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REPORT | *December 2021*

# **People Profession 2021**

United Arab Emirates and Kingdom  
of Saudi Arabia survey report

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## Report

# People Profession 2021: UAE and KSA survey report

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## Author profile

Dr Gill Maxwell, CIPD research adviser, is the author of the report.





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# 1 Foreword

Since the last *People Profession* survey in the UAE and KSA in 2020, the profession has had to respond at speed to a global pandemic. While public health measures left vast sectors of the economy in suspended animation, others, such as healthcare, logistics and security, had to go into overdrive. All of these factors had a profound effect on the labour market and changed the way in which we work and live.

In addition to adapting to an ever-changing regulatory and business environment, people professionals have had to work closely with their organisations and their workforce to ensure business continuity, talent retention and rapid upskilling in order to work remotely, all the while ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of employees.

As the region bounces back from the pandemic and the ensuing economic slowdown, the UAE and Saudi Arabia stand out again as regional leaders in economic resilience. The Dubai Expo 2020, being held this year, has already proven to be a driver for economic growth and sustained confidence in the UAE and the wider region.

With this report, we wanted to bring into focus what people professionals in the region's largest markets are seeing as their biggest challenges and trends. As the survey results indicate, practitioners have shown resilience and a keen sense of responsibility to both their business and workforce. They have led the way in pivoting to extensive homeworking during quite draconian public health restrictions, while operating at the very heart of their organisations as they react to ever-changing guidance on COVID-19.

Their professionalism, expertise and agility in the face of a crisis has been noted. While we are not out of the crisis yet, the people profession in the UAE and Saudi Arabia faces a unique set of challenges in managing skills shortages and hybrid workforces. This also presents a rare opportunity for the profession to lead and shape the future of work in the region.

The findings from this survey report show that people professionals find renewed meaning in their work and the speed at which the profession has learnt new skills is highlighted. It also raises the important point of ensuring the profession doesn't just go back to business as usual but instead learns from the innovations and responses to the pandemic.

In all, this report is an acknowledgement of the resourcefulness and evolution of the people profession. Practitioners should take a moment to celebrate a real contribution to the working lives of so many of their colleagues. We hope it inspires more ideas and further innovation to contribute to the success of both organisations and the people who work within them.

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## 2 Executive summary

When COVID-19 became a worldwide crisis in early 2020, the workscape changed reactively and rapidly. 2020 was described retrospectively as 'the year that HR stepped up', with business leaders commenting on the prominent and valuable role that the people function played in organisations' reactions to the unprecedented challenges brought by the virus. In 2021, we surveyed people professionals on their work experiences and opinions throughout this exceptional time. This report captures the current perceptions of practitioners in the UAE and KSA in the COVID-19 context.

The purpose of our annual *People Profession* survey is to provide an evidence-based, contemporary insight into important dimensions of the work and opinions of people professionals, both in-house and independent. Our achieved sample consists of 355 professionals in the UAE and 179 professionals in KSA. The survey was carried out with YouGov during May and June 2021.

### Key findings

#### **Digital transformation and external drivers are creating organisational change**

While already well developed, digital transformation has accelerated more with the widespread and sudden shift to home (or remote) working due to COVID-19. Governments across the Middle East region mandated this shift, impacting on employees in all industries. Evolving digital technologies and transformation are enabling and driving change in organisations and people functions.

#### **The majority of people professionals are increasing their skills and reputation**

An overwhelming majority of people professionals have had to either upskill, by deepening their skills, or reskill, by learning new skills. The majority of practitioners agree that the reputation of people professionals in their organisation has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **People professionals have a strong alignment to organisational success and outcomes**

A majority of practitioner respondents agree that their people function has a clear understanding of what success looks like in organisational outcomes and that their people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction. Building specialist people expertise is a priority improvement in people management capability within organisations.

#### **People professionals are positive and proactive in their career progression**

A majority of our respondents report that their career progression is meeting or exceeding their expectations. Skills development and professional qualifications are identified as the main enablers of career advancement. The profession offers a meaningful career for a majority of practitioners. A very large majority of practitioners took part in a learning and development activity, mainly via online learning, in the last 12 months.

#### **Purpose is important in people professionals' work**

A very high percentage of practitioners gain personal meaning from their work. Most people professionals believe their work makes them and others happy, and are energised by their work. They see connections between their work and what is important to them in life, as well as the larger social good of their community.

#### **People decisions are mainly based on defining issues and professional judgement**

Most people teams focus on defining the problem or issue before moving to a solution. Professional experience and judgement, and organisational data, are used a lot in making people decisions. The use of people data and analytics has increased.





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## 3 Introduction

This report provides a contemporary insight into important dimensions of people professionals' work and opinions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in 2021<sup>1</sup> in the context of the pandemic.

In the uncharted crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, our findings this year are remarkable. We present them in these six main sections:

- Digital transformation and drivers of change (**Section 4**)
- People professionals' skills and reputation (**Section 5**)
- People professionals' alignment with organisational success and outcomes (**Section 6**)
- People professionals' career progression (**Section 7**)
- Purpose in people professionals' work (**Section 8**)
- People decisions and data (**Section 9**).

We selectively compare our main findings with those of our survey last year so as to track changes across 2020 and 2021 where the questions were the same. Also, dotted throughout the report are comparisons with our [People Profession 2021: UK and Ireland survey report](#), as practitioners in the Middle East, and elsewhere, may be interested in an international horizon. Finally (in **Section 10**), we draw key conclusions and call on people professionals to maintain the momentum they have generated in their organisational contributions.

The report is derived from annual survey research, which is an integral part of the CIPD work on the [people profession now and for the future](#). In this work, we aim to inspire, equip and support people professionals to position themselves at the heart of business to drive positive change, underpinning [good work](#) and job quality for all. Our commitment is to [support a global profession](#).

Throughout the report we refer to 'the UAE' and 'KSA' – as they are known in the Middle East region. KSA is also called Saudi Arabia. We headline and explain the main findings from a separate sample of in-house and independent practitioners in each country (using the terms 'people professionals' and 'practitioners' interchangeably). Our achieved sample this year comprises 355 professionals in the UAE and 179 in KSA. The CIPD surveys people professionals annually to ensure an up-to-date, evidence-based picture of their perceptions and experiences of the profession.

## 4 Digital transformation and drivers of change

### Headline findings

- Digital transformation is the main external creator and enabler of change in organisations (48% of UAE and 45% of KSA respondents).
- In KSA, there are two significant relationships centring on digital transformation technologies. Practitioners in large organisations, and junior and middle managers, are more likely to consider digital transformation as a key driver of change.
- In the UAE, 54% of people professionals agree or strongly agree that the role of the people function is changing significantly, compared with 49% in KSA.





## Explainer

### External change factors

For nearly half of the people professionals in our survey, digital and technological transformation is the main factor leading to change in organisations (Figure 1). Specifically, 48% of respondents in the UAE and 45% of respondents in KSA identified this external trend, which we recognise in our [collective view of future trends](#). This is less than we find in our UK survey, where the digital and technological transformation trend was indicated by a clear majority of practitioners (63%).

Lockdown restrictions in response to COVID-19 in the UAE and KSA, as in many other countries, gave rise to more reliance on technology-based homeworking or remote working that is enabled by evolving digital technologies. Reliance on technology has continued with employees [returning to work](#). Most companies in the Middle East region are open to their staff continuing to work remotely, a big change in practice in the UAE (Gibbon 2020) and KSA (PwC 2021). However, working at home, especially involuntarily, can mean that employees feel less connected to their colleagues and find switching off from work harder (Brown 2021).

The second main trend creating organisational change is external drivers and disruptors, most prominently the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic changes since March 2020. As a whole, however, the Middle East has dealt with both of these changes better than was predicted (Alterman 2021). Although transit tourism in the UAE and pilgrimage tourism in KSA ceased, both countries are coming through the COVID-19 context relatively strongly (ibid), even with the pandemic affecting Saudi oil prices (Robertson 2021) to an extent (Energy Information Administration 2021). In particular, the quickened pace of digitalisation in KSA pre-pandemic has reduced the potential impact of COVID-19 on its economy (ibid). Already a ‘digitally-savvy population’, the pandemic has ‘triggered an acceleration of digital adoption’ in the Middle East in general (Chan et al 2021), which is very likely to transfer to workplaces in the UAE and KSA.

