GUIDANCE

Business Perspectives on Migration
What works and what doesn't?

Tools to best engage with representative voices of the private sector

May 2026

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A contribution from the Business Advisory Group on Migration* to the second International Migration Review Forum (IMRF)

Business advisory group | on migration

*Launched in 2016, the Business Advisory Group on Migration is housed at the International Organisation of Employers (IOE). It brings together large corporations, national employers' organisations, and industry associations to provide business input to global and regional migration fora, including the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), through its dedicated GFMD Business Mechanism. Its overarching goal is to ensure regulatory environments in which labour migration policies contribute to economic development, prosperity and job creation. Past publications are available on: www.business-migration.org

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Executive Summary

The second International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) is taking place amidst a complex global geopolitical context that highlights longstanding gaps in migration policy and governance. Skills shortages persist across all regions and industries, as employers struggle to identify the talent required to fill roles in a rapidly evolving world of work. This calls for an urgent rethink of migration processes to meet 21st-century realities.

This is not only critical for employers' ability to access talent but also fundamental to driving sustainable economic growth, fostering innovation, and supporting more inclusive and resilient societies worldwide. This misalignment between rapidly evolving labour market needs and outdated migration frameworks leads governments to forgo the full potential of migration as a driver of economic development.

This paper sets forth private sector policy priorities related to legal migration pathways, responsible recruitment and skills recognition, outlines the global mobility costs for businesses, and assesses, from an employer's perspective, what has worked and not worked in migration management. Potential solutions are presented, which identify the components of a well-balanced migration model. Technology is a game-changer and is part of the solutions presented, which include:

1. Flexible, transparent, and predictable labour mobility frameworks that respond to current and anticipated labour market needs.
Existing immigration systems were built around an economic model based on fixed work locations and contracts for structured employment. These systems do not adequately address new forms of workplace flexibility, such as remote work and the rise of the gig economy, or employer-of-record arrangements. This collision of business needs with dysfunctional and outdated policies means that businesses face significant impediments to accessing the global workforce, while governments forgo migration-fuelled economic development.

2. Regulatory frameworks that promote the responsible recruitment of foreign workers.
When regulated appropriately, private employment and recruitment services improve labour- market functioning, and thus, a regulatory framework conducive to responsible recruitment is essential. This includes appropriate regulation of the recruitment industry and Employer of Record providers, and institutional engagement with responsible recruitment firms and employers, coupled with severe penalties for those who do not comply.

3. Improved systems for identification, recognition, development and transferability of skills.
There is a global mismatch between worker skills and the needs of the labour market at all levels of the skill spectrum. This is caused in part by demographic realities and an inadequate alignment of educational programming and skills training with the needs of business. Given the skills shortages across many industries, employers place particular importance on skills development and the efficient recognition and transferability of qualifications across borders.

Governments should actively consult employers in migration policy reform, as they are best positioned to determine labour market needs and share practical challenges with immigration systems. Employers should be recognised as both advocates and instrumental partners in immigration reform. In a rapidly evolving geopolitical context, shaping a positive public narrative on the need for well-managed migration is needed more than ever.

The objective of this paper is to uplift this narrative and contribute to the International Migration Review Forum and the timely implementation of the objectives of the United Nations Global Compact for Migration (GCM).

I. Current Migration Trends

The world is in the midst of sustained growth in migration. There were more than 304 million migrants worldwide at mid-year 2024, up from 275 million in 2020.[1] Labour migrants make up a significant and growing percentage of the migrant population, numbering more than 167.7 million individuals in 2022.[2] Labour migrants also make up a significant percentage of the local workforce in many economies: globally, migrant workers constitute 4.7% of the labour force of destination countries.[3] This figure is highest in the Arab States, where, on average, 41.1% of the workforce is composed of migrants. In the UAE, despite a concerted push for "Emiratization", 95% of the labour force is manned by expatriates[4]. The most recent global sector figures show that in 2024, 68.4% of migrant workers were in services, 24.3% were in industry, and 7.4% were in agriculture.[5]

Of the estimated 167 million international migrant workers, 68.4% are in high-income countries, and 17.4% are in upper-middle- income countries. Greater employment opportunities are one of the factors attracting migrants to these countries. However, the share of migrant workers in high-income countries has fallen from 74.7% in 2013.[6] This fall could be attributed to evolving and restrictive migration policies.

II. Current World of Work Trends

1. Skills Shortages

There is a global mismatch between worker skills and the needs of the labour market, across the skills spectrum. This is caused in part by demographic realities and an inadequate alignment of educational programming and skills training with the needs of business. Developed economies are facing the labour impact of ageing populations and falling birth rates. A shrinking domestic labour pool means widespread shortages of workers.

Employers are experiencing the highest levels of global talent shortages in 15 years - particularly in the information, hospitality and leisure and health and social services industries, where labour shortages have impeded restoration of normal levels of service and forced business closures.

Talent scarcity around the world

72% of employers worldwide report difficulty finding needed talent in 2025, double the rate from a decade ago, with 74% of employers in the information, hospitality, public sector, health and social services sectors reporting difficulty in finding workers.

Source: Manpower Group survey, 2026, available at: https://www.manpowergroup.com/en/insights/2026-global-talentshortage

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[1] UN/IOM - Migration Data Portal, Labour Migration, available at: https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/labour-migration-statistics
[2] Migration Policy Institute, available at: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-statistics-global-migration-migrants-2025migration/publications/WCMS_808935/lang--en/index.htm
[3] UN/IOM - Migration Data Portal, Labour Migration, available at: https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/labour-migration-statistics
[4] Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population Policy Brief, 2024, available at: https://gulfmigration.grc.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Magdalena-Karolak-GLMM-Policy-Brief-No.-8-February-2024.pdf
[5] ILO, "ILO Global Estimates on Migrant Workers," June 2024, available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/MIGRANT%20%E2%80%93%20ILO%20Global%20Estimates%20on%20International%20Migrant%20Workers_WEB_0.pdf
[6] Ibid.

