Skift + TOURISE



THE TALENT IMPERATIVE

How Travel and Tourism Will Build Its Next Generation Workforce

Speed-to-readiness, purpose-driven careers, local pipelines, and global talent ecosystems

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Foreword By His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb
Minister of Tourism and Chairman of TOURISE

The future of tourism will not be defined by destinations alone, but by people; their creativity, skills, adaptability, and ambition.

Travel & Tourism has long been one of the world's greatest engines of economic opportunity, cultural exchange, and human connection. Yet today, as the industry enters a new era of growth, transformation, and technological change, its continued success will depend on our ability to invest in and empower the workforce shaping every journey and experience.

The findings in this report make clear both the scale of the opportunity and the urgency of the challenge ahead. By 2035, the global tourism sector is expected to create 91 million new jobs, while simultaneously facing a projected shortfall of 43 million workers. This is not simply a labor gap; rather, it is a strategic imperative that will shape the resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability of the global tourism economy for decades to come.

Profound shifts are reshaping the nature of work itself. Artificial intelligence, automation, and digital technologies are transforming how industries operate and how value is created. Yet even in an increasingly technological world, tourism remains fundamentally human. Technology may enhance efficiency and unlock new capabilities, but people will continue to define hospitality, build trust, solve problems, and create the meaningful experiences travelers remember most.

This moment therefore calls for a new global approach to talent development; one that embraces innovation while placing people at the center of transformation. Indeed, the future workforce will seek more than employment alone. Young people increasingly value purpose, flexibility, mobility, and opportunities for continuous growth. Employers, meanwhile, are rethinking how they attract, train, and retain talent in a rapidly evolving environment. The organizations and destinations that succeed will be those that shorten the path from hiring to readiness, invest in lifelong learning, and create clear pathways for advancement and leadership.

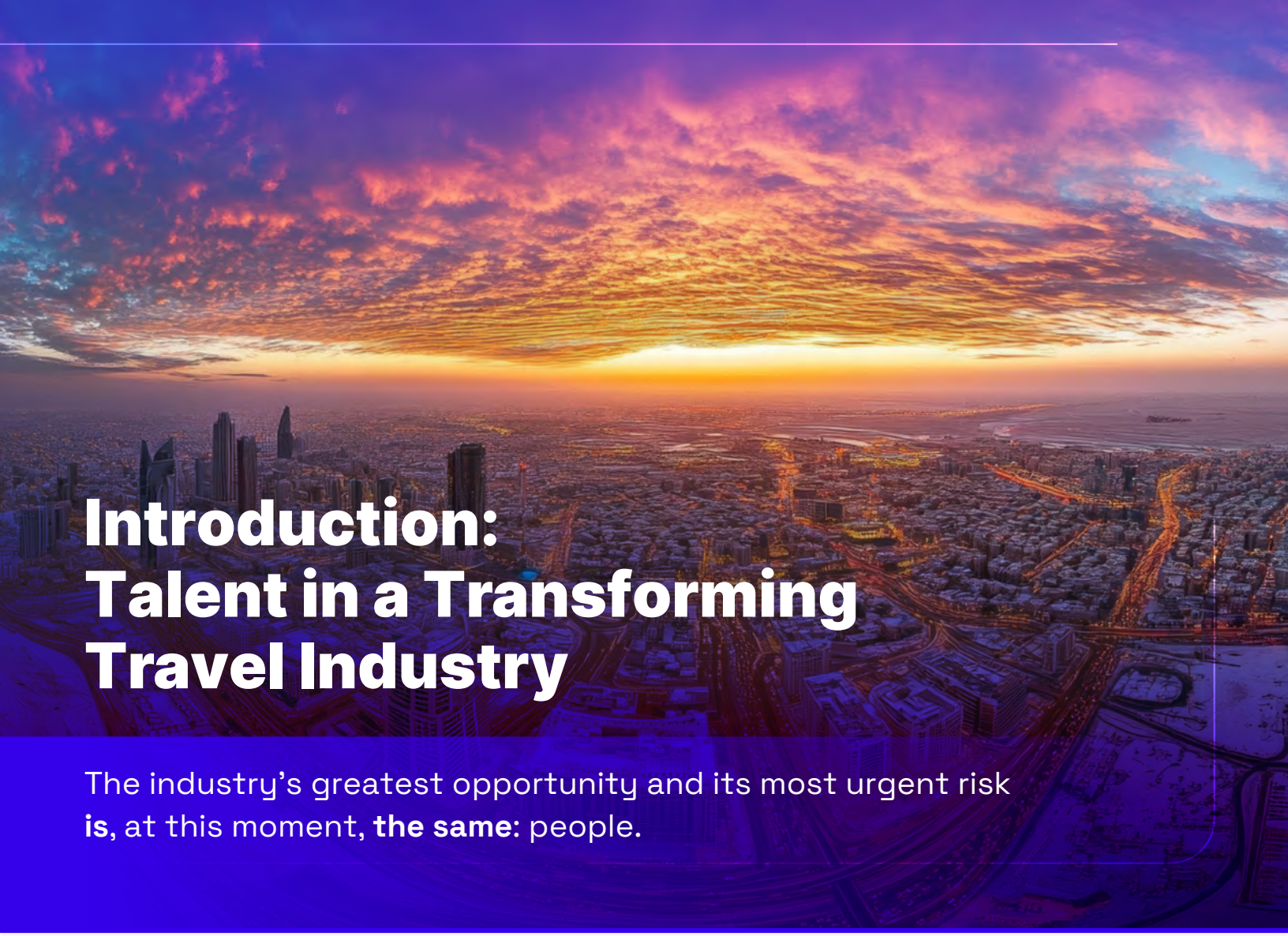
This is why TOURISE was established: to bring together governments, industry leaders, educators, innovators, and communities to shape the future of tourism collectively. As a global platform for collaboration and action, TOURISE is committed to helping build stronger talent ecosystems, advancing workforce preparedness, and ensuring tourism continues to create opportunity for people everywhere.

The transformation ahead cannot be achieved by any one country or company alone. It requires shared ambition, coordinated action, and long-term commitment across sectors and borders. By aligning policy, education, technology, and industry needs, we can build a tourism workforce that is resilient, future-ready, and inclusive; empowering a new generation of talent that is skilled, inspired, and prepared to lead the future of global tourism.

This report offers both a roadmap and a call to action. The next chapter of tourism is already being written. Together, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to shape it with vision, purpose, and confidence.



H.E. AHMED AL KHATEEB
Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of TOURISE



Introduction: Talent in a Transforming Travel Industry

The industry's greatest opportunity and its most urgent risk **is**, at this moment, **the same**: people.

Travel and tourism is entering a new era in which workforce resilience, not demand alone, will determine which destinations and companies can sustain growth.

For more than a decade, the industry's expansion model relied on steadily rising global mobility, relatively abundant labor supply, and operating systems optimized for efficiency and scale. That model is now under pressure. Geopolitical instability, energy-market volatility, inflationary costs, constrained labor mobility, demographic divergence, and accelerating technological disruption are all reshaping the foundations of how the sector operates and grows.

Demand for travel remains strong. Governments continue to invest heavily in tourism infrastructure, aviation expansion, destination development, and large-scale hospitality projects; while consumers continue to prioritize experiences and international mobility despite broader economic uncertainty. Yet sustaining that growth is becoming significantly more complex. Across the sector, leaders are confronting the same emerging reality: workforce constraints are increasingly becoming operational constraints.

In this environment, talent is no longer simply a labor issue or an HR function. It is a core strategic variable that influences service reliability, expansion capacity, customer satisfaction, productivity, and long-term competitiveness.

Globally, scale is no longer a footnote. **WTTC estimates** travel and tourism supports roughly 1 in 10 jobs worldwide and generates 9.8% of global GDP. The sector supported a record 366 million jobs in 2025, and the industry is projected to generate 91 million additional roles by 2035, representing one in three net new jobs created globally.

But the industry's workforce challenge is scaling just as rapidly as its economic opportunity. WTTC projects a global travel and tourism labor shortfall exceeding 43 million workers by 2035 if current trends continue, with labor supply projected to run 16% below demand. Hospitality alone faces an estimated gap of 8.6 million workers. These shortages are already visible across operational, technical, and frontline service roles that are essential to maintaining guest experience, operational continuity, and brand standards.

The pressure is particularly acute in mature economies facing demographic contraction. Japan's travel workforce is projected to run 29% below demand by 2035, the steepest relative deficit among major economies, followed by Germany at 26%, while the European Union overall faces a projected gap of 6.4 million workers. These are not distant forecasts. The structural forces driving them, including aging populations, tightening immigration dynamics, skills mismatches, and intensifying global competition for labor, are already reshaping workforce strategy today.

