Dual-Track National Talent Systems in Qatar: Can Fast-Track Pathways for Qatari Nationals Coexist with General Recruiting Without Reducing Productivity?

Salim Al Barami

Yuri Yoshida

Ruslan Asfandiyarov

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1. Introduction: Defining a Dual-Track System

1.1 Core Concept: Rationale and Modern Framework

In Qatar and the broader Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, a strategic imperative exists to increase the private sector participation of national citizens without compromising economic competitiveness (Waxin and Bateman 2015; International Labour Organization (ILO) 2024; Ministry of Labour (MoL) 2024a). This drive is a central component of long-term national strategies, including Qatar National Vision 2030, which prioritize the development of national human capital to build a sustainable, knowledge-based economy (Schnepfleitner and Ferreira 2021; QatarEnergy 2024). However, research indicates that simplistic policy responses, such as merely increasing the proportion of national employees to meet quotas, can be insufficient and may negatively impact organizational performance (Fatima and Elbanna 2025).

This creates a central tension for firms: how to accelerate the development of national leaders while simultaneously maintaining operational productivity. To navigate this complex challenge, organizations are increasingly adopting sophisticated human resource architectures. The dual-track talent system, the focus of this report, is one such strategic model, designed specifically to resolve this tension.

1.1.1 Historical Origins: The Dual Ladder

The concept of a dual-track system originates from the "dual ladder" model, which emerged in the 1950s to solve a critical business challenge (Shepard 1958; T. J. Allen and Katz 1986). In an era of rapid technological innovation, companies needed to retain their top technical and scientific experts to stay competitive. The traditional corporate structure, however, offered only a single path for advancement: management. This forced many highly skilled individual contributors into managerial roles they neither wanted nor were suited for, simply to gain higher pay and status, thereby wasting their valuable technical talents (T. J. Allen and Katz 1986).

The dual ladder was created as an "alternative technical career path to management" to resolve this dilemma (Deval 2024; Shepard 1958). It was built on the distinction that managers "make a profession of deciding," whereas technical experts "make a profession of knowing" (Deval 2024). The structure's purpose was to build a dedicated pool of specialized talent that could drive innovation by allowing experts to advance without leaving their technical domain (Gilbert et al. 2018).

The ideal was to create two parallel and equally rewarding career tracks (Tucker, Moravec, and Ideus 1992). In practice, however, many early systems failed because the technical track often lacked the genuine prestige, influence, and rewards of the managerial path. It was frequently perceived as a "consolation prize" for those not suited for management, which de-motivated the very employees it was designed to retain (T. J. Allen and Katz 1986). This historical challenge underscores the importance of ensuring both tracks are seen as credible and valuable in any modern dual-track system

1.1.2 Modern Framework: Fast and General Tracks

Building on this history, the modern dual-track system establishes two distinct yet coordinated career pathways within a firm's internal labor market: a structured system of rules and

procedures governing employee careers (Huitfeldt et al. 2021; Harper, Cameron, and Edwards 2024). The two primary pathways are:

- **The Fast Track**: An accelerated, competency-gated pathway designed for select employees identified as "high potentials" who show strong promise for future leadership roles (Kotlyar 2018; Kragt and Day 2020). In the context of nationalization, this track is specifically adapted to prepare a select group of promising national citizens for leadership responsibility on an expedited timeline (Schnepfleitner and Ferreira 2021). It concentrates developmental experiences, such as intensive training, cross-functional rotations, and dedicated mentoring, to build specific, predefined competencies and compress the time-to-readiness for leadership (Kakemam and Liang 2023). The National Graduate Development Program at QatarEnergy, which utilizes Individual Development Plans (IDPs), exemplifies this approach (QatarEnergy LNG n.d.).

- **The General Track**: The standard pathway for individual contributors and experienced professionals, governing entry, development, and promotion for the broader workforce (T. J. Allen and Katz 1986; Tucker, Moravec, and Ideus 1992). Open to all employees, including expatriates and nationals not on an accelerated path, this track is crucial for sustaining business capability. It ensures operational continuity by allowing for the conventional recruitment and internal mobility of experienced talent, particularly in areas where the local leadership pipeline is still maturing (Bidwell 2011; Waxin and Bateman 2015).

1.1.3 Strategic Rationale: The GCC Context

The rationale for implementing a dual-track system in the Gulf region is twofold, addressing both general business challenges and specific policy pressures.

First, the system is a direct response to the "Peter Principle," which posits that firms tend to promote employees based on their performance in their current role, rather than their aptitude for a new one (Benson, Li, and Shue 2019). This dual structure mitigates the risk of creating ineffective managers by establishing a formal mechanism to identify and cultivate managerial potential, rather than simply rewarding past performance in a non-managerial role.

Second, this model is particularly well-suited to the demands of nationalization. It allows private employers to build a robust pipeline of national leaders in a structured, competency-based manner, thus satisfying national policy goals (Forstenlechner et al. 2011). Simultaneously, by maintaining a general track for experienced hires (often expatriates), firms can preserve immediate operational delivery and leverage valuable firm-specific knowledge that external hires would lack (Bidwell 2011). This structure enables firms to invest strategically in a national leadership pipeline without taking on the prohibitive cost of sacrificing current performance (Fatima and Elbanna 2025). The system's effectiveness hinges on its competency-gated design, ensuring that progression is based on the demonstrated mastery of skills, not simply tenure or identity (Škrinjarić 2022; Lacerenza et al. 2017).

1.2 Theoretical Foundations: ILMs, Tournaments, and Justice

The architecture of a dual-track talent system is grounded in well-established economic and organizational theories that explain how firms structure employment, motivate employees, and manage careers. Three theoretical lenses are particularly relevant: (1) internal labor markets,

which describe the structural logic of developing talent from within; (2) tournament theory, which explains the incentive mechanisms driving employee performance in competitive promotion systems; and (3) organizational justice, which addresses the perceived fairness required for these systems to be productive.

1.2.1 Internal Labor Markets (ILMs): The Structural Foundation

The concept of an internal labor market provides the structural foundation for a dual-track system. An ILM is an administrative unit where the pricing and allocation of labor are governed by internal rules rather than by external market forces (Doeringer and Piore 2020). ILMs are characterized by three core features: job ladders with clear progression paths, ports of entry that are confined primarily to the bottom of these ladders, and the upward movement of employees through promotions based on the progressive development of skills (Pfeffer and Cohen 1984). Seminal empirical work by Baker, Gibbs, and Holmstrom (1994) on a single firm confirmed the existence of many of these features, noting stable hierarchies and lengthy, multilevel careers, though it also found that entry into the firm was not strictly limited to the lowest levels.

This structure serves a critical economic function by creating a framework for on-the-job human capital acquisition and learning (Gibbons and Waldman 1998). By creating stable, long-term employment relationships, ILMs encourage both the firm and the employee to invest in "firm-specific skills." These are the knowledge and abilities that are more valuable to the current employer than to other firms. For the firm, the ILM is a mechanism to develop and retain a specialized talent pool, reducing the costs associated with external hiring and ensuring operational continuity. For the employee, the job ladder provides a clear pathway for career advancement and wage growth. Critically, however, the wage progression within an ILM is not always straightforward. For instance, Baker, Gibbs, and Holmstrom (1994) found that while promotions were central to long-term wage growth, the immediate pay premiums from a promotion were often modest compared to the large differences in average pay between job levels. This suggests that the primary benefit of a promotion is gaining access to a higher-level salary band where the potential for future earnings is greater. The "fast track" for nationals in the dual-track model can be understood as a highly structured and accelerated ILM designed to expedite this process of firm-specific skill and leadership development for a targeted group. Broader empirical studies suggest that the features of pure ILMs are not universal, with their prevalence varying by industry and firm characteristics (Eriksson and Werwatz 2004), which highlights that a dual-track system is often a deliberate strategic choice to construct an ILM to secure its benefits.

1.2.2 Tournament Theory: The Motivational Engine

While ILMs provide the structure, tournament theory explains the motivational dynamics that drive performance within that structure. A promotion system can be modeled as a "rank-order tournament," where employees compete for a limited number of higher-level positions, and the "prize" is the promotion itself (Lazear and Rosen 1981). The prize includes the associated increase in wages, status, and responsibility. The effectiveness of a tournament hinges on the "prize spread": the difference in compensation between levels must be significant enough to motivate employees to exert the high level of effort required to compete and win (Connelly et al. 2014).

In a dual-track system, the accelerated promotions on the fast track serve as a significant prize. However, as noted by Baker, Gibbs, and Holmstrom (1994), the "prize" is not merely the immediate pay raise but the long-term earnings potential that promotion unlocks. This aligns with tournament theory's prediction that large pay differentials are necessary to motivate effort. A key advantage of tournaments is their ability to filter out "common shocks," such as random events like economic downturns that affect all employees equally, resulting in a fairer assessment of relative effort (Green and Stokey 1983; Whitford 2018). Contemporary research makes a critical distinction between explained pay dispersion (based on performance) and unexplained pay dispersion (perceived as favoritism). A tournament-based system is only effective when the pay dispersion is clearly explained and accepted (Trevor, Reilly, and Gerhart 2012; Shaw 2014). A recent field experiment powerfully confirms this: a more meritocratic promotion system increased worker productivity by 22%, and a steeper pay progression (a larger prize) boosted productivity only within the meritocratic system. In the non-meritocratic system, a steeper pay progression decreased productivity by 27%, suggesting it was perceived as unfair (Deserranno, Kastrau, and León-Ciliotta 2025).

