

Case studies

Service quality in consulting: what is engagement success?

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Abstract

There are various views about the nature of service quality in a consulting engagement. This paper utilises literature from a number of disciplines, along with exploratory interviews with seven consultants and one client, to address one question, namely, "What is engagement success in consulting, from both the client and consultant points of view?". In addressing this question, the paper considers distinctions between types of consulting, client expectations and needs, and short- and long-term revenue streams. It concludes by suggesting that a consulting engagement is successful if the consultant has met client expectations (by improving one or more of client performance, client capabilities, or organisational culture, without making any category worse) – whether or not a core need has been addressed – and the consultant has enhanced his/her reputation, with expectations of future revenue streams – whether or not any immediate income has been received.

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Introduction

While many consulting engagements do meet the client's expectations about service quality, many others do not. One example concerned a consulting engagement at a plant visited by the author. Here, a well-known consulting firm had implemented a number of genuine improvements concerning just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing, but the client still was not satisfied, having been left stalled, not knowing how to continue to make subsequent improvements. The client had clearly expected the consultants to help set the stage for ongoing improvements. Other examples of failed efforts include Andersen Consulting being sued over the years by a number of disappointed clients (O'Shea and Madigan, 1997), the poor results from the majority of quality improvement programmes, many of them consultant-led projects (Schaffer, 1997; Shapiro *et al.*, 1993), or consultants simply providing advice without adequately helping with implementation (e.g. Schaffer, 1997; Staughton *et al.*, 1986).

Consulting is a professional service. As such, a successful consulting engagement must deliver a top-quality service to the client. Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) outline five dimensions of service quality:

- (1) reliability;
- (2) responsiveness;
- (3) assurance;
- (4) empathy; and
- (5) tangibles.

They point out that the most important dimension of service quality is reliability (i.e. doing what you say you will do) and the only appropriate judge of service quality is the customer. For consulting engagements, reliability means meeting agreed-on goals.

Service quality is important for consultants, as well as for clients, as consultants are judged largely by reputation and word of mouth. When hiring, clients use reputation and experience as their top selection criteria (Dawes *et al.*, 1992; Patterson, 1995) due to the inherent risk of selecting the wrong consultants (Maister, 1993; Shenson, 1990). Clients' subsequent word-of-mouth communications can have a direct influence on consultants' reputations and thus their chances of being selected for further assignments, either with current clients or others (Dawes *et al.*, 1991). In other words,

consultants' longer-term expectations can be best met if their engagements are successful, leading to a reputation for providing top-quality service.

This paper focuses on the service quality of consulting by addressing the notion of success in a consulting engagement. There are many viewpoints about the meaning of consulting engagement success, ranging from a main focus on business performance (e.g. Kubr, 1996; Shenson, 1990) to a main focus on human relations concerns (e.g. Burke, 1997; Harrison, 1995). These usually reflect the particular context or discipline of the author, such as a specific academic orientation, type of consultant, type of client, or industry.

This paper restricts itself to addressing one question, namely: "What is engagement success in consulting, from both the client and consultant points of view?" Other considerations – in particular, factors leading to engagement success – are not addressed.

Method

This paper utilises literature from a number of disciplines, along with exploratory interviews with seven consultants. These interviews were conducted concurrently with the literature review. The consultants were contacted because they had represented themselves, in either a local membership directory of certified management consultants or a local business networking directory, as providing services in typical operations management areas (e.g. total quality management). Also, an interview was conducted with a client who has extensively utilised such services for JIT implementation. Each interview was open-ended, based on a standard protocol, and lasted for one to two hours. Each was recorded, transcribed, and coded for various categories.

This approach is limited in that there could be bias in both the selection of interviewees and in the interpretation of the interview data. Nevertheless, as the interviews were preliminary and the purpose of this effort was to develop some understanding of successful versus unsuccessful consulting engagements, the interview data should be treated as simply further sources of information to augment the material from the literature.

Engagement success – client view

A consulting engagement cannot be considered successful unless the expectations of both client and consultant are met. Nevertheless, this section addresses engagement success from the viewpoint of the client, with that of the consultant addressed in a later section. Then the client and consultant views are brought together with a concluding definition of engagement success.