As a result, the future competitiveness of travel and tourism will increasingly depend not only on physical infrastructure, air connectivity, or investment capital, but on talent infrastructure: the systems that allow workers to move, train, adapt, advance, and remain in the industry over time.

In light of that reality, three structural shifts are redefining the future of travel work:

Demographics are diverging. Sharply.

In many of the world's mature tourism economies, working-age populations are shrinking as the retirement-age population swells. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) projects that without swift policy changes, GDP per capita growth will slow significantly in most member countries. The contrast with younger, fast-growing tourism markets could not be more stark: In Saudi Arabia, 71% of the population is under 35, with a median age of just 23.5 years, according to the Kingdom's General Authority for Statistics. That demographic dividend is an asset, but only if the talent pipeline, training infrastructure, and job design are ready to convert a young population into a skilled, motivated, and retained workforce.

The pandemic reshaped labor expectations permanently.

Covid-19 was not merely an economic disruption for travel and tourism. It was a rupture. Millions of frontline workers, many of them the most experienced and guest-facing in the industry, left during the shutdowns and did not return. The OECD's Tourism Trends and Policies report notes that



tourism businesses have struggled to attract workers back amid tight labor markets and cost-of-living pressures. At the same time, the pandemic produced lasting gains for some workers, particularly in corporate and managerial roles, in the form of remote-work norms, flexible scheduling expectations, and a recalibrated sense of what a "good job" means. The industry now operates inside a bifurcated labor market, where the expectations of frontline candidates and knowledge-worker candidates have diverged in ways that traditional hiring approaches were not built to address.

AI is both a disruption and an opportunity, and the industry's response to it will define a generation of jobs.

Generative AI is reshaping task structures across the labor market. IMF analysis estimates that roughly 40% of global jobs are exposed to some degree of AI-driven task reshaping, rising to nearly 60% in advanced economies. For travel and tourism, this poses a present-day design challenge: which tasks should be automated, which should remain human, and how quickly can organizations build the fluency their workforces will need? The answer to that question is also the answer to the talent question. Organizations that frame AI as a capacity booster for human service — automating routine tasks to free up time for judgment, recovery, and relationship-building — will find it easier to attract candidates who want their work to feel purposeful. Those that do not will face both a talent deficit and a service quality crisis.

Yet the old stereotype of jobs in travel and tourism can still linger: seasonal, low-prestige, transactional. In 2026, the question for travel executives seeking the next generation of industry talent is clear: how do forward-leaning leaders convert old perceptions into credible career pathways without sacrificing operational discipline or inflating the time and resources required for skills, training, and credentials?

One bridge to the desired outcome is a "good jobs" strategy. For most candidates, that means flexibility, fair pay, safe conditions, and clear mobility. For the travel and tourism industry, none of these elements can be treated as overhead. Each plays a role in elevating the industry's reputation, performance, and relevance — creating talent-first environments where new hires ramp up faster, and experienced personnel build lasting careers.

> People are prioritizing what they are passionate about over compensation. We're seeing a high volume of applicants who value work-life balance — flexibility and benefits — over salary. Many have even taken pay cuts or career step-backs to secure roles that better align with their values."
>
> — ADOLFO PENZATO
> **HEAD OF PEOPLE (EMEA), INTREPID**

This "good jobs" strategy matters in a global labor market that still relies heavily on remote and non-traditional work models. The International Labor Organization (ILO), for example, estimates that informal employment accounts for roughly six in ten workers worldwide. Against that baseline, travel brands that make safety, predictability, and mobility legible within more formal and traditional hiring structures can better compete with informality by offering a clear value proposition. When stability, upskilling, and growth are explicit features of a role, time-to-hire shortens, productivity ramps up faster, and early-tenure churn declines. More importantly, candidates begin to see travel and tourism work as purposeful and growth-oriented, rather than simply seasonal.

"People are prioritizing what they are passionate about over compensation," said Adolfo Penzato, head of people (EMEA) at Intrepid. "We're seeing a high volume of applicants who value work-life balance — flexibility and benefits — over salary. Many have even taken pay cuts or career step-backs to secure roles that better align with their values."

"As Saudi Arabia accelerates toward Vision 2030, technology will remain a powerful enabler," said Fabien Fresnel, chief executive officer at The Riyadh School of Tourism and Hospitality. "But hospitality is, above all, a deeply human craft. Investing in the education of young talent is essential to preserving the empathy, care, and emotional connection that define truly world-class hospitality."

In this report, Skift and TOURISE synthesize recent Skift Research, including the "State of Talent in Travel 2025" report and insights from nearly a dozen new interviews with leaders across sectors, including hospitality, academia, destination marketing, cruise, aviation, and online travel. This future-focused report highlights strategies and policies that shorten time-to-hire, accelerate productivity, and curb attrition, while reframing travel and tourism as a platform for leadership and creative problem-solving.

Throughout this report, three essential leverage points emerge:

1. **Package flexibility, fair pay, and mobility.** Work-life balance in the travel and tourism industry includes hiring practices that address commute and housing barriers in high cost of living areas, foregrounding sustainable, long-term, and mobile jobs. In a post-pandemic world, the talent ecosystem is blended: community-first hiring remains foundational, but global, nomadic talent is now an essential part of the mix.

2. **Build dual-track talent pipelines.** Clear pathways into both operations and technology are essential for attracting talent. They signal opportunities for creative and analytical leadership, earning loyalty and performance that extend far beyond temporary shifts that merely try to match the latest hiring trends.

3. **Close the speed-to-readiness gap.** Faster ramp-up times for new hires convert the first weeks and months of a new role into tangible gains in guest experience. Craft becomes visible. Careers feel real.



Source: The International Labor Organization (ILO)

The data underlying this report draws on insights from Skift's "State of Talent in Travel 2025" study, along with new findings from follow-on survey work. The list below captures key takeaways from that research.

- Market temperature. Across all surveyed sectors, 43% of hiring managers say the travel and tourism talent market is balanced. However, new findings show strain in segments such as destination management organizations (DMOs) and tours/experiences: nearly half (43%) of respondents in tours/experiences report a talent pool insufficient to meet hiring demand, rising to nearly three-quarters (73%) among DMOs.

- Near-term demand. Nearly half (49%) of talent leaders expect hiring to increase over the next year, driven primarily by business growth (29%) and seasonality (14%); attrition is a smaller driver (7%).

- Speed to readiness. While 36% of hiring managers fill roles within one to two months — and 64% within one to four months — 42% report it takes four to six months for new hires to reach full productivity.

- Retention levers and risks. Flexible schedules (24%) and pay (22%) are the leading retention drivers, while burnout (16%), schedule inflexibility (14%), and low pay (14%) are the top causes of attrition. New findings indicate burnout is especially acute in tours/experiences, accounting for nearly one-quarter (24%) of cited resignations.

- Gen Z reality check. Flexibility (26%), company values (19%), and rapid advancement (16%) rank as top priorities. Yet only 31% of travel and tourism leaders consider 18- to 28-year-olds a high-priority talent segment, suggesting continued friction around pay and experience expectations.

- AI outlook. A majority (57%) feel equipped to adapt to AI, while 40% already report productivity gains. More than half (53%) expect AI to reduce routine tasks, and 27% anticipate role changes that will require upskilling.

FRAMEWORK
The Travel and Tourism Talent Lifecycle

This report adopts a stage-by-stage model of the talent lifecycle:



At each stage, it examines how flexibility, safety, and visible mobility translate into purpose, creativity, and leadership — attributes that are reshaping how candidates and communities view travel and tourism work, now and in the years ahead.



Recruiting: Reframing Pipelines for a New Generation of Travel and Tourism Talent

TOP THREE MOST DIFFICULT HOSPITALITY ROLES TO FILL

1. Frontline, Guest-Facing
2. Technical and Engineering
3. Product and Data

Travel and tourism's recruiting engine has long been designed to attract candidates willing to accept hierarchy and long hours. That approach is increasingly misaligned with today's labor market. A new generation of talent is prioritizing roles that offer flexibility, creativity, and alignment with personal values.

Gen Z's priorities are clear: flexibility (26%), company values (19%), and rapid advancement (16%). Hiring managers, meanwhile, continue to screen for core capabilities and professional polish. The most common issues employers cited with this generation include communication (15%) - including 27% in the cruise sector - along with leadership (14%) and a reliable, professional work ethic (14%).

