



# STATE OF THE TALENT MARKET IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SALARY SURVEY 2024



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The freelance industry in the Middle East is taking off, specifically in the UAE.

## The State of the Talent Market in The Middle East

**For many global businesses, the Middle East was the jewel in the crown for 2023. While uncertainty rippled across the UK, European, and USA markets, many businesses witnessed record growth across the Middle East, driven mainly by the rise of Saudi Arabian investment and business growth.**

As expert recruiters who hire talent in areas of revenue, reputation, and risk management, we have seen a significant increase in demand for roles in communications, strategy, marketing, and green talent, especially in KSA. This is taking its toll on talent – from both a hiring and retention point of view. Businesses preferring to hire locally are competing in a shrinking talent pool, and as new businesses find their footing, major funds such as the Public Investment Fund (PIF) invest in groundbreaking projects in KSA, and international companies continue to look to the ME to bolster their bottom lines, the strain on this local talent pool is increased. This leads to a knock-on effect – not only is it hard to hire great talent, but retention and employee demands exacerbate, and mediocre talent becomes overpaid and under-skilled.

With economic and tax pressures across the rest of the world, we are seeing a substantial amount of talent moving to the Middle East and as a business ourselves, we have had an increase in people from the UK looking to move to the Middle East. However, many businesses are eager to secure local talent with local knowledge. With policies such as Saudization and Emiratization, businesses are turning to universities to hire local talent and upskill these individuals. Staff retention remains an issue, with many leaving after a few years in favour of government businesses.

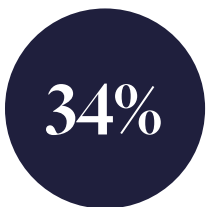
Speaking to HR professionals in the Middle East, staff retention remains a priority – which is a particular challenge in KSA where the HR functions are less developed. Businesses need to focus on employee retention, developing lasting and meaningful upskilling programs for employees, alongside working cultures and practices that mean more to people than just their salary. From our results, bonuses are very rare, and if staggered in the form of both annual and LTIP, would act as both a way

of showing appreciation for great work as well as ensuring loyalty from the employee. Investing in training and development has also proven to be a great means of both upskilling people and showing that you invest in and care about staff. Offering other regional secondments, or even international ones, can help a business stand out from others and help with staff retention.

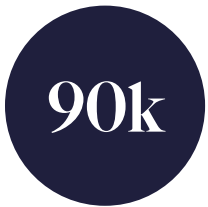
Speaking of meteoric rises, the freelance industry in the Middle East is taking off, specifically in the UAE, which has implemented easier visa regulations for foreign freelancers. This has led to a massive influx of freelancers who, many using their own contacts to find opportunities, are also turning to platforms like The Work Crowd to help secure project-based work. We are also seeing businesses looking to adapt to an agile working model, favouring having a roster of freelancers or consultants to use on an 'on-demand' basis with specific skill sets. Although the cost of a freelancer may be higher than that of a permanent employee, once you factor in other employee costs like flights, healthcare, and gratuity, and taking into consideration government policy around percentages of the local force, this model becomes very attractive. As we see a rise in new skill sets, such as AI, and the increasing need for a variety of skills in a marketing and communications function, having on-demand experts can be very beneficial.

Beyond just employment and freelance stats, the industry of the Middle East is experiencing a massive overhaul. There is an IPO renaissance, arts and culture are undergoing massive investments, and a relatively young workforce (with the average worker being 35 years old) all shaking up existing systems. Even businesses that don't operate within the Middle East will want to keep their eyes on the region over the next few years, as we may be watching the birth of a titan.





of respondents  
claim to work in  
the public sector



of UAE citizens  
are working in the  
private sector



of respondents  
work full-time for  
one employer

## The Workforce

**Before we can dive into the results of a survey, we need to discuss who was surveyed to begin with. We surveyed 407 professionals across the Middle East, with most of our answers (70%) coming from people who work in Dubai.**

In terms of demographics, the gender split was almost exactly even, with 52% of respondents being female. The biggest range in demographic was the amount of time people have spent in their industries. 67% of respondents had been in their industries for 6-20 years.

