GUIDE 01

How Senior Data and AI Roles Are Really Filled in the GCC

What happens before a senior role is advertised, who decides, and why strong candidates are never found.

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For senior data and AI professionals in the GCC

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

INTRODUCTION

The role you never saw

Most senior data and AI professionals in the GCC have had the same experience at least once. A peer moves into a role that would have suited you perfectly. You never saw it advertised. Nobody called you about it. By the time you hear the news, the person has already started.

It is tempting to read that as bad luck, or as a sign that you were not considered good enough. Usually it is neither. It is a sign of how senior roles in this market are actually filled, and of a process that runs largely out of sight.

I have watched that process from both sides. For over 25 years I worked inside institutions including JP Morgan, UBS and ADIA, as a hiring manager and as a candidate. I have also worked in GCC recruitment, which means I have seen how mandates are briefed, how longlists are built, and how decisions are made long before any candidate hears about them.

This guide explains that process. It is written for Senior Managers, Heads of Function and C-level leaders in data, analytics and AI who are based in the GCC or planning a move here. It covers how a senior role comes into being, who decides, how candidates are found, what decision-makers read for, why relationships carry so much weight, and the role nationalisation policy plays.

It does not tell you what to change. That depends on your record, your target and your starting point, and no general guide can judge those. What it will do is help you recognise the patterns, so you can see where your own situation sits.

Each chapter opens with a short case. These are composites: each is built from patterns seen across many careers, and none describes a real individual.

CHAPTER 1

The advert is the last step

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
>
> A Head of Data Governance at a regional bank, eighteen years into his career, decided it was time to move. Over nine months he applied for every relevant senior role he could find across Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Forty applications. A handful of automated acknowledgements. No interviews.
>
> In the same period, two of his former peers moved into senior roles at a sovereign entity and a large private group. Neither role was ever advertised. He concluded that he was too senior, too expensive, or too long in one place. Those may have played a part. They were not the main problem. He was looking for roles at the point where most of them had already been decided.

At mid-level, the job market works roughly the way most people expect. A vacancy opens, it is advertised, candidates apply, and the best applicants are interviewed. At senior level, that sequence is often reversed. By the time a role is visible to the market, much of the important work has already happened.

How a senior mandate comes into being

A senior data or AI role rarely starts as a job description. It starts as a problem. A board decides to commit to an AI programme. A regulator raises expectations on data. A new chief executive wants a transformation agenda. A national strategy creates a mandate that an entity must deliver against.

That problem acquires an owner, usually a sponsor such as a chief executive, a chief operating officer, a group chief data officer or a board member. It also acquires a budget line. Only then does it become a role.

The sponsor's first instinct is rarely to post an advert. It is to ask: who do I know who has done this before? Who do my peers rate? Who did well on a similar programme elsewhere? Within days or weeks, an informal list forms. It may be three names. It may be one.

If that list produces someone credible, the role can be filled without ever going further. If it does not, the organisation may retain a search firm, which begins with its own list of people it already knows. Only after these routes are explored does a public advert become likely, and even then it may be running alongside a search rather than replacing it.

What the advert is for

When a senior role is advertised, the advert can serve several purposes. Sometimes it is a genuine open search. Sometimes it exists because the organisation's governance requires roles to be posted. Sometimes it is a way of testing the market alongside a shortlist that is already forming. Occasionally a strong internal or referred candidate is already in view.

None of this makes applying pointless. People are hired through applications at every level. But it does change what an application is. At senior level, an application is usually one of the weaker routes into a process, not the main entrance.

The pattern this produces

The professionals most affected are those whose careers progressed through internal promotion or through applications that worked well earlier on. The method served them for fifteen or twenty years, so it is natural to rely on it. The difficulty is that the method stops scaling as seniority rises, and the signal that it has stopped working is silence, which is easy to misread.

The useful question is not "why am I not getting interviews?" It is "at what stage am I entering these processes, and who knew about the role before I did?"

CHAPTER 2

Who actually decides

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
>
> A candidate for a Chief Data Officer role at a large regional group did everything right on paper. The search firm presented him with enthusiasm. The HR team confirmed that he fitted the grade and the package range. Two members of the leadership team found him impressive.
>
> He was dropped after a thirty-minute conversation with the group chief executive. The feedback, passed on informally, was that the chief executive could not picture him presenting the data agenda to the board. Nobody had told the candidate that this was the conversation that mattered most.

