



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
WORKFORCE
2026



Preface



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Managing Director, Middle East, Turkey and Africa (META). Korn Ferry

On this coast, the old navigators of what is now the United Arab Emirates moved without instruments. They read the sea the way others read a map: the shift in the Gulf's color, the pull of the wind across open water, the position of Suhail rising steady over the horizon. Even land was never fixed, but felt through memory, star, and tide.

In many ways, reading people is not so different. The signals that matter most are rarely the loudest. They sit in timing, in tone, in what is left unsaid. Just like the sea, they only reveal themselves to those who know how to notice.

For decades, Korn Ferry has helped organizations understand what people need to perform, grow, and thrive at work. But in a world where AI is rapidly reshaping how work gets done, one truth matters more than ever: leaders who fail to listen to the signals coming from their workforce risk making decisions disconnected from the very people driving their business forward.

Read what follows as a map. The signals are good. The heading is clear. The work now is to steer toward it.

Contents

In a world shaped by rapid technological change and evolving workforce expectations, our Workforce Report examines what's defining the employee experience today, from AI in the workplace and the drivers of attraction and retention, to workload, wellbeing, growth, and learning.

AI in the Workplace	04
Attraction and Retention Drivers	11
Workload and Wellbeing	15
Growth and Learning	17



AI in the *Workplace*

What the workforce is telling us about AI

Examining how employees perceive AI through organizational fluency, excitement and anxiety, the impact on daily work and productivity, and the changing nature of roles.



Kam Malik

Senior Client Partner, Korn Ferry

“AI fluency is no longer confined to technical teams. It’s becoming a baseline expectation across every role, and organizations that treat it as optional will spend the next few years catching up.”



Organizational AI Fluency

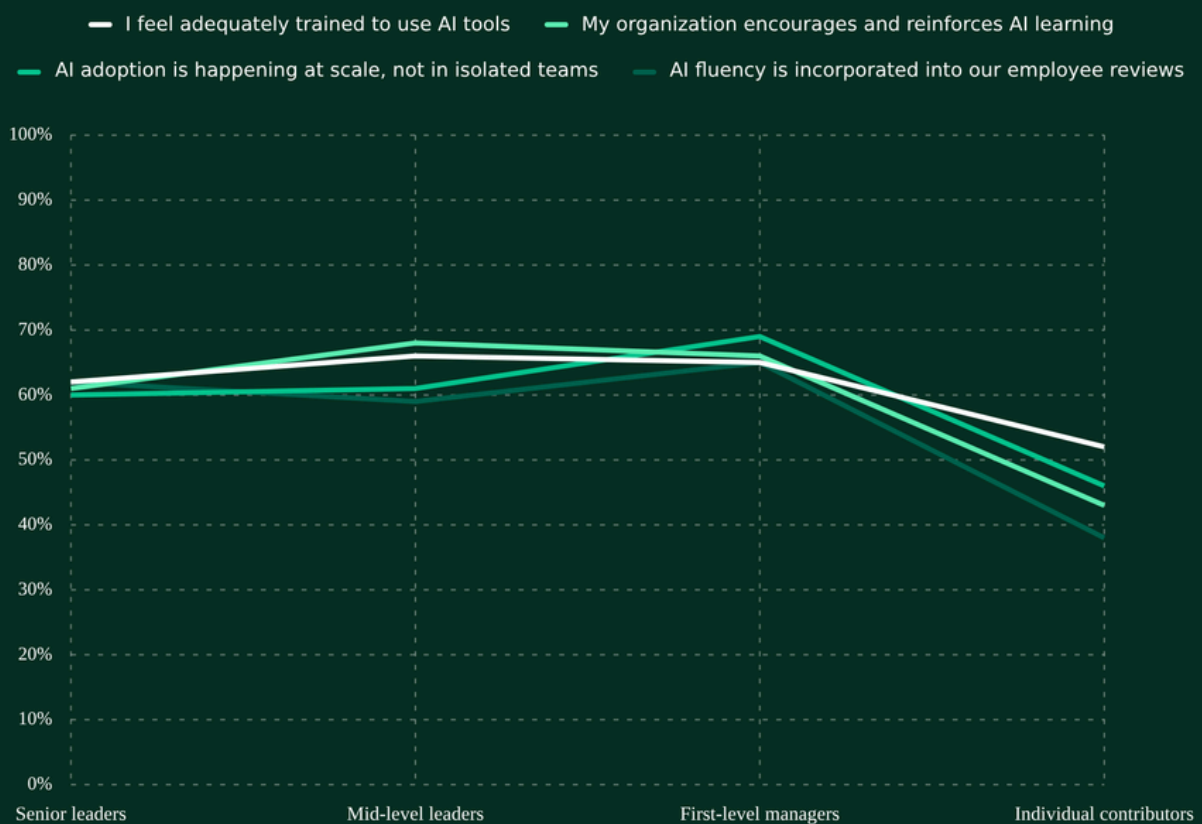
Organizational AI fluency is the collective capability of a workforce to understand, apply, and adapt to AI tools as part of everyday work. It determines whether AI becomes a scalable capability that improves performance, or remains a set of isolated tools used by a few teams.