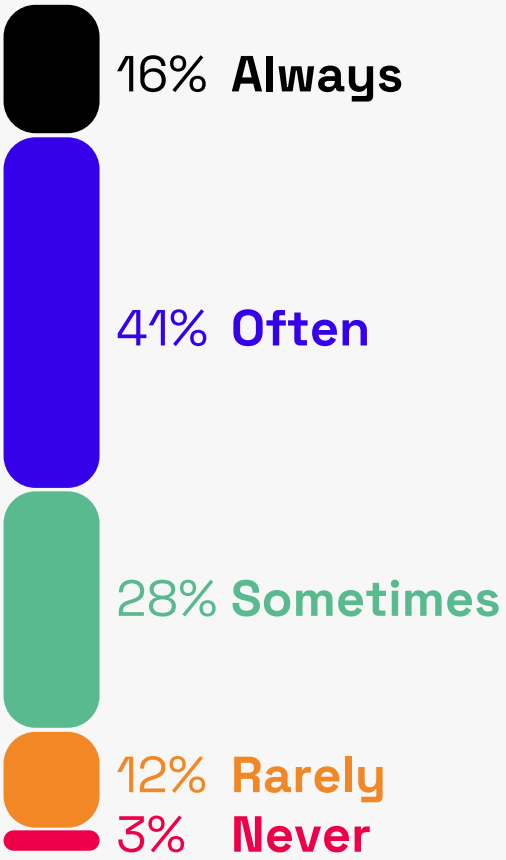
These realities shape where the talent funnel is most likely to show strain. The hardest roles to attract and fill fall into two tracks: frontline, guest-facing positions (50% of Skift survey respondents said hiring for these roles was "difficult") and technical and engineering roles (48% rated them "difficult").

This pressure on the talent funnel is also why travel's recruiting choices matter beyond the enterprise: globally, **young people are around three times more likely to be unemployed than adults**, according to the ILO. In 2023, roughly 65 million young people were unemployed — making "attitude-first, skill-built" pathways in travel a meaningful lever for inclusion, if those pathways are credible and accessible.

Where travel and tourism recruiting for frontline roles succeeds, the process signals agency and purpose to candidates as much as it screens for skills. The strongest pipelines also remain local. According to Skift Research, most hirers draw talent from nearby communities (57% say they often or always do; 85% say they do so at least sometimes).

However, hirers are complementing local reach with school and academy partnerships — an approach used by 24% of respondents. Newly surfaced survey splits show this is especially prevalent in the cruise sector, where 67% report using such partnerships to source candidates. These pathways allow talent teams to highlight service recovery, experience design, and safety culture early in the recruiting process. The effect is twofold: communication and leadership potential surface earlier, and frontline roles are perceived as creative, guest-experience work rather than transactional roles removed from the experience being delivered.

How often does your organization hire talent from the local community in areas where it operates?



Source: Skift Research

"We have people who started by carrying bags and are now captains," said Tony Fernandes, CEO of AirAsia, in a session at Skift Global Forum. "We have cabin crew who have become CEOs. That creates a belief that people can truly develop and grow. The leisure and travel industries offer that opportunity, because we are on a growth trajectory."

Employers that make these factors a visible part of their frontline hiring proposition are better able to meet candidates' expectations for balance and growth — with structured work-life design and clear advancement pathways. Demonstrating how these elements translate into early steps toward supervisory roles often proves decisive in closing candidates.

"The top factors attracting candidates are flexibility — including work from home — salary, and alignment with company values and purpose," added Penzato at Intrepid.

The other side of the industry's talent bifurcation is the product and data track. These candidates seek autonomy to solve problems at scale—across pricing, load management, and the ever-present demand for personalization. Hiring teams that emphasize skills-based entry and cross-functional ownership are directly aligned with these ambitions.

Across both tracks, values alignment is shifting from a slogan to a primary decision factor. Instead of generic interviews, leading talent teams are turning to skills-based exercises and structured conversations about place stewardship and community benefit. This is already reflected in practice: 68% of respondents in Skift's research report intentional efforts to protect local communities from pressures such as overcrowding and non-local hiring. When this messaging includes clear "do no harm" principles, candidates are better able to assess the credibility of a brand's values.

"The industry has always been driven by the idea that you hire for attitude and train for skill," said Laura Hingel, VP of talent acquisition and talent management at Raffles and Fairmont Hotels and Resorts.

Employer branding and social sharing also help broadcast a positive work culture. London Heathrow offers a clear example of this approach.

"We've developed our employer brand, 'No Place Like Heathrow,' supported by colleague-led social media campaigns that bring our culture to life," said Jess Kirbell, people director - future skills, at London Heathrow. "The brand is anchored in four key pillars — Our Pioneering Spirit, A Place to Belong, The Magic in the Moment, and Fulfilling Journeys — reflecting the experiences and opportunities our people enjoy every day. By sharing authentic stories from colleagues, we highlight what it truly feels like to work at Heathrow — and our social media reach shows there is genuine interest in work at the airport."

The conclusion that emerges from strategies like those used by London Heathrow is a recruiting model that meets modern expectations without sacrificing operational discipline: community pipelines that showcase craft, dual narratives that respect the distinction between guest-facing and technical work, and approaches that make flexibility and values tangible. In a sector long associated with hierarchy and long hours, that clarity signals to ambitious candidates that travel and tourism can be a place to create and lead, not just work.





AirAsia Case Study: Culture Fit as the Real Hiring Bottleneck

For AirAsia MOVE, the talent problem Ben Jie Lim, chief people and partnerships officer, keeps returning to is not the usual refrain: "there aren't enough skilled people." Rather, the skills exist, but the challenges creep in later, when technically capable hires fail to integrate into the organization's day-to-day operations.

"It's actually the culture fit," Lim said.

Lim's point is structural. AirAsia isn't hiring into a neat category. "Our organization is not a usual local domestic organization. Neither is it a multinational corporation nor a very large global organization. It's really a Southeast Asian organization," he said, meaning cultural sensitivity is not an HR "nice-to-have," but a performance dependency.

He describes that culture in operational terms: high-context communication, soft language, and consensus-driven decision-making — norms that can be invisible to candidates coming from more direct, process-heavy, or competitive environments. This emphasis on fit also shapes how AirAsia recruits early-career talent. Lim notes that younger talent intake is declining, but the response is not to cast a wider net — it is to narrow it.

Specifically, AirAsia targets university-based organizations where candidates have already developed soft skills and leadership habits. Lim points to AIESEC, a student-led leadership organization, as one such channel. The logic is straightforward: recruit from environments where these cultural norms are already in practice, so hires can "grow on the journey with us" rather than wash out in the first few months.

The outcome Lim describes is fewer generational fractures once younger talent arrives. "We don't face the same level of disconnect between younger employees and leader-level managers," he said.

Taken together, the AirAsia example reinforces a core HR insight for 2026 and beyond: recruiting is not just about skills screening — it is about alignment with values and operating models.



From Pipeline to Offer: Work-Life Balance and Compensation

GLOSSARY

SYSTEM MEMBERSHIP

In this report, "system membership" refers to an **offer that positions a travel and tourism role as entry into a structured system with predictable, fair scheduling and shift-swapping rules, transparent career pathways, internal mobility through talent marketplaces, and funded learning**. This framing signals a clear promise to candidates: the role is part of an intentional, future-focused organization where meaningful career progression is possible.

If the traditional stereotype of travel and tourism recruitment has been a choice between short-term, transactional roles and long hours with limited growth, the emerging alternative reflects a different industry future — one shaped by digital nomads, global remote talent, and community-rooted candidates.

Nurturing that future depends on whether "the travel and hospitality industry can develop more fast-track career pathways that appeal to younger talent," said Daniel Tallos, founder of Find Your Best, in recent Skift reporting. "The problem is that this needs to happen now, as the shortage is already visible."

To that end, speed to hire—and the ability to mitigate churn—hinge on what the offer signals. Landing the next great hire often comes down to whether the offer package reads as a relationship or a gig. Transactional offers in travel and tourism correlate with resignation risks — chiefly driven by burnout (16%), schedule inflexibility (14%), and low salaries (14%). By contrast, offers that emphasize "system membership" tend to attract candidates through flexible schedules (24%) and competitive pay (22%).

The economics justify the shift. Turnover costs more than an empty shift: a widely cited synthesis from the Center for American Progress estimates replacement costs ranging from about 5.8% to 213% of annual salary, depending on role and seniority, with a commonly cited "typical" cost of around 21% for many positions.



Marriott International Case Study: Redesigning Frontline Jobs Through Blended Roles and Career Acceleration

Marriott International's frontline talent story offers a useful counterpoint to the "shortage" narrative that dominates travel's hiring conversation.

First, the company is not struggling to attract candidates at scale. "What our data shows is that we're not experiencing a talent shortage," said Jessica Lee, global officer of talent acquisition and associate development at Marriott International. "We get an average of 2 million unique visitors to our careers site."

That volume reframes the business challenge. When demand is high, the constraint shifts to job design and progression: whether frontline roles can meet modern expectations around flexibility and variety, and whether companies can convert entry-level interest into durable careers and a manager pipeline.