Senior hiring is rarely one person's decision. It is a sequence of judgements made by people who each read something different. Candidates tend to prepare for the most visible gatekeeper. They are often lost at the least visible one.

The people in the room

The sponsor owns the problem the role exists to solve. They are reading for one thing above all: can this person take this off my desk and represent it credibly upwards, to a board, a regulator or a government stakeholder? They rarely read a CV closely. They form a view quickly, often from a conversation and from what trusted people tell them.

The leadership around the sponsor are reading for fit and friction. Will this person work well with my function? Will they compete with it? Do they understand how decisions are actually made here?

The talent or HR team manage the process. They read for grade, policy and risk: does the candidate fit the band, the structure, the nationalisation requirements and the approval route? They can rarely say yes on their own, but they can say no, or slow things down.

The search firm, where there is one, acts as filter and advocate. Its consultants read for a simpler question: can I present this person to my client with confidence, and will they stay the course?

Each of these people can be satisfied while another is not. A process that feels positive at every stage can still end in silence, because the person whose view counted most was never directly visible.

How this varies by type of organisation

The shape of the decision changes with the type of entity, and senior candidates in the GCC often move between them.

In **government and sovereign entities**, decisions often involve committees and several layers of approval. Processes can be long. Alignment with national strategy and the entity's mandate carries real weight, and so do referrals from people the entity already trusts.

In **private regional groups**, influence is often concentrated. A founder, a family member or a small executive circle may shape the outcome directly. Decisions can be fast, and commercial outcomes tend to be read more closely than institutional pedigree.

In **multinationals**, the regional office is often one step in a global process. Global grading frameworks, regional reporting lines and headquarters approval all shape what is possible, and the person you meet locally may not be the person who signs off.

The pattern this produces

Candidates who think of hiring as a single decision tend to tailor themselves to the interviewer in front of them. Candidates who understand it as a chain ask a different question: who owns the problem behind this role, and what would that person need to believe about me?

CHAPTER 3

How a search firm finds you, or does not

> **COMPOSITE CASE**
>
> A researcher at a search firm was asked to build a longlist for a Head of AI at a government-related entity. She had two days to produce around forty names, which the consultant would cut to eight.
>
> She searched by title, location and sector. She asked colleagues who they knew. She checked the firm's own database and the people who had been strong candidates on previous assignments. One professional with an excellent record never appeared. His profile listed a generic title, no detail beneath it, and had not been updated in four years. He was not rejected. He was simply never found.

At senior level, the most important shift is this: you are less likely to be hired because you applied and more likely to be hired because you were found. Being found depends on how searches are actually done.

How a longlist is built

When a search firm takes on a senior brief, the early work is mapping. The team identifies the organisations where suitable people are likely to sit, then looks for the individuals inside them. That work draws on a few sources at once: professional networks and search tools, the firm's own records, referrals from people in the market, and the consultants' personal knowledge.

Two features of that process matter more than most candidates realise.

The first is time. Researchers work quickly across many profiles. Each one gets seconds, not minutes. What can be seen immediately is what gets judged.

The second is that absence is read as absence. If a profile does not show scope, level or outcomes, the researcher cannot assume they exist. They move on to someone whose level is visible. There is no penalty for being overlooked, and no record that it happened.

Referrals: the other half of being found

The second route onto a longlist is a recommendation. A consultant calls a trusted contact and asks who the best person they have worked with in this area is. The names that come back carry weight, because they arrive with someone else's credibility attached.

Referrals depend on being remembered, and on being remembered accurately. A professional known as "very solid on governance" will be recommended for governance roles, even if their real strength is building data platforms. What people say about you when you are not in the room is part of how you are found.

The pattern this produces

Many senior professionals in this region have strong reputations inside their own organisations and very little presence outside them. That was never a problem while their careers moved internally. It becomes one the moment they need the external market to find them.

This is not about posting content or building a following. Some of the most sought-after people in the market post rarely or never. It is about whether the information a researcher or referrer relies on exists, is current, and reflects the level you actually operate at.

Being found is only the first filter. What happens when a decision-maker actually reads what they find is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Why global CVs go quiet here

COMPOSITE CASE

A data leader at a global bank in London was planning a move to the UAE. His CV was strong by any international standard: enterprise-wide programmes, EMEA scope, large teams, well-known platforms.

