Leadership Development for Saudi Hospitality Professionals: Building a Pipeline for Hotel and Resort Management Roles.

Abstract

Expansion in Saudi tourism increases the need for hotel and resort leaders who can run shifts, develop teams, protect service standards, and manage commercial trade-offs. This narrative review combines Saudi tourism statistics and policy documents with research on hospitality competencies, leadership development, and workplace training. It proposes a pathway from frontline supervision through department management to property leadership. The pathway links each transition to supervised assignments, observable work products, and a panel decision about readiness. A staged pilot would measure access to development, workplace transfer, internal appointments, retention, and service performance. National tourism figures provide context for workforce planning. Property-level evidence would be needed to determine whether the pathway improves promotion outcomes or service performance. The framework supports Saudi Vision 2030 by giving operators a method for developing Saudi professionals for increasingly accountable management roles.

Keywords Saudi Vision 2030, hospitality leadership, talent development, succession planning, hotels and resorts, training transfer

1. Introduction

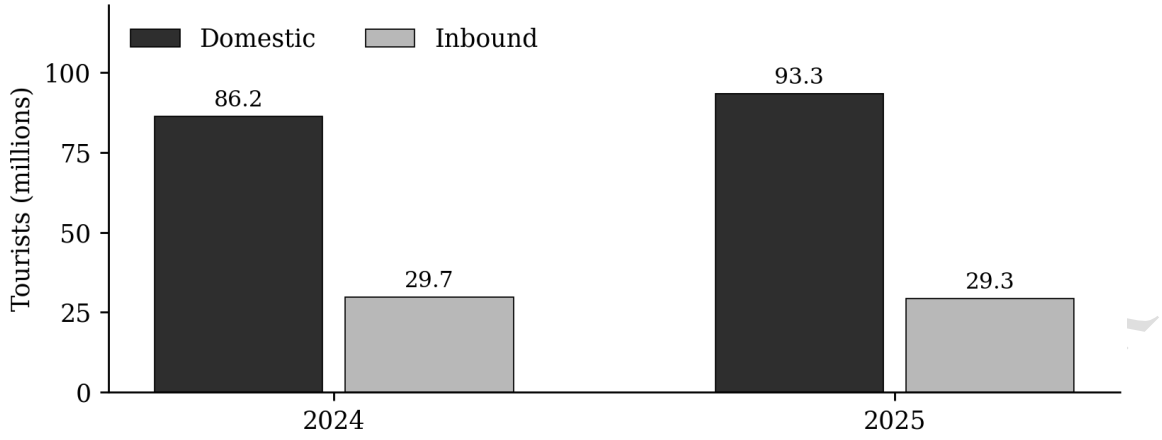
1.1 Tourism growth and management capacity

During a busy resort arrival period, the duty manager may have to reassign staff, find rooms for delayed guests, approve service recovery, and brief the next shift within an hour. A department manager must then examine patterns in those incidents and decide whether staffing, coordination, or room-release procedures need to change. At property level, the same problem enters a wider set of decisions about labour costs, brand commitments, and capital priorities. Each role demands a different kind of judgement. Hiring more people can expand capacity, while developing internal successors addresses who is prepared to exercise that judgement when properties open, teams expand, or managers move.

Saudi tourism activity provides a reason to take this problem seriously. National reporting shows growth in combined domestic and inbound tourism from 2023 through 2025. The mix also changed between 2024 and 2025, with domestic tourism growing as inbound tourism edged down. An urban business hotel and a coastal leisure resort can experience those shifts differently. Portfolio leaders should therefore use national activity as an input to workforce planning, then build their own estimates from opening dates, property type, seasonality, expected occupancy, and existing management coverage. A country-level visitor total cannot supply the number of duty managers needed at one property or the number of department heads who will be ready for its opening.

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Figure 1. Domestic and inbound tourism in Saudi Arabia, 2024–2025



Sources: Saudi Ministry of Tourism Annual Statistical Report 2024 and Saudi Press Agency coverage of the 2025 report.