1.2.3 Organizational Justice: Ensuring Perceived Fairness

For a tournament-based ILM to be productive, it must be perceived as fair by all employees. Organizational justice theory demonstrates that employees' perceptions of fairness strongly correlate with performance, cooperation, and commitment (Colquitt 2001). These perceptions are rooted in social exchange theory, which posits that the employment relationship consists of informal, reciprocal obligations between employees and the organization (Konovsky and Pugh 1994). Research distinguishes between several facets of justice that employees perceive (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007):

- **Distributive Justice**: The perceived fairness of the outcomes, such as who gets promoted and the size of the subsequent pay raise. This relates to the tournament's "prize."

- **Procedural Justice**: The perceived fairness of the formal processes used to arrive at those outcomes, such as the clarity, consistency, and impartiality of the promotion criteria. This is foundational to ensuring the tournament is seen as legitimate.

- **Interactional Justice**: The perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received during the process, including being treated with dignity and respect.

Employees distinguish between performance-based criteria (e.g., skill, effort) and nonperformance-based criteria (e.g., favoritism, identity) (Webster and Beehr 2013). When employees perceive that promotions are awarded based on performance, it reinforces their sense of "promotional justice" and builds trust (Beehr et al. 2004; Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007; Webster and Beehr 2013). This fosters a positive social exchange, where employees reciprocate fair treatment with higher commitment (Kebede and Wang 2022). However, if the fast-track system is perceived as advancing nationals based on identity rather than merit, this perception of favoritism can undermine the motivation of employees on the general track, leading to resentment and a decline in productivity (Webster & Beehr, 2013). This "perception gap" is a common challenge in large organizations; a U.S. government study found that while most supervisors believe their promotion decisions are merit-based, a majority of employees believe they are not (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2001). Therefore, the

credibility of the performance-gated milestones is the engine that ensures a dual-track system can raise inclusion without sacrificing productivity.

1.3 Policy Context: Nationalization and the Firm-Level Dilemma

In nationalization contexts such as Qatarization, Emiratisation, and Saudization, private employers must reconcile two horizons: short-run operational delivery and long-run development of a local leadership bench. Firms frequently adopt dual-track systems to meet both horizons. The central question is one of design: under what conditions can such a two-track coexistence raise inclusion without lowering productivity? To understand this challenge, it is essential to first examine the policy environment and the specific economic pressures firms face.

1.3.1 Nationalization: The Policy Imperative

The drive to increase national participation in the private sector is a strategic priority for all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This imperative stems from a demographic and economic structure unique to the region, characterized by a citizen population that is a minority in its own country and a historical reliance on the public sector for national employment. Data shows that non-nationals constitute up to two-thirds of the total labor force and, in some cases, over 95% of the private sector workforce (Wagle 2024). In Qatar, for instance, the percentage of nationals in the private sector labor force has remained below 10% in recent years (National Planning Council (NPC) 2025).

This structure is a legacy of a "social contract" where oil revenues funded extensive public sector jobs for citizens, which offered higher wages, greater job security, and better benefits than the private sector (Assaad 2014; Forstenlechner et al. 2011). This social contract has created a deeply rooted preference for public sector employment, which is often perceived as more prestigious and less demanding (Wilkins 2001; Rutledge and Al Kaabi 2023). However, with a growing number of young nationals entering the labor market, this model has become fiscally unsustainable, making private sector job creation essential for long-term economic stability and for achieving the goals of national strategic plans like Qatar National Vision 2030 (Hertog 2014).

1.3.2 The Evolving Policy Toolkit: From Quotas to Market Mechanisms

Historically, the primary policy tool used to promote nationalization has been a "first generation" of prescriptive regulations, most notably the quota system (Hertog 2014). These policies, broadly termed "Gulfization," mandate that firms in specific sectors achieve a minimum percentage of national employees (OECD, ADBI, and ILO 2024). Prominent examples include Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat program and the UAE's sector-specific targets, which have been the most binding and strictly enforced in the region (Elsayed 2024; Wagle 2024; Al-Horr 2011).

While quotas have increased the headcount of nationals in the private sector, their effectiveness has been questioned. Research indicates they can lead to counterproductive outcomes, with firms engaging in "window dressing" or creating "phantom employment," which involves hiring nationals to meet quotas without integrating them into meaningful roles, rather than focusing on genuine talent development (Hertog 2014; Elbanna and Fatima 2022; Younis, Elsharnouby, and Elbanna 2024). This has led to a gradual policy evolution towards "second generation" market-based mechanisms, such as levies on foreign worker visas and wage subsidies for nationals, designed to narrow the labor cost gap between nationals and expatriates (Hertog 2014).

Table 1: GCC Nationalization Toolkit: From Quotas to Market Mechanisms (Evidence Snapshot)

Policy Tool	Mechanism	Intended Effect	Documented Side-effects / Risks
Quotas (first-gen)	Mandated national % by sector	Rapid headcount increases	"Window dressing," firm exits, export drops in non-compliant firms
Levies & subsidies (second-gen)	Narrow nat'l–expat cost gap	More genuine hiring/training	Cost pass-through; uneven enforcement
Skills alignment programs	Up/Reskilling nationals	Reduce mismatch	Lag vs. firm needs if not employer-led

Note: This table synthesizes policy mechanisms and outcomes from the literature cited in this report (e.g., Hertog 2014; Peck 2017; Cortés et al. 2021; Waxin et al. 2020).

1.3.3 The Core Dilemma for Firms: Productivity vs. Compliance

The central challenge of nationalization policies for private firms is that they often create a direct conflict between the goals of compliance and productivity. A significant body of research highlights the core of this tension:

- **Productivity and Cost Differentials:** Recent empirical studies from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait show that migrant workers have a significant productivity advantage over nationals and, combined with their lower wages, result in a substantially lower unit labor cost. This makes it challenging for private firms to shift away from a reliance on expatriate workers without incurring significant costs (Erumban and Al-Mejren 2024).

- **Negative Firm-Level Outcomes:** Strict quota enforcement can impose high costs on firms, particularly the most productive ones. Evidence from Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat policy shows that it led to an increased likelihood of market exit, a reduction in exports, and a decrease in the total workforce for firms that were below the quota, demonstrating the real economic trade-offs involved (Peck 2017; Basahal, Forde, and MacKenzie 2023; Cortés, Kasoolu, and Pan 2021). One study estimated that the Nitaqat program caused 11,000 firms to shut down in its first 16 months (Peck 2017).

- **Supply-Side and Skills Mismatch**: Firms report persistent difficulties in recruiting national candidates due to a mismatch between the skills supplied by the education system and the needs of the private sector (Wilkins 2001; Waxin, Kumra, and Zhao 2020). Key challenges include a lack of relevant technical skills, insufficient work readiness, high compensation expectations set by the public sector, and a perceived lack of "vocationally orientated motivation" (Waxin et al. 2018; Younis, Elsharnouby, and Elbanna 2024; Forstenlechner et al. 2011).

This policy environment forces firms to navigate a complex set of pressures. They must satisfy regulators and contribute to national development goals while simultaneously managing labor

costs, maintaining productivity, and competing economically. The dual-track talent system, the focus of this report, has emerged as a strategic human resource architecture designed specifically to resolve this tension.

2. Pros & Cons: Speedy Local Leadership vs. Team Resentment and Knowledge Gaps

2.1 Benefits: A Well-Designed System

A well-designed dual-track talent system allows an organization to balance the immediate need for operational efficiency (exploitation) with the long-term imperative of developing new capabilities (exploration) (Hansen, Güttel, and Swart 2017). The system provides a structured mechanism to resolve the tension between leveraging the skills of the broader, often expatriate, workforce for current performance and cultivating a pipeline of national leaders for future innovation and sustainability.

2.1.1 Leadership Pipeline: Building a Sustainable National Cohort

The primary benefit of a dual-track system is its ability to create a predictable and sustainable pipeline of national supervisors and specialists for pivotal roles. Global Talent Management (GTM) literature emphasizes the systematic identification of key strategic positions and the development of a talent pool to fill them (Collings, Mellahi, and Cascio 2018; Caligiuri et al. 2024). The 'fast track' serves as a dedicated mechanism for this, using structured rotations, targeted training, and mentorship to build firm-specific human capital (FSHC) in promising national employees. These programs act as credible signals of long-term commitment, which are essential for motivating employees to invest in acquiring such organization-specific skills (Raffiee and Coff 2016). For example, QatarEnergy's leadership development programs such as "Activate" for new graduates and "Cadre" for emerging leaders are designed to provide exactly these kinds of structured, competency-based developmental experiences (QatarEnergy LNG 2023).

