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MBA ASSIGNMENT

Human Resource Management

Discuss how an organisation of your choice can achieve a connection between its strategy and human resource management

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1. Introduction

The aim of this assignment is to examine the relationship between Human Resource Management (HRM) and strategy. The essay explores the changing and developing role of HRM in providing a corporate and strategic dimension to an organization's life-cycle. By making use of the literature the essay identifies a number of organizational areas that are believed to be critical when a corporation seeks to inter-link its Human Resource Management Practices with its strategy.

The structure of the essay is divided into six sections which are as follows: The second part examines the relationship between the more traditional HRM approach in relation to the Strategic HRM approach. This section argues that the difference between them lies in the degree of positioning the training and development of employees are subjected to as being critical for the long term prospects of the company's quest in meeting its objectives.

The third part of the essay explores the case of performance appraisal systems as a way of the organization having more transparent access to controlling and managing the employees' as well as its corporate performance. Corporations that are able to achieve a connection between their strategies with their HRM functions are able to indicate specific targets that need to be met while monitoring the employees' performance. The fourth part of the assignment examines the case of self-managed teams and high performance working practices as two additional indicators of an organization that seeks to develop a strategic approach to its HRM.

The fifth part of the assignment looks at the relationship between performance management and its relationship to management learning and change. This section argues that organizations which seek to incorporate a strategic approach towards their HRM do not simply indicate the targets employees are expected to achieve and also do not provide the necessary training and learning so that employees are able to identify ways of developing their knowledge and skills relevant to their needs. Having provided a literature review on the above thematic areas the sixth section looks at bakery retailer Greggs and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the company in relation to its approach towards HRM. This section discusses how Greggs could develop a more explicit strategic approach to its HRM practices while seeking to expand the opening of its stores.

2. Differences between HRM and SHRM

The exercise of HRM is concerned with the nature of the employment relationship between the management and employees (Kaufman, 2001; Armstrong, 2006a). The emergence of HRM took place in the course of realising the significant contribution people play in the life of an organisation (Sisson, 1990; Kennerley and Neely, 2002). Despite this growing recognition that came from the emergence of 'Personnel Management', corporations realised that the management of employees concerned not only the management of all those explicit but also *implicit* functions (e.g. psychological contract) that exercise influence on the contract relationship (Gunderson, 2001; Dulebohn, et. al. 1995). For example, the emphasis shifted from what the nature of tasks employees performed to the wider association with culture of the organisation, to issues of work safety, career progression, performance realisation, task rotation and others (Delery and Doty, 1996; Kaufman, 2001).

The strategic wave of HRM represents one of the latest shifts that underline how the continuing training and development of employees can have clear correlation with the wider performance and function of the firm (See Delery and Shaw, 2001; Mathis and Jackson, 1999). Armstrong (2006a) encapsulates the above notion by stating that: "The fundamental aim of strategic HRD is to enhance resource capability in accordance with the belief that the human capital of an organization is a major source of competitive advantage. It is therefore about ensuring that the right quality people are available to meet present and future needs. This is achieved by producing a coherent and comprehensive framework for developing people" (p.534). Whereas HRM realised the important contribution employees make to the life of the corporation it did not make explicit the strategic and direct impact to its performance (Delery and Doty, 1996). SHRD argues how the environment in which employees realise new opportunities about themselves and the environment in which they are able to utilise new potential represents an interrelated link with the everyday performance and working of the organisation (Delery and Shaw, 2001; Kaufman, 2001). As Figure 1 illustrates SHRM argues for a transformative role employees play and that it needs to be managed and aligned to the wider corporate objective of its management.

