St James's Place

St. James's Place Cross-border Wealth Management Study
United Arab Emirates Edition

Money on the Move 2026

Insights into global mobility and wealth

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Introduction

Global wealth is more mobile than ever as career, lifestyle, and family decisions see more people choose to relocate and build lives across multiple jurisdictions.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a well-established destination on the global expatriate circuit. Home to 11.4 million people in 2025[1], with expatriates accounting for nearly 88% of the population[2], it continues to uphold its reputation as a stable, globally connected hub for talent, business and investment.

Our inaugural Money on the Move report explores how affluent expatriates in the UAE are building, managing and protecting wealth across borders, and the opportunities and challenges that come with increasingly international lives.

Having lived and worked across Asia and the Middle East for two decades, I have seen first-hand how international mobility can transform careers and financial futures. Our findings reflect that experience. 78% of UAE's expats plan to remain abroad for at least another eight years, while 44% plan to retire in the UAE. For many, what starts as a temporary move has evolved into a long-term financial journey.

The financial upside can be significant. Almost all respondents earn (96%) and save (97%) more in the UAE than in comparable roles at home. Seven in ten believe living abroad will accelerate their retirement by at least three years, while 88% of those increasing discretionary spending are directing more towards savings and investments.

But managing wealth across borders is complex. UAE expats cite the high cost of living, cross-border tax and regulation, currency volatility and access to investment products among the biggest challenges to managing wealth internationally. Yet fewer than one in three (27%) consider themselves highly financially literate.

Our findings point to the value of advice in navigating that complexity. Highly financially literate expats are more likely to work with an adviser and hold diversified portfolios, and more than twice as likely to have sought advice in both their home and host markets than those with lower financial literacy (70% versus 28%). It is a reminder that successful financial planning is not about having all the answers yourself, but knowing when specialist advice can help.

Nearly nine in ten respondents believe seeking professional advice earlier would have improved their investment earnings and savings. On average, they estimate earlier advice could have prevented US$56,410 in missed financial opportunities – US$9,248 for every year spent abroad. Those already working with a financial adviser also estimate they save an average of 3.7 hours every month, or around 5.6 working days each year, managing their cross-borders finances.

As people's finances become more international, the value of advice continues to evolve. Beyond just the pursuit of better returns, it is about helping provide continuity, clarity and confidence for the future. I am proud of the work we do at St. James's Place, to provide advice that works hand-in-hand with individual and familial financial and life goals.

I hope this report, its findings and recommendations, will spark positive conversations and help people make informed decisions as they manage their money on the move.

Oliver Wickham
Partnership Director - Asia and Middle East

[1] https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard
[2] https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/the-uae/facts-and-figures

Key findings

Expat life no longer a temporary stop

78%
expect to live abroad for 8 years or more.

Over half
stayed overseas longer than expected.

Living abroad can fast-track financial freedom

64% say financial freedom would have taken at least five years longer without living abroad, and **70%** believing living abroad will accelerate retirement by at least three years.

More than 96%
earn more than they would in a similar role at home, and they save more each month after expenses.

Biggest barrier to effective wealth management abroad?

89% say high cost of living in the host country is the biggest barrier to effective wealth management while living abroad.

Taxation policies (92%) are among the top factors influencing choice of expat destination, alongside residency permits and visa rules (92%) and access to public education and healthcare (92%).

Expats with stronger financial literacy are significantly more likely to take proactive steps in managing their finances and planning for the future. As a result, they are more likely to say their financial position has improved while living in the UAE, compared with those with low financial literacy **(82% vs 67%)**.

However, **only 27%** of expats in the UAE consider themselves highly financially literate.

Trusted advice is more valuable as wealth becomes more mobile

52% rely on professional advice to manage international finance. Seeking advice earlier could have helped expats avoid an average of US$9,248 in annual financial losses.

Saves 5.6 days a year
Working with a financial adviser saves an average of 3.7 hours per month.

61%
of expats unlikely to return home have included multi-jurisdictional assets in their wills.

51%
undertake succession planning to give their children the option to live in the UAE long term.

48%
cite tax optimisation as the top driver of succession and inheritance planning.

Retirement and legacy planning are becoming cross-border priorities

Research snapshot

The report findings are based on a double-blind survey of 450 affluent and high-net-worth residents in the UAE who have lived and worked in multiple jurisdictions and have multi-jurisdictional wealth management considerations.

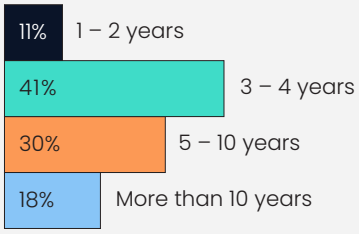
The field work was completed in May 2026.

Respondents surveyed held the following passports:

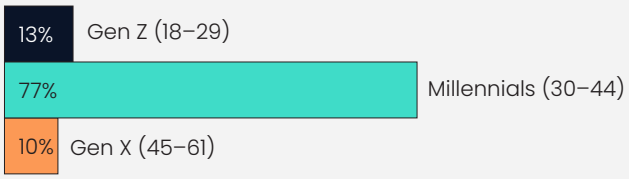
	n=
Australia	56
Canada	54
France	31
Germany	16
Hong Kong SAR	23
India	154
Italy	27
Malaysia	19
New Zealand	13
People's Republic of China	1
Singapore	12
South Africa	7
Spain	6
United Arab Emirates	6
United Kingdom	19
United States	21
Other European countries	5
Other Asian countries	32
Other African countries	29
Other countries in Oceania	1
Latin American countries	1

Who took part in the survey

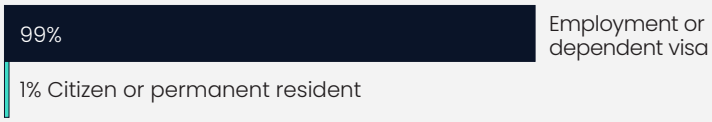
Time as an expat



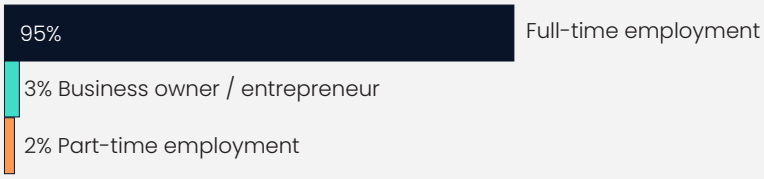
Generational breakdown



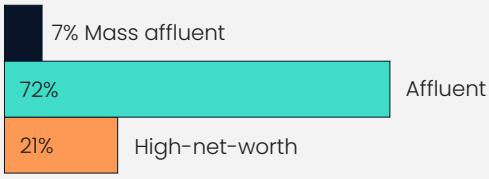
Residency status



Employment profile



Wealth level



Mass affluent: annual income below AED 450,000 and investible assets below AED 650,000