Notions of engagement success from the client's point of view were identified in the literature and interviews, coded, sorted, and grouped into categories. This led to three distinct engagement objectives:

- (1) improving client performance;
- (2) improving client capabilities; and
- (3) changing organisational culture.

Overall, regardless of the particular view, meeting promises is the most important aspect of engagement success. This ties in well with the statement by Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) that the most important dimension of service quality is reliability – doing what you say you will do. The various notions of engagement success are considered in turn.

Improving client performance

A number of authors insist that a successful consulting engagement should demonstrably improve the client's performance (e.g. Gable, 1996; Schaffer, 1997). As consultant seven stated: "I always look at making meaningful gains; it has to add some value. If I can't add any value to the situation, I don't take it on". Improved performance can take a wide number of forms such as improvements in cost and profit, systems and procedures, quality of management, and personnel (Gable, 1996), bottom-line results (Schaffer, 1997), organisational effectiveness (Turner, 1982), or individual, group, and overall organisational performance (O'Driscoll and Eubanks, 1993).

Surprisingly, however, not all authors agree that improvements in client performance should be considered an important part of a successful engagement, especially if this improved performance refers to bottom-line measures such as profit, productivity, or efficiency. In particular, organisation development (OD) consultants do not always concede the importance of output measures. Levin and Gottlieb (1993) report that OD has consistently suffered criticism about its lack of

attention to “hard” outcomes, like productivity and cost efficiency. Similarly, Church *et al.* (1994) explain that business performance has not been the focus of most traditional OD efforts; rather a strong value of humanism has been synonymous with OD since the beginning of the field. Linking OD interventions with competitiveness and profitability was almost considered selling out, with early OD practitioners caring little about an organisation’s wellbeing and not recognising the connection between humanisation of the workplace and organisational effectiveness (Van Eynde *et al.*, 1992).

Currently, OD is seen as having succumbed somewhat to the imperative of organisational efficiency and effectiveness, but its focus is still on process – so, how one achieves the bottom line is considered just as important as the bottom line itself (Church *et al.*, 1994). Similarly, Van Eynde *et al.* (1992) observe that there is now a disparity between what OD practitioners believe should ideally motivate their work and what they believe actually does motivate it.

Improving client capabilities

Second, many authors consider a consulting engagement to be successful only if the client’s capabilities have been enhanced – by helping clients to help themselves (Schein, 1990). Examples of such enhanced capabilities include improved flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptive behaviour (Ginsberg, 1989), increased knowledge about organisational effectiveness (O’Driscoll and Eubanks, 1993), or improved client learning, understanding, or an ability to deal with similar problems independently (Gable, 1996; Kolb and Frohman, 1970; Kubr, 1996; Rynning, 1992; Schaffer, 1997; Schein, 1990; Turner, 1982). The client who was interviewed made it clear that he did not want – as a consultant – an expert who simply fixes things but does not make it clear why or how. He referred to his favourite consultant as having said: “I’ll show you to the point where you understand. Then I won’t show you any more. I expect you to do it”.

However, improving capabilities is not always an objective of consulting engagements. Consultants can play many roles that lead to successful engagements without necessarily enhancing capabilities. Such roles include complementing internal

resources and capabilities, providing information, providing independent evaluation, or giving legitimacy (Rynning, 1992), acting as extra brains, arms, legs, eyes, or ears (Shapiro *et al.*, 1993), or acting as a backup or nay-sayer to the client’s instincts (Shenson, 1990).

Changing organisational culture

In a third category, some authors suggest that successful engagements must involve changes in organisational culture. These suggestions typically imply a particular desired end state; for example, one consistent with flatter, more participatory organisations, more explicit, competent, and effective handling of emotions and conflicts, as well as a better “feeling” toward the organisation by its members (Shea and Berg, 1987). Similarly, Burke (1982, p. 100) offers a normative view of OD in which organisational culture has nine characteristics, namely, the growth of members being as important as profits, equal opportunity and fairness being the rule, authority based on competence and exercised participatively, co-operative behaviour awarded, members kept informed, members feeling a sense of ownership, conflict dealt with openly, rewards based on equality-fairness and equity-merit, and autonomy and freedom.