Executives, managers, and frontline employees experience AI differently. Leaders set the direction, managers translate it into processes, and employees execute it in real workflows, so gaps between levels reveal where adoption is breaking down.

The UAE data shows fluency is still concentrated at leadership and management levels. **While 62% to 66% of leaders feel adequately trained, this drops to 52% among individual contributors.**

Support weakens too: only 43% say their organization reinforces AI learning, and just 38% see it reflected in performance reviews. Adoption peaks among first-level managers at 69% but falls to 46% at the frontline, a clear execution gap.

AI is present across the organization, but it has not yet been institutionalized into everyday workflows and performance systems at scale.



Share who agree or strongly agree with each statement, by job level. Figures are base-weighted across the levels in each group and rounded to the nearest percentage point.

Excitement Leads Anxiety Sits Beneath it

76% of UAE employees feel excited about AI's potential. Yet fear of job replacement is not evenly distributed. It peaks among individual contributors, the cohort least equipped to adapt.

While senior leaders worry at 48%, frontline staff are both the most anxious and the least fluent. That combination of high fear, low capability, and low organizational support creates the conditions for resistance, not adoption.

First-level managers are the only level where increased workload produces efficiency gains. 68% report that AI tools have increased the number of tasks expected in their role. Yet simultaneously, 75% of them see increased efficiency. They are absorbing more work and delivering more value. In the UAE, 72% feel they have more opportunity to innovate today.

76%

of UAE employees feel excited and positive about how AI will change the way they work

75%

of first-level managers say AI has increased their efficiency

68%

of first-level managers say AI has increased the tasks expected in their role



Danny Leinders

Head of Executive Search, Middle East
& North Africa, Korn Ferry

“Excitement about AI running higher here than in the West is a real lever, but only if organizations use it. That means reinforcing learning and development across the board, not just at the top, and reimagining roles rather than bolting AI onto old ones. Do that, and adoption accelerates because people buy in, not because they're told to.”

What the workforce is telling us	UAE vs Global		Job levels in UAE			
	UAE	Global	Senior leaders	Mid-level leaders	First-level managers	Individual contributors
FEAR the anxiety beneath the enthusiasm						
I feel certain my role will be replaced by AI/tech in the next three years	50%	44%	48%	46%	58%	52%
AI tools have increased the number of tasks expected in my role	59%	52%	56%	56%	68%	56%
EXCITEMENT sentiment leads the transition						
I feel excited and positive about how AI will change the way I work	76%	65%	77%	78%	79%	68%
Using AI in my role will bolster my value in the next three years	65%	58%	66%	65%	67%	56%
ORGANIZATIONAL FLUENCY is the organization built to use AI?						
I feel adequately trained to use AI tools	62%	52%	62%	66%	65%	52%
Leaders in my organization understand AI and how to use it	62%	56%	64%	63%	66%	52%
My organization encourages and reinforces AI learning and development	61%	55%	61%	68%	66%	43%
AI adoption is happening at scale, not just in isolated teams	60%	54%	60%	61%	69%	46%
AI tools are integrated into how work gets done in my role	59%	54%	59%	63%	61%	51%
I am assessed on my level of AI fluency	53%	47%	54%	52%	60%	44%
AI fluency is incorporated into our employee reviews	58%	50%	62%	59%	65%	38%
IMPACT AT WORK where AI is in use, it is paying off						
When asked to use AI, I found it increased my efficiency	68%	63%	65%	73%	75%	57%
AI tools allow me to focus on more high-value work	66%	60%	65%	71%	72%	53%
AI or new technologies are enabling me to innovate at work	68%	61%	65%	72%	75%	56%
AI has enabled me to have a larger hand in (re)imagining my role	64%	54%	66%	65%	70%	49%

Lower agreement  Higher agreement

Share who agree or strongly agree with each statement. UAE and Global columns compare regions; level columns break out the UAE sample.

