GUIDE 04

Choice or Circumstance? How Senior Moves Are Really Made

Why some senior professionals move on their own terms, and others wait for the market to decide for them.

04

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For senior data and AI professionals in the GCC

Contents

INTRODUCTION	Two moves, two starting points
CHAPTER 1	The open-ended search
CHAPTER 2	Choice and circumstance
CHAPTER 3	When the target and the evidence disagree
CHAPTER 4	The GCC is not one market
CHAPTER 5	The constraints you have not declared
CHAPTER 6	Expectations set in another market
CHAPTER 7	What this means for you
ABOUT	About the author

The cases in this guide are composites built from patterns observed across many careers. None describes a real individual.

INTRODUCTION

Two moves, two starting points

Two senior data leaders, equally capable, both decide within the same year that it is time for their next role.

The first knows what she is aiming at. She can name the kind of organisation, the level, the mandate and the reason she is credible for it. She starts conversations while she is still comfortably employed. When a role comes, it is one she chose, on terms she could negotiate.

The second is less certain. He is keeping his options open, looking at what appears, and talking to anyone who calls. Then a restructure removes his role, and his search becomes urgent. When a role comes, it is the one that arrived in time.

Both moved. Only one moved from choice. The difference was not ability, and it was rarely luck. It was direction and leverage: how clearly each knew what they were aiming at, and how much room they had when the moment came.

This guide is about that difference. It covers the open-ended search, the gap between choice and circumstance, targets that the evidence does not yet support, why the GCC is not one market, the constraints that derail moves late, and expectations formed in a different market. As in the other guides in this series, the emphasis is on patterns and consequences, not on what any individual should decide. Whether your own target is right, and how to approach it, depends on your record and your situation.

Each chapter opens with a short case. These are composites built from patterns seen across many careers. None describes a real individual.

CHAPTER 1

The open-ended search

COMPOSITE CASE

A Head of Analytics had been "open to the right opportunity" for almost two years. He took every recruiter call, applied to roles that looked interesting, and had coffee with anyone who suggested it. He considered roles in banking, government, consulting and technology, at levels from his current one to two steps above it.

He was busy throughout. He was rarely shortlisted. When one search consultant was asked about him, she said he was clearly capable, "but I've no idea what he actually wants, so I don't know what to put him forward for".

The most common direction pattern among senior professionals is not a wrong target. It is no target at all: a search kept deliberately open in the hope that the right role will become obvious when it appears.

Why it feels sensible

Keeping options open feels prudent. It avoids ruling out opportunities. It avoids the risk of choosing the wrong direction. It produces plenty of activity, which feels like progress. For senior people who have spent their careers being responsive to their organisations, it is also a familiar way of working.

How it is read

The market reads an open-ended search differently. To a search consultant, a candidate without a defined target is hard to place and hard to advocate for. To a hiring executive, a candidate who could do many roles raises a question: why this one? To a referrer, a person with no clear aim is difficult to recommend for anything specific.

Most importantly, an undefined target tends to be read as a candidate who has not decided. Senior hires are made for people who know what they want and why they are right for it. Indecision, even when it is really openness, signals the opposite.

Why activity does not compound

A focused search builds on itself. Each conversation adds to knowledge of a specific market, each relationship is relevant to the next, and the candidate becomes known in a particular space. An open search spreads the same effort across many directions, so little of it accumulates. After a year, the focused candidate is known by the people who matter. The open candidate is known slightly by many people, none of whom think of them first.

The consequence

The cost is time and momentum. Senior professionals can spend one or two years in an open search, busy throughout, before realising that the activity has produced very little. By then, circumstances may have changed, and the search may no longer be one they control.

CHAPTER 2

Choice and circumstance

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
>
> A senior data leader had joined a government-related entity to build its data function. He did it well. Five years later, the function was established, and the organisation's priorities moved on. A new strategy brought a new structure, and his role was folded into a wider department.
>
> He had known, in principle, that his mandate would end one day. He had not prepared for it. His search began the week the restructure was announced, with a notice period running and no conversations under way.

Every senior move happens from one of two positions. Moving from choice means starting while you are secure, with time to be selective and the option to stay. Moving from circumstance means starting because something has forced it: a restructure, a change of leadership, the end of a mandate, a role that has stopped working.

