



**SFO INSIGHTS:
LESSONS FROM
M/HQ's GLOBAL
SINGLE FAMILY OFFICE
ROUNDTABLES**





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CONTEXT

Between September and December 2025, M/HQ convened a series of **closed-door roundtables in Zurich, Geneva, Hong Kong and Abu Dhabi under the theme UAE: Your Global Blueprint for Wealth and Legacy Planning**. Fifty participants took part, mostly composed of single family office (“SFO”) principals, heads of family offices and senior advisers supporting families with complex, cross-border lives.

The discussions focused on **what SFOs actually need** today to operate, govern and preserve wealth across generations, **how effectively those needs are met** through the tools available in the Abu Dhabi Global Market (the “ADGM”) and the Dubai International Financial Centre (the “DIFC”), and **whether those tools are fully understood** and used in practice.

ADGM and DIFC were examined as operating environments. Foundation regimes, SFO frameworks and common law governance structures were assessed against real-world requirements for control, privacy, regulatory interaction and long-term operability. Participants also explored where gaps remain, both in awareness and in the surrounding ecosystem, and what would need to evolve for the UAE to remain competitive for sophisticated families.

A consistent conclusion emerged across regions. **SFOs are multiplying, but readiness is uneven**. Too often, the establishment of a SFO is taken as evidence of preparedness, when it merely marks the beginning of a more demanding phase. The real test is whether a structure can operate, adapt and withstand scrutiny in an environment defined by mobility, transparency and frequent regulatory interaction.

Against this backdrop, **M/HQ** tested its thesis.



M/HQ's THESIS – TESTED

From our work with global families, M/HQ has observed **four priorities shaping how families choose jurisdictions and structures today: Stability, reputation, control and privacy.** The roundtables tested whether these priorities resonate across regions and whether the UAE's offering through ADGM and DIFC aligns with how families actually operate.

The thesis holds, but the discussions also revealed where the UAE is already strong, where awareness remains uneven, and **where targeted refinements could materially strengthen its position as a long-term home for SFOs.**

REPUTATION AS STRUCTURAL PROTECTION

Families were clear that **credibility flows primarily from jurisdictional anchoring.** Being based in a trusted legal and regulatory environment reduces friction, shortens onboarding processes and reassures counterparties.

The role of regulation in this context is indirect. It is the **strength and predictability of the system that enhances reputation,** rather than the degree of supervision imposed on proprietary wealth. How that balance is achieved in practice was explored in more detail in the discussion on regulation.



This explains why participants consistently emphasised the **importance of operating from a highly regulated jurisdiction**, while remaining cautious about being treated as a regulated institution. The former was seen as essential to reputation. The latter was viewed as appropriate only where activities genuinely require it.

Has your perception of the UAE as a financial centre changed over the past five years?

- ✓ Improved: 90%
- Neutral: 8%
- ✗ Worse: 2%

The discussion behind these figures was telling. The **UAE was repeatedly described as stable, safe and predictable**, particularly when compared with political uncertainty and regulatory drift in some traditional centres. Several participants noted that European banks now treat the ADGM and DIFC as credible operating environments rather than emerging alternatives.

As one Swiss-based SFO principal put it,

“Dubai is now recognised by Swiss banks as a platform, not a talking point. The political willingness to attract capital is clear.”

Families were equally clear on what does not enhance reputation. **Being subject to institutional-style regulation when managing only proprietary wealth was not seen as adding credibility.** In some cases, it was viewed as creating unnecessary complexity and raising questions rather than resolving them.

In short, reputation is maximised when a family office operates from a jurisdiction that is trusted, without being burdened by regulatory frameworks designed for client-facing financial institutions. This balance was repeatedly cited as a key reason families are anchoring governance structures in the ADGM and DIFC.



REGULATIONS THAT PROTECTS WEALTH

If reputation is shaped by where a family operates, regulation determines how that environment functions in practice, day to day and under scrutiny. On this point, **increasing confidence in the UAE's regulatory direction was one of the strongest areas of consensus** across the roundtables.

Participants described the **ADGM and DIFC regulators as pragmatic, accessible and fast to implement change**. The ability to design modern frameworks deliberately, rather than retrofit legacy regimes, was repeatedly cited as a competitive advantage.

This was evident in discussions around SFOs. Regulation is accepted where activity requires it. What families resist is automatic supervision that does not reflect proprietary wealth. **Clarity and proportionality mattered far more than formality.**

As one adviser put it,

“regulations may be necessary to work with global banks, but for SFOs it should be optional, limited and driven by activity, not imposed by default.”

