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United Arab Emirates

Corporate Immigration

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This country-specific Q&A provides an overview of corporate immigration laws and regulations applicable in United Arab Emirates.

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United Arab Emirates: Corporate Immigration

1. What are the relevant government entities relating to immigration in your jurisdiction?

The principal government authorities responsible for immigration in the UAE include the Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP), which oversees national immigration and identity management; the General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs (GDRFA), primarily operating within the Emirate of Dubai; the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE), which regulates employment-related immigration in the mainland; and Dubai Economy and Tourism (DET), which interfaces with immigration processes in the context of business licensing and establishment.

2. What are the options available for sponsor-based employment in your jurisdiction and timelines involved in securing a work permit?

Employment-based sponsorship may be obtained through MOHRE for mainland companies or through the respective free zone authorities. The procedural timeline typically involves initial approval, medical fitness examination, Emirates ID registration, and visa endorsement, with an overall processing period of approximately 5 to 10 working days, assuming compliance with documentary and regulatory requirements.

3. What are the primary options available for unsponsored work and investment in your jurisdiction?

The UAE provides a number of unsponsored residency pathways including Freelance Visas (available via selected free zones), the 10-year Golden Visa, the 5-year Green Visa for skilled professionals and independent contractors, and Investor Visas tied to property ownership or corporate shareholding structures.

4. What are the requirements for becoming a sponsor of employment-based migrants and what are the role and reporting duties of

sponsors?

To act as a sponsor, a business entity must be duly licensed within the UAE, possess a valid establishment card, and demonstrate compliance with all applicable labor and immigration regulations. Sponsorship responsibilities include submission and renewal of residence permits, proper cancellation upon termination, and timely reporting of any change in the employee's status to the appropriate authorities.

5. Are applications filed electronically, or paper base? Is a physical visa/work permit document issued or is an electronic approval issued?

Immigration applications are predominantly submitted electronically through authorized platforms such as GDRFA, ICP, MOHRE, and TASHEEL. Upon completion of biometric verification, a physical residency visa is affixed to the passport, although the majority of the process is managed via digital platforms.

6. Is an in-person attendance/interview required as part of the visa/work permit application process? Is an individual required to enrol their biometrics (digital photo, fingerprint scan) as part of the visa/work permit process?

Yes. Applicants are required to attend in person for medical screening and biometric data collection, which includes a digital photograph and fingerprint capture. While interviews are not standard, they may be mandated for specific visa categories.

7. What persons qualify as dependants? Can dependants work based on their dependant visa status? Are there any restrictions?

Dependents may include a spouse, children (sons up to age 25 and unmarried daughters), and, in some instances, parents, subject to prescribed income and accommodation criteria. While dependent visas do not confer the right to work, dependents may engage in lawful employment upon securing an approved labor permit from MOHRE.

8. What is the general time frame and processes for obtaining permanent residence and citizenship for sponsored and unsponsored business-related immigration?

The UAE does not offer permanent residence in the conventional sense. However, the 10-year Golden Visa provides a long-term residency alternative. Citizenship is granted in exceptional cases by presidential decree and is typically reserved for individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the UAE.

9. What productive type activities can a business visitor undertake and for how long?

Business visitors are permitted to participate in non-remunerative activities such as attending meetings, conferences, negotiations, and short-term training. The duration of stay is generally 30 to 90 days, depending on the visa type issued.

10. Can remote work be carried out from your country?

Yes. The UAE offers a Virtual Work Residence Visa that permits foreign professionals to reside in the country while rendering services to employers based overseas.

11. Are there any productive work / revenue generating activities that can be carried out as a visitor and without the need for a work permit? If so, what activities and for how long?

Visitors may engage in preliminary business activities such as attending meetings or exploring investments. However, any form of remunerative employment or direct revenue-generating activity requires an authorized work permit.

12. Is there a remote work or nomad visa category in your jurisdiction? If not, how likely is it that this will be implemented in future?

Yes. The Virtual Work Visa facilitates remote employment and permits eligible applicants to reside in the UAE for an initial period of 12 months, with the possibility of renewal.

13. How easy is it to switch visa

categories/jobs/employer from within country? And/or if made redundant, can the individual regularise their stay in another capacity and what is the timeframe allowable?

Visa category transfers are generally permitted within the UAE, subject to applicable eligibility criteria. Individuals who become redundant are afforded a grace period of 60 to 180 days during which they may secure new employment, transition to a different visa category (e.g., freelance or investor), or make arrangements to depart the country.

14. What common issues or concerns may arise for employers under business immigration in your jurisdiction?

Employers may encounter administrative delays resulting from incomplete documentation, improper classification of employee roles, or non-compliance with Emiratisation mandates. Inadequate handling of visa cancellations can also result in financial or regulatory penalties.

15. Is there a fast track process / certification that business can obtain to expedite visa / permit processing?

Yes. Certain free zones and priority sectors provide expedited services, including "VIP" channels and fast-track processing for long-term visa categories such as the Golden Visa, which can significantly reduce processing times.

