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THE GCC WORKFORCE READINESS REPORT 2026

How HR Leaders Across the Gulf Are Closing

the Skills, AI and Capability Gap

2.5M	44%	87%	10+
Skilled professionals needed across GCC	Core job skills disrupted by 2030	Employers struggle to find right skills	Years of Ensaan GCC expertise

Saudi Arabia · UAE · Qatar · Oman · Bahrain · Kuwait

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A NOTE FROM ENSAAN TECHNOLOGIES

The GCC has never moved faster. Across six countries, national transformation agendas are rewriting industries, workforce expectations and the very definition of competitive advantage. And at the centre of every conversation about what comes next is the same question: *do we have the people to deliver it?*

This report is our attempt to answer that question honestly — drawing on a decade of working alongside HR and people leaders across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait, combined with the latest external research from global authorities on workforce transformation.

What we found won't surprise those living it every day. But the scale of the challenge — and the clarity of what separates organisations managing it well from those that aren't — is striking. We hope this report serves as both a mirror and a map.

Our intention is straightforward: to share what a decade in this region has taught us, and to give you something genuinely useful — whether or not we ever work together.

Ensaan Technologies | June 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The GCC's workforce transformation agenda is unlike any other in the world. Six countries simultaneously pursuing economic diversification, nationalisation mandates, digital transformation and AI adoption at a pace most global markets have never attempted. The pressure on HR leaders is extraordinary.

Five findings that define 2026

87% of employers report difficulty finding candidates with right skills *World Assessment Council, Jan 2026*	**2.5M** skilled professionals needed across GCC by 2028 *Gulf Talent Report, 2025–2026*	**44%** of core job skills will be disrupted within five years *WEF / iMocha, 2026*
60% of GCC professionals feel salary does not match responsibilities *Taggd GCC Talent Market, 2026*	**95%** of executives expect AI spending to increase in 2026 *EY Technology Pulse Poll, Feb 2026*	**10+** years of Ensaan expertise in GCC workforce transformation *Ensaan Technologies*

Central Finding	*The organisations pulling ahead are not the ones with the largest training budgets. They are the ones that have made workforce development a board-level strategy — not an HR programme.*

CHAPTER 1: THE SKILLS CRISIS IS NO LONGER COMING — IT'S HERE

The gap between ambition and capability

Every national transformation agenda in the GCC — from Saudi Vision 2030 to the UAE's AI strategy, Qatar's NDS, and Oman's Vision 2040 — is underpinned by the same assumption: that the workforce will be ready to deliver it. That assumption is increasingly under pressure.

The GCC collectively needs an estimated 2.5 million skilled professionals over the next three years *(Gulf Talent, 2025–2026)*. Yet 87% of employers globally already report difficulty finding candidates with the right skills. In the GCC, this challenge is amplified by the simultaneous pursuit of nationalisation targets and rapid technology transformation.

Where the gaps are deepest

Skill Category	Gap Severity	GCC Context
AI & Machine Learning	Critical — 340% increase in demand since 2020	81% of GCC organisations scaling GenAI; talent supply cannot keep pace
Digital & Data Literacy	High — foundational for all transformation roles	Required across tourism, energy, finance, healthcare simultaneously
Leadership & Management	High — mid-level pipeline the weakest link	The 8–15 year experience band is the structural bottleneck across the region
National Talent Development	Critical in KSA, UAE, Qatar, Oman	Organisations conflating compliance hiring with genuine capability building
Change & Adaptability	Emerging — accelerating rapidly	Deloitte 2026: workforces must 'continually learn, adapt and reinvent in real time'

Ensaan Observation	*Across our work in the region, a pattern keeps emerging: organisations that approach nationalisation primarily as a compliance requirement tend to focus on numbers. Those that approach it as a talent investment tend to build something more durable. The distinction matters — and over time, it shows.*

CHAPTER 2: NATIONALISATION — FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The mandate is the floor, not the ceiling

Every GCC nation has a nationalisation programme — Saudization (Nitaqat), Emiratisation (Nafis), Qatarization, Omanisation, Bahrainisation, Kuwaitization. The strategic intent is the same: build a skilled, self-sufficient national workforce that can drive a post-oil economy.

In the UAE, companies with 50 or more employees must increase Emirati employment by 2% annually, targeting 10% by end of 2026. In Saudi Arabia, Nitaqat compliance ratings directly impact a company's ability to hire expatriates. But the most forward-thinking organisations are moving well beyond quota compliance.