Lee describes flexibility as essential architecture. "Flexibility means a few things," she said: "more creativity around the structure of jobs" and "creative scheduling," as well as a deeper redesign question — "flexibility from the perspective of 'what is the job'?"

That question has led Marriott International to build blended roles that move beyond rigid job categories. "We have roles we call guest experience experts," Lee said, describing associates who can operate across the lobby and front of house.

The Moxy brand illustrates how physical space and role design reinforce each other: "You check in at the lounge, not a classic front desk, and this person can get you a snack, check you in, and offer recommendations on what's happening in the hotel."

Marriott International's second innovation is career acceleration: building a structured bridge from frontline work to first-time management. Lee ties this directly to retention. "Turnover is lower than the rest of the industry," she said, attributing that in part to portfolio scale and internal mobility. "We launched a program called Elevate, giving associates the ability to move laterally or into promotional roles, within their geography or beyond."

Taken together, Marriott's approach points to a practical thesis for travel operators: when the candidate funnel is strong, competitive advantage comes from converting applicants into long-tenure performers — by redesigning frontline work (blended roles), making mobility tangible (portfolio movement), and formalizing the path to leadership (Elevate).

Brands are also leaning into immediate-use perks and greater flexibility across employment and loyalty programs, mirroring what travelers already recognize as valuable. The following list highlights key trends Skift is tracking.

- Making location a feature, not a footnote. Time-zone sensitivity, remote-first rituals, and opportunities to embed with destination teams for short, on-the-ground engagements are becoming differentiators for corporate and mixed-industry teams. "We've seen a rise in staff travel for small meetings, as organizations look to ensure regular in-person interaction to foster creativity and collaboration," said Darren Toohey, head of global sales at CWT, in recent Skift reporting.

- Removing housing, transport, and growth friction. "From car rentals to housing, flights, visas, and currency exchange, it's almost a full-time job living outside of the United States," said Ashley Lawson, digital nomad and event professional, speaking to Skift. For nomads and globally mobile candidates, the deciding factor in choosing a travel and tourism role is rarely just base pay. Candidates are looking for companies that reduce the friction of mobility. For frontline roles, offers that bundle housing, transport, or allowances help signal that commitment. For product and data roles, packages that emphasize learning credits, travel stipends, and short-term internal residencies highlight opportunities for personal growth.

- Progression, visible at the offer. Offers that map early skill gaps, outline first-90-day coaching, and define pathways into leadership align with how leaders already promote — based on performance over time (22%), proactive leadership (16%), and management skills (15%). They turn acceptance into a credible career start, rather than a seasonal stopover.

Retention hinges on the culture, clarity, and leadership signals embedded in the offer. "Compensation is just one lever, but it's not the most effective," said Lim of AirAsia MOVE. "It really comes down to culture — inspiring leadership, clear roles, and clear direction."

Another shift is underway: skills-based hiring is accelerating across industries, with **45% of companies having planned to eliminate bachelor's requirements** for some roles in 2024. But intent hasn't translated into practice — **Harvard Business School** found that dropping degree requirements raised the share of non-degree hires by just 3.5 percentage points, with nearly half of companies making the change in name only. Hiring teams would do well to push for internal culture changes that encourage more flexibility in reviewing non-degree candidates with the adequate skill sets.

Meanwhile, hospitality is formalizing earn-and-learn routes that may increasingly supersede degree-based hiring. The American Hotel and Lodging (AHLA) Foundation helped launch the first registered hospitality apprenticeship recognized by the U.S. Department of Labor and **continues to expand** these pathways, signaling that vocational routes are becoming a mainstream alternative or complement to four-year programs.

"We removed degree requirements because we believe skills are a better indicator of success on the job," said Ren Akinci, executive vice president and people and culture officer at Emerald, **speaking to Skift**. "We are not dismissing the achievements of those with college degrees. We're simply removing a barrier for those who may not have had the same financial opportunity to attend college or university."

Similarly, forward-leaning organizations are positioning vocational education and training as a strategic lever. **UNWTO's Education Toolkit**, for example, highlights the pivotal role of secondary-to-tertiary vocational pathways in building tourism skills. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 explicitly **commits to expanding vocational training** as part of tourism-led diversification — supporting a blended model of certificates, microcredentials, and apprenticeships alongside traditional pathways.

> "We removed degree requirements because we believe skills are a better indicator of success on the job."
>
> — REN AKINCI
> **EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND PEOPLE AND CULTURE OFFICER, EMERALD**



Onboarding to Expertise: Training, Upskilling, and AI

64%

Travel leaders who say it takes at least 4 months for a new hire to become fully productive

Source: Skift Research

The future of the travel and tourism industry will depend less on adding headcount and more on enhancing the capabilities of talent already in the system. That shift addresses a baseline challenge: readiness lags. Skift's research shows that 42% of leaders say it takes 4 to 6 months for new hires to reach full productivity, while 36% report 1 to 3 months. Closing that gap is how hiring ROI scales.

The urgency is not unique to travel. The World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs" research is clear: the skill mix within roles is changing rapidly, and most workers will require training in the near term. For travel operators, that macro reality becomes a local one: speed to hire is visible, but speed to readiness is where the battle is won or lost.

For talent teams working to narrow the time-to-productivity curve, the first 30, 60, and 90 days follow established pathways: buddy systems, protected supervisor coaching, and early exposure to meaningful check-ins.

Some employers are creating hands-on environments to support this approach, as Skift reported in October 2025. Earlier that year, Expedia Group opened the EG Playground, an experimental AI lab where employees can test multiple large language models, prototype new agents, and streamline real tasks. These steps showcase supervision and mentorship — key elements in attracting new talent and retaining high performers.

For the 24% of hiring managers who tap into local schools and academies, employer-linked programs and role-specific microcredentials (e.g., safety and food-handling or service-recovery badges) allow new hires to rehearse high-stakes scenarios before day one. The result is a smoother ramp: start-and-stop first weeks give way to more fluid, progressive experiences. This approach also reframes frontline roles as craft-oriented and rooted in guest experience, rather than a sequence of rote shifts.

"I'm a strong advocate for shorter programs, with upskilling built in over time," said Fresnel at The Riyadh School of Tourism and Hospitality. "Lifelong learning is what the market needs today, starting with vocational learning, especially in hospitality, where 70% to 80% of roles are frontline or supervisory. That's where the focus needs to be."

Successful hiring teams told Skift that promoting or reassigning from within is standard practice; 55% said they do so occasionally, and 37% said they do so frequently. In this context, airlines stand out: 68% of promotions come from within at least occasionally within that sector. Furthermore, leading travel and tourism brands are **standing up academies and formal pathways** to convert vacancies into careers — from United Airlines' Aviate Academy to Hilton's partnership with Guild Education for professional certificates. Together, these changes move organizations away from transactional hiring and toward a compounding skills base that promotes retention and personal improvement across roles and years.

PLAYBOOK

Roles → Skills → Micro-credentials

As companies map ways to bring skills and the promise of career-building micro-credentials into their playbooks, the following table shows how roles, required skill sets, and the prospect of attaching microcredentials can connect for meaningful talent development.

ROLE	SKILLS	MICRO-CREDENTIALS
Front desk/ guest services	Service recovery; safety culture; upsell and CX writing	Service recovery badge; hotel safety/OSH basics; upsell and CX copywriting micro-course
Food and beverage	HACCP/food safety; shift scheduling; conflict de-escalation	HACCP; team scheduling badge; de-escalation for hospitality
Housekeeping lead	Infection control; quality audits; coaching	Housekeeping quality audit badge; infection-control certificate; coaching practicum
Attractions/ ops control	Irregular-ops playbooks; crowd safety; radio comms	Irregular-ops simulation badge; crowd and venue safety certificate
Revenue/ product analyst	Data literacy; demand forecasting; personalization science	Excel→ data literacy; forecasting mini-certification; personalization
Digital/CRM	Segmentation; consent and privacy; prompt engineering for service	CRM segmentation badge; privacy essentials; AI tool literacy for hospitality



Case Study: Saudi Hospitality Training: AI Simulation to Solve Service Readiness Gaps

Saudi Arabia's tourism expansion raises a question that mature travel markets sometimes avoid:

How can a travel organization scale service talent quickly enough to meet rising guest expectations without compromising quality?

Training leaders on the ground indicate that the constraint is structural. For instance, Saudi Arabia's labor mix and localization mandates reshape the challenge. "You have a very young local population that you need to train, and Saudization rates in hospitality and tourism can range anywhere from 30% to 70%," explained Fabien Fresnel, CEO of the Riyadh School of Tourism and Hospitality. "That adds significant pressure to training."