Why the starting position matters

The starting position shapes almost everything about a search. A candidate moving from choice can wait for the right role, decline the wrong ones, and negotiate from a position where staying is a real option. A candidate moving from circumstance is working against a deadline. They are more likely to accept the first acceptable offer, less able to negotiate, and more likely to make a move they would not otherwise have chosen.

Decision-makers can often tell the difference. A candidate who is clearly choosing reads as confident and in demand. A candidate who is clearly urgent can read, fairly or not, as someone the previous organisation did not keep.

The mandate pattern

In the GCC, this is sharpened by a pattern common among expatriate senior professionals. Many are hired to deliver a specific mandate: to build a function, lead a transformation or deliver a programme. Their tenure beyond that mandate often depends on whether a next mandate exists, and whether they are the person offered it.

When a mandate is complete, the signs often appear gradually: fewer new initiatives, a shift in priorities, a new leadership agenda. Professionals who are absorbed in delivery frequently miss these signs, or read them as personal rather than structural, until formal notice arrives.

Why senior people rarely prepare

Senior professionals are often the least prepared for an unplanned move, precisely because they are good at their jobs. Delivery absorbs their attention. Their organisation values them. Looking outward can feel disloyal, or simply unnecessary while things are going well. By the time it becomes necessary, the conditions that would have made a move easy, time, security and active relationships, have often already gone.

Leverage is built before it is needed

Leverage is the room to choose. It comes from having a defined direction, relationships that are already active, and a position in the market that does not depend on urgency. None of these can be built quickly once a search has become urgent. They are built, or not built, in the years before.

The consequence

The cost of moving from circumstance is rarely visible as a single loss. It shows up as a role that is slightly wrong, a level that is slightly lower, a package that is slightly weaker, and a career direction shaped by timing rather than intention. Over several moves, those small compromises add up to a very different career.

CHAPTER 3

When the target and the evidence disagree

COMPOSITE CASE: TWO PROFESSIONALS

The first was a Head of Function targeting Chief Data Officer roles. She reached final rounds three times in a year and was not chosen once. The feedback was always positive and always vague. In each case, the successful candidate had owned an enterprise budget and reported directly to a chief executive. She had not.

The second was a former chief data officer targeting Head of Function roles after a period away from the market. He was interviewed often and offered nothing. Hiring managers liked him, and quietly worried that he would be expensive, restless and likely to leave for the next C-level role.

A clear target is necessary. It is not enough on its own. The target also has to be one the evidence supports, and here senior professionals can go wrong in both directions.

Aiming above the evidence

The more common version is a target set at a level the record does not yet clearly support. The person is capable of the role, often very capable, but the evidence a decision-maker looks for is missing or thin. At the most senior levels, that evidence tends to relate to the real scope of the mandate, who the person reported to, the budget and headcount they owned, and whether their outcomes were enterprise-wide or functional.

Where that evidence is not there, the candidate often gets far in a process before falling short against someone whose record matches the level more directly. Because the feedback is rarely explicit, the pattern can repeat for a long time.

Aiming below the record

The less common version is the opposite. A professional who has held a more senior role targets a lower one, for good reasons: a better fit, a different sector, a change of pace, or a return to the market. Decision-makers often read that as a risk. They worry about cost, about boredom, and about whether the person will leave as soon as a more senior role appears.

Why the feedback rarely helps

Decision-makers seldom tell a candidate that their target sits above or below their evidence. It is an awkward message to deliver, it invites argument, and most organisations prefer to close a process politely. Search consultants may hint at it, but rarely say it plainly. The candidate is left with general reassurance, which encourages them to keep pursuing the same target in the same way.

Why this is hard to see from the inside

Both patterns are difficult to recognise in yourself. Professionals aiming above their evidence usually know they could do the role, and they are often right. Professionals aiming below their record usually know their reasons are genuine, and they are often right too. The problem is not the person's view of themselves. It is the gap between that view and what a decision-maker can see.

The consequence

The cost of a mismatched target is a long run of near-misses. Final rounds without offers. Positive conversations that go quiet. Months, sometimes years, spent pursuing roles that were never quite within reach on the evidence

available, or that were never going to be offered for reasons nobody stated. Whether a particular target is right, or right but not yet evidenced, is a question no general guide can answer for you.

CHAPTER 4

The GCC is not one market

COMPOSITE CASE

A senior data leader with ten years in the UAE decided to target roles in Saudi Arabia, attracted by the scale of the national transformation programmes. He assumed that his regional experience would carry across. Several conversations later, he realised that the organisations he was speaking to were looking for something more specific: experience inside the Kingdom, familiarity with its national programmes, and relationships with its institutions. His regional record was respected. It was not what they were looking for.