Again, however, this view is not universal. Many other authors – while not arguing against the importance of cultural change – speak of engagement success without mentioning cultural change. For example, the model of engagement success suggested by Gable (1996) consists of three areas of assessment, namely, consultant recommendations, client understanding, and consultant performance. While any of these three could concern culture, culture is not explicitly addressed.

Meeting promises

As mentioned, regardless of the particular view of engagement success, the overriding consideration is whether or not promises are met. The types of promises that a consultant could make are almost limitless. But, unless the consultant can meet agreed-on goals (Kolb and Frohman, 1970), the engagement cannot be considered a success. Examples of meeting various types of promises include delivering recommendations (Gable, 1996; Schaffer, 1997), improving client satisfaction

(Dawes *et al.*, 1991; Gable, 1996; O’Driscoll and Eubanks, 1993; Rynning, 1992), solving specific problems, achieving consensus and commitment, providing reliable information, redefining problems, or making expert recommendations (Turner, 1982), changing strategic orientation (Ginsberg, 1986), staying within budget, meeting completion dates, and adhering to the contract (Mitchell, 1994), or implementing recommendations (Schaffer, 1997; Turner, 1982).

As consultant three said: “. . . it is part of making sure that your own competencies are appropriate, making sure you can deliver what you promised”. Similarly, consultant two was willing to lose money to ensure that promises were met: “The downside is that it cost me some money – if you look at some of my time being not billable. But the upside was that I gained a very happy customer”.

Unfortunately, reliably meeting promises is not always an indicator of engagement success. For example, according to Schaffer (1997), consultants have camouflaged failures by convincing most clients to accept as “success” the delivery of a product – such as a nice report – rather than the achievement of a measurable result. The client may be satisfied that the promise has been met but should the engagement be considered a success? This is addressed further in a later section.

Discussion

As noted for each of the views of engagement success, there is disagreement about the extent to which particular statements apply to the notion of “success”, even statements that seem to “ring true”. In the following sections, two issues are addressed in an attempt to understand these disagreements. The first concerns the distinction between OD consulting and other types of consulting and the second concerns the distinction between client expectations and client needs.

A major distinction

A major distinction must be made between OD consulting and other forms of management consulting. The main difference concerns the relative emphases on fostering humanistic concerns on the one hand and focusing on business effectiveness and efficiency on the other (Burke, 1997; Church *et al.*, 1994). OD consultants tend to

emphasise the former, while other types tend to emphasise the latter.

The literature concerning OD consultation is the broadest and most complete, with its own viewpoints, orientation, phrases, and descriptions. OD may be described as a top-down, planned process of change in an organisation’s culture meant to increase organisational effectiveness through planned interventions, utilising behavioural-science knowledge (Beckhard, 1969; Burke, 1982) and grounded in a number of distinct theories (Bazigos and Burke, 1997). As mentioned, it aims at helping firms change to a very particular type of organisational culture (Burke, 1982). Similarly, Church *et al.* (1994) report certain key values, concepts, and practices associated with OD, such as respect for individual potential and growth, an emphasis on decentralising and democratising organisations, the promotion of a systemic view of organisations and related change efforts, and a strong focus on group process and dynamics. They also report how OD consultants often struggle with dual values – wanting to foster human concerns while their clients want to focus on outcomes.

Schein (1990) makes the distinction between OD consulting and other types, in outlining his three models of helping:

- (1) providing expert information;
- (2) playing doctor; and
- (3) process consultation.

Normally, the term expert means expert in a particular industry (e.g. food processing), function (e.g. equipment selection), or functional area (e.g. finance), while the term doctor implies an expectation that the consultant will provide an outside, independent diagnosis, based on certain capabilities or insights. OD uses Schein’s third, and preferred, model, process consultation. As he notes, a process consultant need not be an expert in solving particular problems nor an expert in a particular functional area, but should be an expert in how to diagnose and how to develop a helping relationship (Schein, 1969).

Two of the consultants interviewed turned out to be primarily OD consultants. They tended to describe their practices in very broad terms. For example, consultant one said: “I can’t think of an industry that I have not worked in . . . name me an industry and I

have probably done something for them because what I do is so generic". Similarly, consultant three stated: "My particular practice has been one that covers a broad spectrum. Now, others zero in on certain sectors; mine happens to be across the board . . . The principles of management are universal and the principles of learning are universal and applicable. So, I make no attempt to pretend that I am an expert in, say, mining."

