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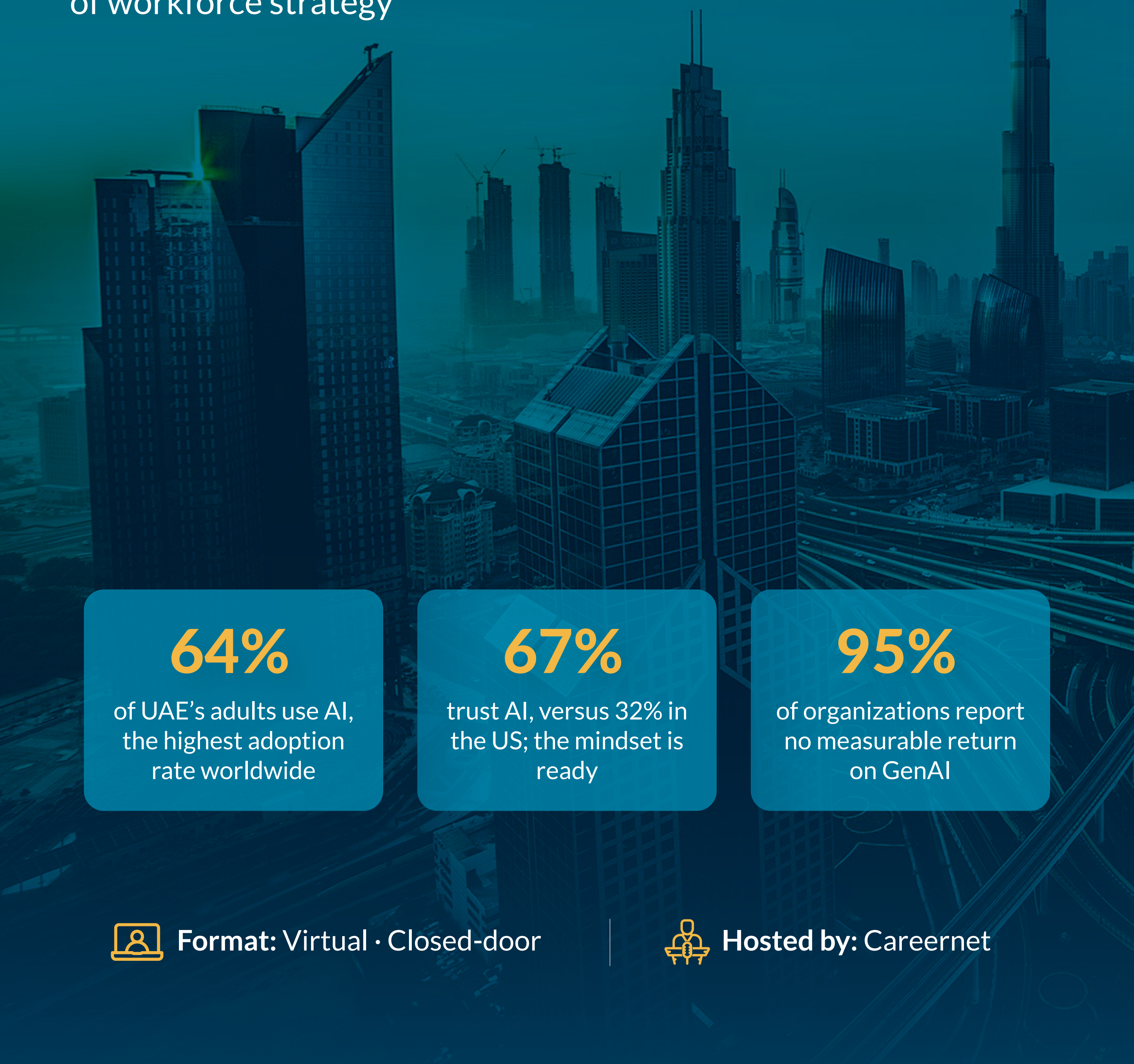
CAREERNET TEN ROUNDTABLE · UAE 2026