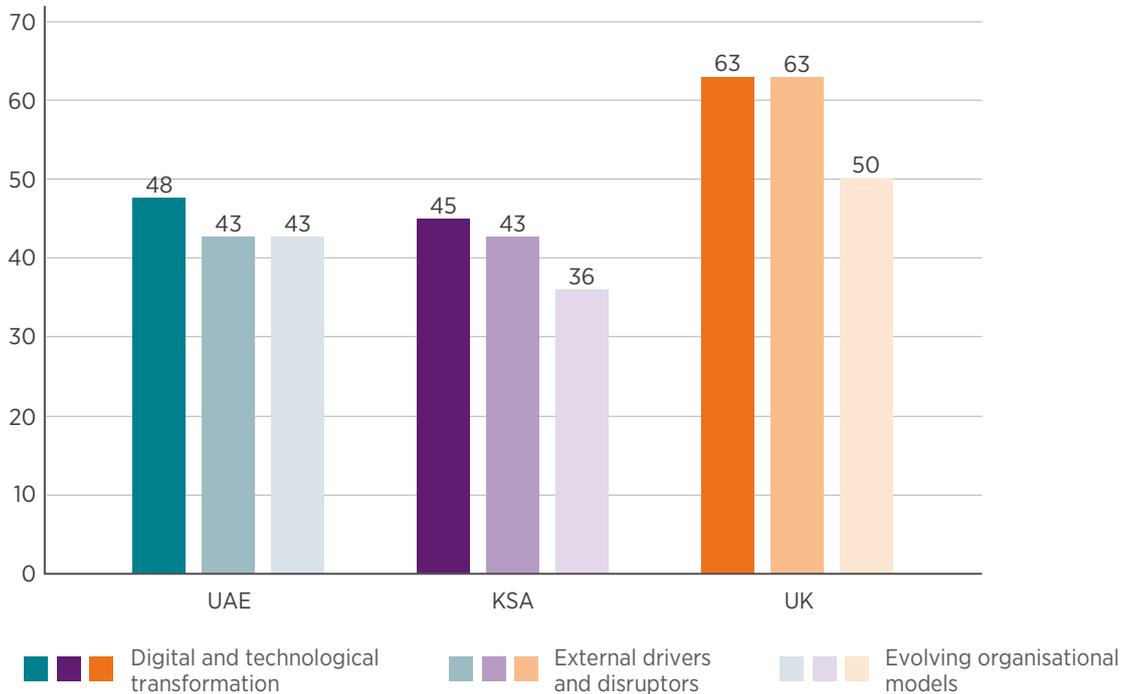
The third main trend we find in the UAE and KSA is that of evolving organisational models, which is also connected to the pandemic. This includes changing organisational processes for employees working in all industries, which are likely to have been caused by the compulsory shift to homeworking in March 2020. Pre-COVID-19, working from home in the UAE was unusual, though hybrid working, flexible arrangements and part-time working are now becoming more commonplace (Tapp 2021). Similarly, traditional ways of working were prevalent in KSA before the pandemic, whereas now, remote working is gaining traction and speeding up the country’s goal of digital transformation (Komati and Saifan 2021). The National Digital Transformation Programme outlines this transformation, which is designed to support [Vision 2030](#). Further, the Government is looking to smart work in the future, building on remote work with new online digital services and processes so that employees can craft their own jobs within organisational goals (World Bank 2021).

Alongside this, we see that people management is, in general, undergoing transformation in the region, and more research is called for on evolving forms of the people function (Budhwar et al 2019). Importantly, studies of the people profession in this area should take account of social, cultural and institutional influences on how people are managed (ibid). For example, the UAE has a multifaceted HR environment due to factors such as its dual labour market and large international workforce (Waxin and Bateman 2016). Saudi Arabia also has country-specific people management factors (Tlaiss and Elamin 2016), for example the prevalence of using personal connections in conducting business (called ‘wasta’), as elsewhere in the region. A relatively new feature of the Saudi labour force is the growing participation of women in work, which has almost doubled to 33% in the last four years (England 2021).



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**Figure 1: Digital transformations are creating change**  
**Top three trends creating change (% of respondents, including UK)**



**Internal drivers of organisational change**

Within organisations, digital transformation is the primary driver of change. Adding this driver to the percentage of responses for mobile technologies (Table 1) shows that a majority of respondents in both the UAE (57%) and KSA (64%) recognise digital transformation technologies as driving internal change the most. The corresponding percentage in the UK survey is 65%, very close to KSA’s 64%.

**Table 1: Digital transformation is driving organisational change**

Question: ‘Which of the following are drivers of change in your organisation, if any?’ (by highest percentage responses to the maximum of three allowed)	UAE (%)	KSA (%)
Digital transformation	32	38
Mobile technologies	25	26
<b>Total digital transformation technologies</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>64</b>

Base: UAE: n=355; KSA: n=179

Further, in KSA, we find two significant relationships between digital transformation technologies and two other variables in our survey. This means that there is a statistical link indicating a very high probability of a close relationship:

- 1 There is a significant relationship between digital transformation technologies and organisational size.<sup>2</sup> The analysis (by cross-tabulation) shows that 33% of respondents in large organisations consider that technology, specifically digital transformation and mobile technologies together, is driving change in their organisation. This infers that digital transformation is more likely to be a key driver of change in large organisations (those with 250 or more employees), than in smaller organisations (those with under 250 employees). Taking the whole number of respondent KSA people professionals (179), 49% work in large organisations.





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2 The relationship between digital transformation technologies and management level is also significant.<sup>3</sup> The analysis (by cross-tabulation) shows that 18% of junior and 15% of middle managers consider digital transformation technologies to be a driver of change in their organisation. This infers that these levels of manager are more likely to consider digital transformation as a key driver of change. Among all of the 179 KSA respondents, 25% are junior managers and 18% are middle managers.

As observed earlier, the focus on digitalisation is not new in Saudi Arabia. Rather, it is a distinct and continuing focus as part of a long-term government strategy. Our [2020 survey](#) results also evidenced that digital transformation and mobile technologies combined were the biggest driver of change in most respondent practitioners' organisations, in both KSA and the UAE (54%).

## 5 People professionals' skills and reputation

### Headline findings

- Due to organisational responses to COVID-19, 61% of professionals in the UAE and 51% in KSA report that they have had to upskill. Factoring in the need to reskill, 88% and 90% in the UAE and KSA, respectively, have built on their HR skills.
- In the UAE, there is a significant relationship between upskilling and working at a strategic level to deliver long-term value for the organisation.
- The organisational reputation of people professionals has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to 53% of respondents in KSA and 52% in the UAE.
- In the UAE, practitioners in private sector organisations are more likely to agree that the reputation of people professionals has increased – a significant relationship.

### Explainer

#### Changing HR skills

In both the UAE and KSA, as in the UK, the changing skills of people professionals is a most important finding. This is more so in terms of upskilling, although reskilling is a feature too.

In the UAE, 61% noted that they have had to upskill – extend or deepen their HR skills – as Figure 2 illustrates. In addition, 27% have had to reskill – learn new HR skills. In contrast, the [People Profession Survey: 2020 global results report](#) highlighted that 22% of respondents in the UAE believed that they lacked some skills to perform their job effectively. This may partly account for the majority of 2021 practitioners in the UAE upskilling, though it is likely to be mainly attributable to the organisational changes induced by the COVID-19 context, as outlined above.

Moreover, a statistically significant relationship<sup>4</sup> is found between upskilling and the type of role in the organisation. The analysis (by cross-tabulation) reveals that 22% of UAE respondent people professionals who work at a strategic level to deliver long-term value for the organisation have had to upskill. The implication is that those who work at this level are more likely to have had to upskill. In the whole UAE achieved sample (355 respondents), 28% of practitioners work at this level.