Globally, 72% of employers report difficulty filling vacancies. While businesses in Colombia, the Czech Republic and Finland are struggling the least to find skilled workers, European employers are reporting the most difficulty, with the biggest impacts being felt in Slovakia, Greece, and Germany.[7]

In addition, considerable research has gone into the future of work in light of automation and digitalisation. Artificial intelligence (AI) advances have created new efficiencies as well as concerns for employers and employees alike. As organisations continue to digitise core business functions and integrate AI into decision-making, customer engagement and back-office processes, demand will shift toward workers who can manage digital systems, interpret data and collaborate effectively with intelligent technologies. Failure to meet these evolving requirements is likely to accelerate the widening of skills gaps across global labour markets and exacerbate workforce displacement in roles most susceptible to automation.

Furthermore, amid growing labour shortages in the process of a greener economy, there is clear scope to focus on practical, workforce-driven solutions that identify and mobilise talent for roles such as solar panel installation, HVAC and heat pump engineering, wind and battery projects and related technical and operational functions. The **Green Horizons project** is one example of an effort to map emerging skills needs and connect employers with appropriately skilled workers, including those who may be transitioning from carbon-intensive sectors with transferable expertise.

As the green transition accelerates, initiatives like Green Horizons, combined with targeted immigration pathways, upskilling programmes and more flexible skills recognition frameworks, will be critical to ensuring that sufficient talent is available to deliver low-carbon infrastructure and climate-aligned growth. At the same time, the accelerating impacts of climate change are expected to drive increased human mobility, as communities are displaced or livelihoods disrupted. Strengthening and expanding regular migration pathways will therefore be essential not only to meet evolving labour market needs, but also to provide safe, orderly and predictable options for those moving in the context of climate-related pressures, while supporting adaptive and resilient economies.

Businesses and governments are engaged in multiple partnerships to close these skills gaps. Efforts include education reform, reskilling infrastructure, expanded skill recognition, apprenticeships, diversity and inclusion programs, and reforms to labour market policies. Mobility of talent across borders is a small but important piece of maximising national competitiveness as well as economic opportunity.

2. The Evolution of the Workplace

Existing immigration systems were built for a now-obsolete economic model based on fixed work locations and contracts for structured employment. These systems do not adequately address the new workplace flexibility in its various forms, which include remote work at home and at client worksites, as well as the rise of the gig economy and entrepreneurship.
The digital transformation is changing how work is organised. The growth of remote work, the ability to collaborate online, AI, new consumer trends and e-commerce demands, as well as the automation of global supply chains, are testimony to this. As cited by Fragomen[8], as of March 2026, 52 countries had a special visa and work permit category for digital nomads, and at least another eight countries have pending programmes. Whilst this paves the way for enabling remote workers around the world, a combination of tax regulations and persistent

[7] The Manpower Group, The Talent Shortage, 2026, available at: https://www.manpowergroup.com/en/insights/2026-global-talent-shortage
[8] Fragomen Worldwide Immigration Trends Report 2025, available at: https://www.fragomen.com/trending/worldwide- immigration-trends-reports/index.html

permanent establishment issues in these countries, together with existing labour market and migration frameworks in many other countries that do not reflect these changes, makes it difficult for companies to adopt consistent remote or work-from-anywhere policies. Depending on the prevalence of such practices, this may contribute to the replacement or displacement of the domestic workforce in some countries[9].

Gig work is also a new development with important implications for labour mobility. Location-based on-demand or crowdsourced jobs require workers available "just in time," perhaps for multiple employers. Project-based work, in which knowledge of proprietary or unique products or services may be required and where employers may not have a permanent presence in the continuity of employment, is on the rise. Working at a customer site is a frequent component of outsourcing contracts for foreign-based employers.

These evolving models blur traditional distinctions between employee and contractor, which can challenge sponsorship-based immigration systems, creating uncertainty in tax, social security and compliance obligations (including the risk of ever-increasing fines against employers deemed to have employed someone without the appropriate migration permission). According to the International Organisation of Employers (IOE)/Fragomen research on migration pathways for expatriate gig workers in the Middle East, migration policies need to adapt to the increasing trend of self-employment or working for multiple employers, as opposed to necessarily being linked to a singular employment contract[10]. Meanwhile, remote gig work may also change migration patterns and require appropriate regulation to allow easier cross-border collaboration between companies and workers.

Moreover, employers of record (EORs) are increasingly being used as a flexible workforce solution, allowing companies to mobilise an employee from anywhere in the world. Under this model, EORs formally hire an employee in Country A and discharge human resources-related administrative and regulatory obligations, including income tax, payroll, and social security, among others. The EOR then mobilises the employee to the end-user business so that the employee, in turn, provides their substantive work output and services to the end-user. While the EOR model offers clear benefits, such as speed to market, reduced administrative burden and access to global talent, it also presents major risks. EOR arrangements are neither expressly permitted nor prohibited in many jurisdictions, which can place them in a legal grey area, creating compliance, immigration, tax and employment law risks in the absence of a duty of care in terms of employment-related safeguarding responsibilities to employees. To provide greater clarity as these models continue to grow, governments should explicitly regulate EOR arrangements as they relate to immigration policy frameworks to clarify this legal ambiguity.

Migration law, policy and administration have not kept pace with such workplace changes. This collision of business needs with dysfunctional and outdated policies means that businesses face significant impediments to accessing the global workforce, while governments forgo migration-fuelled economic development. Further, each additional high-skilled job creates an average of 2.5 jobs in the non-tradable sector; for tech industries more generally, an additional job creates, on average, 1.9 jobs in the non-tradable sector[11].

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[9] IOE/WEC, "Policy priorities for the road to a sustainable job recovery", 2021, available at: https://www.ioe-emp.org/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=148294&token=b526f5962189a7b5fe14151b743087c9b901571c.

