

Summary Report

Business Perspectives on Skills Mobility: A roadmap for recovery: Focus on Middle East

During September 1-2, 2021, the Business Advisory Group on Migration, together with the International Organisation of Employers (IOE), hosted a regional workshop for employers and governments in the Middle East for the six Gulf Cooperative Council countries. Consisting of two parts, the objectives were to support employers in Middle East in their outreach to governments on migration-related issues of priority to business (September 1 – employers only sessions) and to foster and improve the dialogue and understanding between employers and governments on the same key migration topics (September 2 - dialogue for governments and businesses). The State of Qatar co-hosted this dialogue.

The employers' only workshop provided a platform for private sector representatives to share their best practices and challenges on accessing and recruiting foreign skills and agree on a set of key policy messages to discuss with the governments on the next day during the dialogue session with governments. The research study entitled "*Exploring the successes, opportunities, and challenges of business immigration frameworks in the Middle East*¹", undertaken in partnership with Fragomen was circulated amongst event participants in advance and served as an excellent point for productive discussion with specific focus on:

1. Skills mobility frameworks that respond to labour market needs; and
2. Improved systems for identification, recognition and development of skills to promote skills mobility.

These themes are aligned with the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) Objectives 5 and 18, adopted by United Nations member States². The employers' sessions benefited from the expertise of the ILO International Training Center, the United Nations University, Fragomen, and drew 30 participants each; the dialogue with governments attracted more than 40 participants from governments (Ministries of Labour and Foreign Affairs) and business leaders across the GCC. Employers' organisations, businesses and government representatives shared best practices, successes, challenges and discussed solutions to improve migration management in the region. This event served as a platform for exchange between the private sector and governments towards the implementation of the GCM and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in light of post COVID recovery.

Key Takeaways:

- **Need for more agile legislative processes for migration pathways:** Limited options of work visa categories are one of the persisting concerns for business to move talent in the region to work in specialized job sectors. While each country in the region has its unique needs for specific job sectors, overarching solution to increasing economic productivity, global competitiveness and transfer of skills, businesses called for more ease in work visa categories and application processes. Countries using innovative ways for work authorization (i.e. digital solutions to applications, expansion of visa categories, easing on criteria of labour quotas, clearly defining visa application time frames) are spearheading as attractive economies for global talent and economic growth. Participants from the private sector recommended creating a distinct visa category for Intra Company Transfers i.e. employees transferring from within the same group of companies. This visa type should benefit from less restrictive requirements in view of the temporary nature of the assignment.

¹ <https://gfmdbusinessmechanism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Exploring-the-successes-opportunities-and-challenges-of-business-immigration-frameworks-in-the-Middle-East-September-2021.pdf>

² https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195

Example: UAE government approved a **new Remote Work visa** scheme to attract talents and expertise from all over the world. The one-year visa permits foreigners to enter the UAE under self-sponsorship and work in line with terms and conditions issued with the visa. This initiative comes in addition to granting **Golden Visas** to investors, entrepreneurs, specialized talents and researchers in various fields of science and knowledge, students with promising scientific capabilities. **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** has also highlighted within their migration governance strategy the new roadmap to initiate number of reforms to attract high skilled migrants and professionals in specific sectors. In addition, improved and flexible short term work visa categories catering for work assignments up to 6 months would further benefit the region in relation to developing new technologies or facilitating skills transfers that are unavailable. The recent introduction of the Short Term Multiple Entry Visa in **Qatar** was welcomed.

→ **Employers call for expansion and flexibility in work visa categories to allow more efficient process to move skills needed for short-term and long-term assignments. Administrative systems need to be agile and adaptable to meet the fast-changing requirements of business.**

- **Cultivate more transparency in migration processes and trust between governments and employers** Building trust and transparency will ensure migration frameworks that offer multiple win solutions for nationalization programs, employers, and migrant workers. Some of the world leading economies have leveraged digital technologies to implement trusted employer schemes to facilitate compliance checks, increase transparency, make efficient use of time and resources. In GCC countries such schemes could serve as a strong incentive for building trust between governments and private sector: to businesses it will encourage self-compliance, protection of workers' rights, and confidence in the national migration policies. Transparency in migration processes: streamlining and simplifying documentations across different agencies involved with clearly defined timelines and requirements will improve clarity and predictability expediting migration process and skills movement. The creation of detailed "guidance notes" which supplements the law would be a welcome initiative.