Talent Transformation in the UAE

Emiratization, AI, and the future of workforce strategy



64%
of UAE's adults use AI, the highest adoption rate worldwide

67%
trust AI, versus 32% in the US; the mindset is ready

95%
of organizations report no measurable return on GenAI

Format: Virtual · Closed-door

Hosted by: Careernet

Executive summary

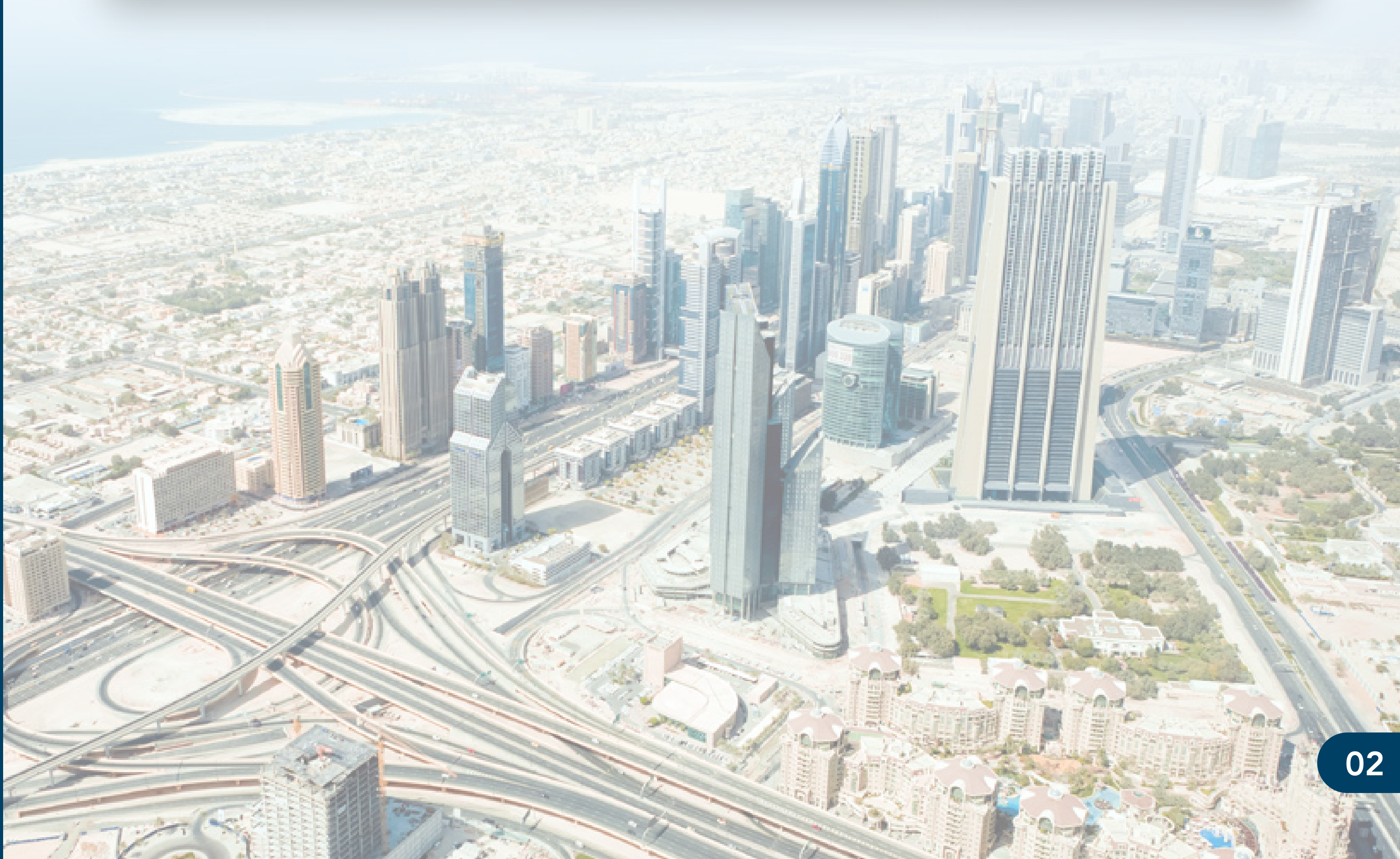
One thesis, two pressures

The UAE's talent agenda is shifting from filling headcount to building capability. Emiratization and artificial intelligence arrive as distinct pressures, a national workforce mandate and a structural technology shift, yet the leaders in this room treated them as the same conversation.