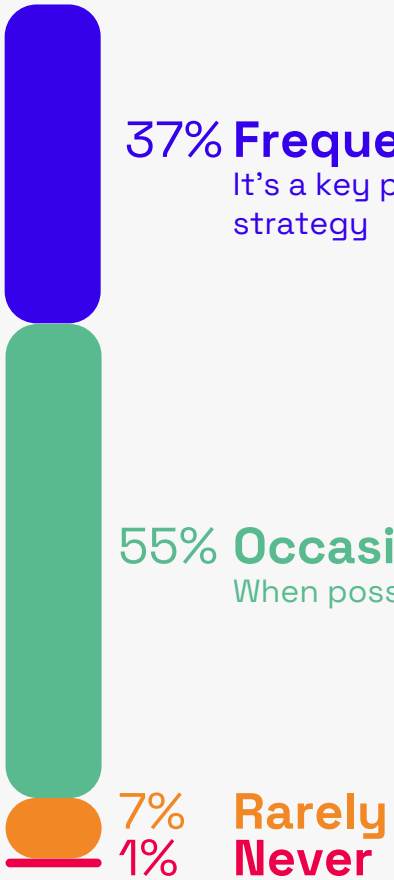
And as luxury tourism supply expands, the differentiator is no longer the products but the service around it. Fresnel is direct about where that leaves the opportunity: "A business class seat is a business class seat everywhere. What makes the difference is how you're greeted, how you're welcomed, how you're recognized." Closing that final gap to deliver high-end hospitality is precisely what fast, immersive training is being built to accelerate.

Rather than treating training as a slow, classroom-bound prerequisite, Fresnel described a model that uses AI to rehearse high-friction scenarios before new hires face them live. The approach reflects a broader reset: shorten programs, deploy talent earlier, and build continuous upskilling into the role.

He framed it as a throughput problem that cannot be solved with traditional timelines: "We're moving from a two-year to a six-month model, because in the years ahead, the market will need between 50,000 and 100,000 new entrants."

The value proposition is clear: faster readiness, fewer challenges with guest interactions, and a training model that can keep pace with national tourism growth. The deeper takeaway for travel executives? When demand outstrips labor-market readiness, AI-enabled simulation must become a form of talent infrastructure, a way to compress "months to confidence" into a shorter, more repeatable path while maintaining service standards.

How often do you promote or move talent internally to fill open roles?



Source: Skift Research

AI is becoming rapidly entrenched in the industry's toolkits, and leading organizations are using it as a time-relief advantage for frontline teams and as critical backline decision support for managers.

"We have an agent named Olivia that supports us in scheduling interviews, and it's really sped up the average time it takes for the interview to be completed," said Lee of Marriott International. "When interviews are being scheduled with Olivia, they are happening within 2.9 days, which is really quick. And then that has a trickle-down effect ... meaning that we have a 40% increase in the speed to hire."

Skift Research found that 57% of talent managers feel equipped to adapt AI into their processes and about 40% have already seen

PLAYBOOK
Human-Only Moments

Savvy teams are not framing AI as a substitute for human-to-human engagement. As one Marriott executive told Skift, AI amounts to "a powerful tool to empower. The warmth still has to come from people."

Authentically putting fundamental human-first approaches into practice takes a playbook. The following shortlist of "human-only" moments can help steer talent-acquisition teams when explaining to their candidates (and existing staff) how AI and technology augment rather than replace in-person expertise and care.

- **High-emotion service recovery (lost bags, overbooking, health/safety incidents):** The human touch is essential to restoring a sense of control and normalcy to the traveler.
- **VIP/exception handling (complex waivers, bespoke itineraries, goodwill gestures):** Discretionary judgment and brand voice matter to the sensitivities established leaders and public figures expect.
- **Ambiguity and multi-party coordination (irregular ops across airline/hotel/ground):** Cross-stakeholder tradeoffs need a human integrator.
- **Sensitive issues (accessibility requests, family emergencies, fraud flags):** Ethical and reputational risks require a people-led resolution.

productivity gains. Meanwhile, 53% expect AI to remove routine tasks, and 27% anticipate role changes that require upskilling.

The Role of AI in the Travel Workforce



Source: Skift Research

That posture echoes the macro trajectory. For instance, an International Monetary Fund analysis estimated that generative AI exposes about 40% of global jobs to some degree of task reshaping (and roughly 60% in advanced economies), not by eliminating entire occupations overnight, but by reassigning tasks within jobs. In travel, that likely means using automation to strip out routine work and redeploy human time to judgment, recovery, and relationships.

"Our technology department has integrated AI into our systems," noted Intrepid's Penzato. "All staff are receiving two- to three-hour ... training courses in how to work with this integration."

In practice, intelligent and thoughtful automation creates time for authentic service, turning AI from a headcount threat into a capacity multiplier that shortens the journey from rookie to reliable. As such, leading teams are building playbooks to help talent learn when to trust the tool, when to override it, and how to explain decisions to guests.

"These agents can connect with humans or other AI," said Heather Unruh, senior vice president at Salesforce, in a Skift interview, "and if the customer seems concerned or nervous about it, the bot can pick up on that emotion and solicit a human agent to take over."

PLAYBOOK
The Talent Welcome Stack

As in any industry, first impressions are critical to onboarding new talent. Hirers should ensure they include and communicate the following elements as a baseline for the first days and weeks of all new team members.

- **Remote work/mobility visas:** Provide clear income thresholds and streamlined renewal processes (e.g., reduce friction that pushes candidates to other hubs).
- **Co-living and staff-housing standards:** Highlight minimum space guarantees, transport proximity, and safety as shared infrastructure across properties/districts.
- **Tax clarity:** Cut through red tape and show solutions for temporary rotations and short residencies. List portable benefits and contributions to de-risk movement for workers and employers.
- **Language services and family support:** Provide translation and local school transfers to expand the eligible talent pool and improve stickiness after acceptance.
- **Mutual recognition of micro-credentials:** Clear a path for acknowledging accomplishments across brands/regions, such as service, safety, and tools. Empower the skills acquired to travel with talent in meaningful ways.



Expedia Group Case Study: AI as a Company-Wide Talent Enablement Strategy

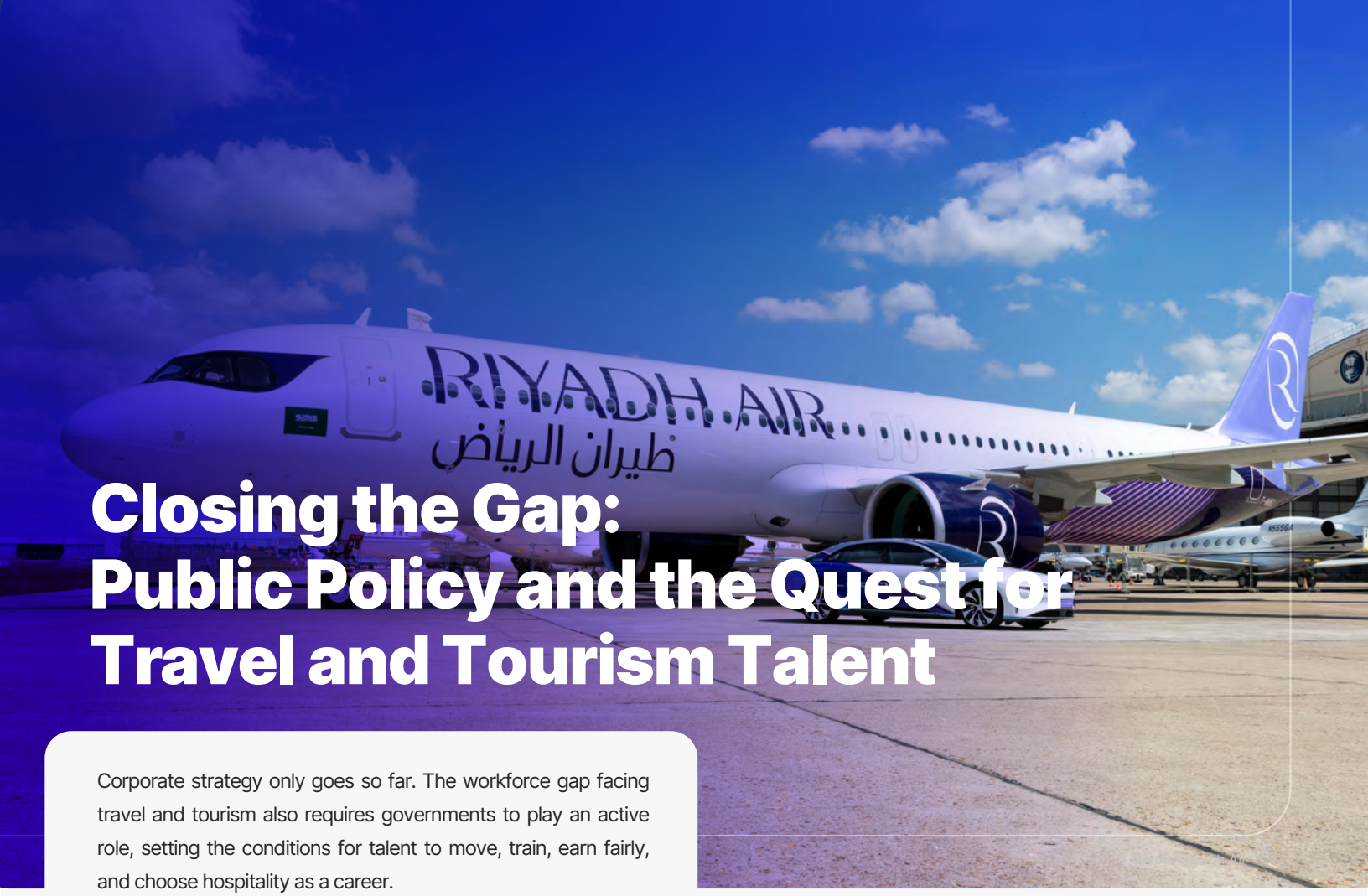
Expedia Group's talent challenge turned out to involve two factors that reinforced each other. First, the market for AI and machine-learning specialists was brutally tight. As Dani Monaghan, SVP of Global Talent Enablement at Expedia Group, explained: "[For] AI and ML roles, there's a shortage, and there's a massive demand."