Role Design

Innovation and Productivity

If the first part of the UAE insights measures appetite for AI, this part measures whether the organization is built to use it.

Agreement that one's role has been redesigned for human-AI collaboration reaches 55%, and 68% say they are more productive than twelve months ago.

A strong focus on driving efficiencies can become a challenge for organizations when it comes at the expense of innovation and value creation. While optimizing existing processes can improve productivity, an overemphasis on efficiency may limit employees' ability to explore new ideas, experiment, and identify new opportunities for growth. Rigid processes and structures can slow decision-making, reduce agility, and make employees feel constrained in their ability to perform at their best.

Over time, organizations risk becoming focused on improving the current way of working rather than adapting to changing market demands, embracing new technologies, or creating new sources of value. A balance between operational excellence and innovation is essential to ensure organizations remain competitive and future-ready.

Here, the friction signals stand at 68% for the efficiency-first focus and 57% for feeling held back by processes and structures. The same numbers can be read two ways about the culture: as a sign of discipline and operational rigor, or as a sign that structure leaves too little room to experiment. Which reading is true in your organization is worth asking directly.



Share of UAE employees who agree or strongly agree with each statement, ranked. Rows tagged FRICTION SIGNAL are statements where higher agreement indicates organizational friction rather than progress.

Source: Korn Ferry Global Workforce Survey 2026 (UAE edition, n=500). Figures show the share who agree or strongly agree.

In UAE, sentiment toward AI is consistently more positive than the global benchmark, with strong signals of growing capability and integration. Much of that momentum is still in the pilot stage across the region, with so much piloting underway in the GCC according to our [**GCC AI Adoption Report 2026**](#).

This indicates that AI is not only being adopted at a tools level, but is increasingly embedded in performance expectations, learning systems, and day-to-day workflows. Importantly, employees also see tangible value in AI, citing improved efficiency, higher-value work focus, and stronger innovation outcomes.



George Karam

Managing Director, Middle East & North Africa, Korn Ferry

“In my decades advising leaders across this region, the change we’re witnessing right now is unprecedented. The organizations that come out ahead will be the ones who genuinely reimagine AI and human partnership, not the ones who simply adopt the technology.”

”

How AI-Ready is your Organization?

You're spending millions on AI. You're testing tools, launching experiments, and running pilots—but still can't see any ROI. That's because technology on its own won't deliver the return you're hoping for.

You need leaders who can guide AI transformation, people with the skills to use AI well, and a culture where teams have room to experiment.

Get those elements right, and you create what neither people nor AI can do alone. People bring judgment and creativity. AI brings speed and scale. Together, they create value in ways that weren't possible before. Is your organization set up for AI success?

Get those elements right, and you create what neither people nor AI can do alone. People bring judgment and creativity. AI brings speed and scale. Together, they create value in ways that weren't possible before. Is your organization set up for AI success?

Answer 22 questions to receive an instant readiness profile across eight dimensions and identify the Human Capital Levers that deserve the most focused attention.

Assess Your AI Readiness



Attraction and Retention *Drivers*

What the workforce is telling us about attraction and retention

Looking at intention to leave and the specific drivers most likely to prompt a departure, alongside the gap between what attracts talent to an organization and what keeps it there, from compensation and advancement to trust in leadership and flexibility.



Vijay Gandhi

Regional Director, Korn Ferry Digital, EMEA,
Korn Ferry

“Workforce expectations move fast, and in a market as competitive as the UAE, organizations that don’t keep pace with them will lose people long before they lose ground on anything else.”



Intention to Leave

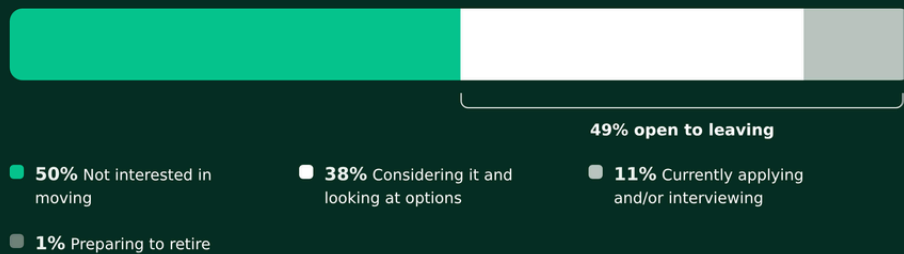
Engagement matters because it shapes whether people stay. In the UAE, 50% of the workforce say they have no interest in moving.