[10] IOE/Fragomen, "On understanding expatriate gig workers in the Abu Dhabi Dialogue Members States", 2026, available at: https://www.ioe-emp.org/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=165550&token=27eff8e904f6299e007090b6e498caac89652441

[11] Local employment multipliers toolkit, "What Works Growth", May 2019, available at: https://whatworksgrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/Multipliers_Toolkit.pdf

3. Operational Challenges with Administrative Processes

Migration systems face many challenges beyond their labour market impact. At a global level, institutions and processes have difficulty responding to contemporary risks and realities, and they often fail to provide pragmatic solutions that effectively address migration issues and protect human rights. This is frequently the result of conflicts between politics and policymaking. Fundamental limitations include structures that are inflexible and maladaptive to change, often with excessive bureaucracy that is further burdened by excessive politicisation.

Border management and security concerns continue to challenge the countries that receive large numbers of migrants. Key problems include overtaxed processing systems and overburdened safety and security mechanisms. When border and security systems are strained, human rights protections often suffer. This is particularly true during periods of increased migration. A lack of effective multinational cooperation contributes significantly to these challenges.

A common thread is the gap between laws, policies and the implementation of procedures as they relate to migration. An example of this exists in some of the Arab States, where gender or nationality-related restrictions - which do not necessarily exist in the legal framework - become obstacles for companies when hiring either female foreign workers or nationals from certain countries. Furthermore, in Sub-Saharan Africa, employers have faced an additional challenge where the gap between law and practice tends to result in inconsistent adjudication standards for work permit applicants, whether these relate to gender, nationality or issues pertaining to the protection of the local workforce.

III. What does Business look for in an Immigration System?

Although business needs vary globally and may differ operationally due to distinct labour markets and socioeconomic conditions, the fundamental principles detailed below apply to well- functioning business immigration systems across the world. All are outlined in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), underlying their importance. This section provides a business perspective on these principles.

1. Transparency, Predictability and Flexibility

Employers need readily available, accurate and appropriate information for their planning and operations. GCM Objective 12 recognises this need for transparency by addressing the collection and provision of governmental data related to the mechanics of the immigration system, including information on standard processes and their processing times, guidance on how applications are adjudicated and issues that may cause delays in adjudication. Transparency is also a significant need in the mechanics of immigration administration. Employers encourage governments to establish online application systems, with functionality that allows electronic submission of applications and supporting documentation.

All business organisations need predictable processing timeframes, outcomes, and costs, as well as an understanding of how regulations apply to the adjudication process and the likelihood of success of work permit and visa applications. Consistency and predictability, as specified in GCM Objective 12, allow businesses the opportunity to optimise their operations, set goals and plan future projects. A lack of suitable visas or work permits can present a significant challenge, as it restricts talent mobility.

Immigration systems can sometimes lack appropriate visa categories to respond to current business needs. Enhancing the flexibility of pathways for regular migration is included in GCM Objective 5 and is particularly important for businesses as free movement regimes, visa liberalisation, electronic travel authorisations and multi-country visas all allow foreign nationals to move across the world more easily, both within and between companies.

2. Efficiency through technology

Productive and competitive companies are crucial to building and sustaining economic development and employment opportunities. That's why efficiency and cost savings are a significant factor for businesses. Lengthy and complicated labour migration procedures are obstacles to efficiency in labour markets, as they incur delays and inhibit planning. Digitisation (that is, the shift from paper-based, manual immigration processes to integrated digital systems that streamline case preparation, filing, tracking, and compliance), and digitalisation (that is, using digital technology to improve, streamline or redesign business processes) are important tools for addressing these obstacles. GCM Objective 5 explains that digitisation and the implementation of online processes can shorten the time to collect and submit documents and reduce discrepancies in processes from one governmental agency to another. AI has begun to help in this regard by automating repetitive and document-intensive tasks within immigration systems.

Governments are increasingly using AI to review large volumes of applications, identify missing documentation and detect potential fraud, allowing straightforward cases to be processed more quickly while freeing officers to focus on complex assessments. In some jurisdictions, elements of residence permit processing and compliance monitoring have already been automated or supported by AI tools, contributing to faster adjudications and more consistent decision-making.

In addition, AI supports broader workforce planning and migration management by enhancing data analysis and predictive capabilities. By helping authorities better anticipate migration patterns and labour market needs, AI enables more strategic, forward-looking policy design. At the employer level, AI can also streamline recruitment and labour market testing processes by assisting with sourcing and screening candidates, thereby reducing administrative burdens and supporting more efficient cross-border talent mobility.

However, the effectiveness of digitalisation ultimately depends on coherent government implementation and coordination among government departments, plus intentional monitoring and evaluation to ensure efficiency and equity.

Finland has implemented AI-driven processing for student residence permits, allowingstraightforward cases to be decided automatically while reserving negative or complex decisions for human review, thereby increasing efficiency without eliminating oversight.

3. Institutionalised Mechanisms for Private sector engagement

The importance of governmental and private-sector cooperation is referenced over 16 times in the GCM, stressing the importance of a “whole-of-society” approach to migration governance. Governments and businesses both aspire to and benefit from well-functioning immigration systems. It allows governments to understand the challenges that can prevent businesses from reaching their economic potential, and it helps businesses to better understand the reasoning and motivation behind particular policies. For example, recently certain governments have raised immigration fees to levels that make it untenable for employers to fill gaps in their labour markets, for example in the United States with the implementation of the $100,000 H-1B fee, and the United Kingdom raising its visa and sponsorship fees across a wide range of categories—including significant increases to Skilled Worker visa application costs, including Certificates of Sponsorship and employer sponsorship fees effective from April 2025. This has resulted in a significant increase in the upfront cost of recruiting and retaining overseas talent for employers seeking to address skills shortages.