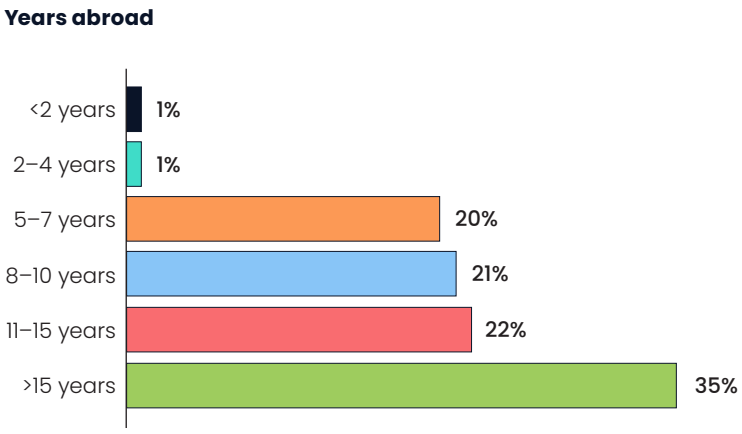
Affluent: those who did not qualify as either mass affluent or high-net-worth, including those with annual income and/or investible assets between the mass affluent and high-net-worth thresholds, or those meeting only one of the high-net-worth thresholds.

High-net-worth: an annual income of AED 700,000 or above and investible assets of AED 700,000 or above

Expat life is lasting longer than most expect

What often begins as a career move is increasingly becoming a long-term financial journey. More than half (55%) of UAE expats have stayed overseas longer than expected, while over three-quarters (78%) plan to live abroad for at least eight years before returning home. Around six in ten (59%) still expect to return home eventually, but do not see that happening before retirement.

Expected total number of years lived abroad before returning home



Mass affluent expats are 2.7 or ~3 times more likely to see the UAE as a permanent home. Nearly a quarter (24%) expect to remain overseas permanently, compared with just 9% of high-net-worth expats.

12%

of expats are unlikely to return home

Mass affluent expats are most likely to stay overseas for good:

~3x

Living abroad is accelerating financial and lifestyle goals

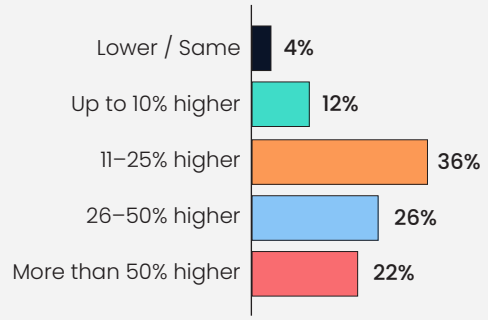
For most UAE expats, relocating overseas was driven primarily by career opportunities, with 64% citing career advancement as their main reason for moving. For many, those opportunities have translated into meaningful financial gains.

Almost all expats in the UAE (96%) report earning more in the UAE than in their home country. Nearly half (48%) say their income is at least 25% higher, and more than one in five (22%) report earning over 50% more after relocating.

Higher incomes are also translating into greater savings. Despite the higher cost of living often associated with international relocation, 97% of respondents say they save more each month than they did at home. Almost half (48%) are saving at least 25% more, while 88% of those whose discretionary spending has increased say they are putting more money towards savings and investments.

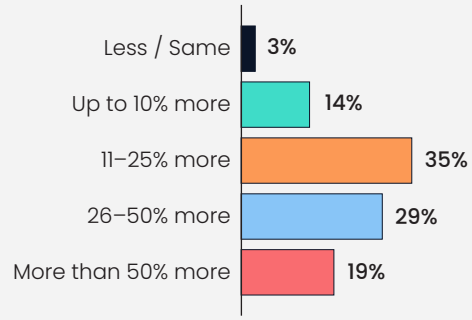
Change in income compared to home country