On the other hand, other types of management consulting typically fit one of Schein's other two models:

- (1) expert; or
- (2) doctor.

The consultants interviewed tended to describe their areas of practice as more focused. For example, consultant five, who practices in labour-intensive industries, focusing on facility planning and other areas that can be measured, said: "... when ISO came along, I liked it. I could eat that up because you can measure the results. Are you certified or not? Are you registered or not? . . . I have worked with SPC because that is measurable also."

Consultant two made it clear that he considered OD consultation to be outside his firm's boundaries:

We have been very careful to prescribe the boundaries within which we are going to operate. I have done a lot of work in organisational change, systems change, organisational systems change, been to a number of workshops, seminars. And some were really first class, with very heavy training around facilitating organisational change. I understand how it works and how it doesn't work, the good and the bad, and how to tell, and the interventions and the tools and techniques. And I can use those but I don't profess to be an organisational psychologist or an OD expert . . . So, we have been very careful to say, "These are our core competencies". . . If the issue is a system, a production system or quality system implementation within the area of manufacturing or production, it is not a problem . . . I know when I am getting into a game that I am not good at. That is probably as important as anything.

Consultant seven also focused on a particular industry: "I have the experience and the expertise from a manufacturing environment and I have also had it from the dairy industry. I bring a skill set that very few consultants have so it becomes a strength and it is also a weakness – the strength being that I have a

very strong niche; the problem becomes, 'He is a dairy man'".

Thus, much of the disagreement in describing engagement success may be explained by the distinction between OD consulting and other types of management consulting, particularly with respect to the categories "improving client performance" and "changing organisational culture". The disagreements are centred around the relative emphasis placed by the consultant on the particular category. While few consultants would argue that "client performance" or "organisational culture" should be made worse by a consulting effort, many will assume neutrality on certain categories, while strongly emphasising others. So, for example, an OD consultant might concentrate on changing the organisational culture of a client, while being quite unconcerned about outcome measures. Nevertheless, there would be an implicit assumption that outcome measures would stay, at least, neutral. Similarly, other types of management consultants would tend to favour outcome measures, while ignoring culture – but implicitly assuming that organisational culture is not made worse by their efforts.

So, engagement success would be better described as keeping promises (meeting client expectations) by improving one or more of client performance, client capabilities, or organisational culture, without making any category worse.

There is some recent evidence that consultants with one orientation are utilising lessons from the other, presumably with some benefit. For example, as mentioned, Church *et al.* (1994) find that current OD consultants focus more on business effectiveness and productivity issues and less on humanistic concerns than was the case in the past. Similarly, from another perspective, Bessant and Rush (1995) indicate that, for consultants in advanced manufacturing technologies, there is growing interest in Schein's process consultation model. In addition, Westbrook (1995) makes a strong case that operations management should utilise action research, which is the methodological model for OD.

This was expressed well by the one client interviewed, who in response to a question about his preferred model of consulting (expert, doctor, process), replied: "I think the process model is the most successful in our

case. The consultant who can diagnose is probably not the best . . . because we are able to diagnose our own problems . . . And maybe that's where you get the hybrid – between the person who has the expert knowledge plus a process-model type of person – an actual practitioner.”

Expectations, needs, and snake oil

Regardless of the particular situation, clients want their expectations to be met. However, simply meeting client expectations may not be enough. In particular, should a consulting engagement be considered successful if it meets client expectations but fails to address the core needs of the client? That is, what if the client expects that core needs will be properly addressed but neither the consultant nor the client has a clear idea of what these core needs might be? In such a case, both client and consultant could easily believe that client expectations have been met and the engagement is a success. Similarly, what if the consultant knows that core needs are not being addressed?

For example, consultant six, criticising experiences during previous employment, explained that: “. . . we came in very heavy handed, and we took control of them all right, and we gave them a great show. And they loved it, and they loved being there. They loved being at our training sessions more than they liked being in the plant. That way you have a really, really good review. And the company was almost at the verge of bankruptcy because we just missed out on the diagnostic aspect of what they really, really needed. What they wanted, you see, was all we were delivering on”.