Second, even if Expedia Group won its share of technical talent, the company still needed its broader workforce — recruiters, managers, and non-technical teams — to be ready for an AI-led operating environment. It's not enough to hire a few specialists. The organization required baseline AI fluency as a shared capability.

Expedia Group's response was notable because it treated AI as both a product capability and a workforce architecture. "Every person in Expedia Group has an AI goal for next year, and we've implemented some really neat tools," said Monaghan.

In addition, the company's goals are now deliberately tiered so the program scales across roles and seniority: "Some people [may] just take some training classes on AI. Some people might be building an agent and sharing the agent broadly with their team. It goes from very simple to very sophisticated."

Expedia Group's approach delivers immediate leverage in recruiting, using AI to compress time-to-hire while preserving decision quality. "We've built our own agent, which is actually phenomenal," said Monaghan. "It's always a human decision-maker, but it really helps us get to the right candidates and more diverse candidates faster."



Closing the Gap: Public Policy and the Quest for Travel and Tourism Talent

Corporate strategy only goes so far. The workforce gap facing travel and tourism also requires governments to play an active role, setting the conditions for talent to move, train, earn fairly, and choose hospitality as a career.

The following six policy levers represent clear opportunities, drawn from models already in operation worldwide.

1 VISA AND IMMIGRATION: WHO'S OPENING THE DOOR—AND WHO'S CLOSING IT

The gap between welcoming and restrictive immigration policy has rarely been more visible. Consider Spain's Digital Nomad Visa, ranked first globally for visa benefits in 2025, which offers a five-year pathway to permanent residency for non-EU remote workers earning above €2,646 per month.

Meanwhile, Portugal's D8 visa, introduced in 2022, provides a similar framework with income thresholds of €3,480 per month and a route to citizenship after five years. As policy models that effectively serve the travel industry, these examples share three features: long-term residency stability (not short-term work permits), employer-independent status that supports worker mobility, and bilateral agreements that expand rather than narrow the pool of eligible source countries.

Policymakers seeking to address hospitality talent shortfalls should prioritize visa frameworks modeled on long-term stability, employer independence, and bilateral reach, rather than sector-specific work permits that tether workers to individual employers and discourage mobility across the broader travel ecosystem.

2 APPRENTICESHIP AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING: STRUCTURED LEARNING THAT PRODUCES READY WORKERS

Germany's dual apprenticeship system (Ausbildung) combines three to four days per week of on-the-job training with one to two days at a vocational school, typically over two to three years. The model applies directly to hospitality: cook, hotel specialist, and restaurant service are all accredited Ausbildung tracks. Employers **invest approximately €18,000 per apprentice annually**, recovering roughly €12,000 through productive contributions. The net cost to the firm is approximately €6,000, which is further offset by lower turnover and recruitment costs among graduates.

In a similar vein, Singapore's **SkillsFuture** program takes a complementary approach: a government-funded lifelong learning framework that provides every citizen aged 25 and older with a SkillsFuture Credit balance for approved courses, with a S$4,000 top-up for those aged 40 and above, introduced in May 2024.

Policymakers should consider co-funding structured apprenticeship programs that meaningfully offset employer training costs, while pairing them with portable skills credits on the Singapore model, ensuring travel and tourism workers can continuously upskill independent of any single employer's training budget.

3 WAGE AND LABOR MARKET REGULATION: A CAUTIONARY TALE

The UK's National Living Wage offers the clearest real-world test case of what happens when governments mandate higher pay floors in the hospitality sector. The NLW rose 9.8% to £11.44 in April 2024 (extended to all workers 21 and older, down from 23), and increased again to £12.21 in April, and again to £12.71 in April 2026 — **a 22% cumulative increase over two years**. Given that **21.6% of UK hospitality workers earned at the minimum wage** in 2023-24, the raises meaningfully improved real compensation for a large share of the sector's workforce. The tradeoff, however, is real. For instance, **PwC reported** that the increase in NLW constituted the single largest operational cost challenge for UK hotel operators in 2024, compressing margins and prompting curtailed hours and reduced hiring in some segments. UKHospitality **has noted** that labor cost increases, combined with higher employer National Insurance contributions and reduced business rates relief, are forcing businesses toward automation and reduced staffing rather than expanded teams. The policy lesson is that wage-floor policy works better when paired with business rate relief, training subsidies, and other cost offsets that allow employers to absorb the increase without reducing headcount.

Policymakers should treat wage floor increases not as standalone interventions but as one element of a coordinated labor strategy, pairing any mandated pay increases with business rate relief and training subsidies sufficient to allow employers to absorb higher costs without reducing headcount or accelerating automation.

4

TOURISM-SPECIFIC WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: CERTIFYING THE SUPPLY CHAIN

The Philippines has built one of the most comprehensive national certification frameworks specifically designed to produce export-ready hospitality workers. The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) issues National Certificates in food and beverage service, cookery, housekeeping, bartending, and hotel/cruise services, assessed against competency standards aligned with ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements. This means Philippine-certified workers are validated for employment across ASEAN and recognized by employers in key hospitality labor markets worldwide.

Policymakers should invest in developing (or aligning with) internationally recognized competency certification frameworks for hospitality trades, using the Philippine TESDA model as a template, while pursuing bilateral (and multilateral) agreements to allow certified workers to move across borders without redundant credentialing.

5

EDUCATION AND PERCEPTION: WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE HOSPITALITY ASPIRATIONAL

Switzerland provides the institutional model for what happens when a government treats hospitality education as a matter of national brand and economic strategy. For example, its EHL Hospitality Business School has been ranked the world's best hospitality institution by QS World University Rankings for seven consecutive years through 2025. Its 30,000 alumni operate across 150 countries, nearly a third in top management. EHL is now a recognized member of Switzerland's national University of Applied Sciences system, positioning hospitality management alongside law and engineering as a credentialed professional path.

Policymakers should elevate hospitality management within their national higher education frameworks, granting it the same institutional standing and public funding pathways as law, engineering, or business. And signaling to students, employers, and investors that the sector represents a serious professional career rather than a fallback vocation.

6

TAX POLICY AND TRAINING INVESTMENT: INCENTIVIZING GROWTH

Governments have a direct lever to lower the cost of workforce development for employers, particularly small- and mid-sized operators who cannot absorb training investment as large chains can. The UK's Apprenticeship Levy, which transitioned to the Growth and Skills Levy in April 2026, is one of the most fully developed models. Large employers with payrolls above £3 million pay 0.5% of wages into a training fund; smaller businesses access apprenticeship training with the government covering 95% of costs. From August 2026, SMEs will pay nothing for apprentices under 25, and levy funds will expand to cover shorter modular upskilling courses beyond traditional apprenticeships.

Policymakers should design levy frameworks that deliberately favor small and mid-sized hospitality operators, who face the steepest barriers to training investment.



The Big Picture: Policy and Strategy for 2026 and Beyond

From patchwork rules to coordinated mobility, the numerous considerations before any given companies always include variables. Differing timetables, region-specific requirements for work permits, credential recognition, and training subsidies all can turn staffing goals into a maze of work.

In response to that challenge, the policy-level mantra is "alignment." For instance, leading destinations and brands are building regional compacts that create fast lanes for verified employers trying to fill in-demand roles, recognizing micro-credentials across borders and brands, and tying training support to completion and retention rather than one-off headcounts.

The practical effect is visible on the ground: predictable rotation windows across location-based and seasonal circuits; staff housing and transport treated as shared infrastructure (and not "perks"); fewer staffing shocks; smoother guest experiences; and a credible promise of mobility that replaces the gig-to-gig shuffle.