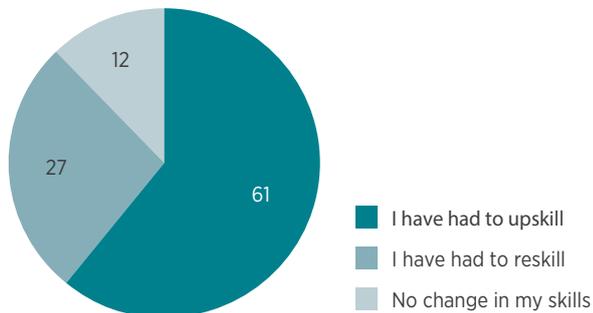
Figure 2 presents the upskilling and reskilling changes in the UAE.





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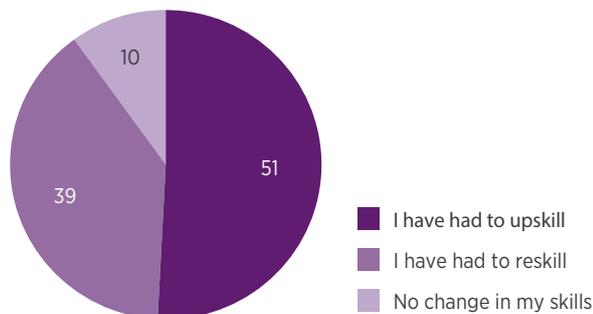
**Figure 2: High levels of HR skills change have occurred in the UAE**  
**People professionals' skills change (% of respondents)**



Base: UAE: n=355  
 (Question: 'Which of the following statements best describes how your HR skills have changed, if at all, as a result of your organisation's response to COVID-19?')

In KSA, 51% of practitioners recorded that they have had to upskill and 39% have had to reskill (Figure 3). The proportion of respondents in Saudi Arabia who noted no change in their skills is a similarly small minority (10%) as we find in the UAE. This underlines the very high numbers of survey respondents from the UAE and KSA who have experienced skills change since our 2020 people profession survey. Supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic is probably a principal area of skills change, for example. In the UK survey this year, 61% of people professionals noted that they had upskilled or reskilled in response to COVID-19.

**Figure 3: High levels of HR skills change have occurred in KSA**  
**People professionals' skills change (% of respondents)**



Base: KSA: n=179  
 (Question: 'Which of the following statements best describes how your HR skills have changed, if at all, as a result of your organisation's response to COVID-19?')

**Increased professional reputation**

Further, just over half of the people professionals in both KSA and the UAE (53% and 52%, in turn) either agree or strongly agree that the reputation of people professionals has increased in their organisation due to COVID-19. Moreover, in the UAE, we find a significant relationship<sup>5</sup> between raised reputation and respondents in the private sector. The analysis (by cross-tabulation) shows that 43% of respondent practitioners working in the private sector either agree or strongly agree that the reputation of people professionals in their organisation has risen. This implies that private sector respondents are more likely to agree on the increase in practitioners' professional reputation than respondents in the public or third sectors. For UAE people professionals as a whole in the survey (355), 84% work in the private sector.





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## 6 People professionals' alignment with organisational success and outcomes

### Headline findings

- In both the UAE (73%) and KSA (63%), a large majority of practitioner respondents agree that the people function has a clear understanding of what success looks like in terms of organisational outcomes – a larger percentage than in 2020.
- Approximately two-thirds of practitioners in both the UAE (68%) and KSA (65%) agree that there are key, agreed links between HR practices and business outcomes – again, more than last year.
- The people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction in about two-thirds of respondents' organisations (68% in the UAE and 65% in KSA).
- Building specialist people expertise is a priority improvement in organisational capability, note 27% of KSA and 25% of UAE people professionals.

### Explainer

By four indicators, more practitioners state that their people function is aligned with organisational success and outcomes than in 2020 (Figure 4). The highest majorities are on:

- understanding what success means in organisational outcomes (73% in the UAE, 63% in KSA), compared with 58% in the UK
- agreed links between people practices and business outcomes (68% in the UAE, 65% in KSA), compared with 52% in the UK.

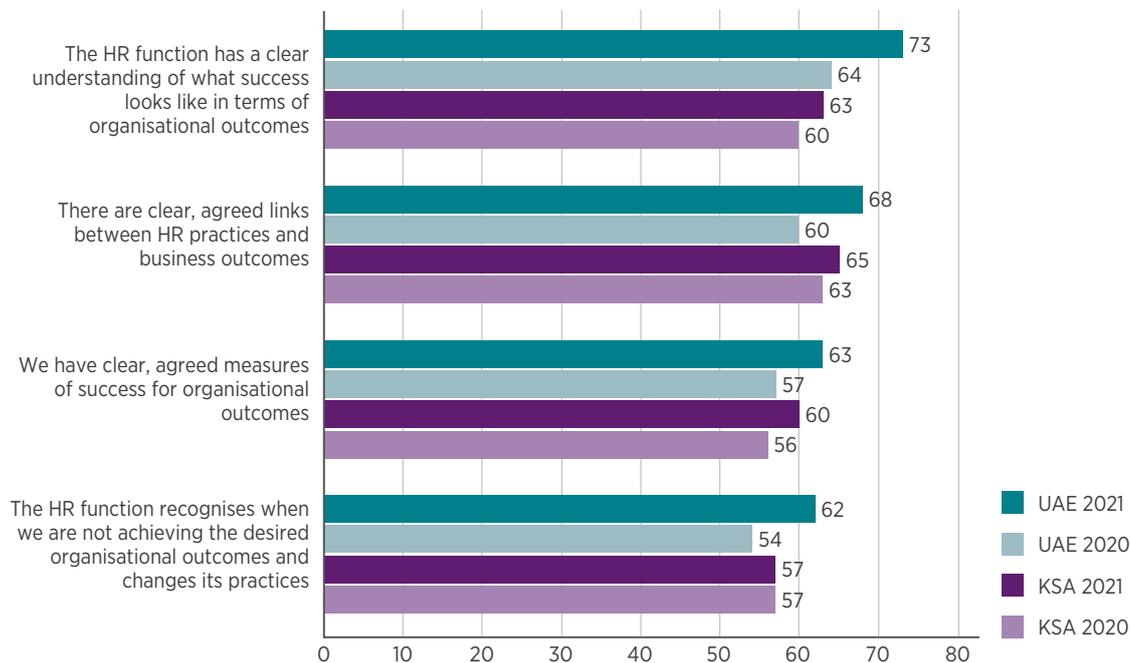
We also see that the majority of people professionals agree that there are HR measures of success for organisational outcomes and that their HR function changes its practices to achieve organisational outcomes. These indicators are third and fourth in Figure 4, which also underlines the alignment of people functions with business performance. We also observe that more respondents in 2021 agree on all of the indicators than in 2020, with one exception in KSA. This exception is the people function recognising when they are not achieving organisational outcomes and changing practices (57% of practitioners in both 2021 and 2020).





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**Figure 4: People functions are focusing more on organisational outcomes**  
**Key aspects of organisational outcomes and success ('net agree' percentages)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254 ; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 Net agree = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' responses  
 (Question: 'Thinking about HR practice in your organisation, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about performance and business outcomes?')

In addition, the people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction in respondents' organisations, according to our surveyed people professionals. In the UAE, 68% of practitioners agree or strongly agree with this, and in KSA, 65% are in agreement. Again, this is higher than we find in the UK (57%). Looking ahead, it will be interesting to discover how the responses to this new survey question compare with our responses next year.

Our findings also strongly suggest that people professionals recognise that building specialist HR expertise will further support organisational success (Table 2). This was highlighted by 27% of KSA practitioners and 25% of UAE practitioners.

**Table 2: Priority improvements in organisational HR capability**

Question: 'Which of the following, if any, are priority areas for improvement across the HR capability in your organisation?' (by highest percentage responses to the maximum of three allowed)	UAE (%)	KSA (%)
Building specialist HR expertise	25	27
Working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation	27	n/a
Organisational development and change management	22	26
Developing confidence to challenge other areas of the business to prioritise people considerations	23	n/a
Using data to inform decisions	n/a	23

Base: UAE: n=355; KSA: n=179; n/a = not applicable as the percentage is less than 20





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We draw attention in particular to the top priority in KSA being to build specialist HR expertise. This is notable when considered alongside the finding of 51% of practitioners having reported that they have upskilled (**Section 5**). The inference is that, among people professionals, there is a clear need and/or intention to continue to add to skills. We also highlight that working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation is the highest priority among (27% of) UAE practitioners. This finding resonates with a need for senior leadership team members to work collaboratively in order to future-proof their businesses as they consider what it will mean to be employed in 2030. The priorities identified in 2021 may reflect the ongoing COVID-19 context, where the emphasis for people professionals in the UAE and KSA has been on bringing their skills up to speed and adapting to new ways of working.