Research confirms that such developmental job assignments are directly associated with the acquisition of critical managerial competencies (Dragoni et al. 2009). A case study of a leadership program in Qatar found that success factors included having a respected selection process and a deep awareness of the participants' professional and cultural contexts, reinforcing that effectiveness is tied to thoughtful design (Schnepfleitner and Ferreira 2021). This internal development ensures a ready supply of well-trained workers who understand the company's unique culture and processes. Functioning like a modern apprenticeship system, this internal talent pipeline is more effective than relying on the external market; studies show that internally promoted employees perform significantly better for their first two years than external hires (Bidwell 2011). The economic benefits of such a pipeline reduce the high costs and performance risks associated with external recruitment for critical positions, a point underscored by the high costs associated with employee turnover in general (Lerman 2014; Hom et al. 2017). This directly supports the goals of Qatar's Third National Development Strategy (NDS3), which aims to create jobs requiring highly experienced skills and enable the private sector to drive economic growth (Council of Ministers Secretariat General n.d.; Planning and Statistics Authority (PSA) 2024).

2.1.2 Talent Engagement: Enhancing National Retention

A well-defined fast-track pathway significantly boosts engagement and early-career retention among national talent. A large-scale study on the reasons employees choose to stay with their organizations found that high-performing employees are particularly motivated by advancement opportunities and organizational prestige, precisely what a well-designed fast-track system provides (Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard 2009). The clear, competency-gated structure provides "Career Success Criteria Clarity," which is empirically linked to higher career satisfaction and person-job fit (Xin et al. 2020). When employees perceive opportunities for career growth, including progress toward their goals and professional skill development, their turnover intentions decrease significantly (Weng and McElroy 2012). This addresses a key challenge in nationalization efforts, where a perceived lack of genuine opportunities can lead to low motivation (Forstenlechner et al. 2011).

Furthermore, specific socialization practices common in fast-track systems, such as formal training, mentoring, and coaching, are empirically shown to facilitate the successful integration of nationals into the workforce (Waxin, Kumra, and Zhao 2020). Such dual-track systems are also essential for retaining valuable technical experts who may not desire a traditional managerial career, thereby catering to diverse career orientations within the workforce (Bigliardi and Dormio 2009).

2.1.3 Organizational Resilience: Balancing Present Demands and Future Needs

A dual-track system makes an organization more resilient by allowing it to navigate the competing institutional pressures of the GCC region (Sidani and Ariss 2014). The general track maintains operational continuity by using experienced hires for today's needs, which avoids the productivity dips that can accompany nationalization quotas (Hertog 2014). Simultaneously, the fast track builds a cohort of agile national leaders through diverse assignments and job rotation, a practice proven to increase workforce flexibility and performance (see §3.3.1 for design and evidence). This structured approach creates a "stable pipeline of talent" that is adaptable to market changes, ensuring the organization has the leadership it needs for future challenges (OECD 2022). The key to this structure is its close alignment with industry needs, a principle established by international competency standards which ensure the skills being developed are relevant and valuable (ILO 2006).

Qatar's national policies provide a strong foundation for this approach. For example, the Ministry of Labour's "Occupational Description and Classification Guide for the Private Sector" establishes a clear, national framework of defined job titles and skill levels (MoL 2024b). This guide allows companies to build their talent pipelines with confidence, knowing their internal training is benchmarked against official standards that are directly responsive to the evolving labor market.

2.1.4 Employer Brand: Projecting Strength and Authenticity

Finally, a substantive and well-governed dual-track system strengthens a company's employer brand in the highly competitive national graduate market. Drawing from marketing theory, an "employer brand image" can be defined by two key dimensions: potential applicants' general attitudes toward the company and their perceptions of specific job attributes (Collins and Stevens 2002). In the GCC context, nationalization initiatives can sometimes be perceived as

"ceremonial adoption" to meet legal requirements, rather than genuine investment in talent (Sidani and Ariss 2014). A transparent, merit-based fast-track system moves beyond tokenism by signaling a credible and meaningful commitment to developing national leaders (Zeffane and Kemp 2020). This authenticity enhances both dimensions of the employer brand image, fostering more favorable attitudes among potential applicants and shaping their beliefs about desirable job attributes, such as career growth and development opportunities (Collins and Stevens 2002). Such programs position the company as an employer of choice for ambitious national graduates, demonstrating a commitment to creating opportunities for leadership development, a noted priority in Qatar (Schnepfleitner and Ferreira 2021). By providing clear pathways and investing in local talent, organizations not only fulfill national policy goals but also attract and retain the highest-potential citizens, securing a long-term competitive advantage.

2.2 Risks: A Poorly Designed System

While a dual-track system is designed to balance nationalization goals with productivity, a poorly designed or governed system can introduce significant risks that undermine both objectives. When the credibility of the system falters, it can depress motivation, create skill deficits, and harm organizational performance. The primary risks cluster around four interrelated failure modes: perceived favoritism, readiness gaps, morale issues among non-fast-track staff, and counterproductive responses to quota pressure.

2.2.1 Perceived Favoritism: The Meritocracy Paradox

A core risk is that the fast track for nationals is perceived as a pathway based on identity rather than merit. This perception of favoritism fundamentally undermines organizational justice, a principle shown to be central to employees' satisfaction and commitment (Martin and Bennett 1996). A meta-analytic review by Chang, Rosen, and Levy (2009) confirmed that perceptions of organizational politics are strongly linked to negative outcomes, including psychological strain, turnover intentions, and reduced job satisfaction and commitment. When employees feel excluded or believe promotion processes are unfair, their motivation and performance suffer (Luo et al. 2023).

Even when organizations implement formal, merit-based policies, a "performance-reward bias" can emerge, whereby women and minorities receive less compensation or fewer opportunities than their male counterparts, despite having identical performance evaluation scores (Castilla 2008). In a dual-track system, this bias can manifest if managers, influenced by conscious or unconscious stereotypes, award smaller salary increases or fewer developmental opportunities to expatriates on the general track compared to nationals on the fast track, even when performance evaluations are equal.

This perceived inequity erodes organizational trust and procedural justice. Indeed, meta-analytic evidence confirms that such perceptions of unfairness are strongly correlated with negative outcomes like stress, burnout, and turnover intentions (Bedi and Schat 2013). Research confirms that a "procedural justice climate," a shared group-level belief about the fairness of procedures, is a critical factor in team performance (Naumann and Bennett 2002). Employees clearly distinguish between performance-based promotion criteria (e.g., skill, effort) and non-performance-based criteria (e.g., favoritism, identity). When promotions are seen as stemming from the latter, it undermines the legitimacy of the entire system, leading to resentment and reduced motivation (Webster and Beehr 2013). This can lead to resentment not just from the

expatriate workforce but also from nationals on the general track who perceive the system as unfair. This can devolve into what is known regionally as "phantom employment," where nationals are hired simply to fulfill a quota without being integrated into a substantive role, the most extreme form of identity-based advancement over merit (Younis, Elsharnouby, and Elbanna 2024).

2.2.2 Readiness Gaps: Competency and Training Transfer Deficits

A poorly designed fast-track system can accelerate promotions without ensuring the parallel development of competencies, creating a 'readiness gap.' This occurs when titles are awarded based on tenure in a program rather than demonstrated skills, leading to quality lapses, control failures, and a loss of productivity (Benson, Li, and Shue 2019; Elbanna and Fatima 2022). This risk is particularly acute in contexts with a recognized 'education-employability gap,' where the skills supplied by the education system do not align with the needs of the private sector (Younis, Elsharnouby, and Elbanna 2024).

This gap is a problem of 'training transfer.' Even when training is provided, its successful application on the job is not automatic. It requires a supportive environment, particularly from supervisors, to translate learning into performance (Hughes et al. 2020; Blume et al. 2023). If a dual-track system is merely a "paper exercise" focused on compliance, an approach characterized as "implicit avoidance" by some firms in Qatar, it will lack the robust mentorship and work-led learning needed to close these readiness gaps (Al-Horr 2011). Consequently, newly promoted national leaders may lack the technical and managerial skills to perform their roles effectively, which not only compromises productivity but also undermines their own credibility and the legitimacy of the nationalization program itself.

2.2.3 Morale and Motivation: The Risk of Knowledge Hiding

The motivation of the broader workforce, particularly experienced expatriates on the general track, is critical for sustained productivity and for the development of national talent. If the fast-track is perceived as an opaque, unfair, or closed system, it can lead to significant morale issues. Research shows that perceptions of interpersonal and procedural injustice are powerful triggers for negative outcomes.

One of the most damaging consequences is "knowledge hiding," an intentional attempt by an employee to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person (Cao 2022). This behavior stems from a breakdown in organizational trust and is considered a form of counterproductive work behavior (Bedi and Schat 2013). Research based on the theory of relative deprivation provides a specific mechanism for this: when employees feel they are personally disadvantaged compared to their peers, their willingness to share knowledge within their team decreases. Procedural injustice, in particular, has been shown to fuel this sense of individual relative deprivation, which in turn mediates the negative effect on intra-team knowledge sharing (Wan et al. 2023).

Applying this psychological principle to the dual-track context, if experienced expatriates perceive the system as unjust and develop a sense of relative deprivation, they may become unwilling to share their crucial tacit knowledge with the national talent they are supposed to be mentoring. By undermining the informal mechanisms of on-the-job learning and knowledge transfer, this reaction not only harms immediate productivity but also directly sabotages the core objective of the fast-track system: building a capable and experienced local leadership pipeline.