The rest are, to different degrees, in play: 38% are weighing their options and 11% are already applying or interviewing. Taken together, 49% are open to leaving.

That openness is backed by confidence: 69% say they could find a new role without much trouble if they left.

So the retention task for the year ahead is straightforward to state: an organizational bond that has loosened, alongside a workforce that knows it has options.

How employees describe their intention to move



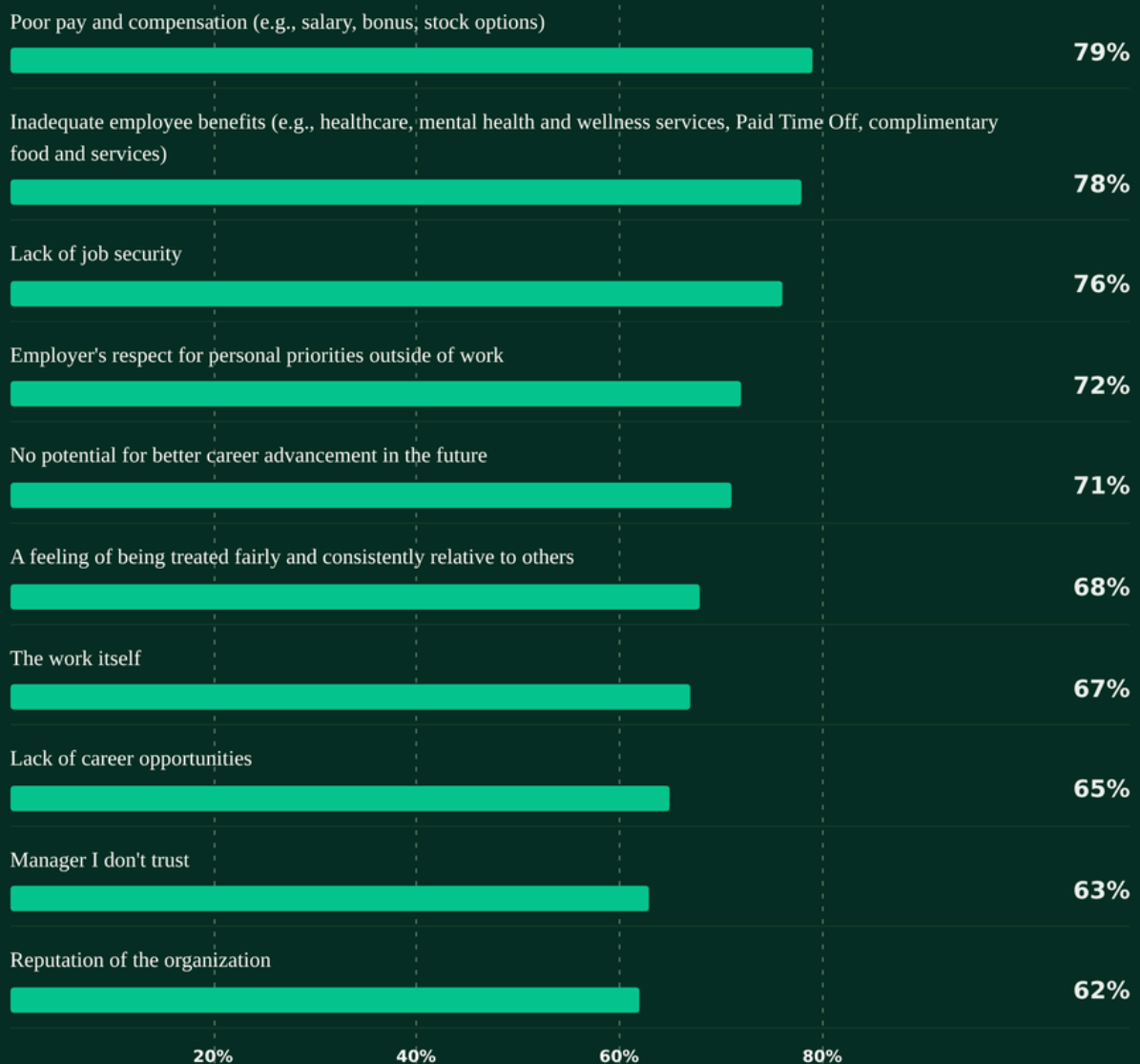
69%

Say they could find a new role without much trouble if they left their organization

What Would Most Likely Prompt a Departure

When employees imagine leaving, the triggers are concrete. Pay, benefits, and security head the list, ahead of the work itself or the organization's reputation.