Compared with our 2020 findings:

- building specialist expertise was less of a priority in 2020, when 18% of people professionals in the UAE and 16% in KSA stated that this was one of the top three areas for HR capability improvement
- 24% of KSA respondents selected relationship-building with colleagues as a main priority in 2020 (but under 20% selected ‘collaborative working with colleagues’, the equivalent area of improvement, in 2021)
- 23% of KSA and 20% of UAE practitioners recorded organisational development and change management as a top three priority in 2020 – fairly similar to our 2021 finding
- using data to inform decisions was a slightly higher priority on the whole in 2020, as identified by 22% and 20% of respondents in KSA and the UAE, respectively.

## 7 People professionals’ career progression

### Headline findings

- A high majority of our respondents (85% in the UAE and 74% in KSA) say that their career progression has either met or exceeded their expectations, which is up on 2020.
- Skills development helps most in career advancement, for 68% of practitioners in KSA and 57% in the UAE – an increase on last year.
- In the UAE, 74% of our respondents concur that the people profession offers a meaningful career, compared with 72% in KSA.
- The profession offers good career prospects, according to 73% of UAE and 70% of KSA people professionals.
- Nearly all practitioners have taken part in a learning and development activity in the past 12 months (94% of UAE respondents and 93% of KSA respondents), mostly via online learning.
- In both the UAE and KSA, the majority of practitioners have reflected on what they have learned (75% and 70% respectively) and applied their learning in their work (77% and 68% respectively).





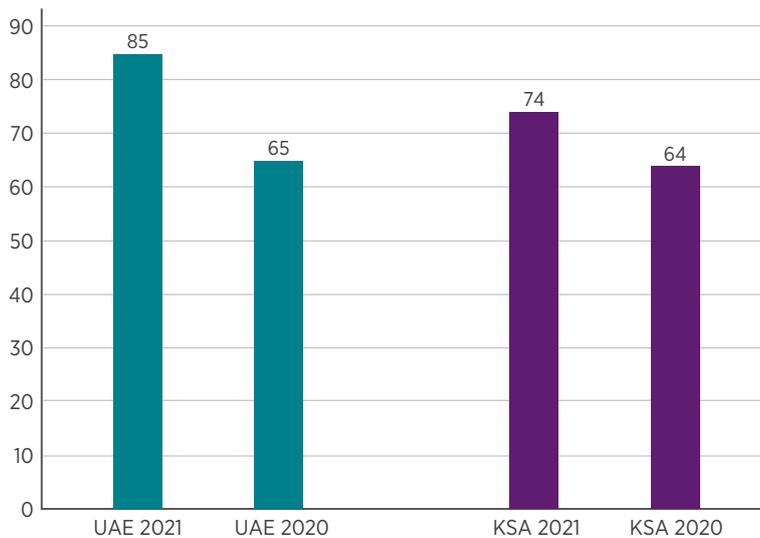
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## Explainer

### Expectations of career progression

A large majority of people professionals in both the UAE and KSA (85% and 74%, in turn) state that their expectations have either been met or exceeded, as Figure 5 illustrates. These percentages are appreciably higher than in 2020, especially in the UAE. It is possible that expectations were lower this year or there were unexpected career advancements. Another possibility is that our findings on the increased reputation of people professionals (**Section 5**) are linked to the career progression of our 2021 survey respondents.

**Figure 5: Career progression is exceeding expectations**  
*Attainment of career progression expectations ('net met or exceeded' percentages)*



Rebased for 'I have no career expectations' responses: UAE 2021: n=343; UAE 2020: n=245; KSA 2021: n=172; KSA 2020: n=244  
 Net 'met or exceeded' = 'Met' and 'Exceeded' expectations responses  
 (Question: 'Has your career progression to date met, exceeded or failed to meet your expectations?')

Just over two-thirds (68%) of KSA people professionals place skills development as the greatest support to career advancement, as shown in Figure 6. It's also the main enabler according to 57% of UAE practitioners. Linking this finding to the very high levels of upskilling and reskilling set out earlier (**Section 5**), the implication is that people professionals in both countries are much better prepared for career progression now than last year. As a consequence, next year's survey may reveal that the career expectations of more practitioners have been either met or exceeded.

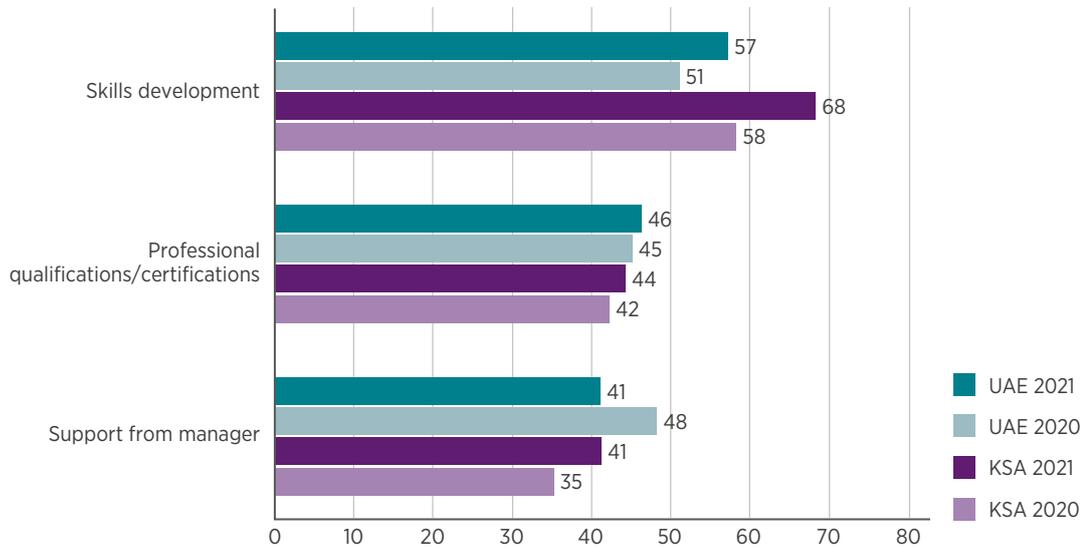
However, in male-dominated industries, such as finance, and male-dominated working environments, such as in KSA especially, female practitioners are encouraged to build a successful career in other ways as well. An example is being aware of workplace politics and navigating them as well as men tend to, according to Drennan (2021).





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**Figure 6: Skills development is the biggest enabler of career advancement**  
**Top three enablers of career advancement (% of respondents)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 (Question: 'If your career progression to date has met or exceeded your expectations, which of the following, if any, has helped you achieve career advancement? Tick all that apply:')

In contrast to career enablers, organisational politics – navigating internal relationships – remains the biggest barrier to career progression, as flagged above. This is a consistent finding in both countries this year and in 2020:

- 20% in the UAE in 2021 and 2020
- 20% in KSA in 2021 and 19% in 2020.

(Question: 'Which one of the following, if any, has been the biggest single barrier to advancing your career to date? Tick one only.')

Nonetheless, a high level of positivity is evident in practitioners' opinions on their profession overall. Figure 7 highlights that the majority of respondents consider that the profession offers a meaningful career, good prospects and good earnings potential.

In the UAE:

- 74% of people professionals agree or strongly agree that the profession offers a meaningful career and 73% that it offers good career prospects – both up on last year
- 65% of respondents concur that the profession is a stepping-stone into other business areas (slightly up on 2020), and 63% that it offers good earnings potential (slightly down on 2020).

In KSA:

- 72% of practitioners agree or strongly agree that the profession offers a meaningful career and 70% that it offers good career prospects (both a little less than last year)
- 69% are in agreement that the profession is a stepping-stone into other business areas and 66% that it offers good earnings potential (again, both a little down on 2020).