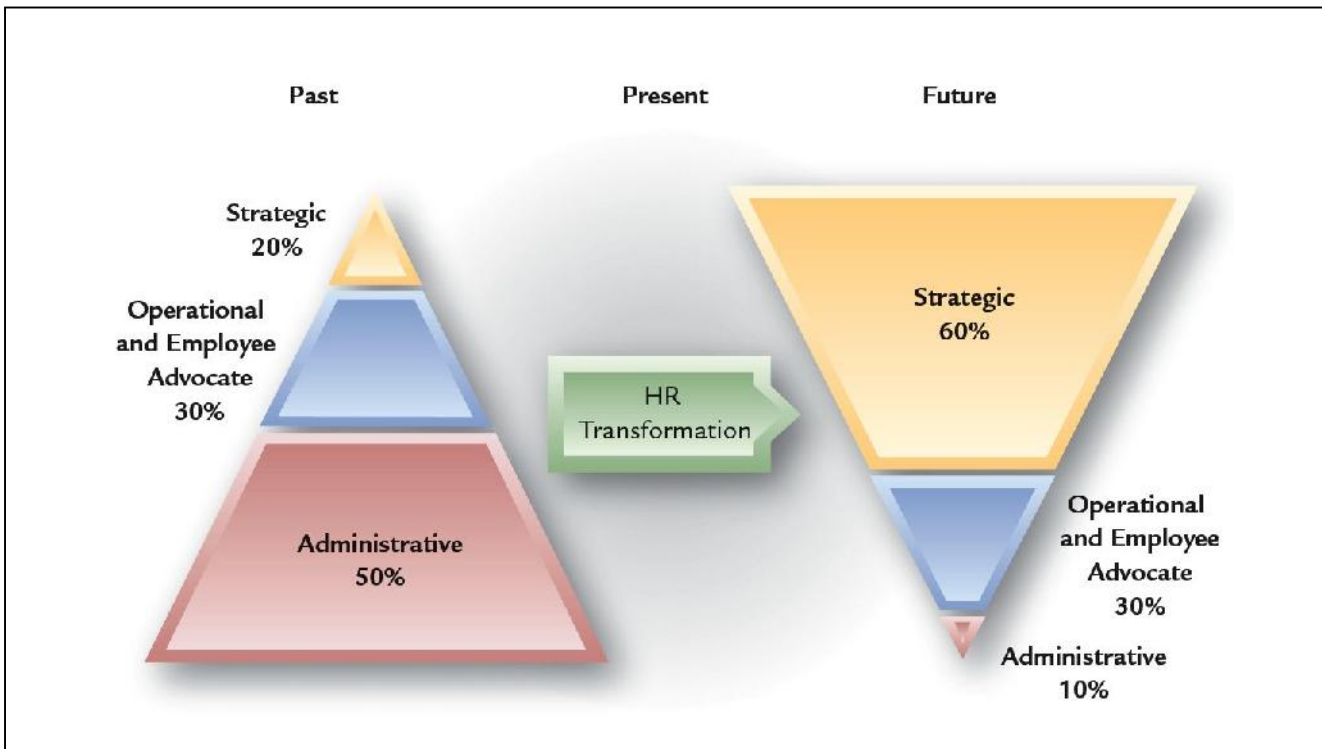


Figure 1 The shifting change of HRM from administrative to strategic
 Source: Mathis and Jackson (1999: 21)

3. Performance Appraisal Systems

The use of performance appraisal (PA) systems aim at evaluating the employees' work and contribution to the organisation over a period of time (McAdam and Bailie, 2002). The objective is to provide a measurable account of the employees' positive or negative performance so that the organisation is able to have a more efficient control over its operations (see Figure 2). For example, Armstrong (2006a) argues how "Performance management reviews (individual and 360-degree feedback) provide the inputs required to create personal or team development plans, and to many people performance management is essentially a developmental process. Performance reviews can, however, produce data in the form of individual ratings, which may be used as the basis for performance-related pay decisions" (p.146).

The extent to which performance appraisals can be of benefit to the organisation is argued to depend on the way that it is *exercised* in the organisation (Neely, 1999). Even though the measuring of performance can be a positive channel in detecting strengths and weaknesses such evaluation modes can also be perceived as intimidating by the employees and lead to issues of demotivation or lack of enthusiasm (O'Mara, et. al. 1998). According to Wiese and Buckley (1998)

some of the advantages of a performance appraisal system are that “it facilitates organizational decisions such as reward allocation, promotions/ demotions, layoffs/recalls and transfers. It may also assist managers in developing employees. It serves to assist individual employee’s decisions regarding career choices and the subsequent direction of individual time and effort. Additionally, performance appraisals may increase employee commitment and satisfaction due to improvements in organizational communication” (p.233). The exercise of PA systems is believed to constitute a key part of an organisation that seeks to integrate its strategy with its HRM practice because it believes that the managing of performance has a direct correlation with the wider performance of the corporation as a whole.