This working demographic has experienced some of the biggest worldwide increases in inflation in recent history, coupled with the smallest increases in salary. The MENA region took this particularly hard, with their inflation rate and pay rise average culminating in a -1.2% average salary change.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the survey, at least when looking at demographics, is the sectors in which our respondents worked. There was a fairly even spread across our 15 choices, with one outlier. Just over 34% of respondents claimed to work in the public sector, with no other sector even breaching 25%.

Despite this being a massive piece of the pie, this is actually down when compared to the past decade. The UAE public sector was a hiring goliath a decade ago, with nearly 90% of working Emiratis being employed by the government. Nowadays, after the government's Emiratisation plan, 90,000 UAE citizens are working in the private sector, with 2023 seeing a massive increase in private hiring.

Finally, in terms of working status, the overwhelming result (82%) was that our respondents work full-time for one employer, with the distant second result being full-time freelancers at 10%. However, much like the public vs private result above, this may be symptomatic of a larger shift.

Freelancing was a particularly tough option in the past, due to red tape around visa and licensing laws. Couple that with the fairly high cost of living, and there were precious few people able to freelance in the UAE. However, visa and policy changes announced in 2022 allowed for a rise of the freelancing UAE economy, and we are seeing a steady cultural shift toward freelancing as the years go on, in fact it's one of the fastest growing global freelance economies.







The UAE public sector was a hiring goliath a decade ago, with nearly 90% of working Emiratis being employed by the government.



## The Market

**When asked about agency or in-house employment, our respondents leaned toward the agency side, with 58% of respondents working in an agency, while 42% worked in-house.**

In terms of sectors, 34% of respondents listed their main sector as Corporate Reputation, with the following top results being Brand Communications (26%), Marketing (23%), and Government Relations/Public Affairs (21%). There's a substantial amount of crossover between these four results, so it's easy to see a theme among the top responses. 34.48% of respondents work in the public sector, the most common response.



26%

of respondents are working in brand communication

58%

of respondents are working in an agency

23%

of respondents are working in marketing



# The Salaries

If there has been one standard across every market, it's that financial turmoil and uncertainty was a staple throughout 2023.

Inflation and the cost of living is settling a bit as 2024 makes a name for itself, but as with any economic change, it will take time for these effects to be felt.

Salary is the most crucial element to both recruitment and job satisfaction, so it's key in discussing the state of any market, with 53% of respondents feel underpaid and 56% of respondents consider pay and benefits to be the most important aspect of a job.



## AGENCY FULL-TIME SALARIES

Financial / Corporate / Government / Healthcare		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Account Executive	10,000	15,000
Account Manager	10,000	25,000
Account Director	20,000	35,000
Associate Director	30,000	45,000
Director	40,000	69,999
Managing Director	50,000	99,999
CEO	90,000	120,000

Consumer		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Account Executive	10,000	15,000
Account Manager	15,000	25,000
Account Director	20,000	30,000
Associate Director	20,000	39,999
Director	40,000	55,000
Managing Director	50,000	60,000
CEO	60,000	90,000



IN-HOUSE FULL-TIME SALARIES

Financial		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	10,000	20,000
Manager	20,000	39,999
Senior Manager	30,000	45,000
Head of Comms/Government Relations	55,000	70,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	70,000	120,000
CMO	80,000	130,000

Government, Utilities, Enviroment		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	10,000	20,000
Manager	20,000	39,999
Senior Manager	35,000	50,000
Head of Comms/Government Relations	60,000	80,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	60,000	120,000
CMO	90,000	140,000+

Healthcare		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	10,000	19,000
Manager	20,000	30,000
Senior Manager	30,000	45,000
Head of Comms/Government Relations	60,000	90,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	80,000	120,000
CMO	80,000	120,000



Consumer focused		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	10,000	19,000
Manager	20,000	30,000
Senior Manager	30,000	50,000
Head of Comms/Government Relations	60,000	80,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	70,000	120,000
CMO	65,000	120,000

Technology		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	10,000	20,000
Manager	20,000	30,000
Senior Manager	25,000	45,000
Head of Comms/Government Relations	55,000	70,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	60,000	90,000
CMO	80,000	120,000

# The Salaries

Freelancer rates vary broadly based on a wide range of skills and industry experience, and therefore, when considering what to pay, it's more of a case-by-case conversation. The rates in the table below are a good starting point, but are subject to fluctuation based on numerous variables.