Drivers most likely to prompt a departure



Share of UAE employees who agree each factor would most likely prompt them to leave, ranked.

What Attracts and Retains Talent

What does the UAE's workforce actually want from an employer? The chart ranks the factors that most attract people to a new role.

Job security and pay-related factors lead, consistent with global patterns, but security and the work itself rank highly, a profile that rewards employers able to combine reward with stability and meaningful work.

What attracts talent to a new role

- 01 Job security
- 02 Pay and compensation
- 03 Employee benefits
- 04 The work itself
- 05 Career advancement
- 06 Fair and consistent treatment
- 07 Potential for better advancement
- 08 Learning and development
- 09 Reputation of the organization
- 10 Respect for personal priorities

What persuades talent to stay

- Pay and compensation 01
- Job security 02
- Employee benefits 03
- Respect for personal priorities 04
- Fair and consistent treatment 05
- The work itself 06
- Career advancement 07
- Potential for better advancement 08
- Hiring manager I trust 09
- Flexible work hours 10

Each column ranks the factors by the share of UAE employees selecting them, from most selected to least.



Iktimal Daneshvar

Managing Director, RPO EMEA, Korn Ferry

“What brings someone in the door and what keeps them there are rarely the same thing. Treating them as one strategy is where a lot of organizations lose people.”



Workload and *Wellbeing*

What the workforce is telling us about workload and wellbeing

Examining how employees experience rising workload through the signals that support them and the signals that strain them, from role expansion and exhaustion to confidence and the pace of organizational change.

70% say their workload has increased significantly over two years, 56% feel exhausted by the pace of organizational change, and 43% report struggling with imposter syndrome.

70%

feel their workload has increased significantly over two years



Strain outweighs support	UAE vs Global		Job levels in UAE			
	UAE	Global	Senior leaders	Mid-level leaders	First-level managers	Individual contributors

SUPPORT SIGNALS what steadies the workforce

I have clear priorities in my role	79%	69%	76%	78%	80%	79%
Leaders in my organization clearly explain the reasons behind organizational changes	67%	60%	71%	60%	72%	60%
I am appropriately rewarded for additional roles I have taken on	64%	58%	63%	60%	72%	60%
My organization's leaders value people over profits	62%	55%	63%	61%	67%	52%

STRAIN SIGNALS where the pressure is building

My workload has increased significantly in the last two years	70%	62%	66%	72%	75%	70%
I feel I am performing the responsibilities of more than one role	65%	61%	66%	66%	64%	62%
AI tools have increased the number of tasks expected in my role	59%	52%	56%	56%	68%	56%
I feel exhausted by the pace of change at my organization	56%	49%	51%	61%	58%	56%
I am stretched too far beyond my capabilities at work	53%	44%	52%	48%	60%	51%
My workload negatively affects my wellbeing	52%	47%	49%	48%	65%	47%
I am too busy to deliver meaningful results	50%	45%	50%	48%	55%	44%
I frequently doubt my ability to fulfil my work responsibilities	44%	41%	40%	45%	55%	37%
I struggle with imposter syndrome (persistent self-doubt that success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved)	43%	42%	38%	47%	50%	41%

Lower agreement  Higher agreement

Share who agree or strongly agree with each statement. For strain signals, higher agreement indicates greater pressure on the workforce.

Growth and *Learning*

What the workforce is telling us about growth and learning

Examining how confident employees feel that their skills will stay relevant, whether they know what to learn next to advance, and how that confidence compares with the rest of the world.