Therefore, year-on-year, we see that while UAE practitioners are increasingly positive about their profession, KSA practitioners are fractionally less positive, although on the

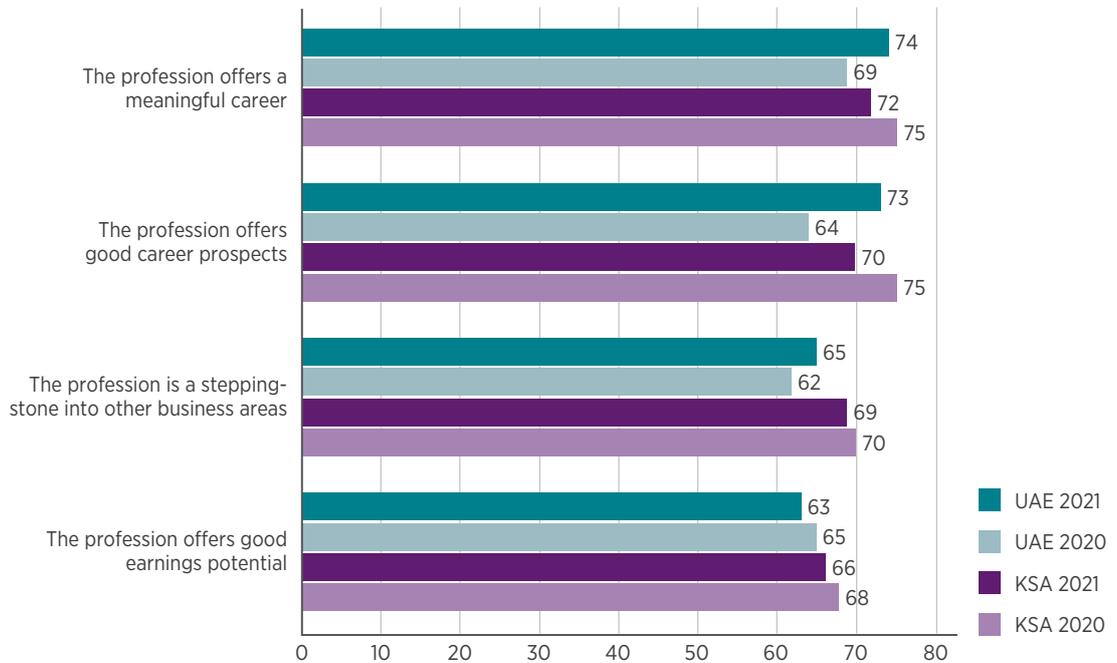




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whole there is a very high level of positive opinion. The positive outlook overall on the people profession connects with the positive findings above on career expectations. In comparison, 86% of UK practitioners concur that the profession offers a meaningful career, and 77% that it offers good career prospects.

**Figure 7: Practitioners believe the people profession offers a meaningful career and good career prospects**  
*Positive opinions on offerings of the people profession ('net agree' percentages)*



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 Net agree = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' responses  
 (Question: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?')

### Actions in learning and development

The proportions of people professionals undertaking learning and development activity in the past 12 months is conspicuously high (94% in the UAE and 93% in KSA – higher than the 89% equivalent proportion in the UK). The most notable change in the types of activity (compared with those in 2020) is the increase in virtual conferences and webinars, which was noted by 33% of UAE and 28% of KSA respondents last year. The increase this year (to 41% and 35%, respectively, in the UAE and KSA) is very likely to be attributable to COVID-19-driven social separation and the need to upskill or reskill (**Section 5**). Table 3 sets out the top three learning and development activities in 2021.

**Table 3: Top three learning and development activities (% of respondents)**

Question: 'In the last 12 months which, if any, of the following types of learning and development have you received? Tick all that apply.'	UAE (%)	KSA (%)
Online learning	41	38
Virtual conferences and webinars	41	35
On-the-job training	-	34
Learning from peers	32	-

Base: UAE: n=355; KSA: n=179

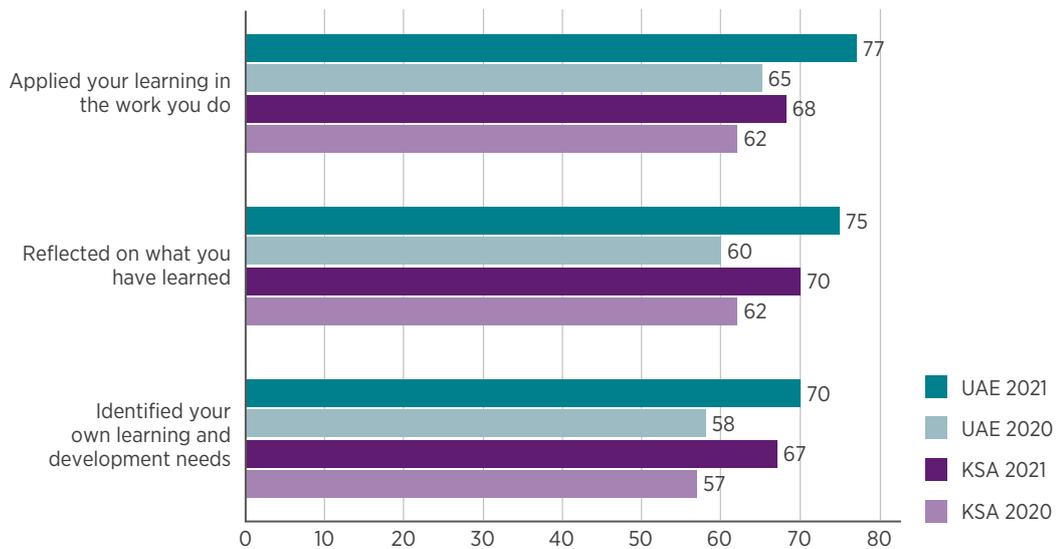




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As regards top professional development actions (Figure 8), these are application, reflection and identification of learning – the same prioritisation of actions but generally higher levels than in the UK. It is noticeable that the percentages in each action in Figure 8 are higher than in 2020, which again is likely to link to the very high levels of upskilling and reskilling (**Section 5**). In identifying future work skills, reskilling and upskilling is critical. Managing a globally dispersed workforce is an example of a new skill being applied in practice, arising from the COVID-19 context, with increasing numbers of international employees relocating to their home countries from the UAE.

**Figure 8: Application of learning remains the top action**  
**Top three professional development actions (% of respondents)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 (Question: 'Thinking about your own professional development in the past six months, how often have you done any of the following, if at all? Tick all that apply.')  
 Net 'Often' and 'Very often' responses

## 8 Purpose in people professionals' work

### Headline findings

- In KSA, 79% of our respondent practitioners gain personal meaning from their work, quite closely corresponding to the 75% in the UAE, and both more than in 2020.
- In the UAE and in Saudi Arabia, 74% and 70% of people professionals, respectively, believe others experience happiness as a result of their work, which is a rise on last year.
- Work energises 73% of our survey respondents in KSA – more than in 2020.
- 72% of practitioners in the UAE are energised and made happy by their work, and 72% state their work is connected to what they think is important in life – all increased from 2020.
- For 72% of KSA professionals, their work is connected to what they think is important in life (up on the previous year) and 70% report that their work makes them happy (the same as in 2020).





### Explainer

We find very high levels of purpose in work in all seven dimensions in the survey (Figure 9). The highest scoring dimension is finding personal meaning from work, which is rated at a level of 79% agree or strongly agree for KSA practitioners and 75% for UAE practitioners. Both are more than was found in 2020. Happiness related to work is noteworthy, in that 74% of our UAE respondents believe others experience happiness through their work and work makes 72% of them happy. Being energised by work is reported by 73% of KSA and 72% of UAE respondents, which is another very positive finding. Work being connected to what is believed to be important in life is positive too, with 72% of people professionals in both countries stating this.

Indeed, all dimensions of purpose in work in both countries are higher in 2021 than in 2020, except for in KSA in terms of:

- work making practitioners happy (at 70% this year and in 2020)
- looking forward to working most days (70% this year, 74% in 2020).