Income increase



Change in savings compared to home country

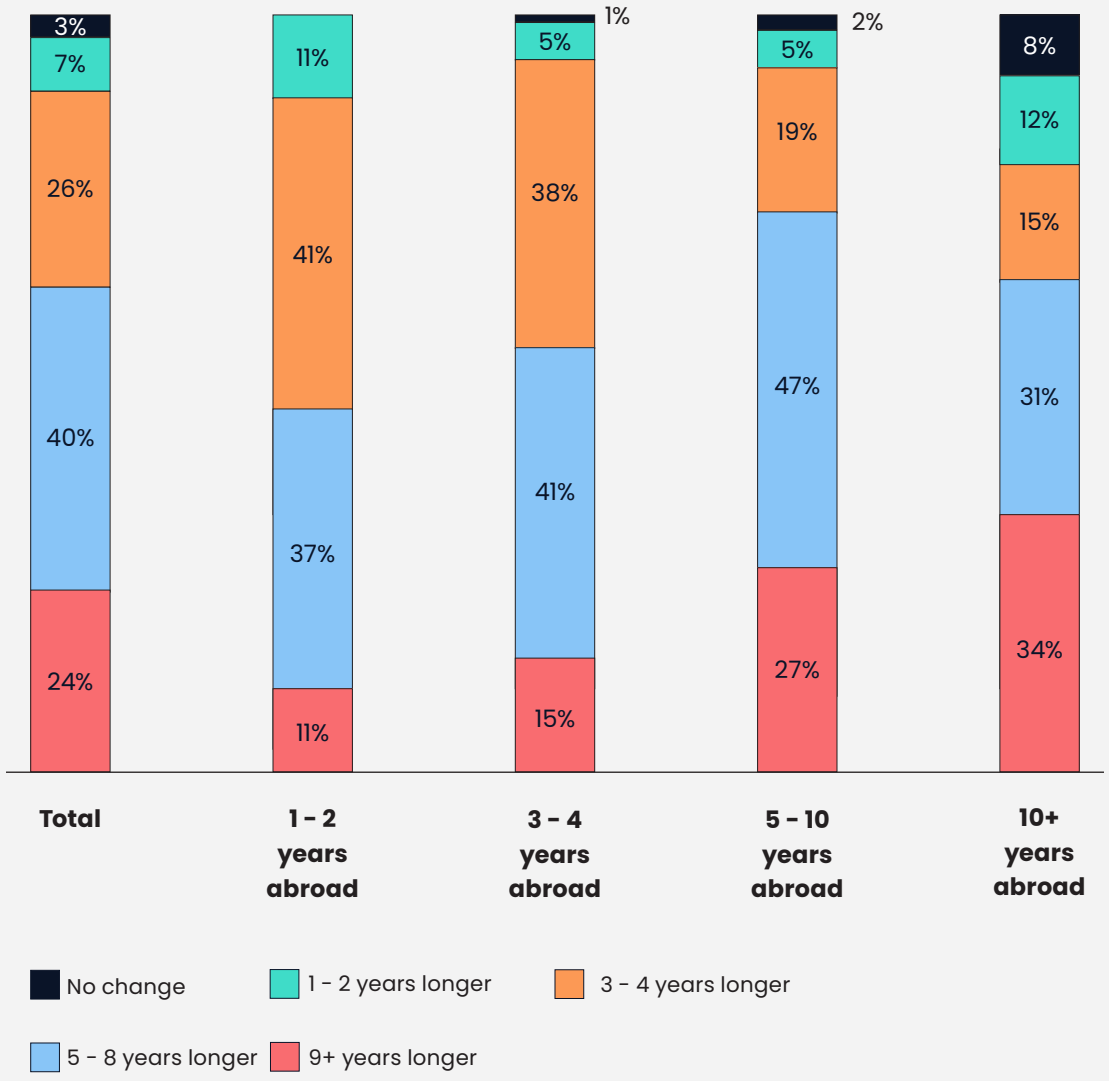
Monthly savings increase



The financial uplift experienced by expats is often transformative, allowing many to achieve goals such as financial freedom and retiring earlier than planned. Two-thirds (64%) of expats in the UAE say that achieving their financial freedom targets would have taken them at least five years longer had they never lived overseas.

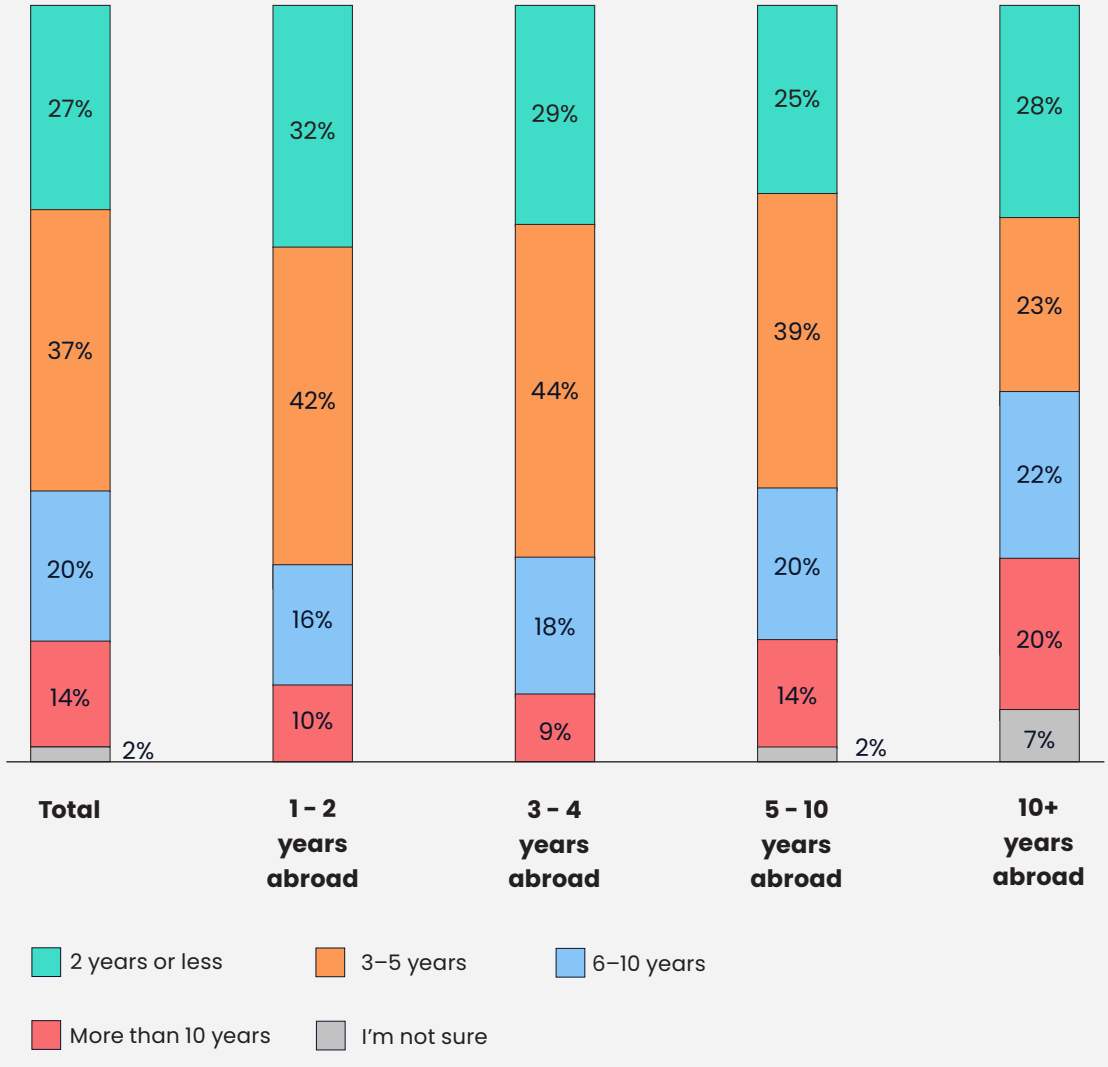
This effect is even more pronounced among those who have been away longer – with those who have been expats for 10 years or more 17 percentage points more likely to have accelerated their financial freedom by at least five years than those who have been expats for one to two years.

