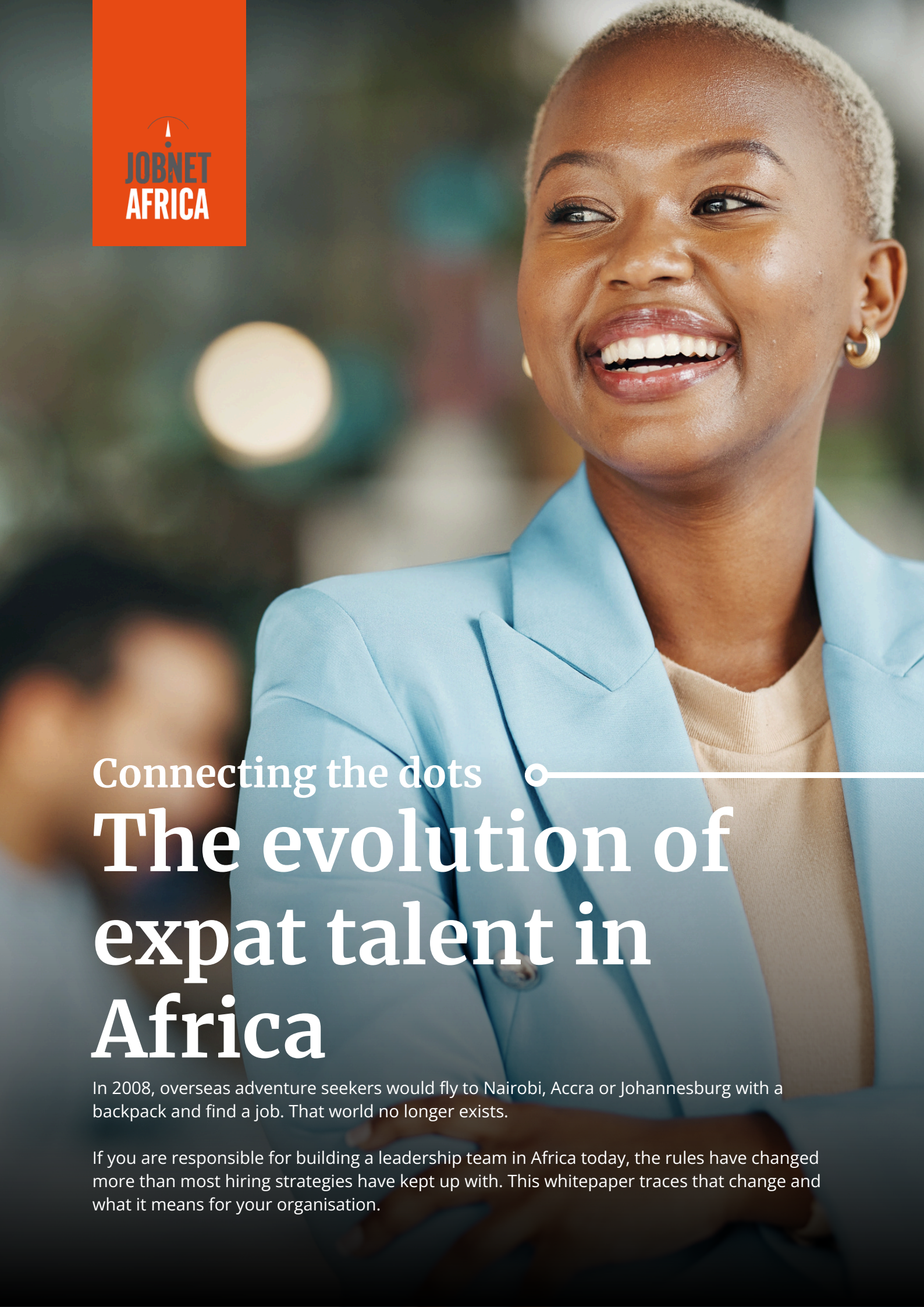

JOBNET AFRICA

Connecting the dots

The evolution of expat talent in Africa

In 2008, overseas adventure seekers would fly to Nairobi, Accra or Johannesburg with a backpack and find a job. That world no longer exists.

If you are responsible for building a leadership team in Africa today, the rules have changed more than most hiring strategies have kept up with. This whitepaper traces that change and what it means for your organisation.

Purpose over career
Before 1980

Before 1980, most people who came to Africa were driven by a sense of purpose. Missionaries, doctors and nurses ran clinics and schools in places where roads, electricity and professional networks barely existed. Coming to Africa was not a career decision. It was a calling.

Only a handful of pioneering companies like Heineken had a footprint on the continent. Corporate Africa as we know it today simply did not exist.

The transition begins
2000–2010

Governments across the continent began pushing back. Visa regulations tightened and companies were expected to justify every international hire and invest in developing local talent instead. This created a genuine difficulty: experienced professionals at senior level were scarce locally, because international hires had always been the default.

At the same time, traditional expat packages gradually disappeared, replaced by local-plus contracts, which offered reduced benefits and no family relocation. True expat packages survived mainly in mining, oil and gas and in international NGOs. For many, this felt like a step back. The familiar approach was no longer working, and a new one had not yet taken shape.

"Today, 80% of our placements are African candidates. Africa is not waiting for the world. It is leading itself."

The real expat era
1980–2000

From the 1980s onwards, Western companies began moving into Africa, drawn by commodities like coffee, cocoa and minerals. The demand for senior professionals grew rapidly, but local talent was considered unready for senior roles. Entire management structures from chief executive to foreman were brought in from abroad.

To attract these professionals, companies offered generous packages covering housing, healthcare, flights, cars, drivers and household staff. Expats moved their families over and many stayed for years. Many became very wealthy, in a lifestyle that was abundant. For companies, this approach worked well and for a long time nobody questioned it.

The rise of local talent
Post 2010 to today

As African men and women returned home after studying or working abroad, supervisor and management roles were filled locally at a rapid pace. Expats found themselves only at the very top of organisations, and even that began to change.

Those who had come to Africa before 2010 gradually left for family reasons, and no new wave replaced them. By that point, the roles that once brought international talent to the continent had already been taken up by local professionals. Today, companies either pay premium packages for rare overseas expats or appoint African talent instead. At JobnetAfrica, around 80% of our placements are now African candidates.

South Africa: a talent story of its own

Due to apartheid, South Africa was bypassed by the early expat era that shaped corporate Africa elsewhere. After 1994, the country emerged as the continent's business gateway. Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) legislation in 2003 rapidly accelerated localisation, producing an exceptionally strong local talent pool.

Yet, like in many other African countries, brain drain has become a serious challenge, driven by economic pressure, currency weakness and security concerns. Today this has taken on a new dimension: overseas companies hire South African professionals remotely at near-Western salaries, making it nearly impossible for local companies to retain top talent.

What this means for your organisation

Thinking locally when hiring talent is increasingly important. African professional talent has developed rapidly over the past two decades. At the same time, experienced international candidates with genuine Africa experience are harder to find than they once were. Before starting any search, ask yourself: are you bringing in someone to run a business, or to provide specific skills that are genuinely unavailable locally? Expat hires are still justified for specialist or transformational roles.

Hiring executive talent in Africa

Are you looking to source senior and executive professionals for your organisation in Africa? At JobnetAfrica, we place both African and international talent across the continent. Around 80% of our placements are now African candidates, and we have the network and experience to find the right person for your specific role, whether that search takes us across the continent or around the world.

Get in touch to discuss your executive search needs and let us help you find the right fit for your organisation.

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