
TheNational

Opportunity knocks

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Moving on is a given in every workplace. Whether it's a sudden change in management, being overlooked for promotion, or a job description that didn't turn out quite as originally envisaged, most of us seek to migrate to a new office at least several times during our career.

And don't forget the reluctant leavers, the ones who could probably go on working in the same position forever but have been wanting fresh challenges and life experiences, or perhaps a better work-life balance.

In a region crying out for skilled labour, and with projects piling up across all manner of industries, the scramble for talent is intensifying. The only absolute is money. Of course, no one moves for less, particularly in the Gulf.

Illustr

Poaching from within the same employment pool is likely to always be a given in this region, as employers seek safe, experienced hands with local knowledge rather than going (international recruitment route. But major changes in the global workplace, particularly in light more people are prepared to go where they can find money and opportunities – two common reserve. And then there is the geographical benefit: we are sitting firmly between Europe and Manpower data suggests Europe could lose up to 60 million people from its workforce in the more likely to head east than west, given that Asian economies are still emerging globally. T foreseeable future, continue to call the shots and is likely to account for 45 per cent of globa

While these are clear advantages for the Gulf, the region is not without its challenges. It is not one in which developed and developing world are fighting for talent. Reconciling demand with For example, China needs a staggering 75,000 managers and other skilled professionals, a year.

So the message is clear: workers that arrive on inbound aircraft from Shanghai or elsewhere return flight as the globalised market becomes increasingly fluid – and that in itself opens an managers involving the full gamut of employment issues such as loyalty, career paths, staff l

Then there are the two major external local issues – inflation and accommodation costs – which managers, continue to affect every business.

Employers are feeling pressure to raise accommodation allowance thresholds in line with inf

workers who make their businesses run.

Labour law

The region has its distinctive ways of working, and irrespective of whether you are on a short-term contract or a long-term contract, you need to be aware of the intricacies of the employment law and sponsorship system. Under law, UAE employees on a limited-term contract who resign from their place of employment are subject to a one-year work ban and will not be entitled to end-of-service benefits if their continuous period of employment is less than five years. Employees are also subject to a salary deduction of 45 days for breaking a limited-term contract.

It's cases in which employees look to move on within the same industry that can be altogether different when it comes to visa transfers.

If a worker who has been terminated by, or resigns from, an employer finds alternative employment in the UAE, then the employee may elect to have his or her work permit and residence visa replaced by the new employer. The new employer would then replace the existing employer as the worker's sponsor.

If the transfer process does not involve the employee leaving the UAE, the current employer and his family – if applicable – with one-way air tickets to the employee's home country, or repatriation is a benefit under his employment contract or the usual practice of the employer. However, the rules relating to the transfer of sponsorship have been tightened recently, and employees must obtain permission from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Interior for the transfer of sponsorship. The existing employer agrees to the transfer.

It appears that sponsorship may not be transferred unless the employee falls into one of the categories that meet certain requirements laid down by the ministries. It is difficult to say with any certainty what the requirements are, as they are continually being revised and their interpretation and application vary between the ministries.

The requirements do, however, exclude from transfer employees who do not meet a particular category or whose transfer is outside the ambit of one of the exempt categories for transfer.

As a general rule, a worker wishing to be transferred from an existing employer to a new employer must be in a professional or managerial position in which he was previously employed and must hold a valid tertiary education qualification. For example, a doctor cannot transfer his sponsorship to work as the in-house doctor for that company.

If the ministries do not agree to the transfer of the sponsorship, the employee must leave the emirate, cancel his or her residence permit and can only re-enter the emirates for work purposes after a period of time.

The mover

Sandra Wilkinson, who recently switched jobs within the UAE publishing industry, found that despite the challenges and opportunities, there is still plenty of room for "gazumping", and recommends exploring your options discreetly. As in any market, she advises you to receive an offer formally in writing from a potential employer before making your intentions public – be it to your current employer, friends or contacts.

"The job market in Dubai is volatile," she says. "That said, there is a lot to be said for the power of choice words to a trusted few acquaintances can move things along. I think, generally, employers are more open when it comes to moving sponsors, which is a sign of a maturing jobs market."