This virtual, closed-door roundtable brought together senior talent and HR leaders spanning **banking, healthcare, professional services, e-commerce, technology, and recruitment advisory**. The discussion was anchored by a sharp paradox: the UAE leads the world in AI adoption and trust, yet the overwhelming majority of organizations report no measurable return. The same pattern shadows Emiratization, where citizen-employment numbers have climbed steeply while genuine capability often lags the quota.

Three convictions emerged. Hitting the number is where the hard work starts, not where it ends. The differentiator is human and organizational: line managers, role models, and job design separate leaders from laggards far more than tool licenses do. And the window is now, with first movers compounding an advantage the rest are left trying to close.

Across both topics, one move recurred: from ***static quotas and bolted-on tools to dynamic, data-informed capability***. Attraction is one problem, retention is a second, and growth is a third. An organization that solves only the first has not really solved Emiratization at all. The same logic governs AI: adoption is not the variable; readiness is.



Discussion 1: Emiratization

Compliance checkbox or genuine strategy?

The room's central question was direct: is Emiratization fundamentally a hiring challenge or a broader business transformation agenda?

The numbers set the stakes. A live deadline requires firms with 50 or more employees to meet a 1% growth target in skilled roles, with significant penalties applying from 1 July. Emirati private-sector employment has grown substantially since late 2024, with progress concentrated in banking, healthcare, telecoms, and technology.

30 Jun

Live deadline for 50-plus staff firms; penalties from 1 July

176k

Emiratis in private-sector roles by early 2026, up from 114,000 in late 2024

8 to 12%

Productivity premium when quotas are paired with certified upskilling and mentoring

The leaky pipeline and the manager factor

The room converged on a hard truth: attracting Emirati talent is the easy part. The steepest attrition falls inside the first 12 to 24 months, driven by expectation mismatch, unfamiliarity with private-sector career models, and above all, the line manager.

Discussion 1	Discussion 2	Discussion 3
Retention is the binding constraint. Attrition peaks inside the first year and flattens after 24 months. The fix runs through realistic job previews, structured assessment centers, and the manager relationship.	Gen Z hires arrive asking where they will be in three to five years. The real question for organizations is not whether a national is on the payroll, but how they are growing within the business.	Hiring at entry level exposes a role-model vacuum. Without visible nationals in senior positions, building career aspiration in the next cohort is significantly harder. Closing that gap is now an explicit near-term priority.

One structural response discussed was a dedicated job band for Emirati talent, paired with a future leaders platform giving graduates direct access to senior executives and equipping managers with mentoring resources. The principle was consistent: ***integration must be year-round, not a last-minute response to quota deadlines.***

> *“The bottom line is that we need intentional mechanisms for long-term sustenance and growth because attracting is one part, keeping them is another, and growing them is another again.”*

Gaming the number and the accountability fix

Quota systems create perverse incentives. A points-based regime common across regulated industries can drift toward ghost hiring, where headcount is added to meet numbers regardless of role substance. A sharper dynamic also surfaced: overachievement resets the baseline upward, forcing organizations to balance building a buffer against overshooting, while late-cycle poaching can trigger surprise departures in the final weeks before a target date.

The accountability shift

The most decisive lever named was ownership. Where Emiratization KPIs sit on department scorecards, and shortfalls affect bonuses, outcomes improve. The consensus: accountability cannot rest with HR alone. It has to live on the business line.

Where sectors diverged and converged

Healthcare sponsored allied health students through their studies and converted them into full-time hires upon graduation, satisfying labor ministry and health authority targets simultaneously.

Banking leaned on a centralized training pipeline, a sector body (EIF - Emirates Institute of Finance), recruiting graduates in bulk, developing them across disciplines, and placing them across member institutions.