How do you view the UAE's regulators and frameworks compared with traditional jurisdictions?

✓ **Forward-thinking and supportive: 92.5%**

Catch-up mode: 0%

No opinion: 7.5%

Which approach is more attractive for SFOs?

✓ **Specifically recognised and exempt from regulatory supervision: 90%**

Regulated as institutions: 0%

No opinion: 10%



PRIVACY



Privacy emerged as a strategic asset.

Participants drew a sharp distinction between high compliance standards and public exposure. Strong entry thresholds were widely supported to keep out bad actors. What families opposed was mandatory public disclosure once those thresholds had been met.

Do you favour jurisdictions that protect privacy, or is public data acceptable?



Privacy is the new super currency: 84.5%

Public data acceptable: 8%

No opinion: 7.5%

Privacy concerns were frequently linked to personal safety, digital identity risk and reputational exposure. Several participants cited ADGM and DIFC's data protection regimes as well as selective exemptions to public disclosure of sensitive personal information as decisive factors when choosing where to establish an international base.

As one adviser noted,

“Compliance should be strict at the door. What happens to your data afterwards should be your choice.”

In other words, transparency to regulators combined with privacy from the public was viewed as highly attractive.



CONTROL AND SELF GOVERNANCE

Control was the third pillar consistently reinforced.

Families increasingly want direct control over investment and fiduciary decisions, particularly as portfolios expand into alternatives, private capital and bespoke strategies. Structures designed around institutional processes for third-party managers were widely viewed as misaligned with proprietary wealth.

Participants valued that ADGM and DIFC tools allow families to self-administer within a credible legal framework. This balance between autonomy and certainty was repeatedly contrasted with more prescriptive regimes elsewhere.

Several families described having moved away from institutional trust arrangements or private trust company arrangements involving an institutional trustee, in favour of simpler foundation-led structures that better reflect how decisions are actually made.

Global families are increasingly selecting ADGM and DIFC tools to consolidate governance, clarify ownership and decision making, and establish a credible centre of gravity for complex cross-border interests under their direct control.





STABILITY AND FISCAL PREDICTABILITY



Stability emerged as a distinct and practical consideration across the roundtables. Participants saw stability as a clear policy continuity over time that allows families to plan with confidence.

This matters because SFOs operate on long time horizons. Governance frameworks, holding structures and succession arrangements are designed to endure across generations. Where policy direction is unclear or subject to sudden shifts, structures may remain technically compliant but become fragile in operation, requiring repeated adjustment and creating friction with banks, counterparties and internal stakeholders.

Participants consistently contrasted the UAE's approach with political trends in a number of traditional wealth centres, particularly in Europe, where fiscal policy has increasingly been shaped by short term political cycles and the taxation of wealth as a visible policy tool. In those environments, families described

growing uncertainty around future treatment of private capital, succession planning and long term investment.

By contrast, over the past decade the UAE has pursued a deliberate and differentiated strategy. Its policy framework has been designed to serve three distinct pools of capital: local families, rooted regional families, and globally mobile private wealth. Measures developed to preserve and institutionalise local and regional family businesses are, by definition, structured for the long term. This long term orientation has **become a subtle but powerful signal** to sophisticated global families assessing where to anchor capital and governance.

In this context, stability and fiscal predictability function as structural risk management tools. They reinforce credibility with third parties and allow families to focus on stewardship, succession and long term value creation rather than constant reconfiguration.



COMPLEXITY IS RISING FASTER THAN READINESS



Despite the continued growth in SFOs, the roundtables revealed a persistent structural gap. Many family office arrangements are legally sound and technically compliant, yet fragile when tested as operating systems. This fragility becomes visible precisely when structures are asked to interact repeatedly with third parties.

In practice, governance frameworks often exist on paper but are not fully embedded in decision making. Authority is assumed rather than clearly allocated. Compliance is addressed episodically, instead of being treated as a continuous operating function that supports the structure over time.

One anonymised European case brought this into sharp focus. The family's structure was compliant across multiple jurisdictions, yet each attempt to onboard a new banking relationship stalled. The issue was not resistance to KYC

or transparency. It was that the structure had to be re-explained from first principles every time. Without a clear, consistent operating narrative, each onboarding exercise became a negotiation rather than a verification.

As one participant observed,

“We are happy to be transparent. We are not happy to be re-explained.”

Participants were clear that these challenges are not theoretical. They surface most often around onboarding, financing, custody, residency planning and succession mechanics, where even strong structures can falter without clearer infrastructure and coordination.