By engaging with the private sector prior to implement these policies, governments can gather valuable input to ensure that businesses’ workforce needs are met while still achieving the policy objectives underlying the fee increases. These dialogues should be encouraged, not least because they lead to more effective policies that incorporate the needs of both parties. Policymakers should recognise labour market needs and modern business practices in the revision and reorganisation of immigration systems. Employers are best positioned to determine the skills and business models necessary to effectively achieve their objectives. Employers are organised through national employers’ organisations, industry associations, and chambers of commerce. All have various roles and interests in migration frameworks. The creation of coordinating institutions, such as a National Task Force on migration, including the participation of the representative national employers’ organisation would serve as good mechanism to strengthen cooperation between national authorities and private sector.

The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) has created formal mechanisms for engagement with non-state stakeholders, including a channel for business. The Business Advisory Group on Migration brings the business voice and the benefit of its on-the-ground experience to the GFMD. It would be advantageous for the IMRF to follow this example and strengthen its relationship with the Business Advisory Group on Migration, the most representative and organised voice of business on migration issues.

Fragomen was commissioned by the UK Royal Society to collect data for a 2025 update to previous analyses on upfront immigration costs for researchers and scientists in the UK and 17 other leading science nations. The result was a report that challenged UK restrictiveness in this area.

Source: https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/publications/2025/summary-visa-costs-analysis-2025/

An example of a functioning dialogue between employers and policymaker is in Australia:

Australia prepared a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration in response to its inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia. The submission addressed the effectiveness of the current skilled migration framework responds to the immediate and long-term needs of states and territories, while acknowledging ongoing constraints related to housing and infrastructure. It further explored ways to better align migration settings with critical skills shortages to strengthen essential services for Australian communities and assessed how these settings could more effectively support businesses, drive productivity and promote innovation.

4. Whole-of-Government Approach and Policy Coherence

While there are clear links between migration, labour markets and skills development, the related national policies and programmes are often disconnected. Indeed, because migration encompasses such a wide range of issues and concerns, numerous ministries or departments are often given responsibility for overseeing pieces of the framework. This increases the difficulty of engaging with the government on migration issues. Establishing a cross-ministry entity/mechanism/process in each sending/receiving country, charged with engagement with the private sector on the various aspects of migration would help the whole-of-government approach sought by the GCM.

5. Building Synergies Among Global Initiatives

Private sector stakeholders may feel lost among the various (sometimes even competing) global and regional initiatives led by International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other intergovernmental bodies. Employers call for building synergies to make use of the various initiatives in this space. This would be not only cost-effective, but also much more efficient. The global initiatives should focus on improving labour market functioning through concrete implementation efforts and creating opportunities for collaboration.

6. Changing the Narrative

Immigration policy has long been a contentious and politically charged subject, often characterised by negative rhetoric and unfounded allegations. Badly or inexistent adequate integration polices or poor management and policy development have fuelled this narrative. Global crises and rising nationalist rhetoric have, unfortunately, provided further impetus to calls for border controls and restrictive policies. Society and employers across the world - as well, of course, migrants themselves - suffer from such badly designed policies or lack of orderly migration flows.

When effectively governed, migration can be a powerful driver of economic growth, innovation and the development of vibrant, diverse societies, benefiting both destination and origin countries. Conversely, it is often shortcomings in policy design, implementation, and integration frameworks that lead to system failures—fuelling public frustration and resentment that is directed at migrants rather than at the underlying governance gaps.

Business has played a prominent role in advocating for fair immigration policies and can be important partners in efforts to shift the narrative. Businesses must commit to promoting the successes of migrants, highlighting their positive economic, social, and cultural contributions if governments play their part and act responsibly. This can contribute significantly to counter xenophobia and widespread distortions about the role and importance of migration.

The business community has actively engaged in the global campaign "It takes a community"[12], initiated by the GFMD Ad Hoc Working Group on Public Narratives on Migration, a multi- stakeholder initiative to promote a balanced and evidence-based public narrative on migration. Business leaders from across the world have produced short videos explaining why well-designed migration frameworks are conducive to positive narrative on migration, and how migrant workers contribute to prosperous companies and economies[13].

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[12] It Takes a Community campaign: https://www.ittakesacommunity.org/.
[13] The video clips of the business leaders are available at: https://www.youtube.com/user/IOEmployers/videos

IV. What works from a business perspective

This section offers recommendations and suggests concrete actions aimed at supporting governments in the implementation of the GCM objectives 5 (Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration", 6 (Facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work) and 18 (Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences). It outlines what solutions work and the areas in which the private sector, through representative national employers' organisations, can contribute in a meaningful way to policy decision-making processes.

1. Business Visitors and Visa Waiver Agreements

A sound migration system begins with provisions that facilitate necessary business travel and promote international trade. A business visitor immigration classification must clearly specify the activities business travellers may undertake, including restrictions on local work and a requirement that visitor activities benefit the foreign employer. Visa waiver agreements among nations should be more widely used. When visa waivers are not feasible, governments should implement streamlined electronic travel authorisation (ETA) systems that allow pre-travel screening without the cumbersome requirements of consular visas. In order to avoid additional burdens, governments should create ETAs that are low-cost and require minimal administrative burdens to obtain.

Where visas are necessary, governments should promote expeditious processing of visitor visas, including avoiding complex adjudications standards; this is appropriate given the short stays typical of business travellers. Harmonisation of the rules for business visitors across countries or trading regions would reduce confusion and noncompliance in this area.

2. Semi and Low Skilled Workers

Advancements in economic development typically create a greater need for technical or semi-skilled labour. Migration schemes inadequately consider these labour needs since there is often the perception that local workers can fill these positions. Areas of labour shortage and seasonal employment needs are exceptions, however, and these can be addressed effectively through migration. Historically, options for lower-skilled workers have been the most underdeveloped aspect of migration systems because of their potential impact on the local labour market. In reality, countries often fill low-skill labour needs with foreign workers who lack proper status; this is one of the key drivers of irregular migration.