Additional years to achieve financial freedom if never lived abroad



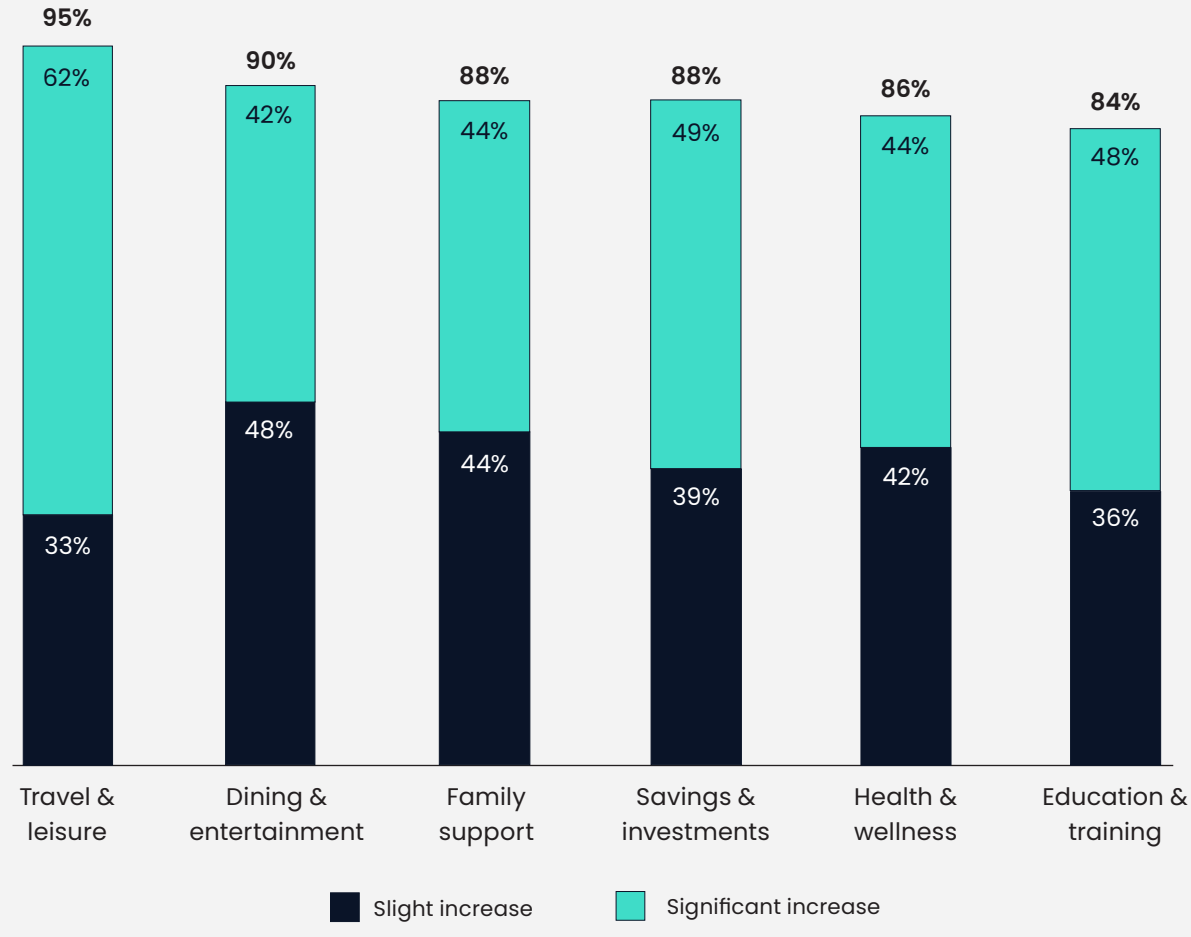
Retirement timelines are also being accelerated. Seven in ten (70%) UAE expats believe living abroad will enable them to retire at least three years earlier than they otherwise would have. Again, this is particularly evident among expats who have lived abroad for five to 10 years, with almost three-quarters (73%) expecting to bring forward their retirement by at least three years.

Number of years retirement will be accelerated due to living abroad



Higher earnings are also changing how respondents allocate their disposable income. While travel and leisure (95%) and dining and entertainment (90%) see the largest increases in spending, almost nine in ten (88%) are also directing more money towards savings and investments. Family support (88%), health and wellness (86%), and education and training (84%) also feature prominently, suggesting many are balancing lifestyle spending with longer-term financial priorities.

