



The Changing Landscape of **Executive Search in KSA**

When it was introduced, Vision 2030 had as its main objective the diversification of the Saudi Arabian economy, and the reduction of dependence on oil as a main source of income. Subsequently, we have witnessed the emergence of several new industries including entertainment, hospitality, heavy industry, military manufacturing and technology companies which in turn require an abundance of experience and expertise which the Saudi market did not have. Compounding the problem was the launch of new mega projects across the kingdom like Neom, Red Sea, and Qiddiya, requiring world class specialist expertise.

The new Saudi Arabia is becoming an attraction for investors from all over the globe and the economy, despite the structural changes, is growing. The demand for local and international talent in many disciplines will continue to grow across various sectors. This type of demand and the opportunity it creates has changed the dynamics of executive search within KSA.

Saudization

Almost 65% of the Saudi Arabian population is from the working age population; however, the percentage represented by Saudi nationals in the workforce of the Kingdom's private sector up until recently did not exceed 50%.

Saudization (or Nitaqat) was implemented to promote and increase the percentage of Saudi nationals in the country's private sector, as private companies are still largely dominated by an expatriate work force.

As a result, EMA Partners has seen a significant demographic shift of leaders being hired and the number of requests for proactive succession planning initiatives, up-skilling and organizational design advisory has increased.

Cultural Fit and Alignment

For decades we have seen several top-notch leaders move to Saudi Arabia from developed markets including Europe, the US and developed Asia. Some have thrived, and continue to do so, but many struggled to navigate the nuances of the Kingdom.

Therefore, hiring focused on fit should be engrained in everyone involved in the selection process, from identification to interviewing. It's imperative to ensure throughout the hiring process that you are transparent on the expectations and personalities of key stakeholders and any dynamics that are unique to the organization, so that there is consistent alignment.

How are we going to conduct the search process?

Will the traditional approach still work in a market where the availability of industry-specific experience is limited?

The solution for this dilemma may be found in several approaches.

- **First:** Involving experienced talent selection professionals

If working with a search partner, ensure that the search firm understands the texture and values of your business and people within it and can effectively relay this to potential candidates.

- **Second:** Using scientific tools to assist in the selection process (Assessment).

EMA Partners supports several organizations across the Middle East with assessing their current and future leaders so that they can make smarter people decisions, resulting in greater engagement and superior performance.

- **Third:** Providing structured and thorough onboarding programs.

The challenge often begins once a leader joins an organization, and without a formal onboarding process, he often falters. It is an organization's responsibility to ensure that the right support is in place to prepare the leader for a better chance of success.

- **Fourth:** Providing on-the-job mentoring and coaching.

This can include more frequent reviews to ensure long-term alignment and course correction if need be or the 'buddy' system.

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The coming era is a challenging one, and it would be unwise to suggest a one-size-fits-all solution. There will be specifically designed strategies to suit each organization's talent acquisition and retention process.

Another challenge is the relative youth of leadership in the Kingdom. Here, it is not only a matter of skill enhancement. Substantial effort should be applied in the area of leadership development.

Another key goal will be to enhance diversity, in terms of increasing the participation of women in the work force, not only in entry to mid-level positions, but in leadership roles, including boards, as well.

In anticipation of this unfolding scenario, EMA Partners Saudi Arabia is developing several leadership development programs using technological interventions in partnership with local and global experts in this area. These programs will enable clients to assess and develop agile leaders, capable of successfully guiding their organizations in Saudi Arabia's rapidly-evolving economy.

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Authors



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Bleihid N Al Bleihid is the founder and Managing Director of EMA Partners Saudi Arabia.

Bleihid was the Chairman of the Board of Directors at Al-Ahli Takaful Company and has been the Senior Executive Vice President – Group Head, Human Resources Group at National Commercial Bank. He was also a Member, Nomination and Remuneration Committee at NCB Capital.

Presently he is a Member of Nomination and Remuneration Committee at Bank ALBILAD and King Abdullah Financial District. He is also a Board Member at Al Rajhi Takaful. Prior to this, he was an Advisor to the Board of Directors at National Commercial Bank (NCB), and a Member, Nomination and Remuneration Committee at ACWA Power.

Bleihid held Senior Executive HR positions with a number of major international companies. He was the Director of Human Resources for Saudi Research & Marketing Group - based in Riyadh but with overall world-wide HR responsibility for all Group companies & operations.

Prior to this, he was General Manager – Human Resources for the Saudi British Bank (SABB), a position that he held for over 9 years as a member of the top Executive strategy team & through its most significant period of rapid change & successful growth.

Educated in the United States of America, he holds a degree in Business Management.



Hala Merhi, Senior Partner, EMA Partners Saudi Arabia

Hala Merhi is a Senior Partner with EMA Partners Saudi Arabia. She has more than two decades of experience with leading executive search firms and professional services firms across diversified sectors.

Prior to EMA Partners International, she worked at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The start of her career was with International Health Resources Corp. as a Recruitment Manager in Lebanon, overseeing the recruitment of medical and support staff for healthcare institutions in the Gulf region.

During the course of her career, she gained significant expertise in executive search encompassing a gamut of sectors such as Banking & Finance, Healthcare, Education, Hospitality, Insurance, Oil & Gas, Consumer Goods & Services, Logistics, HR, Operations and Manufacturing across the Middle East and Gulf Region.

She has received her Master's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Maryland University College along with a Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs from the Lebanese American University.

She is a Certified Intelligent Leadership Executive Coach, Business Coach and Certified Psychometric Assessment Analyst.

Since 1988, EMA Partners has been serving local and international businesses across all industry sectors. The firm has been instrumental in helping its clients recruit thousands of leaders who have made a deep impact in their organizations and society at large.

With access to intellectual property through our association with Decision Dynamics AB, EMA Partners is a provider of leadership assessments and other advisory services to our clients.

Our expertise lies in assessing, hiring and developing leaders at the Board, C-Suite and Senior Executive level across industries. Our clients include global corporations, local companies and not for profit organisations.



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