The legal migration system should strengthen mechanisms that allow the employment of foreign nationals in low-skilled positions, where they are needed. In many contexts, including seasonal agriculture, meat processing, seafood industries, rural service economies, and tourism, employers face sustained difficulties in filling roles that are essential to the functioning of local economies and communities. Shortage categories should therefore facilitate both seasonal and indefinite work that respond to these structural labour market needs. Governments should leverage labour analytics with proactive workforce planning to encourage migration in low-skilled shortage occupations. Sound low-skill migration mechanisms – with appropriate protections for local workers – are crucial elements of a coherent migration system. Their absence can have profound consequences such as trafficking, irregular migration, informal employment activities, unethical recruitment practices or forced labour.

3. The Best and Brightest

There is increasing global competition to fill management, executive and top research jobs with the most qualified candidates, regardless of citizenship. In 2025, 46% of U.S. Fortune 500 companies had been founded by immigrants or their children. In fiscal year 2024, these companies generated $8.6 trillion in revenue and employed over 15.4 million people.[14]

Among the best and brightest sought by these firms are the most qualified foreign graduates of local universities and graduate programmes. Top foreign graduates, encouraged to remain in the host country through offers of employment, require facilitative immigration policies. Student migration categories should facilitate undergraduate, professional and graduate education as well as provide for post-study practical training and first professional experiences as an entrée to skilled-professional temporary migration, as well as to permanent settlement where appropriate. Governments should also consider offering job seeker visas, which allow recent graduates and other highly-skilled foreign nationals to remain in country to secure employment for a defined period of time. Also highly sought are the most highly skilled and talented foreign nationals beyond the student and early career stages. Facilitative migration policies for this group include broader permissible activities, such as self-employment and entrepreneurial activities. Beyond temporary arrangements, more proactive and predictable pathways to permanent residence are also essential, enabling countries to retain talent over the long term, support deeper economic and social integration, and enhance the return on investment in education, skills development, and labour market participation.

4. Work permits for spouses and partners

When moving abroad to work, employees' families are particularly concerned about whether the spouse or partner will have the right to work. In CERC Global Mobility Survey 2025, 64% of Employees are significantly more likely to relocate when provided with support for a spouse's employment[15]. Currently, forty-one countries allow recognised partners to work, depending on the type of permit the employee obtains. In other countries, partners may face long and complex procedures, strict conditions and an uncertain outcome. Some also do not yet recognise unmarried or same-sex partners. In some cases, spouses even find that their qualifications are not recognised in the host country or that their skill set is not relevant in that part of the world.[16]

Supportive and more reasonable policies regarding dependent family members, including employment authorisation, can result in a winning formula for families, employers and host countries. The lack of options for dependents and restrictive work permits regimes that limit spouse or partner employment are key challenges for businesses seeking to attract the most highly skilled foreign workers and have a negative effect on the transfer of employees and business outcomes. Countries that operate a supportive regime for dependents are more attractive for business and assignees.

5. Intracompany Transferees

Intracompany transfer categories facilitate the movement of employees between related companies within multinational organisations, in order to accomplish business objectives and develop employee skills and experience through global assignments. Such categories must be clearly defined, with objective eligibility criteria, an exemption from labour market impact

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[14] Permits Foundation, World Map of Mobile Spouse and Partner Work Authorisation, 2025, available at: https://www.permitsfoundation.com/worldmap/

[15] CERC, Global Mobility Survey 2025, available at: https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/global-study-reveals-shifting-trends-employee-willingness-relocate-work

[16] Permits Foundation, World Map of Mobile Spouse and Partner Work Authorisation, 2025, available at: https://www.permitsfoundation.com/worldmap/

tests and expedited processing. Liberal interpretation of eligibility standards is necessary and appropriate in view of the temporary nature of intracompany assignments and their goal of facilitating employee development.

6. Short-Term Assignments and Project Work

These categories permit foreign nationals to perform brief assignments that facilitate contractual relationships for the provision of services. Such categories should be exempt from labour market testing in view of their limited impact on the local labour market and their importance to the global trade in professional services. Given the rising costs of mobility, employers increasingly favour short-term assignments because they provide operational flexibility while reducing costs associated with long-term relocations, including housing allowances, among others. Well-structured short-term pathways allow companies to deploy specialized expertise quickly for a short duration, without incurring the financial burdens of longer assignments.

A lack of short-term options and administrative hurdles with existing options can constitute significant roadblocks to business and development. For example, employers in developing countries have reported challenges in repair of heavy machineries such as elevators and – most concerning – hospital appliances, which were installed by companies based abroad. Long processes to allow entry of foreign technicians for short-term assignments can lead to the abandonment of such equipment.

7. Local Hires – Integrating migrants into the labour market

Categories for the direct hire of foreign nationals by local employers – including skilled, semi-skilled and low-skilled employees – should be defined with variable eligibility standards to accommodate labour market fluctuations and to protect both local and foreign workers. These protections may include a requirement for employers to train the domestic workforce, local-hire quotas and job portability for foreign workers.

8. Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements

Bilateral or multilateral labour mobility agreements, as well as trade agreements that include labour mobility provisions can facilitate the movement of workers among signatories and are essential to accommodate partnerships and regional relationships. These partnerships can allow for domestic workforce improvements, with origin countries able to improve the capacity of their domestic workforce, allow migrants to access immigration pathways which they may not otherwise qualify for using traditional academic qualifications, and allow destination countries to fill skills shortages. Mobility provisions are particularly appropriate in treaties because they support the trade activities contemplated by such agreements. Such agreements should cover three aspects: a range of immigration options, from business visitors to intracompany transfers to direct hires; facilitation of the recognition of skills and credentials between countries; and protection of migrant workers.

Rising nationalist rhetoric and protectionism and changing political leadership can all affect the stability of these agreements and within them, any mobility clauses. This volatility underscores the importance of making these mobility provisions more durable within any agreements.

Although bilateral and multilateral agreements can be valuable tools to improve migration within a region or a corridor, two considerations are important: employers' representatives, who are best placed to identify needed skills, should be engaged in their design; and such agreements should not be seen to replace effective national migration governance.