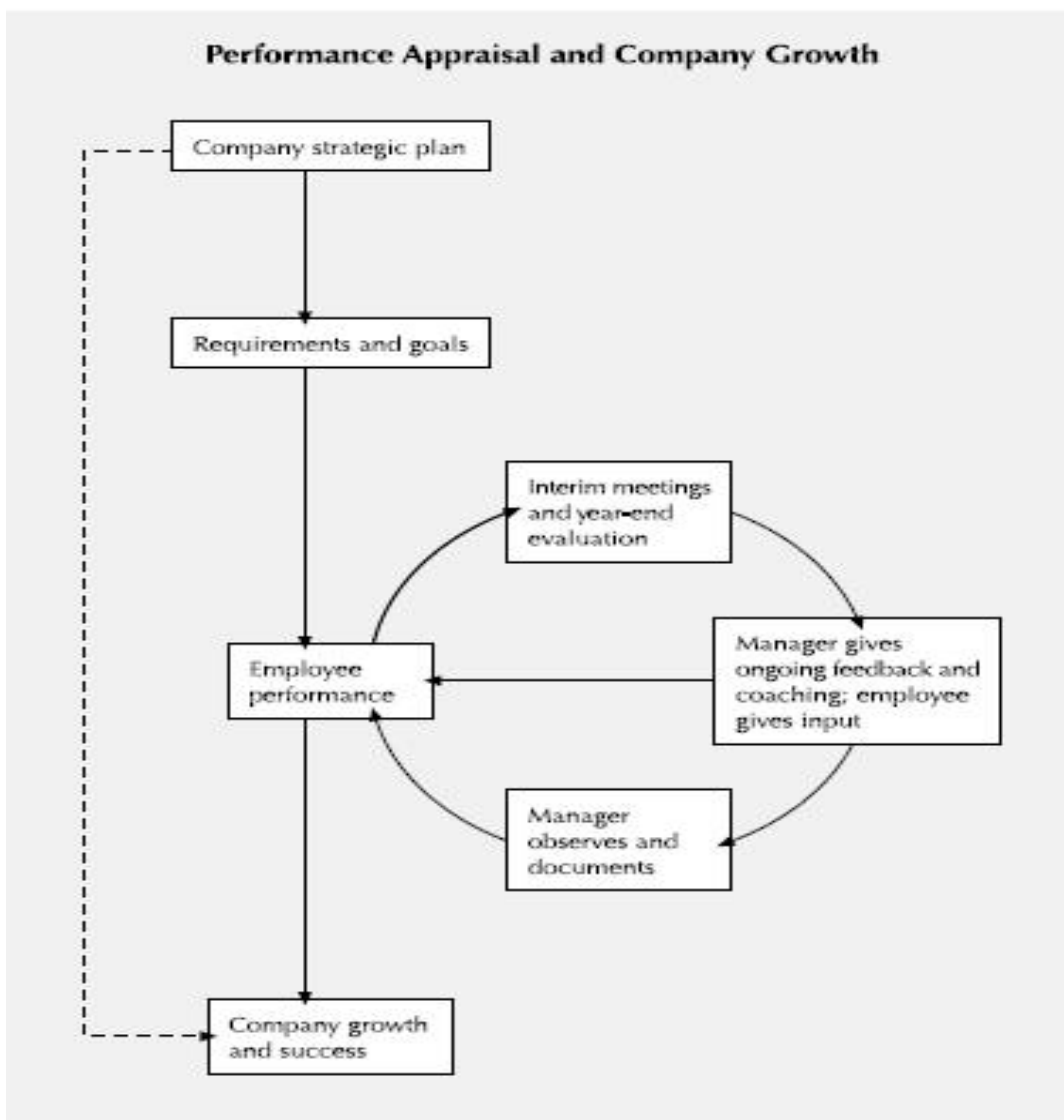


Figure 2 Overview of Performance Appraisal

Source: DelPo (2007, p.10)