## AGENCY FREELANCE SALARIES

Financial / Corporate / Government / Healthcare		
Job title	Minimum Freelance Rate	Maximum Freelance Rate
Account Executive	900	1,200
Account Manager	900	2,000
Account Director	1,500	2,500
Associate Director	2,200	3,200
Director	2,800	4,800
Managing Director	4,000	8,000

Consumer		
Job title	Minimum Freelance Rate	Maximum Freelance Rate
Account Executive	900	1,200
Account Manager	1,200	1,800
Account Director	1,500	2,200
Associate Director	1,500	2,800
Director	2,800	3,800
Managing Director	3,500	6,000



IN-HOUSE FREELANCE SALARIES

Financial		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	900	1,500
Manager	1,500	2,800
Senior Manager	2,200	3,200
Head of Comms/Government Relations	3,800	4,800
Director of Corp. Affairs	4,800	8,000
CMO	5,500	8,500

Government, Utilities, Enviroment		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	900	1,500
Manager	1,500	2,800
Senior Manager	2,500	3,500
Head of Comms/Government Relations	4,000	5,500
Director of Corp. Affairs	4,000	8,000
CMO	6,000	9,200

Healthcare		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	900	1,500
Manager	1,500	2,200
Senior Manager	2,200	3,200
Head of Comms/Government Relations	4,000	6,000
Director of Corp. Affairs	5,500	8,000
CMO	5,500	8,000



Consumer focused		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	900	1,500
Manager	1,500	2,200
Senior Manager	2,200	3,500
Head of Comms/Government Relations	4,000	5,500
Director of Corp. Affairs	4,800	8,000
CMO	4,500	8,000

Technology		
Job title	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
Executive	900	1,500
Manager	1,500	2,200
Senior Manager	1,800	3,200
Head of Comms/Government Relations	3,800	4,800
Director of Corp. Affairs	4,000	6,000
CMO	5,500	8,000



# Operational Costs

Another component of freelance working is the fact that freelancers need to cover their own operating costs.

We contacted our network to ask them about the costs of being a freelancer and running their own business, like healthcare and business costs, as well as administrative elements, like a freelancer permit, accounting services, and insurance. These costs will range widely based on a freelancer's service and industry experience, but the below table of estimates is a good starting point when considering freelance costs.

## FREELANCE BUSINESS OVERHEADS

<b>Operational Setup Costs</b>	<b>840</b>
Business Licence	290
Tax Certificate + time cost	175
Insurance (Business & Health)	375
<b>Tools</b>	<b>950</b>
Computer Hardware	580
Software Programmes and Industry Subscriptions	238
Google business admin or equivalent	132
<b>Corporate Assets &amp; Sales and Marketing</b>	<b>540</b>
Operational	2,582
Work space	475
Transport	500
Communications (Mobile)	500
Utilities (Internet, Water, Electricity etc.)	800
Banking Business	99
Accounting	208
<b>Total Monthly Costs</b>	<b>4,912</b>



Costs will range widely based on a freelancer's service and industry experience.





# The Benefits

With full-time employees, it's not just about salary when it comes to choosing the best employer. Benefits and perks are a huge component of any job, and with such a wide variety of benefits to consider, we asked which are considered the most important.

Firstly, in terms of benefits that people are already receiving, the most common were healthcare for the individual (70%\*), flights home (68%), healthcare insurance (58%), and flexible working (55%). Those aside, a few more benefits fell within the 20-30% range, like healthcare for dependents, mental health services, and maternity leave.

The average holiday offering was very generous, with 48% of respondents having 20-24 days of holiday a year, 34% having 25-29 days of holiday, and 16% having over 30 days.