From outside, the GCC can look like a single market. Senior professionals, particularly those arriving from elsewhere, often talk about "a move to the GCC" as one destination. In practice, each market, and each type of organisation within it, reads candidates differently.

Country by country

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar each have their own national strategies, institutions, regulators and hiring cultures. Experience in one is relevant to the others, but it is not interchangeable. Saudi Arabia in particular, with the scale of its transformation programmes, tends to expect a strong track record in the Kingdom itself, or a clear and credible connection to it.

A target that names "the GCC" rather than a specific market and type of organisation is often a sign of the open-ended search described in Chapter 1.

Sovereign and government entities

Government and sovereign entities across the region operate with their own mandates, strategies and language. Decision-makers in these organisations tend to look for candidates who understand that context: the national vision the entity serves, the programmes it is accountable for, and the way it measures success. Candidates who approach them with an excellent private-sector record and little sense of that context are often read as not yet ready.

Private regional groups and multinationals

Private regional groups and multinationals read candidates differently again. Regional groups often value commercial outcomes, speed and the ability to work closely with owners and senior executives. Multinationals tend to weigh global frameworks, regional reporting lines and experience of operating within a larger group. A record that suits one can be read as a weaker fit for the other, even within the same city.

When long tenure becomes hard to read

The reverse also applies. Professionals who have spent many years inside one institution, and particularly inside a sovereign or government entity, can find that their record is hard for others to assess. Mandates are described in internal terms, outcomes are confidential, and the scale of the work is invisible to outsiders. The prestige of the institution is recognised. The capability behind it is not easily priced, and is often discounted as a result.

Nationalisation

Nationalisation policy also varies by country, by type of entity and by level, and it shapes which roles are realistically open to expatriate senior professionals. Guide 01 covers this in more detail. In the context of direction, the point is simply that a realistic target takes it into account.

The consequence

Treating the GCC as one market leads to targets that are too broad, approaches that miss what each organisation is looking for, and records that are read as less relevant than they are. Strong candidates spend time pursuing roles in markets or entity types where their evidence does not translate, while overlooking those where it would.

CHAPTER 5

The constraints you have not declared

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
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> A senior candidate reached the final stage for a role he very much wanted. The organisation was ready to make an offer. Only then did it emerge that his notice period was six months, that a family commitment meant he could not start before the following summer, and that the role's location would require a household move he had not yet discussed at home.
>
> None of these was unusual or unreasonable. Raised early, they might all have been accommodated. Raised at the end, they stalled the process. The organisation moved to its second candidate.

Every senior professional has constraints. Notice periods, family timing, schooling, visa arrangements, the location they can realistically live in, the things they will not compromise on. These are normal parts of any senior move. What causes problems is not the constraints themselves, but when and how they surface.

Why constraints surface late

Many candidates hold back their constraints early in a process, for understandable reasons. They do not want to seem difficult. They hope the constraint will not matter. They have not fully resolved it themselves. Sometimes they have not recognised it as a constraint at all until the move becomes real.

Contradictions inside the target

A related pattern is a target that conflicts with the person's own situation. A professional targets roles in one market while their family situation points firmly to another. A candidate pursues a role that would require relocation they are not genuinely prepared to make. These contradictions are rarely visible at the start of a search. They tend to appear at the decision point, when they are most costly.

Constraints are not a weakness

It is worth saying plainly that constraints are not a flaw in a candidate. Senior hiring organisations deal with notice periods, relocations and family timing all the time. What they find difficult is uncertainty, and surprises at the point of decision. A constraint that is known can usually be planned around. A constraint that appears at the end introduces doubt about what else might still be unresolved.

How it is read

From the organisation's side, a constraint that appears late changes the picture. A hiring process that seemed close to completion suddenly carries new risk and delay. Even when the constraint is perfectly reasonable, its timing can damage confidence in the candidate, and in senior hiring, confidence is often what decides between two strong finalists.

The consequence

The cost is momentum at the moment it matters most. Offers stall or go to someone else. Processes that took months collapse in a week. And the candidate is often left feeling that the constraint cost them the role, when in many cases it was the timing of it.