Professional services moved from ad-hoc spot-filling to structured graduate intake, while navigating a distinctive awareness gap: many Emirati candidates were simply unfamiliar with consulting as a career path.

Across every sector, the same shape emerged: attract, develop, retain through the leaky middle, and build the role models who make the next cohort believe a private-sector career is worth pursuing.

✗ Quota compliance	✓ Capability development
Targets met for legitimacy. Risk of "ghost" roles, first-year attrition, and productivity shocks when inexperienced hires displace skilled staff. The business case collapses once subsidies taper.	Certified upskilling, manager-led mentoring, role models and succession. The evidence: an 8–12% productivity premium and materially higher retention that survives full-cost economics.

Questions the room left open »

- Is your Emiratization effort owned by HR, or does it sit on the business line's profit and loss and leadership scorecards?
- Are you measuring role substance or headcount? What does genuine integration look like 18 months after the hire?

Discussion 2: AI is rewriting every job. Is TA ready?

Adoption is not the problem. Organizational readiness is. The trigger question for the room was whether organizations are hiring for today's roles or preparing for the roles that will emerge in the months ahead.

The UAE leads the world in AI adoption and trust, yet only a small minority of GCC executives report measurable ROI from GenAI. Government ambition is accelerating regardless, from public targets for AI agents to deliberate moves to lower token costs and bring data centers onshore. The open question is whether organizations are built to translate adoption into outcomes.

12%

of GCC executives capturing measurable ROI from GenAI pilots
(McKinsey, 2024)

30 to 35%

of inbound employee queries eliminated via self-serve automation

10%

of academic papers overlap AI and automation with skills and learning, the most studied future-of-work combination

From tool adoption to work redesign

The sharpest practitioner account came from an organization deploying AI in operational teams since 2024. Roughly a third of inbound queries were eliminated through intelligent routing and self-serve automation, a tangible result that surfaced a harder question: what to do with the freed capacity.

> “*AI is not going to eliminate a job family or a function, but it will reduce the number of heads needed to do that work. Once automation clears the routine, edge cases still need a well-trained subject matter expert. We factor a human-in-the-loop into every automation, even when the solution aims at 100 percent.*”

That human-in-the-loop discipline, keeping a deliberate 15 to 20% buffer for complex exceptions, whether a banking approval, a clinical diagnosis, or a customer escalation, was one of the most widely shared design principles. It reframes AI as a **work-redesign** story: rebuilding job families around human-machine collaboration rather than bolting tools onto unchanged structures.

Build, do not buy: the capability play

On whether to hire AI-ready talent or develop it internally, the room leaned decisively toward building. The argument: ***using AI effectively does not require knowing how to build it, but knowing how to use it.*** Organizations discussed investing in internal programs covering prompt engineering, tool selection, workflow automation, and agent handoffs, run by incentivized internal experts.

The ROI reckoning

Several leaders have begun instrumenting AI use directly, tracking prompts and productivity gains. One organization commissioned an AI literacy assessment to gauge how well existing staff use AI across marketing, finance, and sales, and applied the same assessment to incoming graduates as a hiring signal. The throughline: measurement is finally catching up to adoption.

The double-edged sword

One tension cut through the discussion: how do you ask employees to adopt AI enthusiastically when each of them suspects it puts their role at risk?

The most compelling answer reframed adoption as visible opportunity. An innovation forum inviting team members to showcase AI-built solutions to senior leaders, with on-the-spot feedback and occasional same-week deployment, converted fear into engagement. When using AI becomes how people grow and get noticed, the threat narrative loses its grip.

Discussion 1	Discussion 2	Discussion 3
AI-assisted screening has compressed time-to-fill from roughly 90 days to the mid-60s. The entry bar has shifted too, from secondary-school certificates to university graduates fluent in digital systems.	Independent benchmarking exposes a regional capability gap. The best US banks carry significantly more AI-literate staff than their UAE peers. Functional depth paired with AI fluency is now the profile leaders are protecting.	The org chart is shifting. Last year's playbook centered on full-stack, front-end, and DevOps roles now bends around AI and ML, reshaping team structures and workforce planning across the board.