1.2 The progression problem

A hotel may have a reliable front desk agent who handles guest requests well. Supervising the same desk requires additional skills, including distributing work, intervening when colleagues need help, and managing complaints within delegated limits. A promotion based on strong individual performance can place that employee in charge before these skills have been practised. At higher levels, another gap opens between managing a department and coordinating an entire property. A strong rooms manager may have had little exposure to catering economics, engineering outages, or asset-owner reporting. These gaps are most visible when a newly promoted leader faces an unfamiliar task without someone available to coach or intervene.

Succession planning gives managers time to address gaps before a vacancy opens. Employees also need to know which roles may become available, how selection will work, and whether a move would require relocation. A resort can offer a demanding management assignment and still lose an employee if the next step remains unclear. Regular career conversations connect readiness decisions to realistic internal opportunities.

2. Aim and research questions

2.1 Aim and objectives

The aim is to develop a practical, evidence-informed framework for preparing Saudi hospitality professionals for supervisory, department, and property leadership roles. The objectives are to identify distinct competencies for each transition, explain how workplace assignments can develop those competencies, propose fair assessment and succession procedures, and define measures that a property group can use to test the framework. The intended setting is a hotel or resort operator with access to operational, human resources, and service data. Smaller employers can apply selected elements through shared training partnerships and carefully chosen assignments.

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2.2 Research questions

Which behaviours demonstrate readiness at each management level? How can work assignments develop those behaviours? How can operators assess candidates consistently across different properties? Which measures can test whether the pathway improves readiness, progression, and service performance?

3. Review methodology

3.1 Evidence selection

The study uses a narrative review organised around managerial competencies, leadership training, workplace transfer, internal career progression, and the Saudi tourism context. The evidence base combines hospitality studies, broader research syntheses on leadership and training, locally focused hotel workforce research, and official tourism and workforce publications. Sources were identified through targeted searches on these themes. Studies were selected for their relevance to management work or development decisions, and official figures were selected for their defined geography and reporting periods. The review does not claim exhaustive coverage or pool effect sizes. The framework is a synthesis for later field testing.

3.2 Scope and interpretation

The paper focuses on the movement from frontline work to supervisory responsibility, from supervision to department management, and from department management to property leadership. It treats each move as a change in accountability rather than a fixed period of service. The review distinguishes candidate-level readiness from group-level staffing coverage and property-level outcomes. An employee can meet the readiness threshold while the operator still lacks vacancies in a suitable location. A hotel can improve guest scores during a pilot because it replaced a weak system or hired additional staff. These differences matter when reporting progress to ownership or comparing results across sites.

4. Evidence on leadership development

4.1 Competencies change as accountability increases

Hospitality competency models show that frontline and senior managers share some capabilities while applying them at different scales. A supervisor listens to dissatisfied guests, coaches team members, and responds to immediate operational pressures. A department head integrates staffing, quality, and costs across multiple shifts. A property leader sets priorities across departments and is accountable for consequences beyond the original decision. Even the same competency, such as communication, changes with the role. A supervisor must deliver a concise handover. A department head must explain a staffing proposal to colleagues. A property leader must explain investment options to owners and communicate a decision to the entire management team.

Hospitality leadership research also examines how managers influence employee discretion and service delivery. A manager who authorises a receptionist to resolve a bounded complaint can reduce delay and show confidence in the employee. If escalation rules or compensation limits

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are missing, the same delegation can produce inconsistent decisions. Readiness assessment should cover how a leader delegates, checks understanding, and makes escalation safe. In practice, this means observing a candidate during a shift and reviewing the reasoning in a record of an actual or simulated incident. Brand standards may differ, while the need to exercise authority consistently remains.