CHAPTER 6

Expectations set in another market

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
>
> A senior professional who had first come to the region a decade earlier was negotiating a new role. Her expectations were shaped by the offers she remembered from that time, and by what colleagues had received then. The offer she received was structured differently, and she read it as a step backwards.
>
> She later realised that the market itself had changed, and that the comparison she was making was with a version of it that no longer existed. By the time she had worked that through, the negotiation had become harder than it needed to be.

Expectations about a senior role are rarely formed in a vacuum. They are shaped by what a person has received before, by what peers received at a particular point in time, and sometimes by a different country's market altogether. When those reference points no longer match the market a candidate is entering, friction follows.

Markets change

The GCC market for senior talent has changed considerably over the past decade. How senior roles are structured, what is included in an offer and how packages are presented have all evolved. Professionals whose expectations were set in an earlier period, or who compare primarily with peers who moved years ago, can find that their reference points no longer apply.

A useful way of putting it is that the package premium has gone, not the pay premium. Senior roles in the region can still be financially strong, particularly on a net basis, but the comparison has to be made on what is really on offer today rather than on what used to be standard.

Comparisons across countries

Professionals moving into the region from elsewhere often bring a different set of reference points: the structure of offers in their home market, its tax position and its cost of living. These comparisons are natural, and they are often made on the wrong basis. Comparing headline figures across markets, without allowing for how offers are structured and taxed in each, can make a strong offer look weak or a weak one look strong.

Value is personal

Part of the difficulty is that the value of an offer depends heavily on the individual. The same offer can be worth very different amounts to two people, depending on their household, their stage of life and what they would otherwise be paying for. Comparisons with peers, or with a past offer, often ignore those differences entirely.

How it is read

When a candidate's expectations are anchored to a different market, the organisation tends to read it in one of two ways: as a misunderstanding of the market, or as a sign that the candidate may not be satisfied in the role. Neither helps. In close decisions, a candidate whose expectations fit the market can be preferred over a stronger one whose expectations do not.

The consequence

The cost is friction at the final stage: negotiations that become difficult, offers that are declined and later regretted, and occasionally offers that are withdrawn. Understanding how an individual's own expectations sit against today's market is a personal question that depends on their circumstances, and it is not one this guide can answer.

CHAPTER 7

What this means for you

The patterns in this guide all concern the same underlying question: whether a senior move is shaped by intention or by circumstance.

An open-ended search spreads effort without compounding it. Moving from circumstance removes the room to choose. A target that the evidence does not support leads to a long run of near-misses. Treating the GCC as one market produces targets that are too broad. Constraints that surface late stall moves at the point of decision. And expectations formed in a different market create friction exactly when an offer is on the table.

None of these patterns says anything about a person's ability. They describe how a move is approached, and how that approach is read by the people making decisions.

Do you recognise any of these patterns?

The questions below are not a diagnosis. They are a way of noticing which patterns may apply to your own situation.

- [ ] Could you describe your next target in one sentence: the type of organisation, the level, the market and why you are credible for it?
- [ ] If your current role changed or ended in the next six months, would you be starting your search from choice or from circumstance?
- [ ] Have you reached final rounds for senior roles without being chosen, with no clear explanation?

- [ ] Does your target name a specific market and type of organisation, or "the GCC" in general?
- [ ] Are there constraints, such as timing, location or family arrangements, that you have not yet fully resolved or declared?
- [ ] Are your expectations of a new role based mainly on what you or your peers received several years ago?
- [ ] Would the people who know your work best say that you know what you want next?

If several of these felt familiar, you are in good company. Direction and leverage are among the least discussed aspects of senior careers, and among the most decisive.

Where this fits

This guide covers Market Leverage & Direction, one of the four pillars in the Senior Career Positioning Benchmark. The others are Positioning & Narrative, Market Visibility, and Proof & Credibility. Direction ties them together: it determines what your narrative should say, where you need to be visible, and what evidence matters most.

Recognising the pattern is the starting point. Whether your target is right, or right but not yet evidenced, and how to approach it from a position of choice, depends on your own record and circumstances. If you want help applying this to your own situation, the Benchmark is where that starts. If you have already taken it, re-read your Market Leverage & Direction result with this guide in mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kaleem has spent over 25 years across JP Morgan, UBS and ADIA, with 360-degree GCC recruitment experience on both the hiring and candidate side. He now works with senior data and AI professionals on how they are positioned, evidenced and found in the GCC market.

He is the creator of the Senior Career Positioning Benchmark, a structured self-assessment for senior data and AI leaders based in the GCC or targeting a move to it.

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