Example: UAE shared their experience of implementing "Trusted Employer Self-Assessment Scheme" with the goal to digitize and simplify documentation process, protect worker's rights and encourage businesses for self-compliance.

→ **Employers can better meet government standards and regulations if the migration rules and procedures are clearly streamlined, simplified and more predictable.**

- **Critical need for reforming approach to skills mapping:** In order to create an agile workforce both in training and incubating local talent, private sector needs access to foreign talent to fill the existing skills gaps. Businesses raised challenges of how skills are assessed, validated and time taken for documents to be legalized for use in the respective country. They expressed genuine need for **validation of skills**, to mitigate the risk involved with not accrediting properly, but also accepting that academic qualifications are no longer in of themselves an accurate determination of a migrant worker's skills. Businesses also raised concerns about the needs to put real thought that goes into new and emerging industries where typically some skills are not associated with **academic qualifications**. The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted many industries expediting the need to reskill and upskill the workforce to adjust to the changing economic environment, necessitating regulations to change accordingly. The **recognition of skills** is a major challenge for employers when recruiting foreign talent. Skills categories established by public authorities very often do not match with employers' requirements. Mutual recognition schemes of certified skills offer win-win solutions for employers, workers, and economies at large. Relaxing eligibility and documentary requirements of the skills assessment, recognitions and qualifications fast-track the best talent acquisition and skills transfer to train local workforce.

Example: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has launched number of public-private initiative for short- term to long-term basis to facilitate development of local talent. They designed migration governance module for all political decisions related to labour market involving all relevant stakeholders including private sector. KSA has recently organized public-private dialogue to engage 620 employers of businesses to discuss and assess how to improve the contractual relationship between employer and employees to better address skills mobility challenges. It is also noteworthy to highlight, the government has started comprehensive skills categorization scheme in consultation of whole of society, including private sector.

→ **Employers need greater autonomy to choose the talent they need to fill the positions, particularly in light of the fast-evolving nature of the demand for skills in Industry 4.0 and the future of work, undertaking a detailed skills mapping exercise and loosening the role education degrees play in the immigration process.**

- **Build stronger private sector stakeholder engagement** Businesses emphasized the need for consistent dialogue between governments and employers, be it through existing formal national channels or through ad-hoc dialogues and public-private stakeholder engagement meetings. By strengthening the stakeholder engagement with private entities, public agencies will improve the understanding of the needs of workers and businesses to ultimately meet their nationalization objectives. The Private Sector also recommended having more of a role in the legislative process. Private sector can also play crucial role in supporting GCC governments in their implementation of GCM objectives on labour migration governance.

Example: IOE has a valuable role in the region working with and representing member employers' organisations of the Middle East to facilitate productive stakeholder engagements with governments and private sector representatives. With over 100 years of expertise in labour migration governance, IOE is committed to building capacity and engagement of employers' organisations in supporting their governments to build competitive economies.

→ **Employers can support their governments at all levels of migration governance, including but not limited to identifying digital solutions to streamline immigration, data collection, recruitment and skills recognition processes.**

Additional challenges:

- **In view of nationalization programs, shared concerns of retention of talent in private sector.** Businesses shared their enthusiasm and support of developing and skilling of the local talent through nationalization programs, but they also raised their concern about retention of such talent in private sector. Due to attractive incentives of public sector employment, private sector faces challenge to retain skilled local talent which is specific to GCC countries cases.
- **Diversification of labour quotas specifications:** In order to competitively source global talent and skills, businesses flagged importance of diversifying labour quota specifications. While some countries are opening up to relax the gender, age, nationality, professional title criteria, it is important to consider practicing flexibility with requirements of skill sets and expertise developed and accelerated due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Next steps:

The takeaways of this meeting (including challenges and key recommendations summarized in this report) will feed into the International Migration Review Forum, the United Nations process which will bring together in May 2022 United Nations Member States to review their implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The Business Advisory Group on Migration,

strongly believes in the important role the private sector can play in policy design to ensure that migration frameworks benefit all stakeholders.