9. Investors, Innovators and Entrepreneurs

There is ongoing worldwide competition for capital and for ideas. Migrants are an important source of both. A prime example is in the technology sector, where many of the top global companies are run by foreign nationals. Migration promotes investment, entrepreneurship and development in home and host countries. Migration of innovators and investors must therefore be encouraged.

A fully developed migration system must include opportunities for self-employment by those who can offer unique benefits to receiving countries, including investment, start-ups and development of existing businesses, and opportunities to deploy innovative ideas. Self-employment categories should include a range of subcategories to attract foreign nationals at each stage of the innovation lifecycle, from recent graduates to early-stage entrepreneurs to later-stage entrepreneurs and investors. Sound, well-developed immigration categories for entrepreneurs and investors should be promoted as an aid to development.

Investor visas, in particular, are proliferating across the globe as governments seek additional sources of capital to promote their economic goals; as of 2025, there were residence by investment (RBI) programs in 35 countries/territories and citizenship by investment programs in another 13 countries. In seeking to implement successful investor visa programs, like in Portugal, Greece, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates, governments should consider residency obligations, processing times, tax obligations and dependent family policies. These programs must also be well-regulated in order to balance competitiveness with appropriate due diligence and security measures. To this point, some countries have closed existing investor routes or citizen by investment programs due to security and/or abuse of system concerns. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Investor route closed in February 2022, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The UK government reported inherent difficulties in investment-based visa routes based on passive wealth, both in terms of security and economic value. Some other countries have raised similar concerns within their own systems.

10. Train to hire program

New labour programs are being trialled at small-scale to fill these shortages. For example, the "train-to-hire" program launched by the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR (and partners) in 2025 allows refugees to build up their skills and subsequently matches them with international employment opportunities, allowing them to fill needed labour gaps[17]. Additionally, the European Union's Talent Partnerships seek to boost international labour mobility at all skills levels by engaging with non-EU partner countries, including Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia[18]. Additionally, a digital explorer's program, originally between Latvia and Nigeria, but subsequently expanded to other countries, granted employment and internships to Nigerians in Latvia to work in information and communications technology through a skills enhancement track[19]. Ideally, these types of programmes should also take into account the commercial/investment challenge for employers who face long timelines taking into account the sourcing, training and moving of workers. This may mean 6-12 months between the decision to hire and deployment of the worker, which puts significant strain on the business.

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[17] IOM, IOM and UNHCR Launch 'Train-to-Hire' Initiative to Boost International Refugee Employment, July 21, 2025, https://www.iom.int/news/iom-and-unhcr-launch-train-hire-initiative-boost-international-refugee-employment

[18] European Commission, Talent Partnerships, May 5, 2025, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-resettlement/talent-partnerships_en

[19] Business Advisory Group on Migration, Engaging with Employers in Skills Mobility Partnerships, 2024, https://www.gfmd.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1801/files/documents/france2023/Engaging%20with%20Employers%20in%20Skills%20Mobility%20Partnerships_WEB.pdf

11. Introduction of Labour Mobility Programmes

Labour mobility pathways are programs that enable refugees or other displaced persons to access lawful employment-based entry into another country. They are a subset of complementary pathways, which according to the UNHCR, are "safe and regulated avenues for persons in need of international protection that provide for a lawful stay in a third country where the international protection needs of the beneficiaries are met." Several countries have begun implementing labour mobility programmes to provide an additional avenue for refugee resettlement that encourages self-reliance.

While often framed in humanitarian terms, labour mobility programs also serve as structural workforce tools, as a partial solution to labour shortages occurring across the world. Refugees coming through this type of program either hold a job offer upon arrival or receive additional training towards an occupation. As noted, these programs can help to address labour shortages in destination countries while simultaneously upskilling and providing work opportunities that may otherwise be harder to come by for these populations. Additionally, these programmes can help decrease the number of individuals working in the informal sector and reduce reliance on governmental or non-profit assistance in the future.

However, implementing successful labour mobility programmes comes with challenges. First, they generally require the coordination of multiple actors. Governments must be willing to establish these pathways, despite growing nativist rhetoric in many countries, and must ensure that they comply with ethical recruitment standards. Source country governments may also need to facilitate skills verification, exit processes (procedures and verifications needed to leave the origin country) and alignment with national workforce strategies.

Additionally, employers must be willing to sponsor these individuals, which may require costs above and beyond what is normally required to sponsor a foreign national. Educational and vocational training institutions in both source and destination countries often play a critical role in aligning curricula, delivering bridging programmes, and ensuring that participants meet licensing or regulatory requirements. Further, international organisations frequently as technical advisors, helping to design pilot programmes, mobilize funding, and monitor protection safeguards.

While still in early stages, labour mobility programs are increasingly viewed as an alternative to traditional refugee resettlement programs. If designed effectively, and with the proper financial backing, they can align humanitarian protection, labour market needs and development objectives. However, their long-term success depends on sustained political will, robust employer participation and institutional cooperation between source and destination countries.

Example from the United Kingdom

From 2021 to 2024, the UK ran two pilots: the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot and the Displaced Healthcare Talent Pilot. These pilots, implemented by Talent Beyond Boundaries (with assistance from Fragomen), led to nearly 600 individuals moving to the UK **as of May 2025**. Nearly 300 of these people moved on labour (**Skilled Worker**) visas.

Source:https://www.cgdev.org/publication/pilot-pathway-designing-uks-displaced-talent-visa#:~:text=From%202021%20to%202024%2C%20the%20UK%20ran,(DTMP)%20and%20the%20Displaced%20Healthcare%20Talent%20Pilot.