4.2 Practice, feedback, and transfer

Evidence from leadership training and training transfer supports programmes that respond to the tasks employees actually perform and give them opportunities to practise. Workshops can explain how to deliver feedback or interpret labour variance. Transfer becomes visible when managers see the employee coach a colleague or use a variance to change a staffing plan on shift. A participant learns from a challenging assignment when the responsibility is well defined and an experienced colleague can observe, explain misjudgements, and agree on the next attempt. If the assignment overwhelms the employee or offers little feedback, repeated exposure may reinforce the wrong behaviour.

Mentoring can provide perspective on role transitions and help employees understand career options. An operating coach has a narrower function. The coach observes specific decisions, gives feedback quickly, and verifies whether an earlier error recurs. Both roles can support development, especially when the mentor works outside the reporting line and the coach can observe live work. Managers should agree on time for feedback before offering placements. Otherwise, urgent operating work may crowd out review sessions, leaving candidates with extra responsibilities and little direction about how to improve.

4.3 Careers, retention, and working conditions

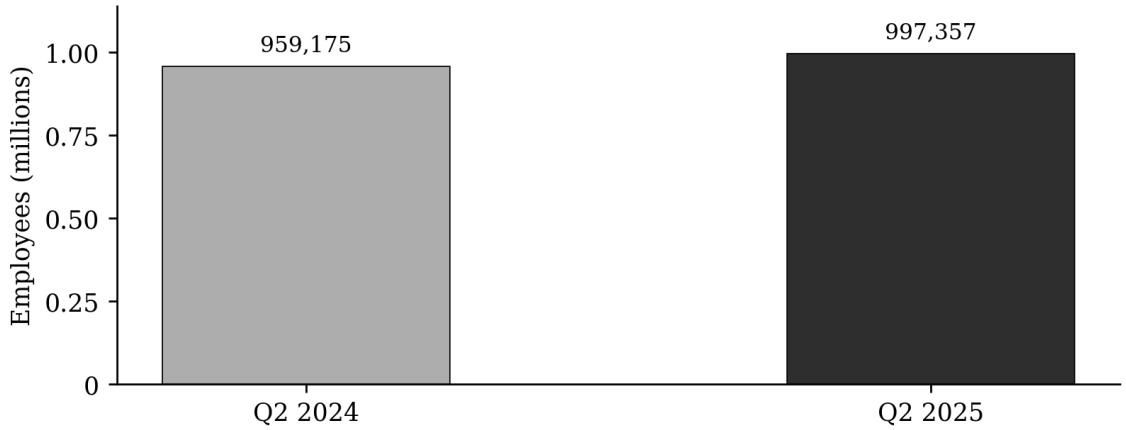
Hospitality career development sits alongside predictable scheduling, fair treatment, meaningful work, and pay. A pathway that asks employees to take on extra duties without clarity about compensation, hours, feedback, or access to vacancies can weaken trust. Research on lodging employees in Riyadh offers a local basis for examining what employees value at work. Older studies of localisation in Saudi hotels help explain why employers should look beyond hiring counts to the work conditions and promotion opportunities that shape careers. The managerial implications depend on the property, occupation, and labour market. An employer should examine its own exit and mobility patterns before choosing which career bottleneck to address.

A company can make internal progression tangible by posting eligible roles, sharing assessment criteria, and offering feedback after selection. Experienced staff should be able to join the pathway from several departments, including housekeeping, kitchens, engineering, finance, reservations, and guest services. Restricting nominations to people with frequent guest or executive contact can undervalue staff who already coordinate teams and solve problems behind the scenes. A property group should examine whether candidates from different functions and shift patterns receive comparable access to the work that allows them to demonstrate readiness.

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Figure 2 compares employment in tourism activities in the same quarter of two successive years. The totals cover tourism activities across the economy. Property vacancy and appointment records provide the detail needed to plan management succession.

Figure 2. Employment in Saudi tourism activities in the second quarter



Source: General Authority for Statistics, Tourism Establishments Statistics, Q2 2025, Table 1. Tourism activities extend beyond accommodation.