Country	Programme	Key 2026 Requirement
Saudi Arabia	Saudization / Nitaqat	Colour-coded compliance (Platinum–Red); non-compliance restricts expatriate hiring
UAE	Emiratisation / Nafis	2% annual increase in Emirati skilled roles; AED 6,000/month fine per gap
Qatar	Qatarization	Private sector targets; focus on leadership and high-skill roles
Oman	Omanisation	Sector-specific quotas; emphasis on private sector development
Bahrain	Bahrainisation	LMRA compliance; incentives for national talent investment
Kuwait	Kuwaitization	Public and private sector targets; leadership pipeline focus

What separates compliance from capability

→ Compliance hires nationals into roles. Capability development builds nationals into leaders.

→ Compliance satisfies the regulator. Capability satisfies the business.

→ Compliance is measured in headcount. Capability is measured in performance, retention and succession depth.

Client Observation	*We have worked with enterprises across the UAE making exactly this shift — from minimum Emiratisation compliance toward structured national talent development. What changes is not immediately visible in the numbers. It shows up in retention, in pipeline depth, and in how quickly nationals move into roles that matter.*

CHAPTER 3: AI IN THE WORKPLACE — THE HUMAN CHALLENGE BEHIND THE HYPE

Adoption is ahead of readiness — dangerously so

EY's Technology Pulse Poll (February 2026) found that 95% of executives expect AI spending to increase — yet over half of all department-level AI initiatives are running without formal oversight or governance. 46% of leaders cite talent skill gaps as a significant hurdle to AI adoption.

Generative AI can now handle up to 40% of standard code and initial testing. Yet without employees who can reason with AI, validate outputs, and apply judgment where the tool cannot, the productivity gains remain theoretical. The technology is moving faster than the people.

The three workforce gaps AI is exposing

Gap	What It Means in Practice
AI Fluency	Most employees know AI tools exist. Very few know how to use them to change the way they work. Digital literacy must evolve into AI collaboration competency.
Human Judgment	As AI handles routine cognitive tasks, the premium on uniquely human capabilities — critical thinking, ethical reasoning, complex problem-solving — increases dramatically.
Change Readiness	Deloitte 2026 surveyed 9,000+ leaders across 89 countries: the primary challenge is building workforces that can 'continually learn, adapt and reinvent in real time'.

What the leading organisations are doing

→ Integrating AI literacy into onboarding and continuous learning — not treating it as a separate initiative

→ Redefining job roles around human-AI collaboration, not replacement
→ Building internal communities of AI practice that spread capability organically
→ Measuring AI readiness as a workforce KPI, not an IT adoption metric

GCC-Specific Finding	*GCC organisations have a structural advantage: more centralised decision-making means faster AI implementation once leadership commits. But that speed amplifies the human readiness gap. Technology can be deployed in weeks. Changing how 10,000 people think and work takes something far more deliberate.*

CHAPTER 4: THE L&D; RECKONING — WHY LEARNING ISN'T LANDING

The gap between training investment and business impact

GCC organisations invest billions in learning and development annually. Yet the question most HR leaders struggle to answer confidently is: *what is it actually delivering for the business?* The challenge is structural — most corporate learning is still designed around completion. Courses run, hours logged, certificates issued.

The connection between learning activity and business outcome is assumed rather than measured, and the assumption is increasingly difficult to defend in front of leadership teams demanding evidence of ROI.

Five signs your L&D; strategy needs rethinking

→ Learning is measured by completion rates, not capability change
→ L&D; programmes run independently of performance management
→ Skills data exists in training systems but never reaches workforce planning
→ Managers are expected to develop their teams but are never developed as coaches themselves
→ The business can't see its own capability gaps until they become operational problems

"Learning that doesn't change behaviour is not learning. It is administration."

What effective L&D; looks like in 2026

From	To
Course completion as the metric	Capability change as the metric
Annual learning calendar	Continuous, role-relevant learning experiences
L&D; separate from performance	Learning integrated with performance and succession
Training as a cost	Development as a competitive investment
Skills data siloed in the LMS	Skills intelligence feeding workforce planning
Managers as recipients of training	Managers developed as learning coaches

Research Finding	*A 2026 study across multiple KSA sectors found consistent positive associations between structured learning investment and three outcomes: employee motivation, retention intention and productivity — with effects sustained across gender, age and sector. (MDPI, 2026)*

CHAPTER 5: RETENTION — THE DEVELOPMENT PROBLEM IN DISGUISE

Why your best people leave — and what actually keeps them

Across the GCC talent market, 60% of professionals report their salary does not keep pace with their responsibilities *(Taggd, 2026)*. But compensation alone rarely explains why talented people leave — and almost never explains why they stay.

The research is consistent: professionals leave organisations where they stop growing. The organisations with the strongest retention are not always the highest payers. They are the ones where people can see a development path, feel invested in, and believe the organisation is committed to their future.