It was read by a senior director at a national institution in Abu Dhabi. She found it impressive and could not connect any of it to her own agenda. The programme names were internal to his bank. Nothing referred to the region, its regulators, its national strategies or any institution she knew. She passed on it, not because the experience was weak, but because she would have had to translate it herself.

Being found gets you read. Being read is a different test, and in the GCC it has a regional dimension that many experienced professionals underestimate.

Who is reading

Senior CVs in this market are increasingly read by regional leadership: people who have built their careers within national institutions, government entities and regional groups, and who carry responsibility for national and organisational agendas. They read for relevance to that agenda.

That reader is asking practical questions. Has this person worked on problems like ours? Do they understand the regulatory and institutional context we operate in? Can I place their scale and outcomes against things I recognise? Would they be credible with our stakeholders?

Global-generic is not neutral

A profile written for an international audience often reads, to a regional decision-maker, as if it were written for someone else. The language is global. The reference points are global. The outcomes may be impressive but they float, with nothing local to anchor them.

That does not lead to rejection on grounds of quality. It leads to something quieter: the reader cannot easily see why this person, for this role, here. Faced with a candidate whose relevance is obvious and one whose relevance needs translating, most readers choose the obvious one.

The in-region version of the same problem

This pattern is not limited to people moving in from outside the region. Professionals who have spent many years inside one GCC institution often describe their work in that institution's internal language: programme names, committee titles, internal grades. Readers outside the institution cannot price any of it.

The result is similar. A long record of genuine regional delivery becomes difficult for the next employer to assess, and so it is discounted.

The pattern this produces

This is not about inflating regional experience or adding names for effect. A sophisticated reader will notice that immediately. It is about whether the regional relevance you genuinely have is visible to the person who needs to see it, in terms they recognise.

The question to hold in mind is simple: if a senior regional decision-maker read your profile for sixty seconds, what would they be able to place?

CHAPTER 5

The network that faded, and the one that never existed

> **COMPOSITE CASE: TWO PROFESSIONALS**
>
> The first had been in the region for twelve years. In his early years he knew everyone: he spoke at events, sat on working groups and was the person others called for advice. Then he spent four years heads-down in a demanding role. When he looked up, most of his contacts had moved on, changed organisations or left the region. The relationships were not gone, but they had gone quiet.
>
> The second had progressed through internal promotions and well-chosen applications for twenty years. She had never needed a network beyond her own organisation. In her late forties she noticed that her peers were moving through conversations she was not part of, and realised the channel they were using was one she had never built.

Relationships matter in every senior market. In the GCC they matter more, for reasons that are structural rather than cultural cliché.

Why relationships carry so much weight here

The senior community in each GCC market is relatively small. Decision-makers know each other, sit on the same boards and committees, and move between the same institutions. A senior hire is a significant risk for any organisation, and a recommendation from a trusted person reduces that risk more effectively than any CV can.

That is why so many senior roles are filled through relationships before they are advertised, and why the people who move most easily are not always the most qualified. They are often the most known, and known accurately, by the people making the decision.

Two different starting points

The two professionals in the case above face the same problem from opposite directions, and it helps to be clear which describes you.

A network that has faded is a depreciated asset. The relationships were real and the skill of building them exists. Time, role changes and people leaving the region have eroded what was there. The signs are familiar: you can name many senior people you used to know well, but few you have spoken to in the last year; many of your strongest contacts are now in a different market; and reaching out feels awkward because it has been so long.

A network that was never built is a missing capability. The career did not need it, so it never developed. The signs are different: your moves have come almost entirely through applications or internal promotion; you know your own organisation well and the wider market much less; and the idea of approaching senior people you do not know directly feels unfamiliar rather than merely uncomfortable.

Neither is a character flaw. The first is what happens to anyone who spends years delivering rather than networking. The second is what happens to anyone whose career worked well without it. But they start in very different places, and treating one as if it were the other usually wastes time.

The pattern this produces

Professionals in both positions often respond to a quiet market by applying more. That is understandable, and it rarely addresses the underlying issue, because the roles they most want are moving through a channel that applications do not reach.

The question worth answering honestly is: if a senior role that suits you were being discussed this month, who in that conversation would mention your name?

CHAPTER 6

Nationalisation: the constraint nobody explains

COMPOSITE CASE

An expatriate Head of Analytics with a strong record was shortlisted for three government-related roles over eight months. Each process went well, and each eventually went quiet. She began to wonder what she was doing wrong, and whether her experience was not as strong as she had believed.

