

EXPLORING THE WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES OF MILLENNIALS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the workplace communication preferences of Millennial employees, a growing subset of employees in today's organizations. Survey results (n = 84) from a sample of Millennials are presented, focusing on the following themes: sharing information, seeing the big picture, the employee-manager relationship, feedback, and coworker communication. Implications for education and business are discussed as well.

Keywords: Millennials, Millennial employees, managerial communication, workplace communication

INTRODUCTION

The workforce today consists of members of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials (Gesell, 2010). As a result of such age diversity, it is likely that employees will have varying approaches to work, as well as differing workplace behaviors, which may result in conflict. Gesell (2010) contends that the current generational mix makes leadership today more complex, and that because of their stark differences when compared to other generations, using traditional approaches of leadership are not successful. Similarly, Ferri-Reed (2014b) suggested that employers need to transition "from a 'boomer-centric' workplace to a 'millennial-centric' workplace" (p. 13). Hershatter and Epstein (2010) noted that college educated Millennials started entering the workforce in 2004 and will continue until approximately 2022. Millennials as a whole are considered the best educated generation to enter the workforce (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Given the rise of Millennials in the workforce, managers must consider how to effectively communicate with these employees by recognizing the communication preferences of Millennials.

When a group of Millennials were asked what they look for in a full-time job, many mentioned elements such as "good communication between coworkers and managers," "respectful and professional work environment," "a good support system for guidance," and "good management." It is evident from comments such as these that the manager plays a large role in shaping the work environment and partially impacts whether an employee is satisfied with the job. Other desires expressed include "fair and equal treatment of all employees" and a "good culture in the workplace." In the opinions of those surveyed, bosses should also be "understanding," "easy to work for," "motivational," and "friendly and honest." The focus on boss-related traits when asked for elements desired in a full-time job emphasizes the importance of the manager's role within the organization. These responses and others will be further discussed in the results section of the paper. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the workplace communication preferences of Millennials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Madlock (2008), the communication competence of a supervisor is the best predictor of the level of job satisfaction experienced by an employee. Cahill and Sedrak (2012) found that many leaders “have made generational issues a low priority” (p. 4) and that sometimes organizations deliberately avoided focusing on generational tensions that existed in the workplace. Since “early life experiences contribute to generational differences that are deeply imprinted in individuals’ beliefs, values, preferences, and behaviors and are not easily changed” (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012, p. 4) it is important that managers recognize different generational preferences in order to effectively lead a multi-generational workforce. Alessandra (1995) set forth the idea of “the Platinum Rule.” Whereas the Golden Rule focuses on treating others the way you want to be treated, the Platinum Rule suggests, “Do unto others the way they want to be done unto” (p. 23). As it relates to communication, this means communicating with others the way they want to be communicated with, or focusing more on the receiver’s perspective, as opposed to the sender’s. Alessandra (1995) suggested that by communicating with others the way they want to be communicated with, an “instant rapport” can be established “by learning how to do what they want done” (p. 23).

Previous research has found that Millennials desire “frequent, positive, and open communication in the workplace” (Chou, 2012, p. 75) and readily share information with others as well (Chou, 2012; see also Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Hill, 2002; Howe & Strauss, 2007; Marston, 2007; Martin, 2005; Tapscott, 1998; Zemke et al., 2000). According to Cahill and Sedrak (2012), Millennials want open communication and for their opinions and ideas to be heard. Ferri-Reed (2010) calls for managerial coaching that balances praise with constructive criticism. Corrective feedback is necessary, but can cause Millennials who are accustomed to receiving praise to become defensive. Instead, she suggests providing specific, objective examples of what needs to be modified while helping the Millennials “understand that changing their unproductive behaviors will help to increase their success” (Ferri-Reed, 2010, p. 33). In addition, Ferri-Reed (2012) identified three things that leaders can do to help Millennials succeed in the workplace: “give them the big picture, help them find the ‘me’ in team, and mentor them on career-building behaviors” (p. 18). Given Millennials’ desire to understand how their work fits into the big picture of the company’s goals and their expectation to be heard, it is important to provide a big picture view for these employees. In addition, many Millennials need help learning the norms of the organization, as well as social expectations and acceptable behaviors in the workplace (Ferri-Reed, 2012).