5. Proposed leadership pathway

5.1 Workforce planning and entry

The pathway begins with a rolling view of critical positions, current cover, opening dates, and likely mobility. Each property identifies roles where a prolonged vacancy would create operational risk or where an opening is planned. Human resources then compares those needs across the group and checks that there are enough placements and coaches to support a cohort. A vacancy forecast should distinguish approved positions from speculative openings. Operators can still prepare employees for future roles when demand is uncertain by offering assignments that improve performance in their current role.

Selection starts with published eligibility and examples of acceptable evidence. A department nomination can identify talent, while self-nomination creates an additional route for employees whose managers rarely put staff forward. A short work sample can test priorities, escalation, and communication under a realistic scenario. The assessors should record evidence and development needs before seeing each other's ratings. Candidates who lack experience in one area can receive a preparatory assignment and reapply. The purpose is to allocate development fairly and identify what each candidate needs to practise.

5.2 From frontline employee to shift supervisor

The first transition builds capability in shift planning, delegation, service recovery, and handover. A trainee takes responsibility for a defined part of a shift with a named supervisor available. Before the shift, the trainee reviews arrivals, expected service demand, and staff availability, then briefs colleagues on priorities. During service, the supervisor observes how the trainee redistributes work, checks on outstanding issues, and escalates matters outside

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delegated authority. A short debrief uses the shift log to examine what happened, what the trainee noticed, and what one change could improve the next handover.

Assessment should include more than one operating condition. A candidate who performs well on a routine morning may need more practice during an evening peak or a busy group arrival. A simulation can cover rare incidents or scenarios unsuitable for live practice. In a lost-property dispute, the candidate might show how to document facts, protect privacy, and refer the case through the proper channel. The assessor can then ask which parts of the response would change if the issue involved safety or a vulnerable guest. The final decision considers whether the candidate can handle ordinary work independently and recognise situations requiring help.

5.3 From supervisor to department manager

The second transition focuses on planning and cost discipline, building team capability, and resolving problems between departments. A trainee might redesign the coordination between housekeeping and the front desk during high occupancy. The assignment would require documenting current room release delays, identifying causes with both teams, proposing a limited trial, and explaining its labour and service implications. The candidate should show how the proposed change affects room readiness, overtime, staff workload, and availability for early arrivals. A method that looks efficient from one department can shift the work to another and make the guest experience worse.

A department-level work product can also include a forecast, roster, corrective action plan, or short business case. Reviewers should examine both accuracy and decision quality. The trainee should be able to explain the occupancy and demand assumptions, what data would change the recommendation, and which service commitments must be preserved. A controller or revenue manager can review commercial reasoning, while an operations coach judges whether the plan can be implemented. This combination gives the assessment access to expertise that a direct supervisor may lack.

5.4 From department manager to property leader

The third transition prepares candidates to coordinate operations across departments and represent the property in commercial discussions. A candidate might lead an operating review, run a pre-opening readiness exercise, or prepare recommendations on a capital request. One scenario could involve a resort booking an event while some facilities are under maintenance. The candidate would evaluate the effects on capacity, guest communication, revenue, staff workload, and contingency arrangements. The assessment should consider which decisions the candidate can make and which should go to the owner, brand representative, or general manager.

To preserve comparability, the three progression stages use the same rating logic. An employee beginning a task needs direct guidance. An employee who can complete it with occasional prompting may be ready for an acting assignment with agreed checks. A ready candidate can make routine decisions independently, explain trade-offs, and escalate exceptions appropriately. The panel records the examples supporting each judgement and identifies any gap that would be material in the target job. Limited demonstration of one skill can lead to a

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targeted placement and reassessment. A strong score in commercial planning should carry little weight when the unresolved gap involves safe incident escalation.