Further, the percentages of agreement in all of the dimensions are slightly more than in the UK, with the exception of gaining personal meaning, which is close at 76% in the UK to the 75% in the UAE. Understanding of personal meaning in work is highest in Saudi Arabia, at 79%. Possibly, the raised rates of purpose in work that we find this year are attributable, at least in part, to two other previously highlighted findings. These are the beliefs held by most respondents that the organisational reputation of people professionals has increased (**Section 5**) and that the people function plays a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction (**Section 6**).

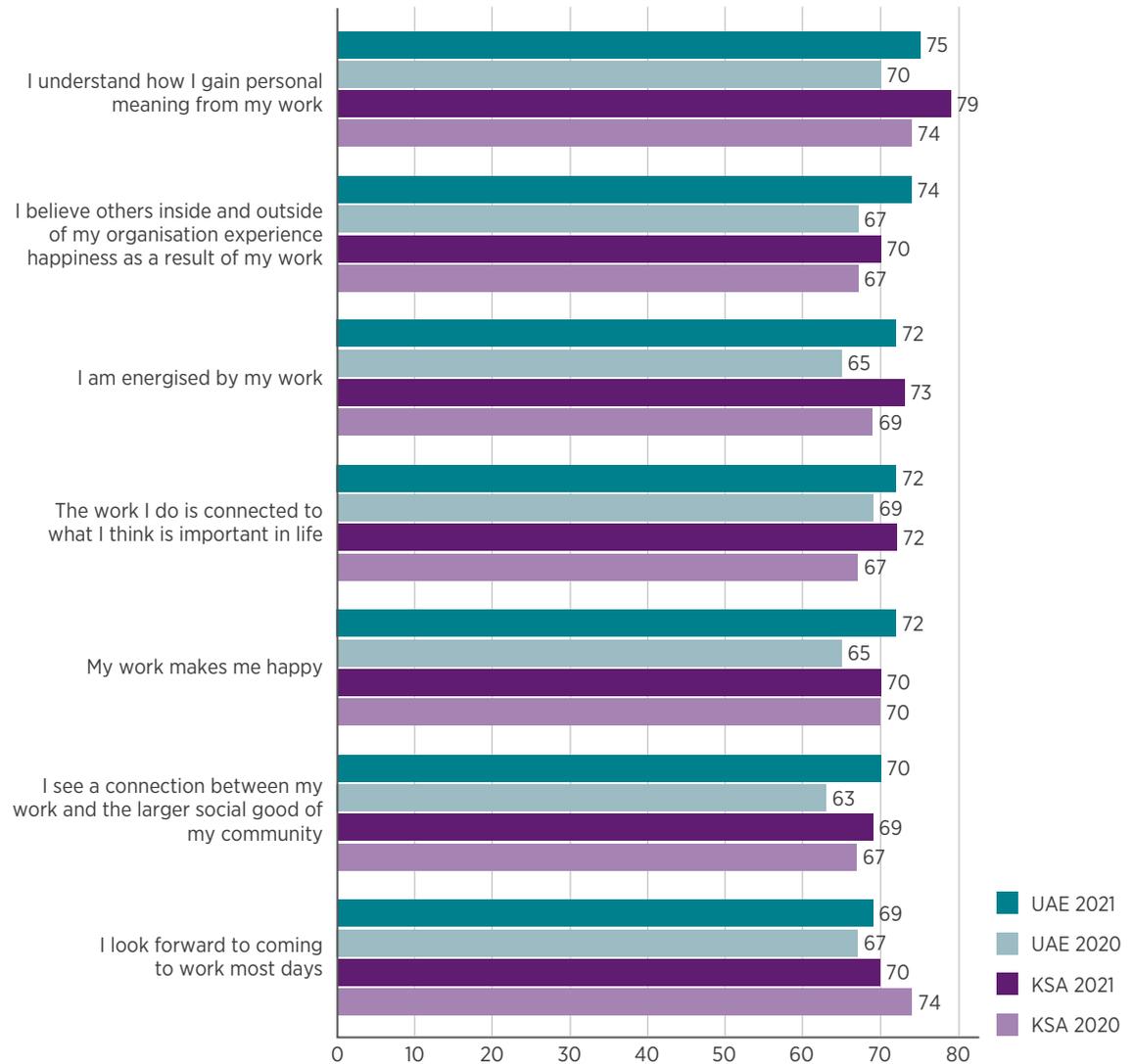
Our findings overall on practitioners' work purpose infer that the people profession has played an important and central role during the pandemic. This seems to have given our respondents a renewed sense of purpose and re-energised them as they work more closely than previously with the business (**Section 6**) to manage rapid and far-reaching organisational change (**Section 4**).





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**Figure 9: More practitioners understand how they gain personal meaning from work**  
**Personal meaning in work ('net agree' percentages)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 Net agree = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' responses  
 (Question: 'To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?')

In terms of how personal principles support personal meaning from work, our findings (Table 4) are somewhat lower than in 2020. This is found in the UK in 2021 as well, although the UAE and KSA level of unlikelihood to compromise principles is, generally, lower than in the UK this year. For example, when under pressure from senior business leaders, 70% of UK respondents are unlikely to compromise their principles and 76% when under pressure from line managers, both in higher deciles than we find in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The differences in principles between the UAE and KSA on one hand and the UK on the other are likely to be related to national cultures, which can influence organisational cultures and practices (Meyer 2016). Organisations in the Middle East are apt to have more authoritarian management styles and stricter practices than organisations in the West (Abi-Raad 2019).





**Table 4: Most people professionals are unlikely to compromise their principles**

I am unlikely to compromise my principles... ('Net unlikely' percentage of respondents)	UAE (%)	KSA (%)
...because they are different from the principles of my colleagues/peers	62	73
...when under pressure from senior business leaders	58	64
...when under pressure from my line manager	57	67
...when they affect my ability to succeed and progress in my organisation	54	55

Base: UAE: n=355; KSA: n=179

Net unlikely = 'Unlikely' and 'Very unlikely' responses

(Question: 'How likely or unlikely are you to compromise your principles in each of the following scenarios?')

## 9 People decisions and data

### Headline findings

- Above all, the majority of people teams focus on defining the problem or issue before selecting or recommending a solution (71% of UAE and 64% of KSA respondents).
- Professional experience and judgement are used a lot as a source of evidence in making people decisions, for 65% of KSA and 61% of UAE respondent practitioners.
- Organisational data is used a lot in people decisions by most UAE people professionals (60%) and half of KSA professionals (50%).
- The use of people data and analytics in both the UAE and KSA is greater than in 2020, and represents a proportionately high increase.

### Explainer

We find that for around two-thirds of people professionals, focusing on defining the problem or issue before deciding on a solution is most important as a basis of people decision-making, as Figure 10 portrays. This is especially so in the UAE (for 71% of practitioners) compared with 64% in KSA (and 68% in the UK). In the UAE and KSA alike, 60% of people professionals indicate that the second most important factor in decision-making is their people leader consulting relevant evidence and data insights when the organisation faces changes and challenges (54% in the UK).

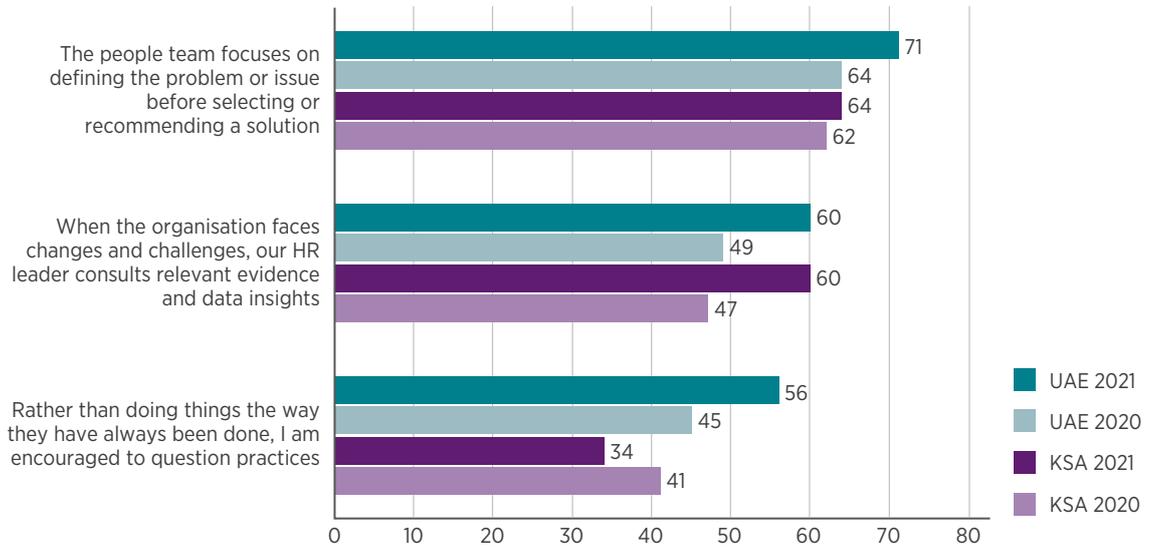
Interestingly, in Saudi Arabia in 2021, only 34% of our respondents are encouraged to question practices, indicating that two-thirds of respondents don't consider that they can challenge decisions. The comparable UAE percentage is 56%, indicating that 44% of respondents here are disinclined to challenge decisions. One explanation for this is authoritarian management styles in the region, as noted in the previous section (Abi-Raad 2019).





