At first glance, the prospects for recruiters in the Middle East could seem challenging. The falling price of oil has hit the local economy and reverberations are being felt by many professionals and industry sectors. The Morgan McKinley UAE Employment Monitor for Quarter 4 illustrated a flat market on a quarter-on-quarter basis with just a slight increase of four per cent in jobs on offer and a three per cent decrease in job seekers across the same period of time. However, scratch the surface of the region and you can still find optimism and opportunities. Speaking at the time of his company’s report Trefor Murphy, managing director, Middle East and North Africa for Morgan McKinley noted: “Despite the flat numbers and the market compression caused by the price of oil it was a busier quarter than Q3. Companies made up the remainder of their hiring budgets in Q4 and this supported that market in Q4.”

Indeed, Murphy notes that the impact of oils’ fortunes are causing the economy to contract and consolidate – a movement which in itself triggers demand for certain skilled candidates: “This type of economic environment inevitably creates an impetus for cost-cutting skills,” he says. “Accountants and corporate finance specialists who have a track record of reducing expenditures will be in demand in the first quarter.”
Taken together with the general evolutionary aspect of the Middle East economy, and it is clear recruiters are in demand to find and place skilled professionals who can make a significant impact on the country’s businesses. “Clients always want the best people and expectations are high,” says Daniel Ayscough of Nimbus Resource Solutions who operates in the telecoms and specifically satellite technology niche. “Each client is different in what they’re looking for and some companies are trying to do it themselves through LinkedIn and other job boards. But that’s not the best way to advertise – you don’t always attract the best candidates – you do have to hunt for them.”

Ayscough has gravitated towards an RPO model, favouring the close relationship it affords him with his clients. With a full understanding of the needs and aspirations of his client he uses a variety of channels in order to locate the talent required. “If you only do one avenue you might miss people so I’ll look at specialist channels which means I can speed up the process and also means the people I contact will understand the job better.”

**Evident attraction**

Attracting possible candidates in the first place is not an issue for recruiters. The lifestyle offered by the UAE and Dubai in particular is extremely attractive, pay levels tend to be higher and the favourable (to say the least) tax situation makes it an attractive stop off point in many people’s career.

It’s not just a question of lifestyle choice, however. According to Greg Wood, commercial director, Your World Healthcare, the healthcare sector in the region is attracting a great deal of investment, with the result that the opportunities it offers skilled practitioners are increasing and are fast becoming world leading. “The rise in the number of healthcare facilities within Dubai and Abu Dhabi has raised the awareness of this location among many qualifying nurses within the UK,” he says. “As the region’s reputation as a centre of excellence for healthcare facilities grows, the more healthcare staff will see it as part of their career development to work in such specialist and state of the art facilities: gaining valuable professional experience and life skills at the same time.”

As more overseas staff work within the UAE, Wood notes there will be a sharing of skills which will aid the development of locally trained healthcare staff, thereby creating an atmosphere of best practice. The resulting up-skilled workforce will be ready to adopt best practice from a worldwide source of healthcare systems. “This is where the UAE has its global advantage,” he says. “As a multicultural society seen as welcoming to many, the UAE offers the lifestyle which many working professionals see as desirable. Sun, sand, sea and wealth. It provides perfect opportunity for professionals seeking the work-life balance: the epitome of a happy and successful life.”

**Evolving talent**

Wood also notes that the region’s aspirations to become a major location for health tourism will only increase this trend, and could ultimately mean healthcare professionals will travel to the region in order to expand their own skillset and experience. “We will see the expertise within the local healthcare workforce expand and increase which will result in the demand for their skillset to be exported to western countries,” he says. “This will be a complete reversal on the current staffing model and represents an opportunity for the UAE to create its next major export product.”
The opportunities outlined within the healthcare sector are duplicated to some extent in other sectors. The evolving nature of the finance market, telecoms and technology use means although the country may currently lag slightly behind the talent demand curve of those industries in other countries, it is extremely keen to make up the ground and become a world leader.

James Wakefield, managing director at Cobalt highlights a similar pattern across the professions his company recruit for. “The skill shortages are in areas where there is a developing or emerging market,” he says. “The roles we’re looking to fill simply did not exist in the region before now.” Among this list he includes compliance professionals, specialist financial services roles, procurement and complex accounting positions. “As the market gets more sophisticated so too do the roles required to be filled,” he notes.

Unsurprisingly UAE nationals are still acquiring the necessary qualifications or experience to take up these opportunities which in turn requires recruiters to be more sophisticated in their search methods and in offering talent to clients. For Wakefield, the international scope of his business means they have good access to skilled professionals.

“We’re fortunate in that we’re a broadly spread global business – we have a presence in Germany, South East Asia, Australasia and can source people from around the world,” he says. Connections are highly important for Wakefield as a lot of his placements come through recommendations.

**Getting the details right**

According to David Pearson, director and associate consultant with oil and gas specialist The Rig Recruitment, while clients want western talent to take the lead for many of their projects, there can be unforeseen issues which challenge otherwise lucrative placements.

“Getting a visa can sometimes be a struggle,” he says. Even though the region is open to outside talent, Pearson says there can be roadblocks to hiring people – reasons why a work visa would not be granted which only come to light further down the line: “When you speak to your candidate you’ve got to know them inside and out,” he remarks. “You need to know what they’ve done, when they’ve worked, where they’ve worked and everything about them. A bad reference can prevent you getting a job in the UK, but you’ll move on and get a job elsewhere. In the Middle East a bad visa will stop you from working entirely.”

Over the past three years Pearson has witnessed the Middle East market change radically. Whilst specialising in the oil and gas sector, his company is now diversifying into other energy markets. He’s worked in solar and is also involved with civil construction projects. The move to some extent is candidate driven as these industries look for similarly skilled workers to those in oil and gas – project specialists who have direct experience of working on significant and large-scale programmes of work. In this context it is clear that getting hold of the right candidate is far easier to do through the use of specialist job boards or carrying out a dedicated search through LinkedIn rather than trying to find talent via more generalist boards.

One of the problems with a generalist approach is volume. Candidates already based in the Middle East are very keen to find their next opportunity, to move onwards and upwards while candidates who are willing to move to the region are similarly enthusiastic to be placed. Jobseekers will therefore send their details to any and every opportunity they think could work
for them, leaving the recruiter with the task of identifying the worthwhile talent from the also-rans.

The streets are not paved with gold in the Middle East and it has proved too difficult for some start-ups and even multinationals. From a career point of view it is felt that some recruiters shift between recruitment businesses at too fast a pace in the hope that the grass is greener rather than building a significant reputation before moving on. However, it is clear the potential is here – with sector and local knowledge, recruiters can survive and thrive in the Middle East.

The Global Recruiter is pleased to announce its inaugural Middle East Summit will be held in Dubai on May 5 2016. The event will be an opportunity for recruiters to understand the intricacies of the region and to ensure their businesses are making the most of the local opportunities. To find out more www.theglobalrecruiter.com/events