The retention-development connection

62%	**60%**	**42%**
cite lack of career development as primary reason for leaving	of GCC professionals feel salary doesn't reflect responsibilities	of employee turnover is preventable
Michael Page Middle East, 2025	*Taggd GCC Talent Market, 2026*	*HR.com, 2026*

The four development signals that retain talent

- → **Growth is visible:** employees can see a clear path forward, not just a current job description
- → **Investment is felt:** the organisation spends meaningful time and resource on their development
- → **Stretch is real:** people are challenged at the edge of their capability, not kept comfortable
- → **Recognition is connected:** performance and learning are part of the same conversation

GCC Context	*In markets shaped by nationalisation mandates, retention of national talent is not just a people strategy — it is a compliance strategy. An Emirati or Saudi national who leaves takes with them not just capability, but quota compliance. The cost of attrition in nationalised talent is substantially higher than the salary saved.*

CHAPTER 6: WHAT THE LEADING ORGANISATIONS ARE DOING DIFFERENTLY

Five practices consistently separate the organisations that are ahead from those still catching up — drawn from a decade of Ensaan's work across GCC enterprises and the latest global research.

Practice	What It Looks Like	Why It Matters
Workforce strategy at board level	CHRO at the executive table with people strategy directly connected to business strategy	Decisions on capability, succession and talent are made with the same rigour as financial ones
Real-time capability visibility	Skills data feeds workforce planning, succession decisions and hiring — not locked in an LMS	Leaders can see the capability map of the organisation and act before gaps become crises
Learning connected to performance	Development programmes built around business outcomes, not training calendars	L&D; reports on business impact, not completion rates — and earns its seat at the table
Integrated talent ecosystem	Learning flows into performance, performance feeds succession, succession informs hiring	Each function knows what the others are doing; data connects strategy to execution
Leaders as developers of people	Managers developed as coaches; developing others is understood as the primary leadership job	Cultures where development is daily practice, not a once-a-year conversation

"The organisations we've seen transform fastest are not the ones that implemented the most platforms. They are the ones that had the clearest strategy, the strongest leadership commitment, and the discipline to connect every learning investment to a measurable business outcome."

CHAPTER 7: GCC COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS — 2026 WORKFORCE PRIORITIES

Country	Primary Workforce Mandate	Biggest HR Challenge	Key Opportunity
Saudi Arabia	Vision 2030: Saudization, AI adoption, sector diversification	Building Saudis into high-skill private sector roles at pace	HRDF-supported development; LMS compliance automation for Nitaqat
UAE	Emiratisation 10% by 2026; AI hub ambition	Genuine Emirati capability development beyond quota	Nafis programme alignment; AI fluency as retention tool
Qatar	Post-World Cup economic expansion; Qatarization	Leadership pipeline depth; mid-level national talent scarcity	LXP-led continuous learning; competency frameworks for NDS
Oman	Omanisation; Oman Vision 2040	Depth of national capability vs. compliance headcount	Cost-effective L&D; at scale; skills-based talent frameworks
Bahrain	Bahrainisation; fintech and financial services growth	Retention of Bahraini talent in competitive regional market	Total rewards + development integration; leadership coaching
Kuwait	Kuwaitization; leadership development gap	Mid-to-senior leadership readiness; digital HR modernisation	Leadership pipeline development; HR digital transformation

CONCLUSION: THE CHOICE IN FRONT OF EVERY HR LEADER

The GCC's transformation agenda is extraordinary in its ambition. And for every organisation operating within it, the workforce question is not hypothetical — it is the deciding factor in whether the strategy gets delivered.

The data in this report paints a clear picture: the skills gap is real and widening, AI readiness is behind adoption, nationalisation compliance is not the same as capability development, and learning investment is not automatically translating into business performance.

But the same data reveals something equally clear: the organisations getting this right are not doing something magical. They are making deliberate choices — to treat people strategy as a board priority, to build ecosystems rather than programmes, to connect learning to performance, and to develop leaders who develop others.

"Your industry is transforming. Your workforce needs to lead it — not catch up to it."

That shift is available to every organisation. What it requires is the right strategy, the right partner, and the commitment to see it through.

ABOUT ENSAAN TECHNOLOGIES

Ensaan Technologies is a leading HR technology and consulting partner serving enterprises across the GCC. With over a decade of regional expertise and partnerships with world-class platforms including Cornerstone OnDemand, we help organisations build future-ready workforces through AI-powered learning, talent management, performance and HR digital transformation solutions.

Our Solutions	
AI-Powered Learning & LMS/LXP	Skills & Competency Development
Talent & Performance Management	HR Digital Transformation
HCM Technology & Consulting	Custom Content & Curriculum Design
Workforce Analytics	Implementation & Managed Services

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Sources & Citations

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