Ferri-Reed (2014a) noted that Millennials often need detailed directions and desire open communication. Accordingly, Ferri-Reed (2014a) suggested that “Millennials respond best when communication is direct, honest, and without hidden agendas. The quickest way to lose the loyalty of millennials is to withhold information or restrict it to a select few individuals” (p. 16). Behrens (2009) highlighted the fact that due to technology, Millennials are well-connected and aware of many job opportunities that exist. As such, he noted that “The employer who fails to challenge the new [Millennial] employee and provide day-to-day mentoring and encouragement may find the Millennial among the dear departed” (p. 20). Accordingly, it is important that managers are aware of the type of communication Millennials desire and responsive to these needs as a way to stifle turnover due to a lack of communication.

When communicating with Millennials, the manager should also provide positive feedback that is both sincere and direct. It is important to recognize the accomplishments of these younger employees, and doing so could have an impact on their level of loyalty to the company,

as well as their commitment to a career path (Ferri-Reed, 2014a). Providing frequent feedback was also suggested, as Millennials want to be told where they stand and how they can improve (Ferri-Reed, 2014b). Ferri-Reed (2014b) suggested that companies “encourage open communication,” “involve workers in decisions and change efforts,” and “provide continual feedback for performance improvement” (p. 13).

Jablin (1987) posited that an employee’s level of job satisfaction is higher when the supervisor is open in communication with the subordinates. Previous literature suggests that Millennials expect communication with their boss to occur more frequently and to be more affirming and positive in nature than previous generations did (Gursoy et al., 2008; Hill, 2002; Marston, 2007; Martin, 2005). Behrens (2009) suggested reverse mentoring as a way to involve Millennials in their new workplace. Schullery (2013) noted that two-way mentoring often benefits both the experienced and the less experienced employees, as well as the employer. In reverse mentoring, the typical mentoring relationship is inverted and newer, younger employees are paired with more experienced employees whereby the younger employee acts as the mentor with the more experienced employee taking on the role of protégé and acquiring new learning (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Kram, 1996; Kram & Hall, 1996). Millennials often expect to build close relationships with their superiors in the workplace, similar to the close relationships they were encouraged to build with their parents and teachers (Hershatzer & Epstein, 2010). Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2012) suggested that reverse mentoring could serve to increase Millennials’ involvement within their organization and keep them committed, while simultaneously engaging Baby Boomers.

Through this review of the literature, it is apparent that communication plays a crucial role in the adjustment, success, and satisfaction of Millennial employees. By applying the Platinum Rule (Alessandra, 1995) and focusing on the receiver’s perspective, managers and coworkers will be better suited to communicate with employees in the manner in which they are accustomed and desire. Failure to do so can have far reaching implications for the organization including lower levels of job satisfaction and potentially higher levels of turnover.

METHODOLOGY

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved survey was administered electronically during the spring and summer 2015 semesters to students enrolled in undergraduate business courses at a regional comprehensive university located in the southwest region of the United States. Five sections of courses were included, and participants voluntarily shared their perspective on workplace expectations and preferences. Students who opted not to participate were not penalized. Once the data collection period ended, the responses were analyzed and incomplete surveys were excluded from the results. The responses to the open ended questions were then open coded to allow for the identification of themes among responses.

FINDINGS

During data collection, 84 completed surveys were collected from participants who reported years of birth that fell into the Millennial category. Individuals who reported birth years outside of 1982 - 2002 were excluded from this study, as they do not fall into the category of Millennials as identified by Howe and Strauss (2000). Females constituted 58.33% of the respondents, and 41.67% of those who completed the survey were male. Survey demographic questions regarding previous work experience were asked to better understand the sample. Of the

respondents, 50 (59.52%) were currently employed and 34 (40.48%) were not. Of those employed, 76% reported being employed part-time, while 24% worked full-time. For the majority of the respondents (68%), their current job is not related to the career they would like after college graduation. Those who indicated that they were not currently employed were asked if they have ever been employed, either part-time or full-time, and they could select all the answer choices that applied. Accordingly, 26 indicated that they have previously worked part-time, while 14 have previously worked full-time. One respondent has never been employed. Since this survey asked respondents about their workplace preferences or expectations, previous work experience is not required to have a valid response to the questions, so the individual who has never been employed was included in the dataset.