MOBILITY AND DEAL FLOW AS ADDITIONAL DRIVERS

Two additional themes surfaced consistently across the roundtables: mobility and deal flow. Both are now structural considerations rather than secondary benefits.

MOBILITY

Residency security has become inseparable from wealth planning. **Families increasingly view UAE residency as a strategic hedge**, not a lifestyle choice. Long-term visas/“Golden Visas” were described as enabling families to centralise governance, decision making and oversight in a stable jurisdiction, while avoiding over-reliance on any single traditional centre that may be subject to political or regulatory change.

DEAL FLOW

Deal flow was discussed in similar terms. The UAE is no longer perceived purely as a regional market, but as a growing access point to global private capital opportunities. Participants highlighted **increasing peer-to-peer deal flow, club investments and co-investments**, often with fewer intermediaries and greater alignment than in more established centres. Several noted that this ecosystem effect is still underdeveloped and represents a clear opportunity for further growth.

In both cases, mobility and deal flow reinforced the same point raised elsewhere: structures must be designed to function across jurisdictions and counterparties, not just exist on paper.



EVIDENCE OF STRUCTURAL CONCENTRATION

Published DIFC data confirms sustained growth in family office-related structures in 2025. ADGM has also seen increased foundation and private capital vehicle registrations, consistent with broader structural adoption across UAE platforms.

IN 2025, DIFC ALONE REPORTED¹

FAMILY RELATED-ENTITIES



1,289

FOUNDATIONS



1,115

GROWTH REPORT

FAMILY STRUCTURES GROWTH



61%
YEAR-ON-YEAR
GROWTH

FOUNDATIONS GROWTH



66%
YEAR-ON-YEAR
GROWTH

Parallel to this growth, the UAE is projected to record approximately



9,800
NET MILLIONAIRE
INFLOWS IN 2025²

This level of structural adoption reflects governance relocation not just capital inflow.

ADGM has experienced similar momentum, particularly in foundation and private holding vehicle formations serving proprietary family capital.³

- <https://www.difc.com/whats-on/news/dubai-international-financial-centre-announces-landmark-annual-results-for-2025>
- [Henley Private Wealth Migration Report 2025 | Henley & Partners](#)
- [ADGM Reinforces Its Status as Region's Leading Financial Hub with Robust Q3 2025 Growth](#)



WHAT IS WORKING WELL VS. WHERE REFINEMENT IS SOUGHT

Across the roundtables, participants were clear on what works today and equally clear on what must continue to evolve.

ADGM & DIFC tick most strategic boxes

High-credibility common law frameworks

Clear separation between proprietary wealth and regulated activity

Strong data protection and privacy regimes

Flexible foundation and SFO tools supporting self-governance

Regulators willing to engage with market feedback

What families want to see evolve

Broader recognition and reuse of KYC through passporting mechanisms

Clearer pathways for lending to assets held within fiduciary arrangements

Deeper local custody and prime brokerage capability

Better alignment between residency regimes and modern wealth structures

Continued clarity around powers of attorney and succession mechanics

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Credibility has overtaken optimisation. Families increasingly favour structures that are explainable, robust and defensible over those that are technically clever but operationally brittle.



Governance is the true differentiator. Readiness is defined by how decisions are made, documented and transferred, not by how many entities exist.



Operational Efficiency has become strategic. KYC passporting and access to financing are no longer niche concerns. They determine whether a structure functions in practice.



Stability and fiscal predictability underpin everything else. Families place increasing value on jurisdictions where policy direction is consistent, long term and clearly signalled, allowing structures and governance to mature without repeated disruption.

One comment from the Hong Kong roundtable captured the shift clearly.

*“The structure will outlive us.
The question is whether it will work
for them.”*

The next decade will not reward families with the most complex arrangements. It will reward those with the clearest ones, anchored in jurisdictions where stability, fiscal predictability and institutional continuity support long term decision making. Readiness is no longer about where wealth sits. It is about whether it is structured to operate and endure across generations.



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M/HQ is a multi-services platform catering to successful individuals and entrepreneurial families. Our one-stop-shop offering is unique in the Middle East: a holistic and cross-disciplinary combination of a market-leading corporate services firm, a private client specialist team and a regulatory & compliance services practice, all through one single platform.

We have extensive experience advising on a broad range of wealth structuring and legacy planning issues. We particularly assist in establishing and servicing **Single- and Multi- Family offices, Family- and Group- Holdings, Foundations** and other asset consolidation/protection and intergenerational wealth management structures.

Headquartered in the UAE, we are an entrepreneurial firm for entrepreneurial clients.