Consultant one criticised such an approach as being one in which “you find out what the people want and that is what you sell them, not what you determine they should have”. Similarly, consultant four stated that “you have to be pretty forthright and say [a particular approach] can only be done under these conditions”.

In other words, should an engagement be considered a success if the client is pleased with “snake oil”? Often a client has an implicit expectation that hiring a consultant will yield positive results about core needs, even if the nature of these needs is unknown. Clearly, engagements that deliver snake oil fail to meet these implicit client expectations, so cannot be considered successful. Thus, the concepts

of “meeting expectations” and “addressing core needs” are not the same. They often overlap but they may be differentiated according to the following four types of consulting engagements (Figure 1):

- *Quadrant I (meaningful engagement)*. In these situations, both a core need is addressed and client expectations are met. There is no doubt that these engagements should be considered successful.
- *Quadrant II (clean contract)*. For these engagements, there is no intention that core needs are to be addressed. Rather, the consultant simply fulfils a contractual obligation, as promised (e.g. the provision of training in computer skills). Such an engagement may have nothing to do with core needs but it does meet particular client expectations. Clearly, these types of engagements should fit the definition of engagement success, in spite of core needs not being addressed.
- *Quadrant III (unstable relationship)*. Here, client expectations are not met even though a core need is addressed. These situations could arise in two ways. One, the consultant addresses core needs but performs the work poorly. But the other more interesting situation is where the consultant accurately addresses core needs, counter to client expectations. Such engagements can involve hidden agendas or suspect motives on the part of the client. For example, the client may simply want to confirm or receive support for actions already decided (e.g. to fire someone). However, the consultant may decide to look beyond this and focus on the core problem – which, for example, might be the client's management ability (e.g. the boss is the real problem). In this case, a core need was (accurately) addressed but client expectations were not met. These situations are unstable and cannot be considered successful, even though core needs are addressed.
- *Quadrant IV (outright failure)*. These engagements are *normally* easy to recognise. However, this quadrant should also include those situations mentioned previously, in which the consultant either knowingly or unknowingly leads the client to believe that core needs have been met (because the consultant is either selling snake oil or simply lacks

Figure 1 Types of consulting engagements

Types of Consulting Engagements		
	Core Needs Addressed	Core Needs Not Addressed
Expectations Met	I. Meaningful Engagement Example: consultant diagnoses and implements changes in core operations capabilities	II. Clean Contract Example: consultant organises and delivers a seminar, as promised
Expectations Not Met	III. Unstable Relationship Example: consultant reports a correct diagnosis that the boss/client is the real problem	IV. Outright Failure Example: consultant sells whatever is in the toolkit (snake oil) without regard for client

knowledge). As the consultant has failed to meet the implicit expectations of the client that core needs are being properly addressed, such situations properly belong in quadrant IV (outright failure), even though they first appear to belong in quadrant I (meaningful engagement).

So, the answer to the question posed earlier is yes, from the client's point of view, an engagement is a success if expectations have been met (quadrants I and II), provided the consultant avoids selling snake oil and meets any implicit expectations the client may have about core needs being properly addressed.

Unfortunately, not all consultants have a strong desire to be of genuine help to their clients; some deliver whatever specific products or skills are in their toolkits, without much regard for the types of engagement or the clients' real needs. For example, Tichy (1978) reports a study of OD practitioners who admitted they were intervening with techniques with which they were skilful and comfortable, rather than ones directed at the primary needs of the organisation, apparently feeling somewhat "impotent" in bringing about change in these areas.

Similarly, Harrison (1995) reports: "I have always had my own agendas for the organisations with which I have worked. The idea of value-free consulting has no meaning for me. I endeavour to give clients what they and I contract for, but I have often had a covert agenda as well, and I have not always been open about my larger goals and motives out of fear of losing the work. At times, I have felt some shame over having an agenda different from that of my clients."

This problem is not easy to resolve. But, part of the resolution has to lie with the client – who must be clear about the requirements and expectations of the consulting engagement. Shenson (1990) suggests that one-third of consulting business would not be undertaken if management took the time to review its needs and circumstances and to think through its problems in a logical fashion. He adds that the most significant reason for dissatisfaction with the results of a consultation is the client's imprecision or sheer laziness in evaluating the need for and the suitability of a potential consultant.