"Nowadays, if you want to have a staff and you don't have a room for your staff, you're not getting that staff; the contract will not be signed," said Martin Nydegger, Chief Executive Officer of Switzerland Tourism. "Hotels need to provide housing for their people."

Another step is to facilitate labor mobility within countries and across borders, and to strengthen collaboration at all levels by providing visas and work permits.

In short, a successful talent policy is a product, and travel and tourism's frontrunners are crafting tomorrow's talent policy like product design. The same intent that shapes brand standards and loyalty mechanics is now shaping visas, training, and mobility. For the companies that approach talent acquisition in this way, the result is increasingly evident: careers feel continuous, and the work itself reads as purposeful.

"When we open a new location, there is an importance of carrying the company culture and values from one property to another," said Hingel at Raffles and Fairmont Hotels and Resorts.

For example, "you notice a difference when a hotel has maybe been converted, or they've just popped up, and they haven't had someone who comes over at the senior level that has experience with the brands," Hingel added. "We launched a new internal mobility program this year that really prioritizes the applications of internal talent over external talent. We've made it front and center. It's not something that is just written on a piece of paper and put in a drawer. It's a metric that we're following as well to make sure that you have those individuals getting promoted within hotels, but also moving across hotels as well."

1 in 9

jobs worldwide is in travel & tourism

Source: WTTC

By reframing prestige through corporate policy, tourism can shed the "seasonal and low-prestige" label. Careers are perceived to be scaffolded and measured. Employers that publish simple workforce scorecards like local-hire share, internal mobility, credential completion, and early-tenure retention signal that people are a strategic asset.

"We try to design jobs that are fun and interesting within the context of, we're still a business, but you have interesting work to do," said Elie Maalouf, CEO at IHG, **speaking to Skift**. "We make sure you have an environment for people that you like and that you trust, a good culture, an inventive culture, a dynamic culture that is performance-driven.

"People stay longer," Maalouf continued, "and … even when they leave, many times want to come back."

Furthermore, community protection efforts already common across leading operators, such as local pipelines, do-no-harm commitments, women's participation, and safe commuting,



become formal compacts with schools and vendors, backed by transparent advancement targets. Paired with portfolio-wide employee scheduling standards and AI-enabled workflows, the job narrative changes from shift-work to building craft, tools, and leadership. Together, these elements create a working ecosystem that matters to guests and to the staff serving them.

As leaders work to improve talent retention, flexibility is becoming a group-level norm, including predictable rosters, clear location-swap rules, and mobility options embedded in job architecture rather than negotiated one-off offers.

Also, for travel travel companies, AI is being successfully framed as additional capacity for human service. Automation takes over repetitive tasks, and coaching focuses on judgment and hospitality craft. Cross-training is the default requirement, as it improves resilience during peaks while making progression clear and attainable from day one. Mobility programs convert geography from a tax to an opportunity, utilizing short residencies and rotation circuits that turn brand scale into personal growth.

The outcome is the same whether the destination is a global gateway or an emerging leisure hub: When policy turns travel and tourism jobs into movable, skills-focused, and skills-building careers, the prospect of long-term work within the industry stops looking seasonal and starts looking like a place to create, lead, and stay.

43M

projected global hospitality worker shortfall by 2035

Source: WTTC





The Work Ahead: Roles and Responsibilities for 3 Key Groups

Closing the travel and tourism talent gap is not a problem any single organization can solve alone. The structural forces at play, including demographic divergence, post-pandemic labor expectations, AI-driven task reshaping, and a projected 43-million-worker shortfall, demand coordinated action across three key stakeholders: industry incumbents, emerging technology-driven disruptors and stewards (government policy makers and researchers). Each has leverage the others lack. Below is a shortlist of targeted recommendations for how each group should lead the way in developing a roadmap for successful talent strategies.

1 TRAVEL INDUSTRY INCUMBENTS

Industry incumbents, including airlines, hotel groups, destination leaders, and cruise operators, hold the most direct influence over the daily experience of travel and tourism workers, which makes their decisions on role design, mobility, and worker investment the single largest variable in whether the industry's talent narrative changes. Specific actions incumbents should consider:

Redesign the frontline job, not just the recruiting pitch.

Blended functional roles, more predictable scheduling, and visible advancement pathways like Marriott's Elevate program, or AirAsia's culture-first pipeline, must become the default job structure, not the exception.

Treat staff housing and transport as infrastructure, not perks.

For jobs located in more rural or destination resort locales, treat staff housing and transport as operational infrastructure rather than discretionary benefits. For more urban and corporate HQ roles, apply the same logic to mobility friction by offering visa support, relocation packages, and commute allowances so that geography doesn't become a barrier to filling critical positions.

Publish workforce scorecards.

Metrics such as the share of locally hired candidates, internal job mobility rates, credential completion, and early-tenure retention are important indicators that offer important signals to job seekers, local communities, and policymakers. Incumbents should make these visible as a signal that people are a strategic asset and create accountability to back it up.

Lead on micro-credential standardization.

Large hotel groups, airline alliances, and cruise consortiums have the scale to establish common credential frameworks across brands and borders. Doing so would immediately expand the addressable talent pool and reduce onboarding friction across the industry.

Invest in internal mobility as a retention strategy, not a reward.

Rotation circuits, short residencies, and cross-property movement, paired with housing, tax clarity, and career guidance, can convert geography from a barrier into a differentiator. Incumbents with large portfolios have an advantage here that smaller operators cannot replicate.

2 TRAVEL INDUSTRY DISRUPTORS

The technology-first travel "disruptors," referring to organizations like AI platforms, ride-share companies, and software firms that operate in and around travel, occupy a unique position. They are simultaneously at the forefront of creating and reshaping the tasks that travel workers perform while also competing with industry incumbents for the same technical talent. Their decisions about how to deploy AI, and with whom, will shape the industry's readiness for the next decade. Here's what they should consider as they push the travel industry forward:

Build AI tools designed to augment human decision making, not just automate it.

The most effective AI deployments, from Marriott International's interview-scheduling agent to Expedia Group's internal recruiting tool, succeeded because they preserved human judgment in the hiring process at key decision points. Technology players should look to develop and market tools explicitly designed to increase the capacity and confidence of frontline workers, HR leaders and managers, not simply reduce headcount.

Open AI simulation infrastructure to training partnerships.

Platforms capable of simulating high-friction guest scenarios like complaint handling, peak demand periods, or unique accessibility needs can compress months of readiness into weeks. Rather than selling these tools exclusively to enterprise clients, technology players have an opportunity to partner with vocational schools, DMOs, and national training authorities to scale access and build trust, both with job seekers and policymakers.

Invest in AI literacy as a shared workforce/talent resource.

The 27% of travel talent managers who anticipate roles changing enough to require upskilling represent an enormous training market. Mobility companies and AI platforms that develop modular, stackable AI fluency programs targeted at frontline supervisors and mid-level managers can build durable relationships with an industry hungry for practical tools.

Use platform data to surface labor market signals.

Travel management platforms sit on rich, real-time data about where workers move, what roles they leave, and what conditions improve retention. Sharing anonymized, aggregate insights with destination partners and workforce researchers would help the industry make faster, better-calibrated decisions on hiring and retention strategy.

Build for informal-to-formal job transitions.

Roughly six in ten workers globally are informally employed, and travel is no exception: freelance tour guides, cash-paid housekeeping and unregistered transport operators represent a largely invisible labor pool that the industry depends on but doesn't always convert into formal employment. Technology platforms willing to consider building and scaling tools that help reduce the friction of job formalization offer an intriguing set of solutions. Examples include portable benefit accounts (for health insurance, paid leave or retirement), along with digital credential wallets, and portable work histories, all of which create pathways into structured travel employment while expanding the disruptors' own user bases. This is an underserved design opportunity.

3 STEWARDS

The final stakeholder group, composed of government policymakers, and researchers operates at the intersection of perception, policy, and evidence. And these are the three forces most capable of shifting how the next generation of potential workers views travel and tourism as a career. Here are some ways they can support the narrative:

Government policymakers: Move from permitting talent mobility to engineering it.

The evidence is clear: policy decisions related to visa design, apprenticeship funding, wage floor policy, and training levies are competitive assets that can make or break talent flows. Destinations with streamlined work-permit processes, mutual credential recognition agreements, and training subsidies will attract more operators and produce more stable workforces than those without. Policymakers who treat talent infrastructure with the same urgency as physical infrastructure will see it pay dividends in destination competitiveness and community employment outcomes.

Researchers: Close the measurement gap.