16. What are the recent trends, both political and social that have impacted (or are anticipated to impact) your jurisdiction with regard to immigration policy and law?

Current trends include heightened emphasis on Emiratisation in the private sector, increased openness to remote professionals and digital nomads, and an overall shift towards more family-oriented and long-term residency solutions.

17. How has the COVID-19 pandemic shaped current immigration landscape in your jurisdiction?

The pandemic acted as a catalyst for the UAE's digital transformation of immigration systems, introduced

remote work visa options, and prompted extended grace periods for visa holders adversely affected by job losses or travel constraints.

18. Are there any new and / or anticipated changes impacting immigration law and / or policy in your jurisdiction?

Anticipated reforms include expanded eligibility for long-term residency categories, enhanced digitization of visa processing, and stricter regulatory enforcement around employer obligations and Emiratisation quotas.

19. How do you see technology developing and evolving to support immigration process in the future?

The UAE continues to innovate through platforms such as EmaraTax, UAE Pass, and GDRFA Smart Services. Technological enhancements include widespread use of biometrics, facial recognition, and the potential integration of artificial intelligence for application review and compliance monitoring.

20. What are the Right to Work requirements in your jurisdiction?

Individuals must possess a valid labor card and residency visa to be legally employed in the UAE. Freelancers are also required to hold an active freelance permit issued under an authorized licensing framework.

21. What are the types of civil and criminal penalties employers may face for non-compliance with immigration rules i.e. employing an individual who does not have the Right to Work?

Sanctions for non-compliance include monetary fines of AED 50,000 or more per offence, potential business license suspension, company blacklisting, and, in severe or repeated cases, criminal liability including imprisonment.

22. Are there labour market testing requirements in your jurisdiction and if so, what do they involve?

There is no formal labor market testing mechanism. However, Emiratisation obligations require employers in

certain sectors to prioritize the recruitment of UAE nationals, particularly in skilled roles.

23. Are there quota requirements, restrictions or a cap on the numbers of foreign nationals hired per company in your jurisdiction?

While there are no nationwide quota caps, companies must adhere to visa ceilings determined by business activity, and must meet Emiratisation benchmarks. Free zone entities typically benefit from greater flexibility in hiring foreign nationals.

24. Are there any exit procedures in your jurisdiction, if an individual is departing permanently?

Yes. Individuals must cancel their visa via the relevant authority (GDRFA or the respective free zone), resolve any outstanding employment obligations, and may also cancel their Emirates ID and return health insurance cards.

25. Are there any requirements for medical certificates or vaccinations for your jurisdiction?

A standard medical fitness examination, including chest X-ray and blood testing is mandatory. Screening includes tuberculosis, Hepatitis B/C, and HIV. COVID-19 vaccination is not a current prerequisite for visa issuance.

26. Are there any language requirements for your jurisdiction?

There are no statutory language requirements for immigration purposes. However, proficiency in English or Arabic may be advantageous in navigating administrative procedures and in fulfilling professional obligations.

27. What are the government costs associated with a typical employment based visa?

In the mainland, government fees for employment-based visas typically range between AED 3,000 and AED 7,000, inclusive of medical testing, Emirates ID, and visa stamping. Costs in free zones may vary between AED 5,000 and AED 10,000 or more, contingent upon license type and optional services.

28. Is a local contract of employment required in order to obtain a work based visa or work permit? Are there salary or other thresholds to be met by the migrant?

Yes. An employment contract in compliance with MOHRE (or the equivalent for free zone authorities) is required for visa issuance. While there is no formal minimum salary, a monthly income of AED 4,000 or more is generally required for eligibility to sponsor dependents.

29. What are the maximum periods of stay for individuals on an employment based visa / work permit?

Mainland employment visas are typically valid for two years, whereas many free zones issue visas with a validity of up to three years. Golden Visas provide residency for 10 and 5 years respectively, subject to renewal conditions.

30. Does your jurisdiction allow dual nationality?

Dual nationality is permitted only under presidential decree. UAE citizenship remains discretionary and is typically reserved for individuals demonstrating exceptional merit or contribution to the nation.

31. What are the most positive aspects of your immigration system compared to the rest of the world?

The UAE's immigration regime is characterized by efficiency, absence of personal income taxation, availability of long-term visa options, and a welcoming environment for foreign investors, entrepreneurs, and skilled professionals.

32. Are you facing any challenges resulting from a shortage of skills. If yes, which skills?

Yes. The UAE has identified shortages in areas including information technology, cybersecurity, healthcare, sustainable energy, and advanced engineering, as well as AI-driven sectors.

33. Are there any plans in place to address green skills and/or to support transition to green economies'?

In alignment with national sustainability goals and commitments under COP28, the UAE has introduced incentives and visa pathways for professionals specializing in renewable energy, environmental consulting, ESG, and related green economy sectors.

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