2.2.4 Quota Pressure: The Perils of Dysfunctional Compliance

While nationalization policies often rely on quotas to drive urgency, excessive pressure without adequate support can lead to dysfunctional outcomes. Firms may resort to hiring "quota-fillers" or creating "phantom employment" roles simply to meet regulatory mandates without genuinely investing in talent development (Hertog 2014; Zeffane and Kemp 2020). This focus on compliance over productivity can impose substantial costs (see §1.3.3 for firm-level evidence). This focus on compliance over productivity can impose substantial costs, including firm exits and reduced exports (see §1.3.3 for firm-level evidence).

2.3 Evidence Synthesis: Lessons from Cross-Sector Evaluation

Cross-country evaluations of nationalization initiatives show gains in national employment where pathways exist, with costs concentrated where upskilling and supervision lag. Sector cases in banking, telecom, and public finance illustrate that balanced staffing, which involves continuing experienced recruitment while national cohorts mature, stabilizes delivery. The empirical message is consistent with theory: clear rules and credible assessment gates harness tournament-style motivation while protecting the ILM's quality bar.

Table 2: Dual-Track Benefits, Risks, and Mitigations

Dimension	Principal Benefit	Dominant Risk	Primary Mitigation
Leadership Pipeline	Faster, predictable readiness for nationals.	Mis-promotion and readiness gaps where promotions are not tied to demonstrated competence.	Implement competency frameworks, formally assessed milestones, and capstone simulations to validate readiness.
Engagement & Retention	Higher commitment and retention within targeted national cohorts due to clear career pathways.	Perceived tokenism, where the program is seen as a "ceremonial" exercise rather than a genuine investment in talent.	Publish clear eligibility rules and rubrics; communicate program data transparently; ensure robust mentoring with accountability.
Team Motivation	Increased effort and motivation ("effort lift") driven by a transparent, tournament-style system with clear "prizes."	A drop in morale and motivation among employees on the general track due to perceptions of an unfair, closed system.	Design the fast-track to be permeable, allowing mid-stream entry for high-performers from the general track; establish clear feedback and appeal routes.

Business Continuity	Establishes a local leadership capability anchor while leveraging external expertise for immediate operational needs.	Output volatility and potential for negative firm-level outcomes resulting from rigid quota enforcement ("quota shocks").	Maintain a "seasoned-hire floor" to ensure operational stability; align program intake and promotion pacing with available training and supervisory capacity.

Note: This table synthesizes benefits, risks, and mitigations from the economic and organizational literature cited throughout this report. Key sources informing the framework include Baker, Gibbs, and Holmstrom (1994) on internal labor markets; Lazear and Rosen (1981) on tournament theory; and Colquitt (2001) on organizational justice, supplemented by empirical evidence from sources such as Bidwell (2011), Peck (2017), and Schnepfleitner and Ferreira (2021).

Case Snapshots

- **Banking & Finance:** Regional banks operate national leadership streams in parallel with conventional recruitment. Fast-track programs combine structured rotations through revenue-generating and control/risk functions with rigorous assessment-center exercises prior to first-line leadership roles. This model has enabled a steady increase in national supervisors without a decline in service or control metrics.

- **Telecom & Digital:** Leading telecom groups run national graduate programs in high-demand fields like AI and data science, culminating in a defended capstone project. This track coexists with competitive global hiring for senior and niche roles, a blended staffing model that preserves service quality and operational continuity while national cohorts develop expertise in emergent domains.

3. Best Practices: Performance-Based Milestones, Transparent Criteria, Balanced Promotions

Figure 1 provides a schematic of this dual-track operating model, illustrating the relationship between the two tracks and the shared governance infrastructure.

Figure 1. Dual-Track Operating Model
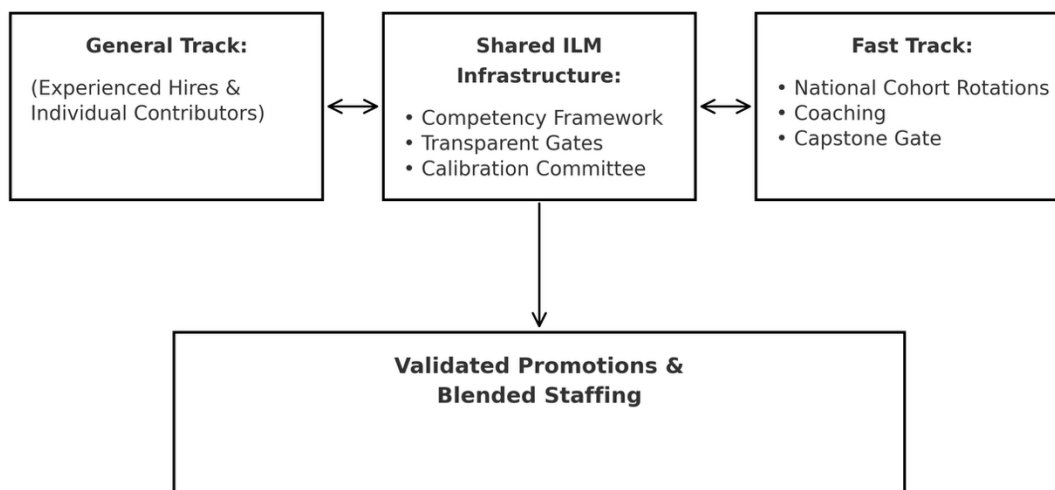
3.1 Milestone Architecture: Ensuring Rigorous Assessment

Progression in a dual-track system, especially on the fast-track, must be evidence-based at each gate to be seen as legitimate and to avoid the productivity losses associated with "paper promotions." The credibility of the entire system hinges on the design and implementation of a rigorous architecture for these milestones. This involves moving beyond vague appraisals to a structured system of competencies, objective behavioral indicators, and multi-faceted assessments.

3.1.1 The Foundation: Designing Competency-Based Frameworks

The architectural foundation of a robust milestone system is a well-defined competency model. Unlike traditional job analysis, competency modeling is fundamentally strategic, designed to influence employee behavior and align it with the organization's goals (Sanchez and Levine 2009). A competency is a collection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) needed for effective performance, defined in a way that links directly to organizational strategy and distinguishes different levels of performance (Campion et al. 2011).

According to best practices, each competency within the framework should have a clear "anatomy": a descriptive title, a definition in behavioral terms, and clearly defined levels of proficiency. This structure transforms a milestone from a vague checkpoint into a measurable demonstration of specific, required capabilities. The use of tools like Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS), which provide concrete behavioral examples for different levels of performance, is one practical method for creating the objective and transparent scoring rubrics this system requires (Klieger et al. 2018). Research on executive-level promotions shows that professionally conducted Assessment Centers (ACs) have incremental predictive validity over and above standard cognitive tests, confirming they measure unique managerial abilities and performance attributes (Krause et al. 2006).

This approach is increasingly being adopted in the region, often pioneered by large-scale public sector initiatives that set the standard for modern talent management. These government systems, designed as part of broader national development strategies, signal a clear direction for how human capital is to be managed. For instance, Qatar's "Adaa" performance management system and the UAE's Employee Performance Management System (EPMS) for federal employees both incorporate competency frameworks as a core component of evaluation (Civil Service and Government Development Bureau (CGB) n.d.; Federal Authority for Government Human Resources (FAHR) n.d.; Government of the UAE 2020). Private sector firms, particularly those competing for national talent, often look to these frameworks as a benchmark for their own HR systems.

3.1.2 Milestone Design: Ensuring Objectivity and Observability

For a dual-track system to be perceived as fair, progression criteria must be based on performance, not identity or favoritism. The rigor of a milestone lies in its objectivity and observability (Boon, Hartog, and Lepak 2019). Progression should be tied to the demonstration of specific behavioral indicators for each competency level. This principle is increasingly embedded in regional governance, setting a clear benchmark for best practices in talent management that extends to the private sector. For example, Qatar's public sector governance, through Act No. 15 (2016) on human resources and the national "Kawader" e-recruitment portal, is founded on the principle of merit-based appointment and promotion based on performance evaluations (State of Qatar 2016; United Nations 2024; Sultanate of Oman 2007).

An effective milestone is not simply "completes leadership training." It is the demonstrated attainment of a specific proficiency level within a competency, as illustrated in Table 3 below. For example, an effective milestone might be: "demonstrates proficiency in the 'Proficient' level behaviors for the 'Managing Conflict' competency, as observed in a project leadership role."

Table 3: Example of a Synthesized Competency Proficiency Level Framework

Level	Descriptor	Key Behavioral Characteristics
1	Novice	Possesses foundational knowledge of concepts and terminology. Requires significant guidance and supervision to perform tasks.
2	Developing	Can apply knowledge to perform routine tasks effectively. Handles common, straightforward situations but requires guidance on more complex issues.
3	Proficient	Performs independently and consistently meets all expectations. Successfully handles a wide range of situations and challenges. May provide informal guidance to others.
4	Expert	Is recognized as a subject matter expert and a "go-to" person. Handles complex, ambiguous, and novel situations with skill. Actively coaches and mentors others to develop their capabilities.
5	Master	Defines best practices and sets new standards for the organization. Develops strategic solutions to broad business challenges and influences the direction of the organization in their area of expertise.