Percentage of respondents reporting increase in discretionary spending



Managing wealth across borders is becoming more complex

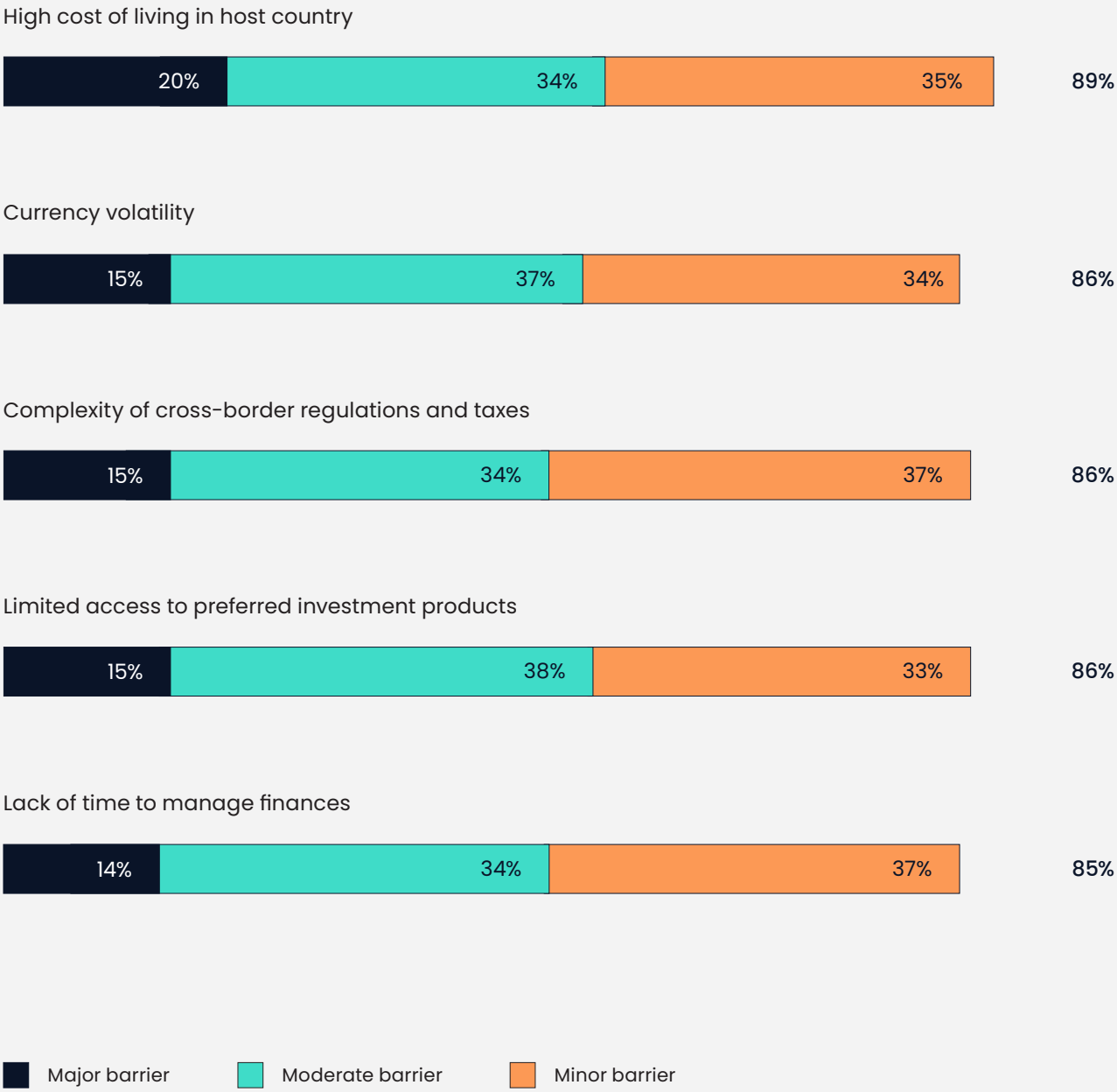
The financial benefits of international mobility are clear, but building wealth across borders also introduces new layers of complexity. As assets, income and long-term plans become increasingly international, respondents are navigating a growing range of financial, regulatory and geopolitical considerations.

The high cost of living is the most commonly cited challenge to managing wealth effectively (89%), followed by currency volatility (86%), cross-border tax and regulatory requirements (86%) and access to preferred investment products (86%). A lack of time to manage finances (85%) adds another layer of complexity.

Practical constraints like insufficient time to manage finances (85%) add further pressure, making the availability of third-party support even more valuable.

These challenges become more pronounced the longer someone is an expat. Respondents who have lived abroad for more than 10 years are 27 percentage points more likely than those with two or fewer years' experience to view these issues as major barriers to managing their wealth.

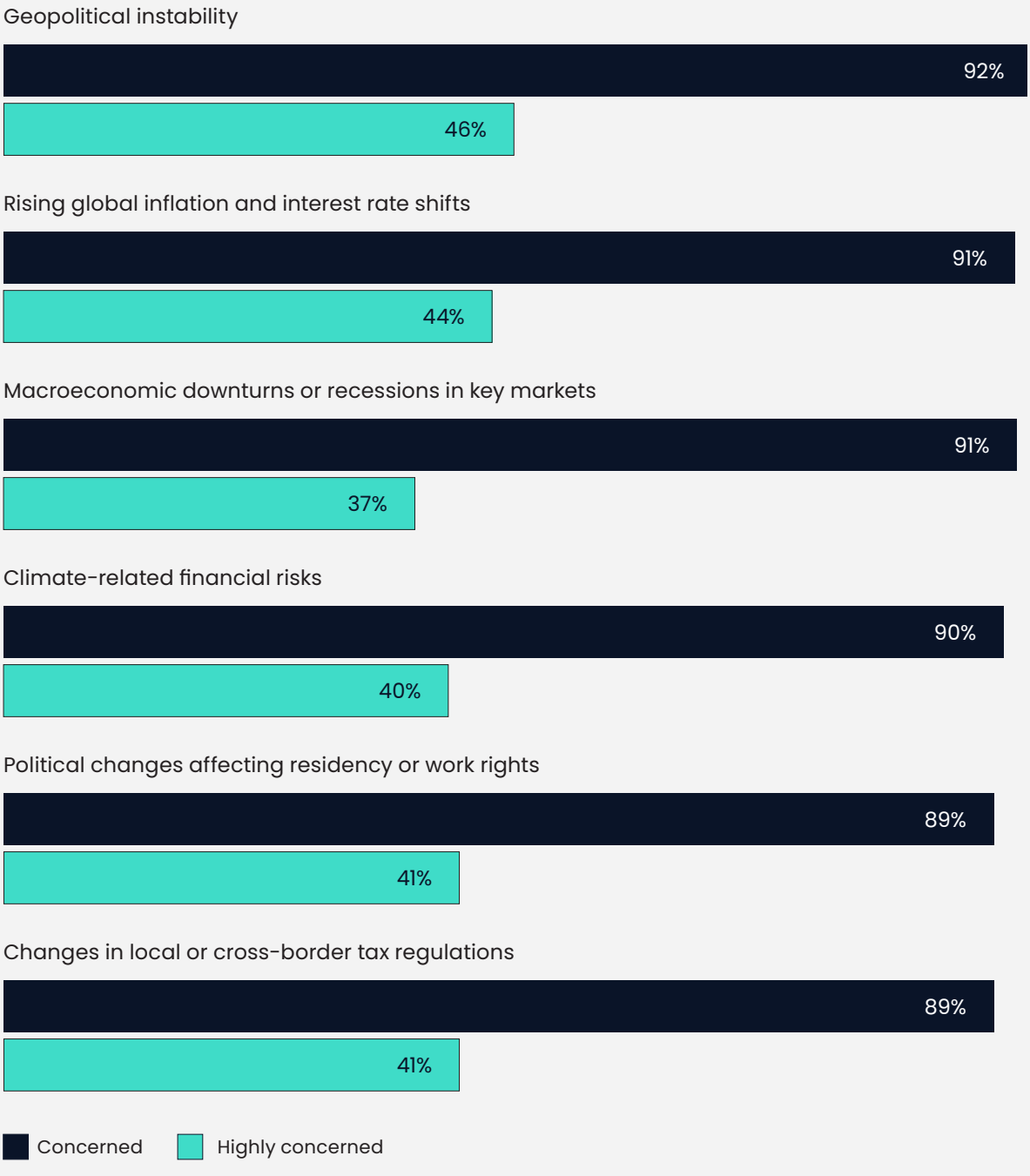
Percentage of respondents citing barriers to effective wealth management while living abroad



These issues are compounded by shifting global conditions, with more than nine in 10 (92%) respondents concerned about geopolitical instability and around 90% expressing concern about a range of other macroeconomic and regulatory risks.