Husain Jabir

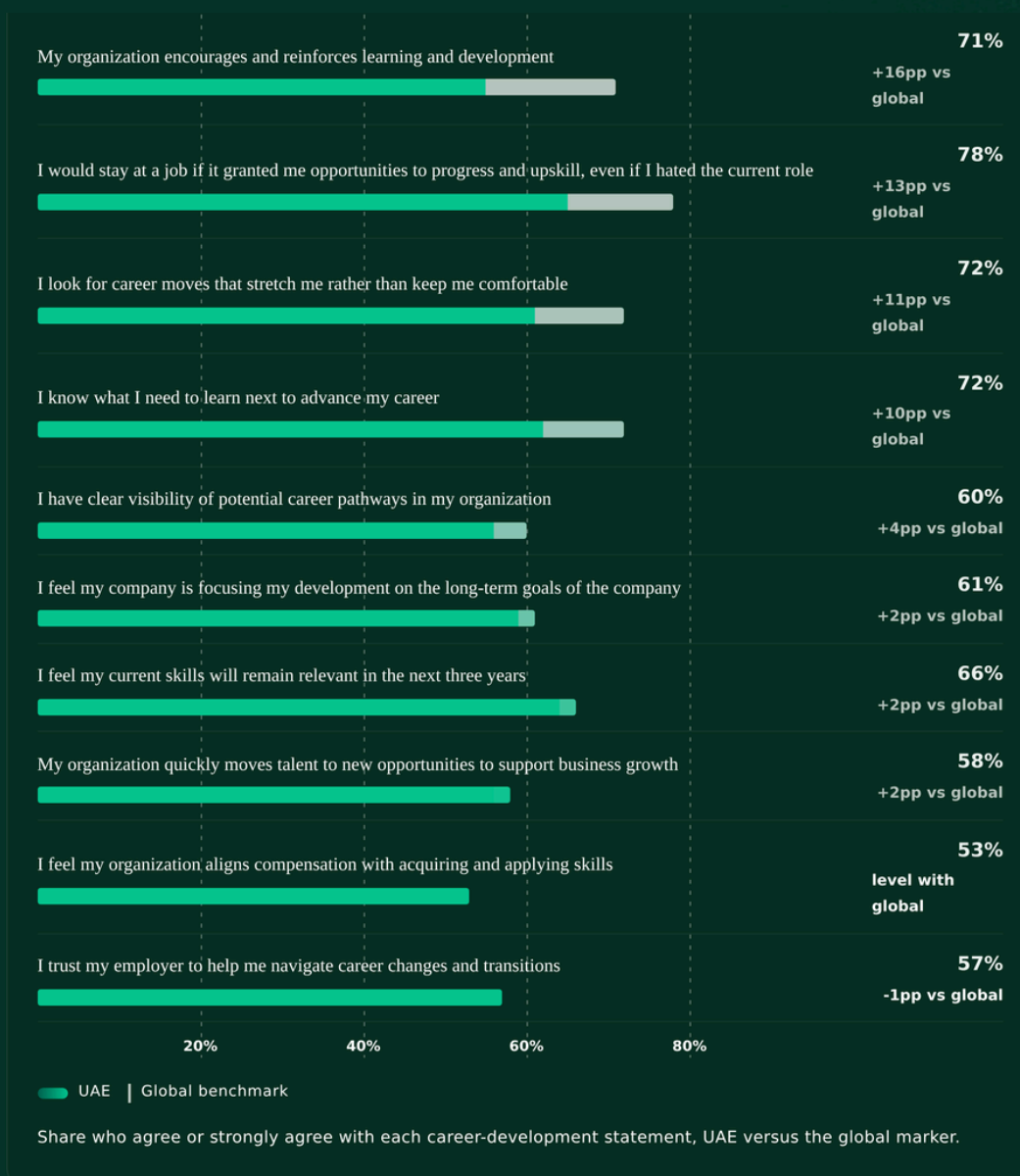
META Growth Leader, Korn Ferry Digital
Korn Ferry

“Upskilling and reskilling can’t be treated as a one-time initiative. The organizations that take it seriously, continuously, are the ones that stay ready for whatever comes next, instead of scrambling to catch up when it arrives.”

Careers, Skills and Development

The data point to a workforce that is ready before the organization is. Employees are confident in their own skills and clear on what they need to learn next, and 78% say they would stay in a role they otherwise disliked if it offered room to grow, making progression one of the strongest retention levers available.

What lags is the organization's own delivery: visibility into career pathways, the speed at which talent is actually moved into new opportunities, and trust that the employer will manage transitions well. For organizations, the task isn't building more confidence in people, it's building the internal mobility infrastructure fast enough to capture the willingness that's already there.





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Career makers.