Note: This table represents a synthesis of common proficiency scaling practices described in the literature. The principle of using behaviorally-defined, multi-level proficiency scales is a core tenet of modern competency modeling (Campion et al., 2011). Real-world applications can be seen in technology-based career navigation tools (Choi et al., 2023) and in regional government performance management frameworks. For example, the "Proficient" level often corresponds to a "Meets Expectations" rating in systems like the UAE's EPMS and Qatar's Adaa system, which form the basis for performance appraisal and promotion decisions (Civil Service and Government Development Bureau, n.d.; Federal Authority for Government Human Resources, n.d.).

3.1.3 Rigorous Assessment: Multi-Source Feedback and Capstones

Evidence of competency attainment must be gathered through rigorous and varied assessment methods. Table 4 maps key assessment methods to the competencies they are best suited to validate. These tools range from developmental feedback mechanisms like 360-degree reviews to summative evaluations like capstone projects, which are essential for validating readiness before promotion.

Table 4: Assessment Methods Mapped to Competency Evidence

Assessment	What it Validates	When to Use	Notes

360/MSF	Behavioral competencies (team/communication)	Mid-rotation, development	Must include goal-setting + follow-up
SJT (low-fidelity sim)	Judgment under constraints	Pre-promotion screen	Valid for leadership constructs
In-Basket	Prioritization & execution	First-line manager gate	Predicts career progress
LGD	Influence & collaboration	Manager/senior gates	Predicts promotion speed

Note: : This table synthesizes assessment tools and their applications from the human resource and organizational psychology literature cited in the text (e.g., Smither, London, and Reilly 2005; Bracken, Rose, and Church 2016; Gaugler et al. 1987; Makhinova and Deng 2024).

- **Multisource Feedback (360-degree Review):** This process gathers performance feedback from an individual's supervisor, peers, and direct reports to provide a holistic view of behavioral competencies. For this tool to be effective, best practice dictates that it must be part of a larger developmental process that includes goal-setting and follow-up to ensure accountability (Smither, London, and Reilly 2005; Bracken, Rose, and Church 2016; Bracken, Timmreck, and Church 2001).

- **Capstone Assessments**: These summative evaluations, conducted before a significant promotion, validate readiness by testing judgment and decision-making under pressure. Common formats include simulations, assessment-center exercises, and defended capstone projects (Bishop 2013; Makhinova and Deng 2024). This final, rigorous check ensures that the promise of accelerated development is converted into validated readiness, minimizing the risk of promoting individuals who are not yet prepared.

3.2 System Governance: Upholding Transparency and Permeability

For a dual-track system to be perceived as a legitimate meritocracy, its design must be rooted in transparency and permeability. These principles are essential for upholding organizational justice and channeling the motivational power of tournaments across the workforce (see §1.2.2 for the underlying theory). Research confirms that when employees perceive fairness in processes, they are more likely to accept outcomes, which is critical for maintaining the motivation of those on the general track (Ray 2023).

3.2.1 Procedural Justice: Ensuring Fairness Through Transparency

Transparency in a dual-track system means that the criteria for assessment, the mechanics of promotion, and the pathways for career progression are explicit, objective, and clearly communicated to all employees. This is foundational to establishing promotional justice, which is the perception that the promotion system is fair (Webster and Beehr 2013). Research confirms that transparency is a direct antecedent of procedural justice, leading to higher levels of perceived fairness, which in turn enhances intrinsic motivation (García-Izquierdo, Moscoso, and

Ramos-Villagrasa 2012; Wenzel, Krause, and Vogel 2017). This approach is increasingly being adopted in Qatar through government systems like "Adaa" and programs at major national employers like QatarEnergy (CGB n.d.; QatarEnergy 2021; QatarEnergy 2025). (For competency model design, see §3.1.1.)

3.2.2 Talent Motivation: Retaining Engagement Through Permeability

A permeable and fair system requires robust mechanisms for both identifying high-potential talent and ensuring that promotion decisions are made without bias (the justice mechanism is summarized in §3.2.1). Permeability is the principle that the fast-track must remain an open, contestable pathway rather than a closed system. Talented and motivated employees on the general track must have opportunities to enter the accelerated stream at defined intervals. This facilitates a "contest-based" form of career mobility, as opposed to a closed "sponsorship-based" system that can be perceived as patronage (Webster and Beehr 2013; Malau and Sitinjak 2024).

A key mechanism for identifying employees who could "test into" the fast track is their on-the-job behavior. Research shows that employees who actively seek out challenging job experiences or demonstrate discretionary "extra-role" behaviors (such as helping colleagues) are consistently rated by supervisors as more promotable (De Pater et al. 2009; Le Sante, Eaton, and Viswesvaran 2021). A permeable system creates formal processes to recognize these signals, a process often enabled by active sponsorship and a high-quality supervisor-employee relationship (Kim and Holzer 2014; Malau and Sitinjak 2024).

To ensure these promotion decisions are transparent and merit-based, leading organizations increasingly use "calibration committees." These committees, typically composed of a manager's peers and senior leaders, review and discuss performance ratings and promotion nominations for a given department (Grabner, Künneke, and Moers 2020). By requiring managers to justify their ratings in front of peers, these committees create a strong incentive for objectivity and mitigate the biases of individual managers. This is supported by clear appeal routes, which provide an additional layer of procedural fairness.

3.2.3 Calibration Committees: A Mechanism for Procedural Fairness

To ensure that promotion decisions are transparent and merit-based, leading organizations increasingly use "calibration committees." These committees, typically composed of a manager's peers and senior leaders, review and discuss performance ratings and promotion nominations for a given department or division (Grabner, Künneke, and Moers 2020). This process serves as a powerful tool for procedural justice by mitigating the biases of individual managers and ensuring that performance standards are applied consistently across the organization (Bol, Margolin, and Schaupp 2025).

Calibration committees directly address the risk of perceived favoritism in a dual-track system. By requiring managers to justify their ratings in front of peers, these committees create a strong incentive for objectivity. Research from a professional services firm shows that calibration committees effectively discipline supervisors for opportunistic behavior (e.g., inflating their subordinates' ratings) by lowering the supervisors' own performance ratings. Conversely, supervisors who demonstrate skill by providing differentiated and informative ratings (i.e., using the full rating scale rather than compressing all ratings at the top) are rewarded with a higher likelihood of promotion (Grabner, Künneke, and Moers 2020). This creates implicit incentives for

managers to act as fair and diligent evaluators, which is the engine of a credible talent system. The presence of a committee also forces supervisors to engage more deeply with performance information rather than relying on cognitive shortcuts or prior biases (Bol, Margolin, and Schaupp 2025).

3.2.4 Data Disclosure: A Tool for Upholding Transparency

Modern transparency extends beyond internal processes to include the disclosure of human capital data, a practice increasingly expected under global standards for Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting (International Finance Corporation (IFC) 2025). International organizations like the OECD and ILO are actively promoting pay transparency as a tool to close gender pay gaps, establishing a global norm for data disclosure as a means of ensuring fairness (OECD 2021; ILO 2022). For a dual-track system in the GCC, this principle can be adapted to mandate the collection and disclosure of data on key outcomes, such as promotion rates, pay levels, and workforce representation by nationality at different levels of the organization.

Disclosing such data serves two purposes. First, it provides a mechanism for corporate accountability, allowing stakeholders (including investors, regulators, and employees) to monitor the firm's commitment to its stated nationalization and meritocracy goals (IFC 2016). Second, it reinforces the integrity of the system by demonstrating that pathways to leadership are genuinely open. Reporting these metrics aligns with international best practices and frameworks like the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, which recommend disclosure on human capital management policies and performance (OECD 2023a). This practice helps build trust and validates the fairness of the talent system, moving beyond "ceremonial adoption" to genuine, data-backed commitment (Sidani and Ariss 2014).

3.2.5 Perceived Fairness: The Role of Manager-Employee Relationships

While system-level transparency is crucial, its effects can be significantly influenced by the relationship between an employee and their direct supervisor. The quality of this relationship is a key antecedent for the acceptance of performance appraisal systems (Kim and Holzer 2014). Research on organizational justice demonstrates that an employee's perception of fairness is formed at multiple levels, distinguishing between the organization as a whole and their specific department or team (Johnson et al. 2009). In many cases, the fairness of the local, departmental environment is a more powerful predictor of employee performance and cooperative behaviors than the perceived fairness of the broader organization.

The quality of the leader-member exchange (LMX), which encompasses the trust, respect, and mutual obligation in the relationship between a manager and a direct report, acts as a critical buffer. Line managers are the "link pin" between intended policies and practice, and their support is a key mechanism through which talent management initiatives translate into improved performance (Kravariti et al. 2022; García-Izquierdo, Moscoso, and Ramos-Villagrasa 2012). When LMX is high, employees are more likely to trust their manager and, by extension, the organization, making them less sensitive to perceived procedural unfairness. A high-quality relationship can compensate for the negative effects of a system that is otherwise seen as unfair. Conversely, when LMX is low, employees become highly attuned to procedural justice; in this context of low trust, the formal transparency and fairness of the system become paramount to sustaining motivation and performance (Johnson et al. 2009). This highlights that for a dual-track system to succeed, structural transparency and permeability must be complemented by strong

line management that fosters trusting relationships with all employees, both on the fast track and the general track.