Table 1. Work assignments and readiness evidence by transition

Transition	Supervised assignment	Readiness evidence
Frontline to shift supervisor	Lead a shift briefing, coordinate guest recovery, and complete handover.	Observation notes, shift log, and appropriate escalation of exceptions.
Supervisor to department manager	Trial a revised room-release process and calculate labour effects.	Baseline and trial results, staffing assumptions, and a reasoned decision.
Department manager to property leader	Lead an operating review or readiness exercise across functions.	Business case, options considered, and clear ownership of follow-up.

6. Implementation and governance

6.1 Roles and operating commitments

The general manager sponsors the pathway and protects time for development. Human resources maintains the role profiles and cohort records, schedules review panels, and monitors access across departments. Department heads provide assignments and agree where the candidate can act independently. Coaches give feedback and report observed behaviour. The governance group reviews staffing, candidate progress, transfers, and operating indicators together. Before approving a rotation, it checks that the receiving department can provide supervision and that the sending department can release the employee without leaving a critical shift uncovered.

6.2 Fairness and consistency

Assessment panels should use common behavioural criteria and allow different ways to demonstrate the same capability. A candidate from a city hotel may have limited exposure to resort activities and still show credible incident management through another demanding context. A candidate from a resort may show event coordination through a leisure programme instead of a conference. Assessors compare how the candidates anticipate problems, allocate responsibility, and document decisions. Using a common scenario periodically can help panels check whether one property rates candidates much more generously than another.

The programme should report where people leave the process, including staff who express interest but cannot attend, candidates who begin but lose access to placements, and participants who qualify and receive no suitable offer. Scheduling, travel, care responsibilities, or lack of shift cover can limit participation. An operator can respond with alternative assessment times, local assignments, or structured remote coaching for tasks where direct observation is unnecessary. Managers should share the basis of decisions and offer an opportunity to correct factual errors in assessment records.

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6.3 A staged rollout

For a pilot, the group can begin with one high-volume city property and one resort if each has supervision capacity. The first month can be used to agree criteria, identify managers to coach, and record baselines. Development assignments then proceed according to operational demand and candidate preparedness. The group should schedule reviews early enough to adjust a weak placement while it is ongoing. Leadership should decide at the end of the pilot which roles, practices, or sites are ready to expand, and where additional supervision or clearer role criteria are required.

7. Evaluation and discussion

7.1 Measures and evidence quality

The primary indicators should reflect whether candidates obtain meaningful practice, meet the readiness criteria, and progress into target roles. Eligible internal appointments should be divided by all eligible appointments during the same period. Retention should be measured from a defined start date and compared over a consistent interval. An operator should distinguish between moves inside the group, exits from the group, and cases where employees are still in training. Small numbers require counts alongside rates. A change from one appointment to two can look dramatic as a percentage while giving little basis for predicting the next year's results.

Role-specific performance measures give additional context. A shift supervisor may influence the quality of handovers or time taken to resolve a complaint. Department management can affect labour scheduling and room readiness. Property leaders can influence several measures at once, making it harder to attribute a change. Service recovery time should be interpreted with complaint severity and reopening rates. A faster closure can conceal unresolved issues if staff mark cases complete early. A lower incident count can signal safer operations or declining confidence in reporting. The evaluation should compare operational data with samples of the underlying work.

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Table 2. Indicators for evaluating the leadership pathway

Indicator	Definition	Interpretation
Access to practice	Participants completing supervised assignments ÷ enrolled participants.	Show differences by department, property, and shift.
Readiness	Participants rated ready ÷ participants assessed.	Report deferrals and people awaiting assessment separately.
Internal appointment	Eligible posts filled internally ÷ all eligible posts filled.	Track vacancy counts and distinguish acting assignments.
Retention at 12 months	Appointees still employed at 12 months ÷ appointees with 12 months of follow-up.	Distinguish internal moves from exits.
Service and safety	Review indicators such as complaint reopenings and escalation accuracy.	Examine the underlying cases and account for workload.