The question however surrounding the exercise of such methods is *how* they might be perceived by the employees that receive them (see Rangone, 1997). Furthermore, questions arise like what kind of performance appraisals will be appropriate to help produce the necessary satisfaction for their positive performance as well as indicate areas of improvement when weaknesses are detected? The argument that is supported by authors across a wide spectrum is that performance appraisal systems or reviews, cannot in themselves, become a positive resource for improvement in the organisation (Kuwaiti and Kay, 2000; Wiese and Buckley, 1997). It is argued that performance appraisal systems can be manipulated differently by the members of an organisation. For example, Cook (1995) argues that “The interviews also uncover managers’ reasons for making deliberately *low* PRs: to shock someone back onto a higher “performance track”, to teach a rebellious subordinate who is in charge, to send someone a message that they should consider leaving the organization and to build a well-documented record of poor performance to speed up termination” (p. 3). All of the above characteristics indicate how performance appraisals can be used in a number of ways and according to the interests of those that deploy them (Neely, et. al., 2000).

4. Self-Managed Teams & High Performance Working Practices

4.1 Self-Managed Teams

The use of self-management teams has become a popular way of organising the employees’ working environment and it is believed that can contribute to an increase of efficiency and input (Buckenmeyer, 1996). The rationale behind the rise of self-management teams emerges out of the recognition that employees need to increase their sense of independence and involvement in the organisation by sharing ideas and working with others (Lawler, 1999). By being ‘self-managed’ it is argued that employees will sense a greater sense of empowerment that will also lead to a more innovative decision making behaviour and performance (Barry, 1991; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; McKee, 1992; Mears and Voehl, 1994), (see Figure 3).

| Traditional work groups | Self-directed teams |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Take directions | Take initiative |
| Seek individual rewards | Focus on team contributions |
| Focus on blame | Concentrate on solutions |
| Compete | Co-operate |
| Stop at present goals | Continually improve and innovate |
| Demand more resources | Work with what they have |
| React to emergencies | Take steps to prevent emergencies |
| Spend money to improve quality | Save money by improving quality |

Figure 3 Differences between traditional work groups and self-managed teams
Source: Elmuti (1997:235)

In using the work by Sirking (1993) Elmuti (1997) argues that “self-managed teams programmes can produce greater satisfaction, reduced costs, faster and better decision making, improved pricing, and increased market share” (p.234). Elmuti (1997) makes the distinction between two most popular approaches to self-managed teams, namely a) work teams and b) problem-solving teams. Elmuti (1997) argues that “A problem-solving team is similar to a taskforce in that it is formed for temporary purposes. While problem-solving teams are temporary, work teams, which are used by two-thirds of US companies tend to be permanent. Rather than attack specific problems, a work team does day-to-day work activities” (p.233)

In addition to the above, the study of self-management teams has also been a contested issue because of the management’s lack of appreciation of the process of the employees’ contribution and decision making. For example, it is argued that there is lack of appreciation at an individual level for how employees lead to innovative ideas, and that eventually can help the performance of the organisation. However, the question remains of whether the employees’ commitment and high involvement is being evaluated by the organisation. Wiese and Buckley (1998) argue that “...in a team environment, some believe individual performance appraisals interfere with teamwork by overemphasizing the individual” (p.234).

From the above discussion follows that the use of self-management teams can be a win-win situation, when the employees’ contribution to the organisation is evaluated in a way that the individuals’ efforts are being recognised. The use of self-management teams can be a loss-win situation for the employees when their ideas help produce innovative suggestions that the employees do not themselves profit from (e.g. financial or non-financial recognition). At the same time, it can be a loss – win situation for the organisation when the employees do not make use of their

independence and empowerment to contribute to the firm. Employees can manipulate the freedom that they are given and use their independence in ways that their involvement becomes superficial or unproductive.

4.2 High Performance Working Practices

The study of High Performance Work Practices (HPWP) has received attention in the study of SHRM because it is believed to indicate specific relationships that when implemented can lead to higher levels of performance (Conolly and McGing, 2007). HPWP is used to characterise a synthesis of best practices that are argued to be resembled across successful organizations (de Waal, 2007). The work by Huselid (1995) became influential in introducing this argument in the literature. By studying 968 public firms Huselid (1995) was able to identify a set of common trends that were shared between organisations. Such trends were particularly indicating specific approaches to the employees' involvement in the organisation and were designed in a strategic rather than random mode. De Waal (2007) argues that High Performance Organisations (HPO) share some certain characteristics like "strong financial results, satisfied customers and employees, high levels of individual initiative, productivity and innovation, aligned performance measurement and reward systems, and strong leadership" (p.180).