3.3 Development Modality: The Primacy of Work-Led Learning

Classroom content scaffolds skills, but competence is built in live environments. For a dual-track system to successfully accelerate the development of national talent without being perceived as an unfair "paper exercise," the modality of development must be fundamentally grounded in the realities of the workplace.

This principle of work-led learning, which combines structured on-the-job experience with targeted theoretical instruction, is validated by extensive research. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Burke et al. (2006) found that training methods requiring active participation, such as behavioral modeling and hands-on practice, are significantly more effective for knowledge acquisition and behavioral improvement than passive methods like lectures or videos. More recent meta-analytic work on job-embedded professional development confirms that models such as coaching and mentoring yield positive outcomes for teachers and students, supporting their implementation and expansion (Balta, Fukkink, and Amendum 2023).

Studies of apprenticeship systems in England and Germany, for instance, demonstrate that this dual approach yields significant positive returns in employment and earnings, largely because it builds practical, transferable skills that are directly valued by the market (Cavaglia, McNally, and Ventura 2020; Riphahn and Zibrowius 2015). In the Gulf context, where a key challenge is bridging the gap between academic qualifications and the specific needs of the private sector, a work-led modality is not just beneficial but essential (Darwish et al. 2022; Rutledge and Al Kaabi 2023).

3.3.1 On-the-Job Learning: The Primacy of Structured Experience

The most effective training programs hinge on active, learner-centric delivery methods (Raeisinafchi et al. 2025). Passive classroom learning, while useful for foundational knowledge, is often insufficient for developing the complex, context-dependent skills required in modern workplaces (Pastore and Pompili 2019). The "fast track," therefore, must be designed around a core of structured, on-the-job experiences. This aligns with the "dual system" model of apprenticeships prominent in countries like Germany, which combines practical on-the-job training with theoretical education (Riphahn and Zibrowius 2015), a model whose relevance in the Arab region is underscored by recent reviews of work-based learning programs (Billett 2019).

A core component of this model is structured rotational assignments across key business units, such as profit-and-loss, operations, and risk/compliance, which serve as the primary vehicle for learning. Job rotation serves three critical functions in a dual-track system: (1) "employee learning," as it speeds up skill acquisition and human capital development; (2) "employer learning," as it allows the firm to learn more about an employee's different competencies and thus improve the quality of job-matching; and (3) "employee motivation" (Ortega 2001; Eriksson and Ortega 2006). This approach ensures that trainees acquire not only technical skills but also a holistic understanding of the business, its challenges, and its culture. A meta-analysis of 56 studies confirmed that job rotation is significantly associated with outcomes like job satisfaction, career success, and labour flexibility (Mlekus and Maier 2021; Shahiri, Husin, and Khain 2023; OECD 2023b). Furthermore, a longitudinal study in the financial services industry found that while lateral moves were more frequent among low performers, the employees who benefited most in subsequent performance were the high performers who had been rotated (Kampkötter,

Harbring, and Sliwka 2016). This suggests that rotation, when used selectively, is a powerful developmental tool for fast-track employees.

3.3.2 Learning Transfer: The Role of Mentoring and Coaching

Work experience alone does not guarantee development; it must be supported by deliberate mechanisms for reflection and learning transfer. Mentorship is a critical component for facilitating this process. A meta-analysis confirms that mentoring is consistently associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for protégés, including favorable behavioral, attitudinal, and career outcomes such as higher compensation and greater satisfaction (T. D. Allen et al. 2004; Eby et al. 2008). In a dual-track system, each fast-track employee should be assigned a mentor-of-record who is accountable for translating on-the-job experiences into tangible learning. This moves beyond informal guidance to a structured relationship focused on performance. A systematic review on workplace-based assessment found that providing credible, systematic feedback is a key driver of performance improvement, and that this process is often enhanced by facilitation or coaching (Miller and Archer 2010). Further meta-analytic evidence confirms that social support, from both supervisors and peers, is a powerful predictor of motivation to transfer learning to the workplace (Reinhold, Gegenfurtner, and Lewalter 2018).

While mentoring focuses on overall career and skills development, coaching is typically more short-term and focused on improving performance in a current or specific task (Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) 2020). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that coaching programs have large positive effects on instructional practice and smaller, but still positive, effects on achievement (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018). A mentor's role is to help the trainee make sense of their experiences, clarify goals, navigate organizational processes, and build crucial interpersonal relationships (Carlock 2012). This structured support, which a study in Qatar identified as a key component of informal workplace learning alongside team-based knowledge sharing (Al-Hajri 2024), is essential for ensuring that the developmental journey is intentional and that learning from diverse rotations is integrated effectively. Local research in Qatar's healthcare sector highlights practical challenges, such as the confusion between mentoring and direct supervision (Suliman et al. 2018) and the significant workload burden placed on preceptors (Varghese et al. 2023), underscoring the need for well-structured and properly resourced mentorship programs.

3.3.3 Validation: Using Simulation-Based Assessments and Rater Calibration

To ensure the credibility of the fast-track and uphold organizational justice, progression cannot be based on tenure. Before any significant promotion or "title change," candidates must pass a rigorous, simulation-based assessment that validates their readiness. Such assessments test judgment, stakeholder communication, and decision-making under pressure, providing more objective evidence of competence than a standard performance review. The principle of using systematic, observable, and simulation-based exercises to evaluate on-the-job competencies is supported by extensive research in various professional fields (Miller and Archer, 2010). Common formats include exercises styled after assessment centers, a methodology that meta-analytic research has repeatedly confirmed is valid for predicting career advancement (Gaugler et al. 1987), and low-fidelity simulations such as Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs), which are a valid and construct-driven method for assessing competencies like leadership and dependability (Christian, Edwards, and Bradley 2010; Olaru et al. 2019).

Specific tools used within these centers have demonstrated their own predictive power:

- **Leaderless Group Discussions (LGDs)**, where candidates are observed in a group problem-solving scenario, have been shown to have incremental validity in predicting promotion speed and number of promotions, even after accounting for cognitive ability and personality (Borteyrou et al. 2015).

- **In-Basket Exercises**, which simulate a manager's typical administrative workload, have also been shown to have criterion-related validity for predicting career progress and salary advancement (Schippmann, Prien, and Katz 1990).

However, the credibility of the assessment hinges on the credibility of the assessors. If managers use different standards to evaluate performance, the system's fairness is compromised. Research on "Frame-of-Reference" training demonstrates that the accuracy and fairness of performance ratings can be significantly improved by training managers to share a common conceptual framework, or "schema," of what constitutes effective performance (Gorman and Rentsch 2009). For a dual-track system to be perceived as a meritocracy, managers and mentors must be trained to apply a single, consistent competency framework to all employees, ensuring that promotion decisions are, and are seen to be, based on demonstrated ability, not track status.

3.4 Implementation Levers: Incentives and Manager Accountability

For a dual-track system to succeed, it is not enough to simply design two pathways; the system must be powered by a coherent set of incentives and robust accountability mechanisms. This ensures that managers and employees on both the fast track and the general track are motivated to engage productively. A central challenge, particularly for managers on the general track, is the incentive to invest time and effort in developing national talent who may eventually be promoted ahead of them. Without clear incentives, these managers might resort to knowledge hiding or deprioritizing mentorship, thereby undermining the entire system. Therefore, rewards, accountability, and the very definition of managerial performance must be explicitly aligned with the dual-track objectives.

3.4.1 Incentive Design: Balancing Tournament and Team Goals

A dual-track system inherently creates an incentive structure that can be understood through the lens of "tournament theory," where accelerated promotion on the fast track serves as a significant "prize" (Lazear and Rosen 1981). This theoretical model helps explain the powerful motivational effect of such a system.

However, applying this model also highlights inherent risks. First, using promotion as a primary incentive for current performance can lead firms to prioritize top performers over candidates with the best managerial potential, an outcome consistent with the "Peter Principle" (Benson, Li, and Shue 2019). Second, an overemphasis on such individual, tournament-style success can foster counterproductive behaviors, such as a reluctance to help colleagues, as individuals focus solely on their own relative performance (Danilov, Harbring, and Irlenbusch 2019).This blended approach is crucial in a dual-track system. While the "prize" of fast-track promotion motivates high-potential nationals, a component of managerial bonuses should be tied to the overall performance of the team or business unit. This ensures that experienced employees on the general track are rewarded for contributing to collective success, which includes the successful development and integration of their fast-track colleagues.

Regulatory frameworks in Qatar already point toward this balanced approach. The Qatar Central Bank's (QCB) Corporate Governance Principles mandate that a bank's remuneration system must be consistent with its risk profile and overall performance, considering profitability, liquidity, and long-term objectives (QCB 2015). Similarly, the Qatar Financial Centre Regulatory Authority (QFCRA) requires that remuneration policies appropriately balance risk and reward and align with the firm's long-term strategic direction (QFCRA 2025). This provides a clear regulatory foundation for designing incentive systems that reward not just individual achievement but also collaborative, productivity-enhancing behaviors that support the dual-track model.

3.4.2 Manager Accountability: Focusing on Process over Outcome

For incentives to be effective, they must be linked to clear accountability. In the context of HR, it is useful to distinguish between two types of accountability focus: process and outcome (Hewett et al. 2024).