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**Figure 10: Defining the issue or problem is most important in making decisions about people**  
**Opinions on people decisions ('net agree' percentages)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257  
 Net agree = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' responses  
 (Question: 'To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?')

The main source of evidence used widely by people professionals in Saudi Arabia (65%) and the UAE (61%) is professional experience and judgement, compared with 78% of practitioners in the UK. The second most common evidentiary base that is used a lot is organisational/internal data by 60% and 50% of our UAE and KSA respondents, respectively. (The scale on the sources of evidence question is: 'a lot'/'a little'/'not at all'.)

Relatedly, our findings on use of people data and analytics (Table 5) are noteworthy this year due to the increase on last year, though they have not yet reached the threshold of a majority of respondents in either country. The biggest increase in 2021 from 2020 in the UAE is in the HR function providing regular people data reports for the business, whereas the biggest equivalent increase in KSA is in people data being managed by the HR function in response to requests from management. With a 10% increase in both cases, it's a relatively high uplift in the UAE's 26% and KSA's 30% last year for these uses of people data.

In the UK, the principal uses of people data are found in:

- people data being managed by the people function in response to management requests (49% of respondent people professionals)
- people functions providing regular reports for the business (46% of practitioners).

It's interesting that, in both the UAE and KSA, nearly a third of people professionals use advanced analytical techniques on people data (30% and 32% respectively). The advances in the use of people data and analytics, in general, reflect our commentary on continuing digital transformation in **Section 4**.





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**Table 5: People data and analytics are used increasingly**

Question: 'Which, if any, of the following statements describe how people data and analytics are used in your organisation? Tick all that apply.'	UAE 2021 (%)	UAE 2020 (%)	KSA 2021 (%)	KSA 2020 (%)
My organisation combines HR data with other data (including financial data) to provide a more holistic view of the organisation	43	35	38	33
My organisation routinely uses HR data and analytics in decision-making across the business	39	30	32	30
People data is managed by the HR function, which responds to requests from management	37	31	40	30
The HR function provides regular people data reports for the business	36	26	37	33
My organisation uses advanced analytical techniques on HR data (eg machine learning, pattern recognition) to help inform business decisions	30	24	32	24

Base: UAE 2021: n=355; UAE 2020: n=254; KSA 2021: n=179; KSA 2020: n=257

## 10 Conclusions

Our core conclusion is that the COVID-19 context has been transformational for people professionals in the UAE and KSA. Throughout a time of prolonged crisis, practitioners have shown resilience and responsibility. They have pivoted to obligatory and extensive homeworking, while operating at the very centre of organisational reactions to the shock effects of the global pandemic. In sum, our respondent people professionals have successfully confronted the most challenging of circumstances in helping steer organisations through the far-reaching impact of COVID-19 on people’s working lives. They are not only stepping up, but also standing out as never before in dealing with changes and challenges with professionalism.

### Changes

Clearly, people functions in both UAE and KSA organisations have changed significantly, and we find evidence that they are playing a vital role in influencing organisational strategy and direction. They are in the driving seat of organisational change, are becoming more closely aligned with business needs and are adapting to constantly shifting priorities. At the same time, they have focused more than before on business success and outcomes, increasing their use of digital technologies in addition to people data and analytics. Consequently, or coincidentally, the reputation of people professionals in their organisations has increased due to COVID-19. Viewed from this perspective, the pandemic has had a positive impact on the profession overall, according to our survey.

As the recent need for reactive responses to change reduces, people professionals are now able to consider more proactive changes. Practitioners tell us that building specialist HR expertise is a priority area for improvement across the people profession capability in their organisations. In the UAE, working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation is another priority. Meanwhile, in KSA, organisational development and change management is a second priority. Therefore, there’s potential for further high-level business alignment. In this, we encourage people professionals to be alert to new changes





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and future trends, both internally and externally. Horizon-scanning should therefore be an integral part of their work and will help practitioners maintain the momentum they have generated in their organisational contributions in the COVID-19 context.

### Challenges

We find that having the right skillset seems to have been a particular challenge for our respondents. However, our findings show that practitioners have confronted this challenge with extremely high levels of either upskilling or reskilling in the last year or so. We urge them to continue with this, taking account of a future perspective (Leonard-Cross 2021). Further, nearly all of our respondents have engaged in a learning and development activity in the past 12 months, increasing their skillset further. Notably, application of their learning in their work is the top professional development action.

Digital work is likely to have been both an area of skill-building and means of applying learning. We sound a note of caution here as the sharp rise in digital work can, simultaneously, enhance and undermine work-related mental wellbeing. People professionals need to be mindful of the challenge in balancing digital work with employees' mental wellbeing, especially in avoiding work intensification. Calibrating digital work is very important as home, hybrid and – especially in the UAE – remote working models become more commonplace.

Offering more flexible work may be necessary in the near future for resourcing and talent planning to ensure the attraction and retention of employees. This may especially apply to the UAE, where previously high levels of global mobility facilitated a very international labour force in workplaces, but managing globally dispersed workforces is very likely going forward. KSA, conversely, has a more domestic labour force, with a growing number of women entrants. Again, horizon-scanning may help in identifying and planning for future challenges.

### Commitments

Despite or because of the pandemic, practitioners are, arguably, more committed to their work. A large majority have a heightened sense of purpose in their work, deriving personal meaning, happiness and energy from it. The pandemic has evidently re-energised people professionals and brought a renewed sense of purpose. They are more outcomes-driven and focused when finding solutions to people issues. Also, practitioners are exercising professional experience and judgement in making people decisions, with more use of organisational data. People data and analytics are being used increasingly, though we encourage more development in this area and in evidence-based practice. This will help people professionals make better decisions, act with confidence, perform at their peak, drive organisational change and progress in their careers, as emphasised in our Profession Map.

In closing, we note that the findings discussed in this report are not confined to the UAE and KSA. Although there are differences in some areas, many findings are similar to our UK People Profession survey findings, as pointed out throughout this report. The inference from this is that the trajectory of the people profession and professionals is an international trend. We call on practitioners to maintain the recently generated momentum, all the while combining operational delivery with a strategic perspective. The COVID-19 context has presented an unexpected stimulus and opportunity for people leadership, in keeping with responsible business. The CIPD is here to support practitioners in making the profession future-fit with our cutting-edge tools and resources.





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## 12 Appendix

### Survey method

The CIPD now carries out an annual survey with in-house and independent people professionals. The purpose is to develop an evidence-based, contemporary insight into important dimensions of their work and opinions each year. Last year's results for the UAE and KSA were published in [The People Profession Survey – 2020 Global Results](#).

The dynamic content of the survey this year meant that, for the first time, in-house and independent professionals used the same weblink to complete the survey. The findings from both groups are combined in the report. The question wording was attuned to independents as appropriate through the survey, though we present the findings in the wording of the in-house respondents as the number of them is much greater in our achieved sample (see Table 6). We derived the survey items mainly from the 2020 survey. Where the 2021 survey questions are the same as those in last year's survey, we are able to compare the results, selectively, in this report in line with our main findings.