The industry's talent decisions are too often made with lagging, incomplete, or sector-siloed data. Academic institutions and government research bodies have an opportunity to build shared longitudinal data sets tracking time-to-readiness, credential portability, retention outcomes by job design type, and the measurable effects of AI deployment on frontline roles. This research doesn't just inform policy — it gives employers the evidence base to justify the investment required to turn good intentions into structural change.

Framing the Future: 8 Forward-Looking Takeaways for Travel and Tourism Talent Strategies

1 LUXURY EXPANSION WILL PUSH BRANDS TO BUILD "CULTURE-CARRYING" LEADERSHIP CIRCUITS ACROSS PROPERTIES AND MARKETS.

As hospitality seeks to uphold quality standards under the pressure of rapid scaling, operators will increasingly depend on mobile managers who can move, embed, and transfer operating discipline without losing local nuance. Hingel, at Raffles and Fairmont, described the dynamic this way: "You need to have managers who will move around and carry the culture and carry the service standards and the quality." The implication is structural: Growth will increasingly require a staffing model built around mobility rather than just headcount.

2 HIRING WILL CONTINUE TO SHIFT TOWARD FORMAL "ATTITUDE-FIRST, SKILL-BUILT" PIPELINES AS LOCAL TALENT ECOSYSTEMS DEEPEN.

In tight markets, especially where experience is uneven, employers will increasingly select for service mindset and trainability, then accelerate readiness through structured onboarding and repeatable practice. Hingel captured the operating philosophy by saying "the industry as a whole has always been driven by the spirit that you hire for attitude, and you train on skill."

3 TALENT POLICY WILL BE TREATED LIKE HARD INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT SOFT HR.

In rural and seasonal markets, staff-housing capacity — and the permitting speed that makes it real — will become a destination's competitive advantage as much as room inventory or airlift. For an increasing number of operators, employee housing is no longer a "benefit"; it is the condition for workforce stability.

4 WORK-PERMIT DESIGN WILL BECOME A FRONTLINE OPERATIONAL ISSUE.

Destinations that reduce friction for contract-backed hires while maintaining safeguards will stabilize service delivery faster, especially in high-demand roles where a single vacancy can compromise the guest experience. Nydegger of Switzerland Tourism framed the practical threshold clearly: "Obviously, they need to provide a working contract. And if you give someone a working contract, then it should be easier." The winners will be the systems that treat labor mobility as a matter of service continuity.

5 ONBOARDING WILL STANDARDIZE INTO A GLOBAL CHASSIS WITH LOCAL CUSTOMIZATION, BECAUSE SCALE DEMANDS IT.

As brands grow across geographies, they will formalize service fundamentals, brand standards, and safety culture while building a controlled layer of local adaptation that keeps the training credible on the ground. Lee, at Marriott, put the split succinctly: "80% is globally relevant, and 20% is going to need to be customized based on the geography." That ratio becomes the blueprint for speed-to-readiness at scale.

6 READINESS WILL BE WON THROUGH CONCENTRATED, HANDS-ON CAPABILITY TRANSFER, ESPECIALLY IN MARKETS THAT ARE BUILDING LUXURY SERVICE CAPACITY QUICKLY.

The next era of training will lean harder on structured ramps, pre-opening intensives, and experienced operators deployed as coaches to compress the time from rookie to reliable. "You have experienced leaders … coming from other hotels … spend that hands-on time to bring knowledge of the brand, operational standards," said Lee. The trend is clear: the fastest-growing operators will stop treating ramp time as inevitable and start treating it as designable.

7 GOVERNMENT TRAINING LEVIES WILL BECOME A COMPETITIVE DIFFERENTIATOR.

As large-market models mature, operators in well-structured markets will face meaningfully lower workforce development costs than peers in markets without equivalent frameworks. See, for example, the UK's Growth and Skills Levy from April 2026, under which SMEs will pay nothing for apprentices under 25 and levy funds will expand to cover modular upskilling beyond traditional apprenticeships. For brands choosing where to grow, training infrastructure will increasingly factor alongside costs in site selection decisions.

8 NATIONAL CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORKS WILL EMERGE AS A STRATEGIC EXPORT.

Destinations that build credentialed, internationally recognized pipelines, such as the Philippines' TESDA system, will find their workers in higher global demand. For operators, the practical implications run in both directions: certified markets become preferred sourcing pools, and destinations without equivalent frameworks face a quiet but compounding disadvantage in attracting experienced hospitality talent from abroad.

TRAVEL AND TOURISM TALENT PLAYBOOK

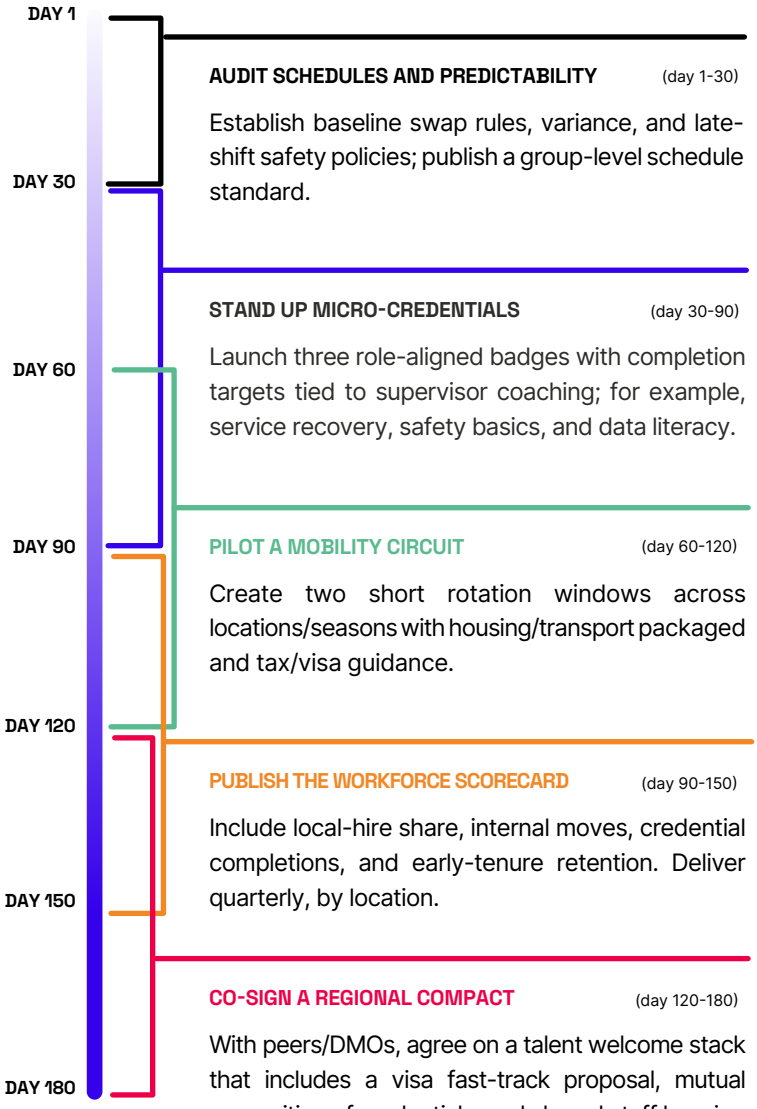
Travel and Tourism Talent Checklist

For talent teams seeking a baseline to measure their readiness for the modern industry candidate, the following checklist summarizes the key ideas in this report:

- ☐ **Visa/permit fast lane for verified employers and in-demand roles**
- ☐ **Mutual micro-credential recognition** (service, safety, tech tools)
- ☐ **Portable training subsidies tied to completion and retention**
- ☐ **Staff housing and transport as shared infrastructure rather than ad-hoc perks**
- ☐ **Safe-commute standards** (i.e., late-shift corridors, lighting, escorts/transport)

180 Days to a Build Successful Talent Ecosystem

For companies looking to take their acquisition and retention plans to the next level, the following timeline outlines a path to successfully highlighting and acting on strong talent policies.



About TOURISE

TOURISE is the world's premier platform for shaping the future of global tourism. Powered by the Saudi Ministry of Tourism, its inaugural Summit was held November 11–13, 2025, in Riyadh.

Bringing together global leaders across government, business, investment, and technology, TOURISE drives transformative initiatives and year-round collaboration to build a tourism sector that is sustainable, equitable, and future-focused.

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Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors in travel. Through news, research, conferences, exclusive interviews, strategic

sector-focused newsletters, and more, Skift deciphers and defines the global trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

Skift Studio is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Accor, Dubai Tourism, AWS, Expedia Group, Allianz Partners, and many more to help brands solve problems, create unforgettable moments, and communicate big ideas through content, research, and event activations.

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Acknowledgments

Skift and TOURISE would like to extend a special thank you to Sarah Altamimi, Tiffany Misrahi, Jeremy Kressmann, Anne Duffy, and all of the industry interview subjects for their contributions to this report.