In two of the three cases, the roles were filled by national candidates. Nobody told her. The silence that she read as a judgement on her ability was, in large part, the effect of a policy she had not factored in.

This is the one pattern in this guide that is caused by the market rather than by anything in a professional's own positioning. It is also the one that is least often explained openly, which is why it causes so much confusion.

What nationalisation policy is

GCC governments have long-standing programmes to build national capability and increase the participation of their citizens in the workforce. In the UAE this is known as Emiratisation; in Saudi Arabia, Saudisation. Other GCC states have their own equivalents.

These are legitimate national goals. Building a deep bench of national talent in fields such as data and AI is a priority for the region, and many organisations take that responsibility seriously.

In practice, the policies shape hiring in ways that affect expatriate senior professionals. Certain roles, grades and types of entity give priority to national candidates. An organisation may prefer a national candidate even when an expatriate candidate is fully suitable. A role may open more widely only if no suitable national candidate is found, and that point can come late in a process.

Why it is rarely explained

Organisations seldom tell expatriate candidates that nationalisation shaped an outcome. Partly this is about process confidentiality. Partly it is that the topic is sensitive, and partly it is that nobody in the process sees it as their job to explain.

The effect on candidates is predictable. A strong professional experiences months of positive conversations followed by silence, and draws the conclusion that the problem lies with them. Confidence erodes. Search behaviour becomes more scattered. In many cases, the real explanation was never about them at all.

What this means, and what it does not

Nationalisation does not mean that expatriate senior professionals cannot succeed in the region. Many continue to compete strongly and to be hired into significant roles. It means that the market is not uniform. Where the policies bind most, and how, varies by country, by type of entity and by level, and it changes over time as policy evolves. It is worth checking the current picture rather than relying on assumptions from a few years ago.

Understanding where you genuinely compete, and how to position for it, is a strategic question that depends on your own record and target. That is beyond the scope of a general guide. The purpose of this chapter is narrower and, I think, more important: if your search has involved strong processes that ended in unexplained silence, this is a factor to consider before concluding that the problem is you.

CHAPTER 7

What this means for you

Taken together, the patterns in this guide describe a market that works differently at senior level from the way most people assume.

Senior roles begin as problems owned by sponsors, and much of the decision is made before a role is visible. Several people shape each hire, and each of them reads for something different. Candidates are found in seconds, by researchers and referrers working from whatever information exists. What they find is then read by regional leadership for relevance to their own agenda. Relationships move roles before adverts do. And nationalisation policy shapes which roles are realistically open, often without anyone saying so.

None of this is a criticism of anyone's ability. Most of the professionals I have described had strong records. What they lacked was a clear view of how the market was reading them, and of where in the process they were entering.

Do you recognise any of these patterns?

The questions below are not a diagnosis. They are a way of noticing which of the patterns in this guide may apply to you.

- [ ] Have most of your senior moves come through applications or internal promotion, rather than through someone approaching you?
- [ ] Do you tend to hear about the roles you would have wanted only after they have been filled?
- [ ] If a researcher searched for someone with your title in your city tomorrow, would they find you, and would what they found reflect your real level?

- [ ] Would a senior regional decision-maker recognise anything in your profile as connected to their own agenda?
- [ ] If a suitable role were being discussed this month, can you name someone in that conversation who would mention you?
- [ ] Are your strongest professional relationships still active, or have most of them gone quiet?
- [ ] Have strong processes ended in silence, and have you assumed that the reason was you?

If several of these felt familiar, you are in the majority of experienced senior professionals in this market, not the exception. Recognising the pattern is the starting point. What to do about it depends on your own record, your target and your starting position.

Where this fits

This guide covers Market Visibility, one of the four pillars in the Senior Career Positioning Benchmark. The others are Positioning & Narrative, Proof & Credibility, and Market Leverage & Direction. They interact: being found matters little if what people find does not land, and the best-written profile achieves little if nobody sees it.

If you have already taken the Benchmark, it is worth re-reading your Market Visibility result with this guide in mind. If your situation changes, or you are planning a move, you can take it again at any time to see where you stand.

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.

This guide provides general information only. The case studies are composites built from patterns observed across many careers; they do not describe real individuals. Nothing in this guide creates recruitment representation, provides access to vacancies, or guarantees interviews, offers, salary outcomes or employment. Hiring practices and nationalisation policies vary by country, organisation and level, and change over time.

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