Engagement success – consultant view

While the focus of a consulting engagement is – and should be – the client, an engagement cannot be considered successful unless the needs and expectations of the consultant are also met. These might include being called for repeat business (Armenakis and Burd, 1988), the potential for follow-on work, the potential as a reference site, or the training value of the project (Gable, 1996). But, most important, consultants expect to earn income. While there are undoubtedly some exceptions and many reasons for becoming a consultant, such as a desire for independence or a genuine desire to help others, in most cases the definition of "engagement success" must include the provision of income. As consultant one noted, in trying to explain how to measure the success of an engagement, "Sometimes, you go back to, 'Did I get paid?'"

However, this focus on consultant income should not be oversimplified. A single

engagement that simply generates income is not necessarily a successful one. The reason is that, as mentioned, a consultant's reputation plays a powerful role in obtaining engagements (Bloom, 1984; Dawes *et al.*, 1992; Day and Barksdale Jr, 1992; Patterson, 1995; Stock and Zinszer, 1987) and, in turn, client satisfaction plays a powerful role in establishing this reputation (Dawes *et al.*, 1991). Thus, it is very important to ensure client satisfaction for two reasons. First, it is much easier to gain new business by marketing to existing clients (Maister, 1993). Second, because of referral networks, a consultant's reputation is being established even with one-time clients. So, it is wise to ensure a satisfied client even if there is no intention to do further work for the client (Dawes *et al.*, 1991). The one client interviewed, discussing the motivation of a consultant who had been doing a series of projects for the firm, noted that the consultant's focus was toward a "much larger segment of our company . . . to use this [assignment] as a leapfrog into that [part of our] organisation. So there are benefits for him to do well here, if that allows him to gain a reputation and move forward".

Consultant six recognised these short- and long-term approaches, "[My former firm's] approach is very simple: go in and give the client what he wants, don't get philosophical . . . do not talk about 'what if'. If they want this module, deliver it, get paid, move on; it is a business. Consequently, in terms of billable hours, I was doing much better with [them] than I do now, but I think, for the future, by having conversations with clients about stretch goals and so on, I am hopeful that they will remember me."

A particular engagement should be judged according to its ability to generate long-term revenue from a series of engagements, either with the current client or with others.

Consider a consultant who willingly takes payment for work which does not meet the client's expectations. This should not be considered part of the definition of engagement success, as any consultant who would simply "take the money and run" jeopardises expected long-term income. On the other hand, consider a consultant who gives the client a break, such as working almost for free, following up to ensure the client is completely satisfied, providing certain free services, or waiting until the

client is established before submitting an invoice. Such behaviour makes sense when seen in the light of enhancing one's reputation – and future revenue – via satisfied clients and thus should be considered part of the definition of engagement success.

Conclusions

Service quality is important not only for the client; the consultant has an interest, as well, in providing a high level of service quality in each consulting engagement. In this regard, consultants should always remember that their future revenue streams depend on the service quality they provide and the subsequent reputation they establish, primarily via informal word-of-mouth communication.

Various authors have outlined three main objectives of consulting engagement success:

- (1) improving client performance;
- (2) improving client capabilities; and
- (3) changing organisational culture.

Similarly, there are distinctions to be made between types of consultants, in particular between OD consultants and other types of management consultants. Thus, clients must be clear about their expectations for each consulting engagement and attempt to match these expectations with consultants who have corresponding approaches. This is especially important, given that often the same terminology (e.g. total quality management) is used by various consultants to mean quite different things.

Also, from the client's point of view, it is more important to have expectations met, whether or not core needs are being addressed. This has implications for both clients and consultants. Clients must keep control of the agenda to ensure that each consulting engagement delivers what they expect. In particular, it is risky to ask a consultant both to determine one's needs and to implement solutions. Consultants should recognise that they are being hired for a particular purpose that may not necessarily address core needs of the organisation. They should meet these limited expectations and resist the temptation to promote other agendas.z

Definition – engagement success

Regardless of the specific situation, a consulting engagement may be defined as successful if the client is satisfied that the consultant has met expectations (by improving one or more of client performance, client capabilities, or organisational culture, without making any category worse) – whether or not a core need has been addressed – and the consultant is satisfied that his/her reputation has been enhanced, with expectations of future revenue streams – whether or not any immediate income has been received.

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