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Opportunities in the region

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Dubai is a thriving hub for the Middle East and its most glitzy attraction for would-be expatriates. It has also experienced swifter rises and falls in activity than other parts of the region.

But there are signs that hiring activity is reviving across the Gulf Co-operation Council area. GCC member countries include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Yemen, and United Arab Emirates (Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah are the best known of the seven emirates, or states).

“We have had two very difficult years,” says Tariq Sadiq, markets, accounts and business development leader for Middle East and north Africa (Mena) for the professional services firm Ernst & Young. “Our profession follows our clients. And optimism has been creeping into the market.”

He is seeing a huge amount of government activity, with an acute need within the GCC to create employment, following investment in areas such as education, health, public-private partnerships and tourism.

“In the GCC jobs have traditionally been allocated to expats, but now there is also a lot of investment going into their own nationals. Where expats are hired, the market requires deep skills at senior levels, experience of the region, commercial awareness and flexibility in understanding new trends,” he says.

Saudi Arabia remains the dominant player in the region, accounting for as much as 80 per cent of hiring.

Mikael Zoghbi, of London-based executive search firm Zoghbi Associates, says: “Across the GCC, everything needs building – roads, railways, hospitals, airports, sewage networks – this means lots of engineers and younger go-ahead management as well as a strong retail sector. The airlines are buoyant and hiring and consultants are in demand. Places like Abu Dhabi have a vision of a city of 5m people by 2030. That necessitates a huge amount of activity.”

The oil and gas sectors have been more resilient through the economic slowdown as the oil price never really crashed, even if some projects slowed or were delayed.

Today, there is a sense that the Middle East is a land of opportunity in terms of the intellectual and professional aspects of a career (rather than merely a way of earning a high tax-free income).

Tim Rockell is director of sales and markets for KPMG in Saudi Arabia. He says: “There is such a misconception about the Middle East being all about the desert and oil rigs. Once they take decisions here things can move incredibly fast.”

An important element in its appeal to prospective candidates is the region’s ability to offer an opportunity to be at the centre of decision-making and future growth.

Global executive search firm Korn/Ferry International has a strong presence in the Middle East and Metin Mitchell, its Mena managing director, sees a pick-up in telecoms, financial services in the areas of debt capital markets, and among family businesses such as the Olayan Group and the Al Muhaidib, a diverse group of private multinational enterprises.

He says: “If you are in the UK and being a banker is a dirty word and you are going to pay a lot of tax, clearly the attractions of going to Saudi Arabia have grown. The expatriates who work well in the Middle East are those who have multicultural experiences, have worked in emerging markets and have a fair degree of humility. There is a lot of depth and wisdom in the region. You need to understand you have to work within the culture.” And English is the main business language.

Richard Stewart, who runs Mindbench, a recruitment specialist in management consultancy, says: “The operating climate is tougher than in Europe and people need to be thick-skinned. There may be more ambiguity, the rules of the game may be less clear and good relationship management skills and emotional intelligence are very important.”

There are fewer opportunities for women. But telecoms and consulting have proved attractive to women and there are signs of change regarding women in Saudi Arabia, the most conservative country in the GCC. Companies such as KPMG are addressing gender balance within their own businesses, but as Stephen Harrison-Mirfield, director of operations for KPMG in Saudi Arabia, says: “There is still a long way to go.”

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