Geopolitical instability (46%) is the risk which the largest proportion of respondents identify as being a major concern, followed by rising global inflation and interest rate shifts (44%). Political changes affecting residency or work rights and changes in local or cross-border tax regulations are also identified as major concerns by 41% of respondents.

Percentage of respondents citing concerns about macroeconomic and regulatory risks



Top factors influencing choice of destination

In the UAE, expats weigh a range of practical considerations when deciding where to live. Taxation policies, residency permits and visa rules, and access to public education and healthcare are each cited by 92% as factors influencing their choice of destination, closely followed by employment regulations and property ownership rules (both 91%).

92%
Taxation policies

92%
Residency permits, visa rules

92%
Access to public education and healthcare

91%
Employment regulations

91%
Property ownership rules

Financial literacy shapes long-term wealth creation

The nature of being internationally mobile increases the onus on individuals to manage the opportunities and potential pitfalls that come with increasingly complex financial situations. Financial literacy is therefore an important factor in how confidently and effectively expats can build, protect, and transfer wealth internationally. Yet only 27% of UAE expats consider themselves to have strong financial literacy.

The findings suggest that financial literacy influences behaviour as much as knowledge. UAE-based expats with high financial literacy are more likely to hold diversified investment portfolios across different asset classes than those with low financial literacy (43% vs 29%), and are considerably better prepared for wealth succession (68% vs 28%).

They are also more likely to have sought financial advice in both their home and host markets (70% vs 28%) and to view cross-border planning as an important part of wealth succession (42% vs 28%), reflecting a more proactive approach to managing internationally mobile wealth.

This relative proactiveness and sophistication in wealth management may explain why highly financially literate expats are more likely to say their financial position has improved while living in the UAE compared with those who report low financial literacy (82% vs 67%).

Difference in wealth management approaches and outcomes between high and low literacy expats

High financial literacy		Low financial literacy
43%	Hold diversified investment portfolios (five asset classes or more)	29%
68%	Feel prepared for wealth succession	28%
70%	Sought advice in home and host markets	28%
42%	Consider cross-border planning important in wealth succession	28%
82%	Financial position has improved while living in the UAE	67%

*Based on self-reported sentiment on knowledge and confidence to manage financial matters including investment and advanced financial topics.

The typical profile of a highly financially literate expat

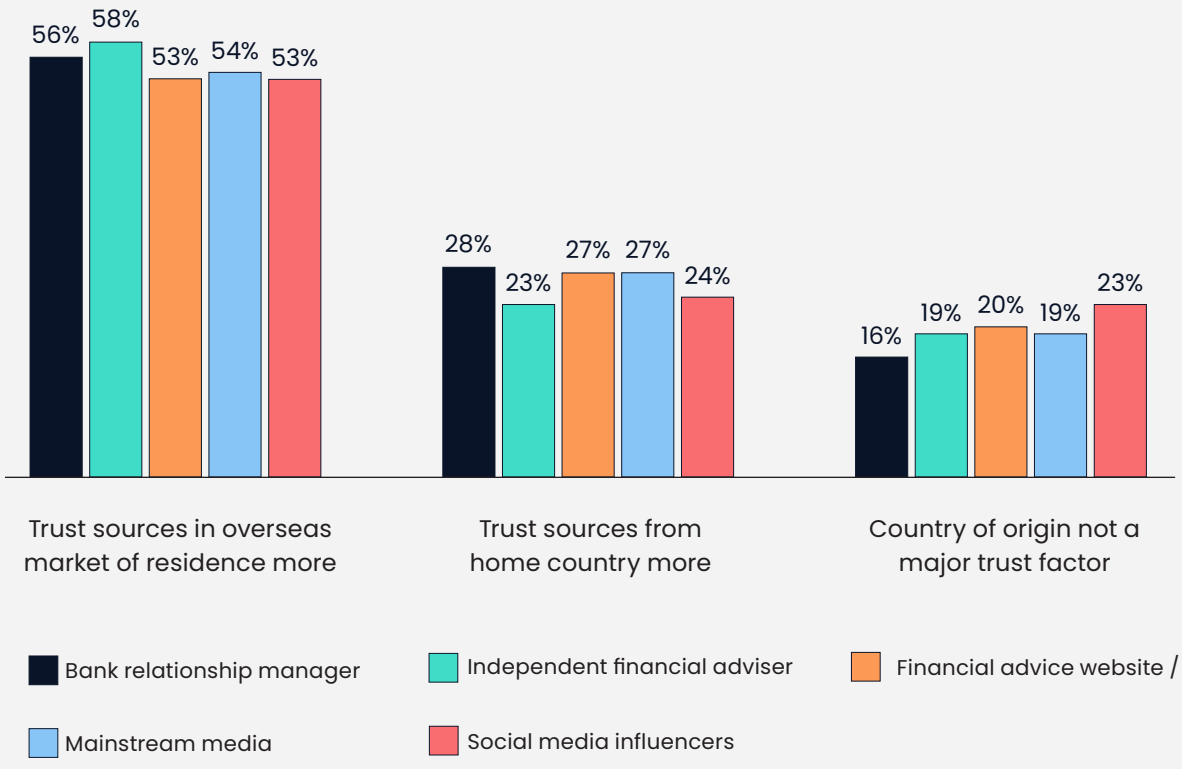
While financial literacy does not eliminate the complexities of managing wealth across borders, it appears to better equip internationally mobile individuals in making more informed financial decisions that help build, protect and transfer wealth more effectively to accelerate the achievement of long-term financial goals.