7.2 Pilot comparison and interpretation

A staged rollout makes comparison more informative. The operator can collect outcomes for pilot and later-entry properties before training starts and track their paths over comparable periods. The comparison should consider property type, occupancy, staffing, management changes, and opening dates. A property preparing for an opening is unlikely to have the same workload or promotion opportunities as an established hotel. With enough sites and comparable pre-pilot trends, a later study could estimate changes against a comparison group. In a small pilot, the emphasis should remain on implementation quality, uncertainty, and whether patterns are consistent with the programme's intended mechanisms.

Quantitative changes are most persuasive when operational records show a plausible sequence. If complaint reopening declines after participants begin reviewing handovers, case notes should show clearer ownership and follow-up. If internal appointments increase, the review should examine whether more qualified candidates applied, whether vacancies expanded, or whether the company changed its recruitment rules. A panel might find high readiness and limited placement because geographically suitable vacancies were scarce. That finding calls for review of mobility and succession coverage. It would be premature to interpret it as weak training transfer.

7.3 Trade-offs in assessment and promotion

Promotion incentives can distort assessment if managers are rewarded for meeting a numerical placement target. A panel under pressure may classify people as ready before they have shown consistent judgement. Department heads may nominate only those already slated for promotion, improving apparent outcomes while reducing wider access. A workforce review should therefore consider development opportunities, readiness, and appointments together. It should also check service, safety, and workload indicators so managers can investigate whether any short-term gains came with operational costs.

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8. Implications, limitations, and future research

8.1 Implications for operators and training partners

For operators, the framework provides a way to connect workforce planning with daily management work. A shared definition of readiness allows properties to coordinate rotations and compare succession coverage. Hotels with limited capacity can share workshops or simulations with a training partner and keep workplace assessment with the operator. Academic partners can build case exercises using realistic hotel problems, such as forecasting staffing during a demand surge. The hotel can then verify whether staff apply the same reasoning on the job. A certificate can record participation or learning, while the promotion panel uses evidence from the duties of the target role.

The framework is relevant to Vision 2030 workforce objectives because it makes advancement into operational management measurable. A destination or portfolio can monitor whether trained Saudi professionals receive substantive responsibility and whether they stay in management after promotion. Reporting should include appointments across functions and property types to show where progression is broadening. Operators could share aggregate findings with education and training providers to improve assignment design and identify skills employers repeatedly struggle to develop. Personal assessment data should remain within the authorised employment process.

8.2 Limitations and future research

This review draws on evidence from different hospitality markets and other industries. The workplace studies vary in how they measure leadership, learning, and performance. National tourism data include activities outside hotels and do not identify hotel management vacancies. Consequently, the suggested scores, review periods, and assignments need field validation. Case examples in this paper illustrate application and do not describe observed outcomes from a participating group. Differences in property structure and seasonality may also affect which progression stages operators need to prioritise.

A prospective study could follow candidates from application through at least one year after appointment. It should collect assignment exposure, coach observations, rating consistency, vacancy availability, and employee feedback. Operators could compare outcomes across city properties and resorts, accounting for staffing and demand. Interviews with candidates who withdraw or decline promotion would help explain gaps that programme completion data cannot capture. Further work should examine whether brief work samples predict later performance and how much supervisor time is needed to sustain assessment without disrupting service.

9. Conclusion

Saudi hotels and resorts can strengthen management succession by defining what leaders must be able to do at each level and giving employees supervised opportunities to perform that work. Shift supervision calls for reliable delegation, escalation, and handover. Department management adds planning, budget judgement, and coordination. Property leadership requires balancing commercial, operational, and stakeholder priorities. Candidates need a clear route to

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demonstrate these skills, receive feedback, and compete for vacancies. Operators can test the pathway by tracking the quality of assignments, readiness decisions, internal mobility, and service outcomes through a staged pilot. This makes leadership development relevant to both growing portfolios and the individual careers of Saudi hospitality professionals.

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