Murphy and Southey (2003) argue that HPWP were seen as detrimental in having "improved worker output, improved worker efficiency, reduced absenteeism, reduced layers of management, reduced incidence of grievances and in general "higher productivity and product quality" (p.73) From this premise Huselid (1995) argued that the indications that organisations place on nurturing for managing of the workforce have a wider and direct contribution to the performance of the organisation.

HPWP are not essentially different from HRM. Instead, the study of HPWP aims at indicating a specific set of relationships that need to be strengthened within HRM practices. Such relationships are perceived as critical or detrimental for making an organisation successful in terms of its relationship to commentators (Guillory, 1996; Mirrielees, 2006; Stevens, 2000; Teare, et. al. 2002). Furthermore, it is for this reason that Connolly and McGing (2005) argue how "Huselid (1995) argues that certain criteria must exist if human resources are to be a source of competitive

advantage: first, that individual performance significantly affects the organisation's productivity; second, that the skills must be rare, and finally that the human capital is difficult to imitate" (p.202). By drawing reference on the above qualities of HPWP, the effort is to try and establish a narrower and almost causal relationship between HRM practices and performance. However, and despite the above emphasis it is equally widely agreed that there is little known about how the employees' high involvement can help generate high performance in the organisation (Guillory, 1996; Mirrieles, 2006; Stevens, 2000; Teare, et. al. 2002).

5. Performance Management (PM), Learning & Change Management

The exploration of Performance Management in the literature is closely associated with measuring the employees' outputs against performance criteria that can be introduced from the management or from discussions with employees (Kennerley and Neely, 2002). Managing the employees' performance is a form of quantifying their offering to the organisation (Murphy, 1999). Organisations that operate in the service sector (e.g. call centres) often want to measure how the employees' initiated contact with the customers, how well they managed to answers questions the customers asked and whether the conversation was held in a professional manner that resembled the values/principles of the organisation (Kennerley and Neely, 2002). In the literature, PM is discussed in light of managing learning and change (Murphy, 1999). Authors argue that organisations should not only indicate the targets that need to be met but also provide the necessary learning structures so that employees are able to develop the right competencies in order to meet them (Roos, et. al., 2004). Love and Holt (2000) argue that to a large extent, PM practices fail to accomplish what they are believed to offer because employees experience uncertainty about the process of accomplishing them. Moreover, managers set standards without acknowledging the skills and competences employees not only have but also lack (Roos, et. al. 2004). Kirkpatrick, (2006) argues that "In an extensive study on performance reviews, researchers at General Electric came to the following conclusion: Implicit in performance appraisal programs are now structured and include two distinct objectives: (1) letting a person know where he or she stands via ratings and salary actions, and (2) motivating him or her to improve". (p.20) The management of learning or change is about introducing the employees to

those new or different knowledge areas that they need to develop their skills in order to meet their performance targets (Kennerley and Neely, 2002). In this context, the process of managing the employees' performance takes place together with managing their learning or development that is *not* immediately corresponding to the targets that need to be met. It is for this reason that Armstrong (2006b) rightly argues how: "Discussions take place on ways in which the individual's role could be developed so that it becomes more challenging from the viewpoint not only of new tasks to be accomplished but also the need to acquire or extend knowledge and skills in order to carry out those tasks". (p.144)

6. Greggs plc

Greggs is a large bakery retailer that has a leading position in the UK's bakery market. With 1,200 shops nationwide, Greggs has been expanding its market share by maintaining a reputation for quality and freshness that has won the trust of its consumers, overtime. Some of the products include freshly-baked savoury products like pies, pasties and sausage rolls, plus sweet lines like doughnuts and drinks. Taking into account the difficult logistical demands Gregg has to meet, its employees play a critical role in helping support the large manufacturing and selling targets. Despite the fact that its products are distributed from central bakeries around the country, the personal interaction with the customers at the time of selling remains an important activity for achieving customer satisfaction. By examining the company's report and published information, it is clear that Greggs does not seem to position the role of its employees at a strategic level for its envisaged expansion. The employees seem to play a supportive role in the company's functions which is not perceived as critical. Scarce information is provided for example in the company's website for outlining how the employees play an important part in the company's current performance or future expansion. The company advertises its Values online as an indication of the importance attached to them. It states: "*Our Values – We will be enthusiastic and supportive in all that we do, open, honest and appreciative, treating everyone with fairness, consideration and respect.*" (www.greggs.plc.uk) (Italics in the Original).