- **Process Accountability** involves holding managers accountable for *how* they implement HR practices. In a dual-track system, this means assessing whether managers are actively engaging in the required developmental activities, such as providing regular coaching, conducting performance reviews, offering mentorship, and assigning challenging "stretch" assignments.

- **Outcome Accountability** focuses on holding managers accountable for the final *results* of these practices, such as whether a national employee achieves a promotion within a specific timeframe.

While outcomes are important, an excessive focus on them can create pressure for managers to take shortcuts, whereas a focus on process encourages more thoughtful, high-quality developmental interactions (Hewett et al. 2024). For a dual-track system to build a sustainable pipeline, managerial accountability must emphasize process. Managers should be evaluated on their coaching skills and their commitment to developmental activities. Research confirms that skillful managerial coaching is a key driver of team performance and knowledge building (Nyfoudi et al. 2023). This process focus is particularly crucial because feedback tools alone are insufficient; research shows a significant number of managers never download their 360-degree feedback reports unless a coaching or follow-up process is mandated (Bracken, Rose, and Church 2016). Successful nationalization frameworks explicitly engage expatriate staff in the socialization and development of national citizens, holding them accountable for these process-oriented activities (Waxin, Kumra, and Zhao 2020). Furthermore, a focus on process aligns with new policy directions in the region. For example, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD) in Saudi Arabia now mandates that establishments with over 50 employees disclose their training data and plans annually, holding them accountable for the *process* of workforce development (HRSD 2025). Finally, accountability systems must be designed with objective criteria to mitigate unconscious biases, such as the tendency for managers to give higher ratings to subordinates they perceive as being more similar to themselves (Turban and Jones 1988).

3.4.3 Promotability: A Non-Financial Incentive for Mentoring

While financial incentives are important, a powerful non-financial incentive for managers on the general track to mentor and develop junior talent is the impact of these activities on their own

career progression. Engaging in developmental behaviors serves as a credible signal to senior leadership about a manager's own leadership potential.

Research confirms that managers who provide career-related mentoring to their direct reports are, in turn, perceived by their own bosses and peers as being more promotable (Gentry and Sosik 2010). Similarly, employees who take on challenging job experiences are seen by supervisors as having higher advancement potential, independent of their current job performance (De Pater et al. 2009). Meta-analytic reviews confirm that workplace coaching is an effective tool for improving learning and performance outcomes, justifying its central role in such developmental programs (Jones, Woods, and Guillaume 2015; Cannon-Bowers et al. 2023). By coaching, mentoring, and delegating challenging tasks, managers demonstrate crucial leadership competencies such as talent development, strategic thinking, and the ability to build effective teams. OECD reports on apprenticeships likewise emphasize the importance of building capacity for in-company trainers and supervisors as a pillar of a successful system (OECD 2018).

This creates a virtuous cycle. The organization signals that people development is a valued leadership competency, and managers with a strong "learning orientation" recognize that investing in their team members is a direct investment in their own career advancement (Dragoni et al. 2009). This is a critical mechanism for ensuring that experienced expatriate and national managers on the general track actively champion the development of high-potential nationals on the fast track. Beyond individual benefit, fostering a culture of mentorship has been shown to improve overall organizational performance through enhanced organizational learning and citizenship behaviors (T. D. Allen et al. 2009). As the OECD notes, a key function of a modern senior service system is to position managers as "people developers" and hold them accountable for cultivating the leadership pipeline (Gerson 2020).

3.5 Pacing and Staffing: Aligning with Supervisory Capacity

Cohort size and promotion cadence must track available training and supervisory capacity. This capacity is not static; it is highly dependent on the active participation of experienced managers. A key challenge, particularly in the GCC context, is the risk of "knowledge hiding" by experienced expatriates who may fear being replaced by the national talent they are expected to train (Al Bastaki, Haak-Saheem, and Darwish 2021). Therefore, building sustainable supervisory capacity requires creating powerful incentives for mentorship. A crucial non-financial incentive is making the development of junior talent a key criterion for a manager's own career advancement, credibly signaling that mentoring is a valued leadership competency (Gentry, Weber, and Sadri 2008).

Where national targets are rising, a "seasoned-hire floor" in critical teams, a practice of blended staffing, stabilizes output while national cohorts mature. This model is economically sound, as research demonstrates that internally promoted employees perform significantly better for their first two years than external hires, who are often more expensive (Bidwell 2011). Maintaining a floor of experienced staff ensures operational continuity by leveraging their firm-specific skills while the fast-track cohort develops its own. However, this blended structure must be designed with care. If the seasoned-hire floor is significantly older than the national cohort, the resulting age hierarchy can inadvertently weaken the younger group's motivation to compete, undermining the system's "tournament" dynamic (Talavera, Yin, and Zhang 2021).

Finally, employers must establish a clear accountability framework. This involves routinely comparing time-to-readiness, output per FTE, and quality/safety indicators between fast-track units and matched controls, adjusting the intake or hardening assessment gates as necessary. This practice is shifting from a strategic recommendation to a regulatory expectation in the region. For example, a recent Saudi Arabian resolution now mandates that all large establishments must publicly disclose their training data annually, creating a powerful mechanism for holding firms accountable for the process and outcomes of their workforce development programs (HRSD 2023).

4. Company Case Studies: Local Practice and Transferable Patterns

The dual-track talent system, which combines a fast-track for developing national talent with general recruitment for experienced professionals, is not merely a theoretical construct. Its application is evident across key sectors in Qatar. The following case studies illustrate established local practices and transferable patterns that demonstrate how firms navigate the tension between nationalization and productivity.

4.1 Banking and Financial Services: A GCC-Wide Pattern

The banking and financial services sector across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a primary field for implementing nationalization policies, making it a rich source of case studies on the dual-track talent model. Regional banks have become adept at operating national leadership streams in parallel with conventional recruitment to meet the dual imperatives of building local capacity and maintaining global competitiveness. This pattern of coexistence is not unique to Qatar but is a shared strategic response to similar labor market dynamics across the Gulf.

The model's effectiveness stems from its clear division of purpose between two distinct but complementary tracks:

- **The General Track for Operational Excellence:** This track addresses the immediate need for specialized, experienced talent to ensure operational continuity. Banks across the GCC, including those in Qatar's Financial Centre (QFC), consistently rely on the local expatriate community and international markets to fill roles requiring deep technical expertise (Petrelli and Tamayo 2025). This conventional recruitment ensures that service quality and productivity are maintained while the national talent pipeline develops.

- **The Fast Track for National Leadership Development:** This track serves as a structured, accelerated pathway for national citizens. This is a strategic priority across the region, with "Emiratization" in the United Arab Emirates serving as a notable parallel to "Qatarization." Research in the UAE's private banking sector highlights that the sustainability of these initiatives depends on a holistic integration of stakeholder and talent management, focusing on engagement, trust, and social cooperation to successfully develop and retain national employees (Al Blooshi 2024).

This strategic approach is vividly illustrated by leading institutions in Qatar. Qatar National Bank (QNB) has a board-level "Group Human Capital Committee" that oversees a strategic plan which

has driven its Qatarization rate to over 50% through programs designed to advance nationals into senior roles (QNB 2024; QNB 2025). Likewise, Qatar Islamic Bank (QIB) utilizes an "Emerging Banker program" to train and motivate local talent for the private banking sector, demonstrating a direct investment in building a national skills base (QIB 2025). These in-house programs are often supplemented by national initiatives like the "Kawader Malia" program, which prepares fresh graduates for the financial industry (Qatar Finance and Business Academy (QFBA) n.d.).

The success of these dual-track systems in preserving productivity hinges on two key design principles observed across the region:

1. **Work-Led, Rotational Development:** Fast-track programs typically combine structured rotations through critical business functions (e.g., a revenue-generating post and a control/risk post) to build essential, on-the-job experience.

2. **Rigorous, Merit-Based Progression:** Advancement is gated by competency-based assessments, such as assessment-center exercises or defended capstone projects, rather than being based on tenure.

This meritocratic approach is the core of a successful system. Empirical evidence from Qatar confirms that "Qatarization effectiveness," defined by strategic investment in talent development, has a positive impact on firm performance. In contrast, a simplistic focus on meeting quotas (the "Qatari Employment Metric") without genuine integration can negatively affect non-financial outcomes (Fatima and Elbanna 2025). By maintaining a high bar for advancement on the fast track while simultaneously leveraging global talent on the general track, the GCC banking sector provides a powerful and transferable model for how to raise national inclusion without lowering productivity..

4.2 Telecom and Digital: A Model of Structured Programs

The telecommunications sector in the GCC provides a clear and robust model of a dual-track talent system in practice. Leading telecom groups run structured national graduate programs, often targeting high-demand specializations like artificial intelligence (AI) and data science, alongside continuous, competitive global hiring for senior and niche positions. This dual approach is a strategic necessity as the industry transitions from a traditional telephony to a technology solutions-based model, facing new demands for skills in areas like AI, cybersecurity, and cloud computing (Tamkeen 2023).