The governance caution the room did not dodge

AI in talent decisions demands guardrails. One organization described building departmental sandboxes to test AI with sensitive data before any wider rollout, with governance designed in from the start. The supporting research sharpens the warning: models trained on historically expatriate-heavy data can systematically downgrade citizen candidates, making bias audits and human oversight a non-negotiable companion to adoption.

	✗ Tool adoption	✓ Work redesign
Approach	Licenses bolted onto unchanged structures	Job families rebuilt around human-AI collaboration
Outcome	Headline adoption numbers, near-universal absence of measurable ROI	Measurable productivity gains and durable engagement

Questions the room left open »

- You have the same AI tools as everyone else. What is the real barrier to ROI, and who in your organization actually owns it?
- Has anyone genuinely rewritten a job family around AI-augmented workflows, or are tools simply bolted onto unchanged structures?
- Where is AI already making hiring or workforce decisions that should carry explicit human oversight?

The connective thread

Skills, capability, and meaningful work

Skills-first capability is where Emiratization and AI readiness meet. It widens the Emirati pipeline beyond pedigree and network, and future-proofs employees against role obsolescence.

A synthesis of roughly five decades of academic work across banking, legal, medical, and other fields points to a consistent pattern: the most studied future-of-work combination is not AI in isolation, but AI alongside deliberate skill development. Technology amplifies; human capability leads.

49%

of the variance in meaningful work explained by job variety, the single biggest driver

37%

explained by development opportunity, above pay and perks

5x

engagement gap between employees with strong purpose and those without

The counterintuitive finding

It is **job variety and development opportunity**, not training spend or wellbeing perks, that drive meaningful work and engagement. Designing roles for narrow efficiency is an active choice to disengage the people an organization depends on most.

This is where both discussions converge. The Gen Z national hire asking about a five-year career path and the operations specialist whose routine work AI has absorbed are asking the same question: ***is there room here to grow?*** A skills-first lens answers both, widening the Emirati pipeline beyond the usual universities and networks while giving every employee a path through an automating workplace.

> *"What we see, more and more, is that AI works alongside the creation of a better skill set inside the organization, either through development or by hiring from outside. The most studied future of work is not AI alone. It is AI and skills, together."*

Implications: what leaders should do next

Emiratization and AI are the same conversation. Both demand the move from filling roles to building capability, and the leaders who internalize that compound an advantage the rest are left chasing.

Takeaway 1 Move ownership onto the business line	Put Emiratization and AI ROI on department scorecards and leadership KPIs. Accountability that touches the profit and loss and the bonus is what converts intent into outcome.
Takeaway 2 Engineer the first 24 months	Attrition concentrates early. Invest in realistic job previews, structured onboarding, and manager capability. Visible role models hold the leaky middle of the pipeline.
Takeaway 3 Redesign work, do not just buy tools	Rewrite at least one job family around human-AI collaboration with a deliberate human-in-the-loop buffer. Tool adoption without redesign is the direct route to the no-ROI outcome.
Takeaway 4 Build capability before buying it	Train existing experts to use AI rather than hiring around them. Make AI literacy a hiring signal and reframe adoption as visible opportunity.
Takeaway 5 Design roles for growth	Job variety and development drive meaningful work more than budgets or perks. In a mobile workforce, growth-shaped roles are the retention strategy for nationals and expatriates alike.
Takeaway 6 Govern AI deliberately	Sandbox sensitive use cases, audit for bias against citizen candidates, and embed human oversight in every AI-assisted talent decision.

Where does your organization sit?

A quick self-check to take back to your leadership team. Tick only what is genuinely true today. The empty boxes are the most useful for conversation.

Emiratization

- Emirati hiring sits on business-line scorecards, not only on HR's.
- We track retention, promotion, and skill growth, not just headcount at the point of hire.
- We have named role models and a visible national leadership layer.