	Attribute
Age profile	Aged 35–44
Expat tenure	5+ years
Stage of expat journey	Fully integrated, long-term expat (10+ years abroad)
Reasons for moving abroad	Career reasons

Professional advice becomes more valuable as wealth becomes more mobile

Managing wealth across multiple countries often requires specialist expertise. As international finances become more complex, many UAE expats are turning to professional advisers to help navigate tax, investment and retirement decisions across jurisdictions.

Expats have higher trust in advice originating from their market of residence, rather than their home market



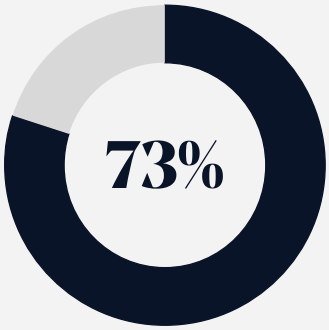
More than half (52%) of expats in the UAE already rely on an independent financial adviser to manage finances, especially for tax planning, investment strategy and retirement planning. Interestingly, expats trust advice originating from their overseas market of residence more than that coming from their country of origin, suggesting local market expertise has become increasingly important for internationally mobile professionals.

Investment strategy is the most common area where UAE expats have sought advice from professional financial advisers (91%), followed by property purchase abroad (89%), retirement planning (88%), insurance and risk management and currency and remittance management (both 87%), and tax planning (86%).

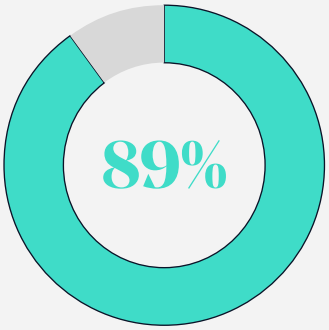
Nearly three-quarters (73%) of those who have worked with a financial adviser say the advice they received has been effective.

In contrast, the financial cost of navigating this complexity without support can be substantial. About nine in ten respondents (89%) believe seeking the right financial advice earlier would have improved their investment returns and savings. On average, they estimate they could have avoided US$56,410 in missed financial opportunities – equivalent to US$9,248 for every year spent living abroad. Similarly, 87% say a better understanding of cross-jurisdictional tax rules would have helped them avoid tax losses, estimating an average financial loss of US$42,315, or US$6,917 per year of living abroad.

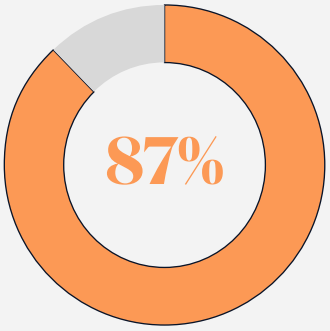
Percentage of respondents who find obtaining professional advice and understanding tax rules helpful



The financial advice they received has been effective



Obtaining the right financial advice earlier would have improved investment earnings and savings



A better understanding of cross-jurisdictional tax rules would have helped avoid tax losses

* Based on respondents' estimated cumulative financial impact to date

89%

believe they could have achieved better financial outcomes with earlier professional advice, potentially saving them an average of **US$9,248 per year** abroad*.

* Based on respondents' estimated cumulative financial impact to date

Given the implications of ineffective wealth management, expats are right to be selective about the advisers they choose to work with. Trustworthiness and transparency are the most important qualities respondents look for in an adviser (40%), followed by the ability to manage cross-border complexity across tax, currency and compliance considerations (37%). International expertise (34%), experience working specifically with expats (34%) and the ability to communicate complex financial issues clearly (34%) are also highly valued.

What expats value most in financial advisers

Trustworthiness and transparency	40%
Ability to manage cross-border complexity (tax, currency, compliance)	37%
Knowledge of both home and host country financial systems	34%
Experience working with expats	34%
Clear communication and ability to explain complex topics	34%
Cultural understanding and sensitivity	21%
Personal rapport / feeling understood	19%

What if you had one week a year back?

The time cost of managing finances takes a considerable toll on UAE-based expats with multi-jurisdictional assets:

67%
spend +10 hours each month on financial management

37%
spend +20 hours each month on financial management

Those working with a financial adviser estimate time savings of 20%.

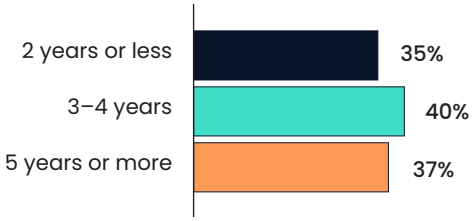
This is an equivalent time saving for the majority of UAE expats of at least:

5.6
working days a year

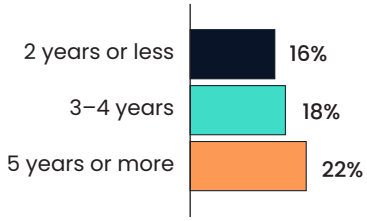
3.7 hours
a month

Time savings increase as respondents spend longer living abroad, reinforcing the growing complexity of managing wealth across multiple markets.

% +20 hours per month



Average % time saved

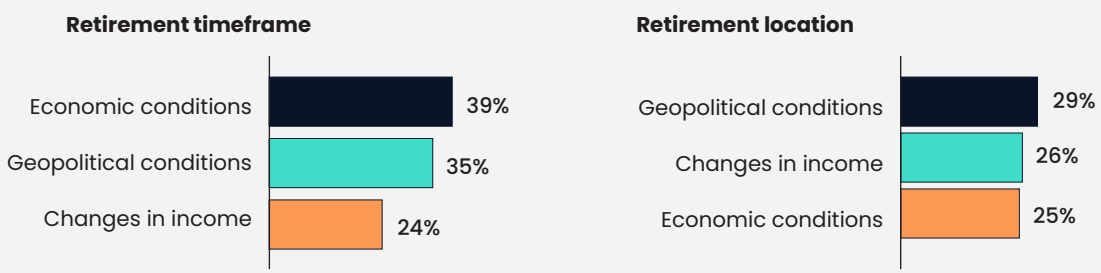


Retirement and succession planning are becoming cross-border priorities

As more internationally mobile professionals build long-term lives in the UAE, retirement and wealth succession planning are becoming increasingly important. Unlike previous generations of UAE expats, many are now planning for retirement, family wealth and inheritance across multiple jurisdictions.