Moreover, in the Interim Results Report by its long standing director Sir Michael Darrington, reference to the employees remains scarce. The report states "Our

people are coping well with a period of considerable change in the way we organise and run the business” (www.ir.greggs.plc.uk). Mention is then swiftly made to the company’s relationship with the wider social environment and how the employees’ involvement within the wider community which in turn helps improve the image of the corporation. In addition to the above the company provides little information about the specific skills and competencies that potential employees might need in order to apply within its different departments. Reference is made to a number of sections such as recruitment (e.g. a) Secretarial and Administration b) Food/Health and Safety c) Finance d) People e) IT f) Purchasing g) Marketing h) Marketing i) Production). However, no further link is made for how the changes and developments within those departments may affect the company’s performance. Even though the above presentation of Gregg’s treatments of its employees might not reflect in full the internal workings of its staff environment, it is clear that the company does not place strategic importance on its people. In contrast, the emphasis is repeatedly mentioned to be dependent on the expansion of its products, the use of more robust advertising and marketing practices and opening of more stores in existing UK cities. If the company was to perceive a strategic correlation between its performance and people at a strategic level it would position the areas of training, learning and employee development as more central to its growth.

6.1 Creating a More Strategic HRM Focus

Having examined a number of key areas that constitute important strategic approach to HRM it can be argued that Greggs plc is able to incorporate some of the mentioned practices in order to provide a more strategic edge to its recruitment and retention of employees. For example, a performance appraisal system can be introduced in order to assist the management of the company to identify current areas of improvement as well as strengths. Even though the company’s shops operate within different parts of the UK, the company could improve the exchange of learning between the shops and employee within the different locations. Moreover, the company could identify more explicitly areas of improvement within its HRM that would be supplemented with a specific strategy that would be committed to addressing the identified needs. A specific budget could be allocated for introducing training initiatives and explicitly outlined in its company reports similar to the

marketing and advertising campaigns. This would be an indication of the seriousness with which the company is committed towards introducing an SHRD strategy.

Even though the distinction is made by the company in regards to the working environment compromised by the retail selling employees against those working in the more administrative areas, there is absence of the different forms of involvement and empowerment which they are subject to. Greggs plc could make more explicit the link between the opportunities and challenges present within the different working environment that may raise interest in future employees. Instead of promoting a traditional approach to HRM, Greggs plc could be keen on outlining the innovating role of its staff and how they have contributed to its current achievements and growth. In addition to the above, performance needs to be more integral and formally incorporated within the language Greggs plc uses on its electronic publications. Despite the size of the employees it employs, it can be surprising how the presentation of the performance targets Greggs plc needs to meet are loosely defined and become insignificantly intertwined within the company's values. As we have seen from the literature, practices of assessing performance and showing commitment to training and development are important qualities for any organisation that is willing to integrate its HRM within its wider corporate strategy. Greggs plc might already be serious about its performance targets but nevertheless needs to assure that it explicitly communicates them to the current and future employees.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this assignment has been to investigate the connection between the function of an organisation's HRM within its wider strategy. This essay argued that the development of strategic HRM in the literature is a clear indication of the changing role of HRM as compromising a much more critical and corporate role than it received in the past. This essay provided a literature review and identified four areas which are critical for developing a strategic approach to HRM. All of the above practices aim at integrating the role and performance of the employees in a way that is more explicitly measured as well as managed within the wider corporate strategy. Employees are not simply believed to provide a maintenance role within an organisation but their training and development is believed to be a source of improvement to the corporation as a whole. By examining the case of Greggs plc, this essay identified how the organisation does currently possess a strategic focus

on its HRM practices. Instead the company seems to treat its employees as providing a functional role that translates into the manufacturing and selling practices. In order to develop a strategic focus to its HRM functions, Greggs needs to make more explicit its commitment to training and development as being an important prerequisite to its wider corporate performance.

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