### How do you see the profession evolving going forward?

The HR role has become much broader than previous decades, when it existed as a purely internal focussed function. Coming back to my previous point, the ability to see the complete business context and to create value from this perspective is gaining prevalence and will continue to do so. HR's role is no longer limited to 'HR subjects' - in my view, this is merely the lens we use to look at the wider business context.

HR technology is also allowing us, more than ever, to spend time on the important value-adding organisational work, such as building teams and leaders rather than carrying out operational HR tasks. Technological tools

for continuous monitoring of performance are helping to improve employee experiences and establish more productive organisational cultures. They also enable HR to better target their talent approach; aligning the company's objectives closely with the skills, capabilities and behaviours of its people. Data tools are allowing us more, faster and better data to help ask the right questions.

### What is your advice to someone who is moving up the ranks and wants to reach the top of the profession?

Get out of your typical 'HR thinking' and learn as much as you can about the business and the wider business context.

### Is there anyone that you look up to as a role model for your career?

There are various business leaders and HR professionals who have influenced my thinking and acting along the way. I am always learning new things which support my ongoing development.

### What are your main interests / hobbies outside of work?

I love cooking and can be found at markets, food shops or in the kitchen, and then of course at the table for long meals with friends after!

“ As HR professionals, we are tasked with reaching business objectives through working with, what is for most companies, their most important (and costly) resource - people. ”

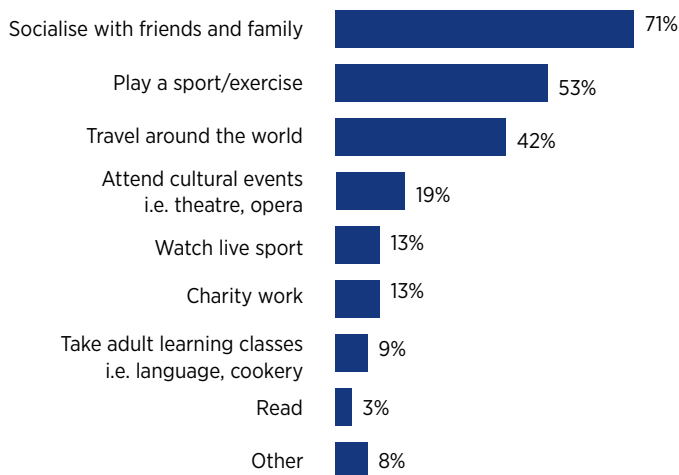
# INTERESTS AND INSPIRATIONS

## HR leaders like to engage in a variety of activities outside of work

### The majority (71%) like to socialise with family and friends

In terms of the working week, many of our respondents made reference to their role being intense and demanding long working hours. But no matter how many hours you put in at work, it is important to have interests and hobbies that allow you to wind down when you leave the office. Outside of work, 71% of HR leaders like to socialise with friends and family, 53% like to play sport or do exercise and 42% enjoy travelling.

#### What activities do you do in your spare time?



## Top tips for the next generation

### 53% of HR leaders advise gaining experience from different industry sectors

Our respondents encourage the next generation of HR leaders to follow in their footsteps, advising them to gain experience across a range of industries (53%), be commercial (52%) and gain international experience (49%).

They believe that this breadth of experience stands individuals in good stead for taking on larger roles with vast lines of responsibility. This is demonstrated by the 66% of HR leaders in our research who are accountable for the HR function of either the whole of their international organisation or a region bigger than just the GCC (i.e. MENA, EMEA).

With regards to being commercial, this links back to earlier findings on the personal characteristics required of the role and in particular, being ethical and credible, in order to be considered a valuable business partner.

# SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

## DNA OF AN HR LEADER

HR leader roles are so broad and vary so greatly from organisation to organisation that it is impossible to define any HR leader as 'typical'. As this report has shown, HR leaders hold a variety of qualifications and almost half have worked outside the HR function for part or in some instances, most of their career. Nevertheless our research suggests that HR leaders tend to be highly experienced and well-educated professionals with a proactive and ethical nature. They work hard and with integrity, believing that they can make a difference through what they do. They nurture others and they are credible, collaborative, goal focussed, and adaptive.

Once they enter the HR profession, they typically gain additional HR qualifications, and are focussed on their ongoing learning and development.

As with everything, the job will change and evolve – we can only predict what the HR leaders of 2030 and beyond will look like. Over the last 30 years the role has changed significantly as technology has advanced and the HR decisions of today are very different to previous decades. Today's HR leaders need to work out how to align strategic requirements with operational budget and the workforce, deal with company culture, engage employees, and have a say in what impact automation and outsourcing should have in a business.

They must also find a way to ensure HR maintains its credibility, is recognised as a change agent and remains the social conscience of a business. And all this must be done while achieving company objectives.

Reassuringly, the HR leaders of today look back on their careers as time well spent, and say that given the chance they would do it all over again. For most then, HR offers a very rewarding career.



**Aged 31-45, with a minimum 10 years' experience**



**Possess multiple professional qualifications**



**Have worked across a range of different industries**



**Actively network with industry peers**



**Are happy with their career choice**



**Are social and active**



# ABOUT US

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From our offices in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, we focus on offering permanent and contract recruitment solutions, across 20 different industry sectors, throughout the GCC region. We're proud of the long-lasting relationships we've built with all of our clients since first launching in 2005.

Hays is the leading global expert in qualified, professional and skilled recruitment.

Working across a wide variety of specialist areas, we have experts recruiting for professions from HR, legal and accountancy & finance to information technology, construction and Oil & Gas, meaning we have the breadth of expertise to find the people you need.

Our extensive database allows our consultants to search millions of candidates globally using Google® search technology to find the best people in the fastest timeframe. In addition, our exciting collaboration with LinkedIn® provides real-time data on the active candidate market, behavioural trend analysis for future movers and an additional talent pool of over 200 million potential candidates.

Hays is the most followed recruitment agency on LinkedIn in the world. Join our growing network by following [Hays Worldwide](#).

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## Capabilities

- Permanent hiring
- Contracting
- Executive Search
- Head hunting
- Multiple hiring
- Emiratisation
- Recruitment Process Outsourcing

## Local areas covered

- UAE
- Saudi Arabia
- Oman
- Kuwait
- Bahrain
- Qatar

# 37

Specialist recruitment consultants

# 300+

Total years of recruitment experience

# 2005

The year Hays GCC was established

# 100,000

Database of candidates

# CONTACT US

If you require any further information on Hays or would like to discuss your recruitment needs, please contact our local experts on +971 (0) 4 559 5800 or email [marketing.uae@hays.com](mailto:marketing.uae@hays.com)

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