Since the bureaucracy is complicated, she adds, it is best to leave the paperwork in the hands of those involved and their human resources departments.

"I'd be sure to flag up any potential issues at an early stage – a pre-booked holiday, for example, when your new employer takes vis-à-vis the visa," she says. "I was unofficially advised to take all my leave when I cancelled my old visa, so maybe there is still some mileage in the 'freezing' thing. But it's more of an employer one, and can be resolved with the provision of a new salary certificate."

The employer

Simon Fowler, the managing director of Hephher Project Management in Dubai, says it is an in-demand industry, as opposing forces are evident in the recruitment market.

"We are seeing increasing availability of quality, experienced staff that have now been pushed out of the US downturns," he says.

"These can be people that have thought of relocating but have remained in their home countries. But while demand for positions is high and salaries are increasing, ironically this is reflected in an interesting cycle that has developed where the property owners are raising rents, the main infrastructure developers are paying more for their property to be built and maintained. "This is a gross generalisation," he says.

Macdonald and Company, the property recruitment specialist, recently released its Middle East survey of professionals – which coincided with Cityscape Dubai 2008. It found an average rise of 13.2 per cent in 15 disciplines in the region's real estate sector, indicating salaries are keeping pace with inflation. Average total monthly remuneration (basic, housing and transport allowances) of professionals rose 10.7 per cent since last year, reaching Dh39,181 (US\$10,666).

One in three surveyed began working in the region within the past two years, fewer than 40 per cent have worked for five years or more, and 60 per cent have actually had between two and five different jobs since starting, suggesting a culture of switching jobs, which is endemic.

Salary chart

Lawyers' salaries in the UAE, especially in the banking and financial services sector, are clearly the highest, with an average of Dh82,000 per month for the head-of-legal, according to a study conducted by Tessera with the Dubai Corporate Counsel Group (DCCG).

While last year's survey showed the real estate sector paying some of the highest salaries, this year has seen a shift to banking and financial services, IT and telecommunications sectors. The survey, which surveyed lawyers from a wide range of organisations, found salaries of Dh130,000 to Dh150,000-plus to be unusual, with 20 per cent of heads of legal departments now being paid more than Dh100,000 per month. Overall, the results show that the highest-paid lawyers qualified in North America, followed by those qualified at the head-of-legal level, however, an England and Wales qualification places one at the top of the list, while those qualified on the Indian subcontinent remain the lowest paid, on average.

"By and large, lawyers who qualified in the US or Europe, including the UK, New Zealand, Australia and Canada, are paid more than those from the MENA region or the subcontinent. This year, however, the pay gap is less pronounced," says Elizabeth Williams, the senior partner and legal practice head at Tessera Executive Search.

"Western-qualified, bilingual Arabic/English lawyers are still the most sought after and comm packages in some cases reaching Dh244,000 per month."

UAE employers pay for experience, showing a direct correlation between salary and the number of years of post-qualification experience (PQE). The average salary for lawyers who have 5 to 10 years PQE is Dh31,000, with the highest salary reported in this range being Dh66,000 in the banking and finance sectors. The highest salary reported for the five to seven years PQE range is Dh94,000 per month, again in the banking and finance sectors. In the 10 to 15 years PQE range, the highest salary reported, Dh115,000 per month, appeared in both banking and finance sectors.

"The salary increases since last year are due in part to a significant shortage of qualified law demand for in-house lawyers in the UAE, as shown by the fact that more than 75 per cent of law firms have hired and expand their departments, especially in Abu Dhabi, with its dramatic expansion plans," says Dominic Ellis, chairman of the DCCG.

He adds that other drivers of pay increases include the increased cost of living and the depreciation of assets which reduce the value of compensation packages, putting further upwards pressure on salaries. "We expect the war for talent to continue, with salaries likely to rise even further, especially for those with experience," he says.

Regarding job and salary satisfaction, the majority of the study's respondents stated they were satisfied with their compensation. However, 44 per cent of them said that they worked more than 10 hours a day and 30 per cent reported their job was stressful and 30 per cent reported it was very stressful.

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