Prominent examples of these national "fast-track" systems are found across the region:

- In **Qatar**, Ooredoo's "JAHIZ" program is a flagship initiative within its structured Qatari career track. This year-long program is designed to build leadership skills in high-potential Qatari professionals through immersive learning modules with global institutions like MIT and Kellogg, and practical application via "Action Learning Projects" that address live strategic challenges (Ooredoo Qatar 2025).

- In the **UAE**, companies like e& and du have similar initiatives. The "e& AI Graduate Programme" is a 12-month, hands-on program specifically designed to build a future-ready Emirati digital workforce with skills in AI, big data, and cybersecurity (e& 2025).

Likewise, du's "FutureX" program is a 12-month development journey for Emirati graduates focusing on digital capability (du 2024).

- In **Saudi Arabia**, stc runs a "Talent Incubation Program" for recent graduates, providing intensive development and aligning with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and its goals for Saudization (stc 2024).

- In **Bahrain**, Batelco's Graduate Trainee programme, in partnership with the labor fund Tamkeen, focuses on developing both core business and technical skills to prepare future Bahraini leaders for the sector (Batelco 2019).

A common pattern in these programs is a rotational structure spanning key business units like product, analytics, and network operations, culminating in a defended capstone project (e.g., a live product or analytics solution). This work-led learning model ensures that theoretical knowledge is translated into practical, validated competence. This approach directly addresses findings from studies in the region's ICT sector, which highlight that leadership and a supportive climate for innovation are critical for performance (Sandhu and Al Naqbi 2023).

The coexistence of these graduate pipelines with open external hiring is crucial for maintaining operational productivity. While the national cohorts develop skills in emergent, strategic domains, firms continue to recruit experienced specialists, often expatriates, for senior, safety-critical, or niche technical roles where the local talent pipeline is still maturing (Tamkeen 2023). This preserves present-day service quality and ensures business continuity. Furthermore, this system helps build long-term organizational memory and capability within the national workforce, mitigating risks associated with knowledge withholding or over-reliance on a transient workforce, which has been identified as a key challenge in the region's telecom sector (Gharib et al. 2025).

4.3 Energy and Industrial: A Pioneer of Dual-Track Systems

The energy and industrial sector in the GCC, particularly national oil and gas companies, has been a pioneer in implementing sophisticated dual-track talent systems. This is driven by two imperatives: the strategic national policy of workforce nationalization ("Qatarization," "Saudization," etc.) and the operational necessity of maintaining deep technical expertise and uncompromising safety standards in high-risk, capital-intensive environments (Jolo 2008; Naji et al. 2022).

These companies provide clear examples of both tracks operating in parallel: a technical specialist track and a national development track.

- The Technical Specialist Track: The classic "dual ladder" model is exemplified by programs like Saudi Aramco's Specialist Development Program (SDP). Established as early as 1984, the SDP was designed to create a structured career path for high-potential engineers and scientists to become world-class technical experts, providing an alternative to the managerial ladder. The program involves a rigorous selection process, a long-term (9-10 year) development plan, and is built around educational milestones and specific technical competencies. This ensures the company retains its top technical

talent by offering advancement and recognition outside of management, directly addressing the core challenge of the dual-ladder system (Al-Bagawi 2007).

- The National Development Track: National oil companies operate formal, high-profile programs to accelerate the development of citizens. At QatarEnergy, Qatarization is an integral part of the strategic workforce plan. Initiatives include the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP), which provides a competency-based framework and tailored Individual Development Plans (IDPs) to enable Qatari graduates to become fully qualified professionals (QatarEnergy LNG n.d.; QatarEnergy 2025). These programs formalize development through competency sign-offs, safety credentialing, and mentor-of-record logs. This structured approach is crucial, as studies on Qatar's oil and gas industry have shown that training effectiveness is strongly linked to educational background and subsequent promotion opportunities, making a clear, merit-based pathway a key motivator (Jolo 2008).

The successful implementation of these dual-track systems hinges on their ability to coexist with general recruitment without undermining productivity or safety. The sector's approach is a carefully balanced model of blended staffing. While the "fast tracks" build a sustainable pipeline of national talent for leadership and key technical roles, experienced external specialists (often expatriates) remain in place to ensure operational continuity and transfer crucial tacit knowledge.

This is particularly vital in safety-critical roles. Research in the petrochemical industry emphasizes that a positive safety culture, effective communication, and strong leadership are paramount to performance and preventing incidents (N Naji et al. 2022). Therefore, promotions into such roles are strictly contingent on competency sign-offs and incident-free tenure, not merely program completion. This careful, competency-gated design ensures that as national cohorts mature, the organization's high standards for safety and productivity are maintained. The system's credibility is the engine that allows it to meet national policy goals without compromising operational excellence (Al-Horr 2011).

4.4 Public Financial Authorities: A Model of Blended Staffing

Public financial entities across the GCC, such as central banks and regulatory authorities, explicitly illustrate the logic of a "blended staffing" model. These institutions operate in a context where national policy mandates the rapid development of local talent, yet the critical nature of their work, such as supervising markets, ensuring financial stability, and overseeing payments, demands deep, often internationally acquired expertise. This creates a clear imperative for a dual-track system where national graduate intakes build future capacity ("the fast track") while seasoned external hires ensure immediate operational continuity ("the general track").

This approach is a direct response to strong nationalization policy imperatives. For instance, a circular from the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) mandates the complete "Saudization" of all roles in money exchange firms within a one-year timeframe, requiring companies to submit a detailed plan for training and qualifying Saudi employees (SAMA 2018). Similarly, nationalization strategies like Qatarization are driven by quotas, such as the 20% target for the private and quasi-private sector in Qatar (Elbanna and Fatima 2022). This policy pressure is particularly acute in the financial sector, where national talent remains significantly underrepresented. A 2025 study of Qatar's Financial Centre (QFC), for example, found that Qatari

nationals represent just 3% of the workforce in the surveyed firms, highlighting a structural challenge that necessitates targeted talent development initiatives (Petrelli and Tamayo 2025).

To address this, public authorities have become model practitioners of the "fast track" through formal graduate development programs. Examples include:

- The **Central Bank of Bahrain's (CBB)** "GP15" Graduate Development Program, a highly selective six-month initiative that combines cross-functional rotations, project-based assignments, and workshops to build competencies in financial analysis and banking strategy for new Bahraini graduates (CBB 2025a; 2025b).

- The **Central Bank of the UAE's (CBUAE)** "Ethraa" program, which focuses on the "Empowerment of Human Competencies in the Financial Sector" by placing UAE nationals into critical roles supported by specialized training plans (CBUAE 2025).

These programs function as highly disciplined "internal labor markets," creating a structured pipeline for national talent. Simultaneously, these institutions maintain their operational integrity and productivity by continuing to recruit experienced professionals, often expatriates, for senior supervisory and technical roles. This ensures continuity in critical functions like investment oversight and payments supervision while the national cohorts mature. The design logic of operating dual pipelines under a single, rigorous quality standard maps directly onto the challenges faced by regulated private-sector contexts, providing a clear and transferable pattern for implementation.

5. Conclusion

This report argues that dual-track systems can raise national inclusion without lowering productivity when, and only when, the fast track is truly competency-gated, transparent, and permeable. Internal Labor Markets provide the structure; tournament dynamics supply motivation; and organizational justice preserves legitimacy across the whole workforce. Poorly governed systems risk readiness gaps, perceived favoritism, knowledge hiding, and quota-driven output volatility. Well-designed systems, by contrast, create a predictable leadership pipeline for nationals, stabilize delivery through blended staffing, and signal an authentic employer brand. For Qatar and the wider GCC, the operational blueprint is clear: codify merit-based milestones, validate readiness with capstone assessments, keep the fast track open to high performers from the general track, and align manager incentives with mentoring and coaching obligations. Done this way, firms can meet nationalization imperatives and build tomorrow's leaders without sacrificing today's performance.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Codify the rules of the game:** Establish and publish clear eligibility criteria, assessment rubrics, and objective review panels. The pathway to the fast track must be transparent and contestable, remaining open to high-performing employees from the general track to ensure the system is perceived as fair and merit-based.

2. **Harden milestones with competency-gated assessments:** Progression must be earned, not based on tenure. Use capstone projects, portfolio defenses, and simulation-

based assessments to validate readiness before promotion. This prevents the "readiness gap," where titles advance without a parallel development of competencies, and ensures the credibility of the fast-track program.

3. **Align manager incentives with development goals:** Tie rewards, recognition, and promotion prospects for managers to the process of mentoring and coaching junior talent. This creates a powerful non-financial incentive for experienced expatriate and national managers on the general track to actively champion the development of high-potential nationals, turning mentorship into a core leadership responsibility.

4. **Scale at the speed of capacity, not targets:** The size of national cohorts and the pace of their promotion must be aligned with the organization's available training and supervisory capacity. Overloading the system to meet aggressive quotas without adequate support risks burnout, knowledge gaps, and a decline in productivity.

5. **Maintain blended staffing as a core design feature:** A "seasoned-hire floor" of experienced staff is essential to stabilize output, ensure operational continuity, and facilitate the transfer of crucial tacit knowledge while national cohorts mature. This blended model is not a temporary measure but a strategic imperative that allows the organization to build tomorrow's leaders without sacrificing today's performance.

Acknowledgement:

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