AI readiness

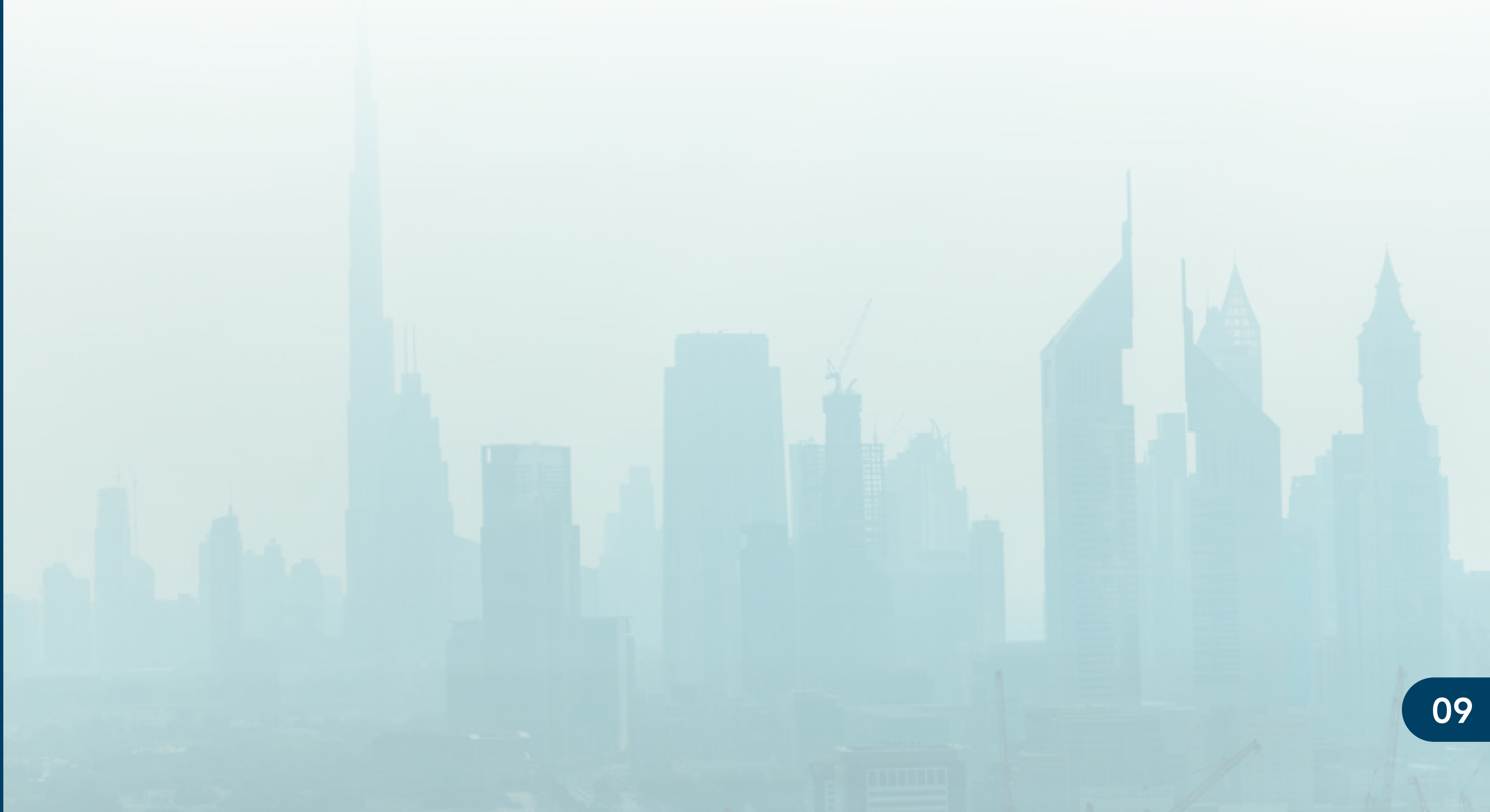
- A named owner is accountable for AI's return on investment in our function.
- We have redesigned at least one job family around AI, not just added tools.
- Human oversight is explicitly built into any AI-assisted talent decision.