12. Proper Regulation of the Recruitment Industry

Business has long argued that appropriate and effective national regulation that promotes responsible recruitment practices will serve to create a level playing field for the legitimate recruitment industry and to protect vulnerable migrant workers. Recruiters and other employment service providers such as Employer of Record companies play a significant role in matching labour supply and skills with international employment opportunities. They are often the first entry point to international employment for many foreign nationals. Promoting responsible and ethical agencies will ensure high quality recruitment standards and processes that protect migrant workers.

When regulated appropriately, private employment and recruitment services improve labour- market functioning by matching jobseekers to decent jobs, inside and across borders. Responsible recruitment provides new and sustainable job opportunities to a diverse workforce, creates more decent and productive work, and enhances fair and transparent business practices, all of which ultimately contribute to economic growth.

Yet many countries continue to have inadequate regulatory frameworks for these services, and/or do not adequately enforce existing regulations. This allows for illegal, unethical and/or rogue players to deceive and trap jobseekers and workers into indecent jobs, debt bondage and dangerous working conditions. These inadequate frameworks and rogue practices prevent recognised and responsible players from entering the market and thus providing quality alternatives.

ILO Convention 181[20] establishes clear criteria for ethical and responsible recruitment. Adopting appropriate regulations on the recruitment sector, based on or compatible with the elements outlined in Convention 181, will promote the development of ethical and responsible recruiters and eliminate bad actors. A conversation at national level with both representatives of the organised recruitment industry and employers would help governments devise and implement regulations in line with ILO Convention 181.

13. Ban of Recruitment Fees on Migrant Workers

The global business community has taken a clear position against the charging of recruitment fees to jobseekers and workers. This is expressed in many business-led initiatives, such as the World Employment Confederation's Code of Conduct, which clearly states: "Private employment services shall not charge directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, any fees or costs to jobseekers and workers, for the services directly related to temporary assignment or permanent placement."[21] At the same time, it is recognized that legitimate recruitment related costs may be shared among employers, recruiters, workers and governments, provided such arrangements are transparent and do not result in worker indebtedness. The IOE publication "An employer's guide to fair recruitment"[22] provides tools on steps to be undertaken in the recruitment process, ensuring a transparent and responsible process.

The business community cannot act alone. Governments should take a clear policy position and include in national legislation a clear ban on charging recruitment fees, as defined by the

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[20] ILO Convention 181 – Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997

[21] WEC, Code of Conduct, available at: https://wecglobal.org/world-employment-confederation-global/code-of-conduct-2/

[22] IOE, "An Employers' Guide to Fair recruitment", 2021, available at: https://gfmdbusinessmechanism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/20211105_N557_ANNEX__Business_Advisory_Group_on_Migration_-_An_employers_guide_to_fair_recruitment_FORMATTED_v.4.pdf

[23] ILO, "General Principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and definition of recruitment fees and related costs", 2019

ILO, to migrant workers.[23] So long as national legislation allows these fees to be charged to jobseekers, vulnerable migrant workers will risk being trapped by rogue intermediaries.

14. Trusted Employer Schemes

Trusted Employer Schemes allow employers who have been previously vetted by government authorities to submit fewer corporate documents when sponsoring visas for foreign nationals. For many individual immigration applications, employers routinely provide the same corporate documents. By utilizing Trusted Employer Schemes, employers would need to submit this documentation only once (unless change notifications were required), significantly decreasing document gathering time in the immigration process. Additionally, government adjudicators would have fewer documents to review, saving time and expense and, allowing resources to be allocated elsewhere. In addition, the availability of Trusted Employer Schemes can serve as a factor in business location and expansion decisions, with companies often favouring jurisdictions where streamlined and predictable immigration processes reduce administrative burden and support faster workforce deployment.

Sponsors must generally meet certain criteria to participate in Trusted Employer Schemes. In Australia, for example, among other requirements, the sponsor must have a strong record of, or a demonstrated commitment to, employing local labour and must declare they will not engage in discriminatory recruitment practices. The government must not have any adverse information regarding the business that could affect their suitability as a sponsor. Lastly, strong compliance measures are part of a successful Trusted Employer Program. There must be severe consequences for non-compliant employers. These consequences should include meaningful financial penalties, suspension or revocation of Trusted Employer status and, where appropriate, temporary bars on future program participation. Clear enforcement mechanisms will ensure that the program maintains integrity and public confidence. At the same time, compliance standards should be transparent and consistently applied. Employers must have clear guidance regarding their obligations, regular opportunities for training and a fair process to address alleged violations. By pairing rigorous oversight with predictable and proportionate enforcement, the system can deter abuse while continuing to reward employers that demonstrate a sustained commitment to lawful and ethical hiring practices.

Requirements such as these would be helpful as governments are working to enhance workplace protections for employees, while simultaneously ensuring that the local population is given job preference for positions for which they are qualified.

15. Skills Anticipation Systems and Alignment of Skills and Migration Policies

The ability to hire skilled foreign nationals allows employers to access skills that may not be readily available locally. An evidence-based approach is required to demonstrate the existence of skills needs and skills gaps, and to build as broad a consensus as possible in support of the need for employing foreign nationals. Governments should use data and analytics from their databases (especially considering the advent of AI and advanced data analysis available today) to create more strategic immigration pathways for needed talent. Legislation that affords protection, equal treatment and fair recruitment practices to regular migrant workers should serve to dispel the myth that all immigrant labour is cheap labour. The presence of foreign workers, whose competencies and skills complement local workforces, can raise overall skill levels and help to create new work opportunities for local workers. An evidence-based approach is also required to demonstrate the changes in current demand and anticipation of future skills gaps.

There have been considerable efforts made by the governments of the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada to establish a digital program to match skills sets with job opportunities. Further efforts are needed to ensure that countries issue appropriate work authorization and entry documents. The business community supports governmental efforts to extend this program to needed occupations as well for migrants in general. In the past, such programs have been hindered by a mismatch between their objectives and existing regulation or established practice. For example, legislators in Ontario, Canada made it illegal for professional bodies to require local (Canadian) experience to receive their accreditation.