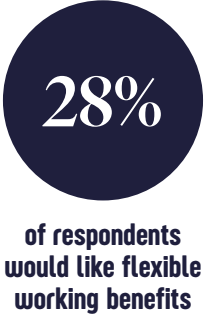
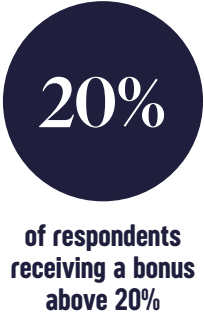
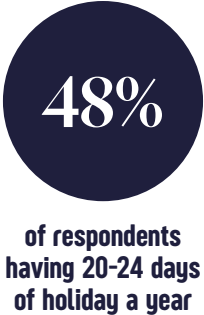
One benefit that was fairly thin on the ground was yearly bonuses. 40% of respondents didn't receive a bonus of any type, with only 20% of respondents receiving a bonus above 20%.

With this in mind, we also asked what three benefits people would like to see added to their employment package. Unsurprisingly, a great bonus took a comfortable lead with 50% of the vote, followed by schooling with 38% of the vote, and accommodation and flexible working, both with 28% of the vote.



## MOST COMMON BENEFITS

Benefit	% of Employees
Healthcare for Employee	71.09%
Flights Home	67.58%
Healthcare Insurance	57.81%
Flexible Working	55.08%
Healthcare for Dependents	38.67%
Maternity Leave	28.52%
External Training, Coaching, or Mentoring	23.44%
Schooling	21.48%
Mental Health Services	20.70%
Accommodation	19.14%
Paternity Leave	17.58%
Sabbatical	10.55%
Subscription to a Sports Club	7.81%
Retirement Savings Plan	7.42%
Stock Options or Shares	7.03%
Company Car	5.08%



## MOST DESIRED BENEFITS

Benefit	% of Employees
Great Bonus	50.58%
Schooling	38.61%
Accommodation	28.57%
Flexible Working	28.57%
Healthcare for Dependents	19.69%
Stock Options or Shares	18.92%
Healthcare Insurance	16.99%
Retirement Savings Plan	16.60%
Healthcare for Employee	15.83%
Substantial Holiday Allowance	13.90%
External Training, Coaching, or Mentoring	11.58%
Mental Health Services	10.81%
Flights Home	9.65%
Sabbatical	5.79%
Company Car	5.41%
Subscription to a Sports Club	1.93%
Maternity Leave	1.54%
Paternity Leave	0.77%



# Satisfaction

**The final element to consider when looking at optimizing retention is overall job satisfaction. Unlike salary and benefits, it's difficult to quantify this with a metric, but with a quick look at the responses, most respondents would be open to a change.**

Only 23% of respondents were fully satisfied with their current role, with the remaining 77% at least willing to consider a change. 41% would actively welcome a change in their career. We don't know whether this is based on salary, benefits, or just general restlessness, but the fact that over half of the respondents felt underpaid is emblematic of dissatisfaction.

In terms of keeping workers satisfied, everyone is different, and what someone might consider a priority might be an afterthought to someone else. We asked what the most important factors in job satisfaction were, and the top three results were salary and benefits, flexible working, and workplace culture.

As for what people considered to be the least important, the top (or bottom) three choices were sustainability credits, diversity, and training opportunities. When considering the more social elements of a role, like sustainability and diversity, it's often the consumer who cares more about these issues, with water preservation, waste management, and general pollution being key factors in who they decide to do business with. While employees will likely still care, it's not going to take precedence over being able to afford to care for their family.



41% would actively welcome a change in their career.



## About Hanson Search and The Work Crowd

**This survey was a collaborative effort between Hanson Search and The Work Crowd.**

Hanson Search is an award-winning international talent advisory and headhunting consultancy, specialising in all areas of revenue, reputation, and risk management, focusing specially on roles in communications, public affairs, marketing, and sustainability. We are trusted advisors to our partners, recruiting and placing talented mid to senior people for the world's most successful brands, agencies, and startups. We are known for the quality of our candidates, speed of delivery, and deep understanding of the market. We have been in the talent industry for over 20 years, and have over 10 years of experience in the Middle East.

Hanson Search's sister company, The Work Crowd, is a technology-based freelance platform that connects businesses with freelance, fractional, or contract-based talent on a global scale. Originally based in the UK, The Work Crowd has taken advantage of the new wave of freelancers in the Middle East and established a robust network of both businesses and talent to ensure both sides can mutually benefit.



**If you would like to get in touch with us, either for business or general enquiries, please email [info@hansonsearch.com](mailto:info@hansonsearch.com) and we would be happy to talk.**