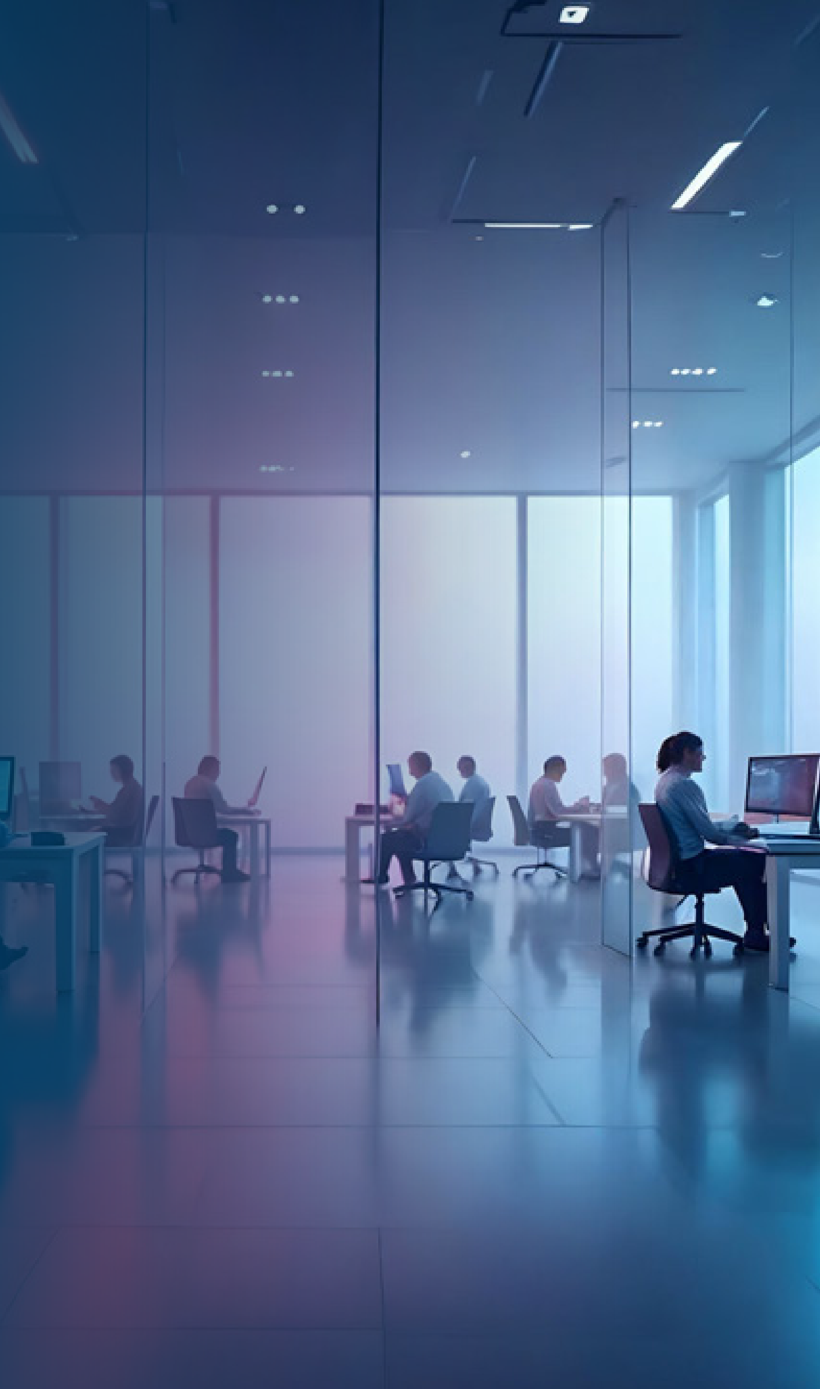
Capability

- We invest in job variety and internal mobility, not only training catalogs.
- We can name the behavioral capabilities our people will need in three years.
- We design roles for growth, knowing much of our workforce is mobile.
- AI literacy is instrumented and treated as a hiring signal.

The question to sit with »

If we met again in twelve months, what is the one capability in your people or your function you would wish you had started building today?





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