Retirement plans are also evolving in response to changing global conditions. More than four in five respondents (83%) say they have changed aspects of their retirement planning over the past year, including when they plan to retire, where they intend to retire and their approach to investment risk. Economic conditions (39%) and geopolitical developments (35%) are the leading factors influencing retirement timing, while geopolitical uncertainty (29%) is the biggest driver of changes to retirement destination.

Top reasons for changing retirement timing and destination in the last 12 months



Preparing for retirement increasingly goes hand in hand with planning how wealth will be preserved and transferred across generations. While it is already on the agenda for our respondents, many have yet to put key measures fully in place. Just one third have life insurance (37%), a trust or foundation structure (28%), and a will or estate (22%) in place. As a result, only 9% feel fully prepared for wealth succession.

For many respondents, these decisions are shaped by increasingly international lives. Earlier in this report, 44% said they expect to retire in the UAE, meaning retirement planning is no longer confined to a single country. Assets, family members and future generations may all be spread across different jurisdictions, making coordinated planning increasingly important.

Tax optimisation (42%) is among the leading considerations in succession planning and inheritance planning, alongside retirement location (48%) and ensuring legal arrangements work effectively across jurisdictions (37%).

Top considerations in legacy and inheritance planning

48%
Retirement location

42%
Tax optimisation

37%
Jurisdictional harmonisation, such as multi-jurisdictional wills or governing law

Most expats who have longer-term plans in the UAE seem prepared to address this complexity. 61% of those who say they are unlikely to return to their home country have factored multi-jurisdictional assets into their will, compared with 57% of those planning to return after retirement.

There may be value for those who have yet to start thinking about cross-border wealth succession planning to consider doing so, whether they currently see themselves retiring abroad or back in their home country. Having such plans in place early helps families prepare for sudden changes while opening doors for the future. In fact, more than half (51%) of respondents who have conducted wealth succession planning in the UAE say they did so to give their children the option to reside in the country for the long term.

For families who live and work across borders, retirement and succession planning creates security, flexibility and choice for the next generation. Putting plans in place at an early stage, particularly with the help of advisers who can provide the necessary expertise, can support these families and their next generation to create the future they desire. Our findings show that expats who receive professional advice on retirement planning are more likely to feel well prepared for wealth succession compared with those who do not (44% vs 31%).

Despite ongoing geopolitical tensions, confidence in the UAE remains resilient. Seven in ten respondents report a more positive perception of the region as a place to live, reinforcing why many continue to see the UAE as a long-term destination for both career progression and wealth creation.

Recommendations:

How to manage your money on the move

International mobility and the experience of living and working as an expat opens the doors to greater earning potential and as shown by this report, in most situations, will help with fast-tracking financial goals. However, managing money across borders comes with financial complexities which can lead to material and unnecessary losses if not addressed effectively.

We are pleased to share five actions to help you make the right choices before and during your time abroad to maximise your financial success.

1

Become a money expert and set financial goals

Every expat's financial journey is different, but our report shows that financially literate individuals with a clear plan are likely to improve their financial position more than those who do not. Whether your priorities are building long-term wealth or preparing for eventual retirement at home, taking steps to improve financial literacy and set clear financial goals are the foundation of success. A well-structured plan aligned with your lifestyle, career trajectory, and future aspirations helps ensure your financial decisions remain focused and purposeful throughout your time abroad.

2

Understand cross-border challenges

Living and working overseas often means navigating multiple tax systems, investment regulations, and residency requirements. Understanding the financial rules that apply across jurisdictions can help you avoid costly mistakes, optimise tax efficiency, and stay compliant. Familiarity with local and international regulations and policy landscapes enables expats to fully understand their asset management and retirement options and plan accordingly.

3

Maximise the opportunity of living overseas

Our findings show that expats tend to earn more than they do in their home markets. It is a shame to let this wealth accumulation opportunity go to waste. Maintain a long-term focus on growing your investment portfolio and savings fund, and balance lifestyle spending with future goals. Stick to a consistent and diversified investment plan and stay the course through market movements to enjoy the full economic benefits of life abroad.

4

Seek advice — the most financially literate do

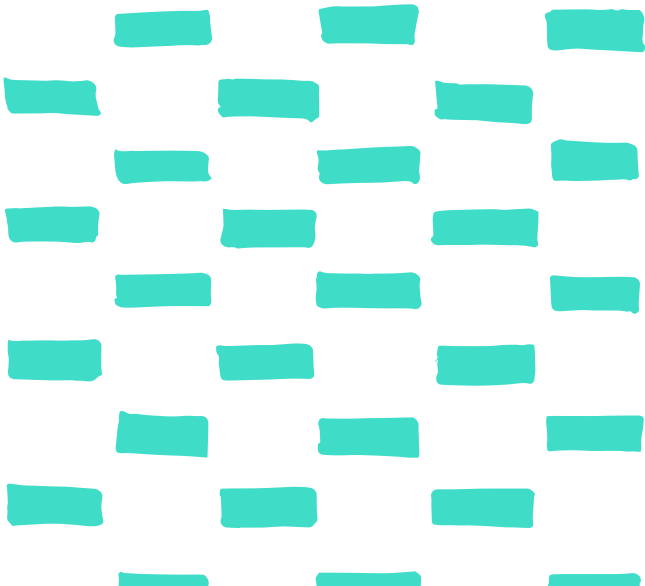
Working with a financial adviser who understands cross-border considerations, international taxation, currency exposure, and global investment opportunities can provide insight and direction. Our research shows that financially literate people are more likely to turn to an adviser for help, also reaping the rewards. An adviser can be a valuable long-term partner who helps tailor strategies to your unique circumstances while ensuring your financial plan remains aligned with long-term objectives.

5

Start planning early and review plans regularly

Starting your financial planning journey early provides greater flexibility and allows more time for investments to grow. Crucially, it can help avoid financial losses through unwise investments and poor tax planning. Starting early helps address important long-term considerations such as pension portability, inheritance laws across jurisdictions, and the smooth transfer of wealth to future generations.

Career moves, relocation, and family developments can change an expat's circumstances quickly. Reviewing your financial plans regularly ensures they continue to reflect your current goals and remain effective in changing market conditions.



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