There are important interlinkages between migration, labour markets, education and skills development. Aligning education systems with labour market needs will ensure productive employment opportunities for local citizens and thus have an impact on inbound and outbound migration movements, as well as on the likelihood that migrants will return to their countries of origin. Also, investment in education has consequences for migration. National education systems often do not align with labour market needs, and thus in many countries significant resources allocated to public education and training do not lead to desired employment outcomes. This national skills mismatch may lead to pressure to emigrate. Instead, governments should adjust their educational systems to better prepare graduates, both national and foreign, for jobs in growing sectors of the labour market.

The "brain drain" experienced by many countries could be addressed by integration programs for returning migrants. Employers in these countries are interested in repatriating these talents and digital tools could help in this regard by, for example, linking home country employers with their diasporas. Vocational training should integrate migrants who would benefit from both employment and training opportunities. Finally, skills partnerships that involve training and employment components can lead to win-win solutions for all stakeholders, although these may prove difficult to implement on a large scale.

In drafting or reviewing migration policies, policymakers should raise these critical questions:

- Which sectors and occupation are projected to grow and where?
- What skills will be in demand for companies in the short-medium-long term?
- In what skills should the national education system invest?
- What would be the lifelong learning path?
- What re-skilling or upskilling is necessary to meet the new market needs?
- Which occupations are heavily impacted by digitalisation?
- What is the role of soft skills and which ones are in high demand?
- What is the migrant population already active in the labour market?
- Where are skills being lost? Or not fully utilised?

16. Convergence towards Skills Recognition

Bilateral, regional, or multilateral skills recognition agreements and skills identification programs that include private sector input will facilitate scalable and sustainable results. Lifelong learning, upskilling, and vocational training schemes for migrants should be designed and implemented based on real time information on labour market needs and practices. Immigration systems need to adapt to both current and future skills needs. Therefore, it is important for governments to work with the private sector to understand changing patterns, structures, practices and conditions of employment.

Successful labour mobility programs, a subset of complementary pathways, builds training and skills mechanisms directly into programs from the outset. These models align source-country training institutions with destination country regulations and employers before mobility occurs. This proactive alignment reduces delays and friction in labour market entry while mitigating skills underutilization. Such structured partnerships represent an evolution from ad hoc recognition processes to more integrated mobility systems.

Additionally, many countries are establishing systems to acknowledge competencies gained through informal and non-formal learning. The Recognition or Prior Learning process can help individuals acquire formal qualifications that match their experience, knowledge and skills, and thereby contribute to improving their employability and mobility. This can be a valuable enabler of social transformation. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has accelerated the new digital, technological and interpersonal skills, as well as the need for reskilling and upskilling.

Effective cross-border recognition frameworks reduce friction in international mobility systems by minimizing duplicative assessments and administrative delays. In doing so, they enhance transparency, predictability and trust between sending and receiving countries. Streamlined and reliable recognition processes are particularly critical in sectors experiencing acute labour shortages, as they enable governments and employers to respond more rapidly to skills gaps and evolving market demands. Over time, coordinated recognition mechanisms also support the development of stable and sustainable global talent pipelines.

The world is moving away from traditional ideas as to what it means to be “suitably qualified for the position“. This used to be judged in terms of academic background and strictly relevant work experience. Now employers are adjusting their recruitment processes towards more comprehensive skill set assessments, including human and social skills. In Canada, the Global Talent Stream offers a three-year temporary visa to highly skilled workers, requiring experience but no academic background. Immigration policies have not caught up with this trend, and it is difficult for employers to attract and obtain work permits for suitable candidates if a country’s immigration policy is strictly based on criteria around academics and work experience.

Example from Sri Lanka

The Skills Passport, an initiative of the Ministry of Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations, The Employers’ Federation of Ceylon (EFC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). A returnee migrant worker can assert his/her expertise and experience to gain visibility of potential employers in Sri Lanka by presenting a proof that is embedded with skills and qualifications of a worker, acquired informally, along with references. The passport allows both the employer and skilled workers of Sri Lanka to identify their experience under the national skills assessment systems, explore job opportunities with an adequate wage, decent work conditions and further training for re-skilling and up-skilling.[1]

[1]More information about the Sri Lanka Skills passport: https://employers.lk/skills-passport/

V. Conclusion

The global economy is entering a period in which the costs of inaction on migration are becoming impossible to ignore. Skills shortages are deepening, demographic pressures are accelerating, and geopolitical tensions are reshaping labour markets at a pace that outstrips existing policy frameworks. The current moment demands more than incremental adjustments—it requires a decisive shift toward migration systems that are agile, transparent, and capable of meeting 21st-century workforce realities.

Across every region, employers are signalling the same message: the world of work is changing faster than migration governance can keep up. Businesses are uniquely positioned to provide real-time insights into labour market needs, emerging skills, and the practical barriers that impede mobility. Their participation is not optional—it is essential. A migration system designed without meaningful private sector engagement risks being misaligned with economic realities and unable to deliver the talent mobility required for competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable growth.

At the same time, this is an opportunity to reclaim the narrative around migration. In a geopolitical climate marked by polarization and uncertainty, the evidence remains clear: when well-governed, migration strengthens economies, supports communities, and expands opportunity. Employers see this every day in their workforces, supply chains, and global operations. Their experience underscores a simple truth: migration is not a problem to be managed—it is a strategic advantage to be harnessed.

The path forward requires partnership. Governments, international organizations, and the private sector must work together to build migration models that are fair, efficient, and future-ready. Technology, data, and collaborative governance can unlock solutions that benefit workers, employers, and societies alike. The Business Advisory Group on Migration stands ready to contribute to this effort, bringing forward the practical insights of employers who understand both the urgency of the moment and the potential of a well-designed migration system.

The stakes are high, but the opportunity is greater. By acting now—and by ensuring that business has a central role in shaping policy—the global community can build migration systems that meet today's challenges while laying the foundation for shared prosperity in the years ahead.

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