For our 2021 survey we devised new, COVID-19-specific questions and responses in order to delve into the impact of the extraordinary pandemic context on people professionals. New questions on trends and sources of evidence were also included this year, informed principally by our [People Profession 2030](#) report on future trends, published at the end of 2020. The survey was administered by YouGov in the UAE from 17 May to 14 June 2021 and in KSA from 17 May to 21 June 2021. The data collection period in KSA was extended by a week to increase the number of respondents. The achieved samples are detailed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Achieved survey samples**

	Total	In-house	Independents
UAE people professionals	355	315 (89%)	40 (11%)
KSA people professionals	179	170 (95%)	9 (5%)



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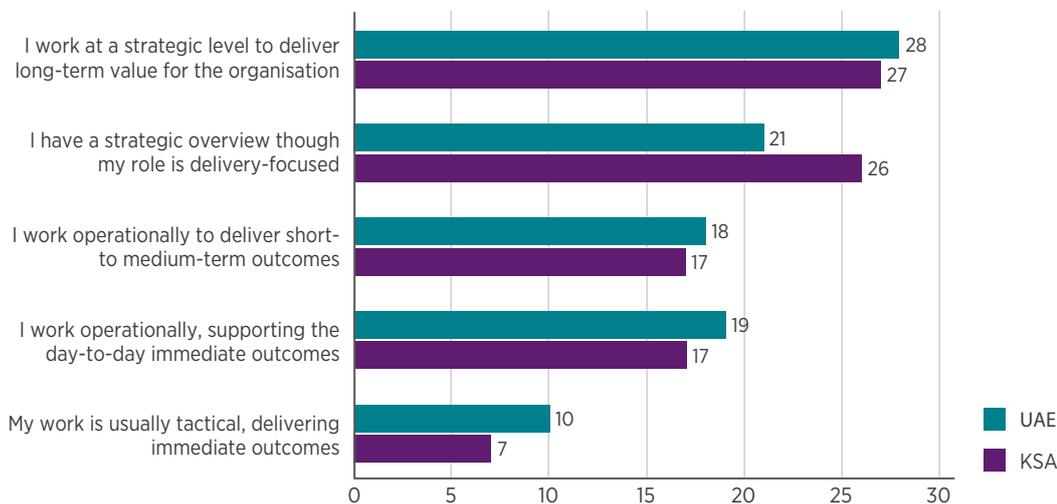
The principal features of the largest groups of the respondents are delineated in Table 7. These features are very similar across both countries except in gender, where the proportion of male respondents is substantially higher in KSA. This reflects the much lower rate of women’s participation in work (35%), with men comprising 65% of the number of employees, according to the General Authority for Statistics in KSA ([www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/woman\\_international\\_day\\_2020EN.pdf](http://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/woman_international_day_2020EN.pdf), p27).

**Table 7: Profile of survey respondents**

	Gender	Age	Years of experience in the people profession	Business size	Business sector
<b>UAE</b> (n=355)	53% male 47% female	43% 18–34 years old 42% 35–44 years old	54% 6–16 years	54% up to 250 employees	84% private sector
<b>KSA</b> (n=179)	80% male 20% female	42% 18–34 years old 42% 35–44 years old	45% 6–15 years	51% up to 250 employees	70% private sector

Figure 11 adds another contour to the profile of respondents. The level of role contribution among our achieved sample is broadly similar. It spans senior to junior levels in both the UAE and KSA, with most practitioner respondents working at a strategic level.

**Figure 11: Level of HR role contribution**  
(% of respondents excluding ‘None of the above’/‘Other’ responses)



Base: UAE: n=355; KSA: n=179

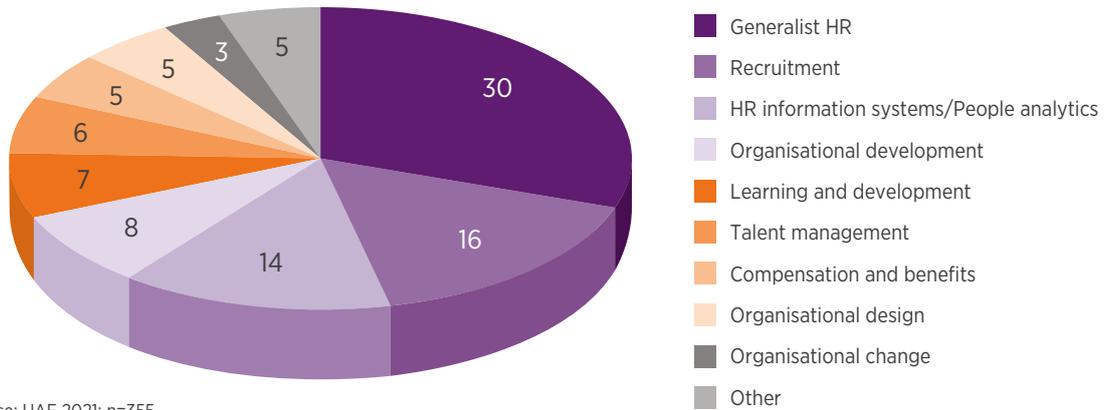
We represent the HR/people profession areas of our respondents in the UAE and KSA in Figures 12 and 13. Throughout this report, we use the terms ‘people professional’ and ‘practitioner’ interchangeably.





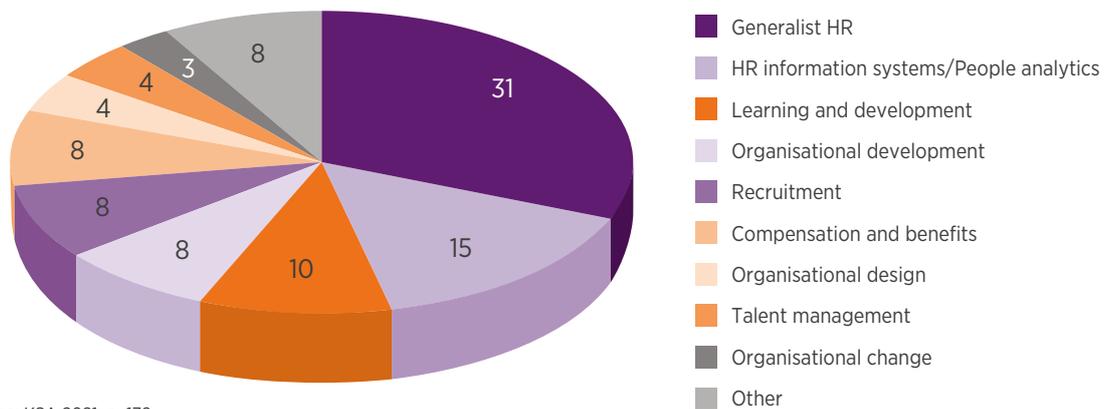
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**Figure 12: UAE respondents' areas of people profession work (% of respondents)**



Base: UAE 2021: n=355

**Figure 13: KSA respondents' areas of people profession work (% of respondents)**



Base: KSA 2021: n=179

Our analysis of the survey results includes descriptive statistics, where percentages are rounded to whole numbers. A few totals may be marginally less than 100% because of this rounding. Additionally, we ran Pearson chi-square tests on the data in order to identify statistically significant relationships. We cross-tabulated five variables with five key questions.

The variables are:

- management level
- work sector
- organisation size (<250 employees, ≥250 employees)
- type/level of HR role
- gender.

The key questions are on:

- upskilling
- drivers of change (digital transformation technologies and demands for flexible working)
- the reputation of HR/people professionals
- the role of the HR/people function in influencing organisational strategy and direction
- the HR/people profession offering a meaningful career.

Four significant relationships are found, two in the UAE and two in KSA.





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## 13 Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The demographic profiles of our achieved samples are summarised in the Appendix.
- <sup>2</sup> Pearson chi-square ( $X^2 = 18.509$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $sig = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).
- <sup>3</sup> Pearson chi-square ( $X^2 = 10.190$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $sig = 0.037 < 0.05$ ).
- <sup>4</sup> Pearson chi-square ( $X^2 = 19.360$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $sig = 0.013 < 0.05$ ).
- <sup>5</sup> Pearson chi-square ( $X^2 = 14.130$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $sig = 0.007 < 0.05$ ).



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