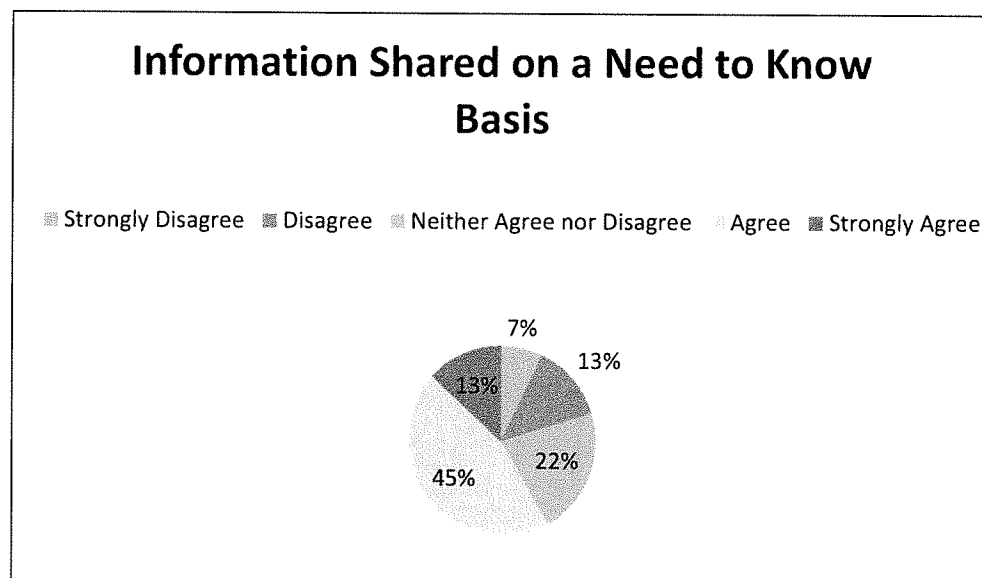
Culture

It is important to understand the broader organizational culture in which Millennials wish to work before narrowing in on communication related preferences. When presented with the statement “The culture of the company is important to me,” the average response on the 1 – 5 Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree) was 4.31 with 40 respondents (47.62%) scoring that statement with a 5. Similarly, when survey respondents were asked to rate how important “ethical tone set by management” was when considering full-time employment, the average response was 4.38 with nearly 55% of respondents selecting 5 on the Likert scale.

Sharing Information

Interestingly, the average response on the statement “Company information should be shared with employees on a need to know basis only” was 3.44. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of each response.

Figure 1
Need to Know Basis



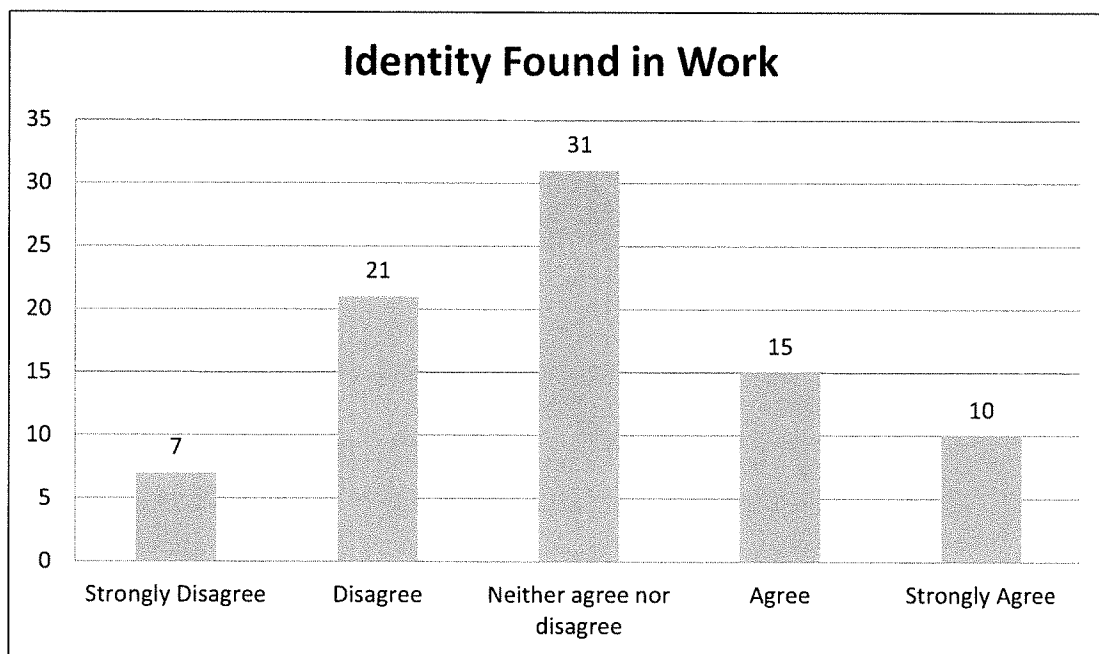
This finding does not support previous research's suggestion that Millennials do not appreciate information being withheld from them.

In addition, the Millennials want to know why their organization or boss is having them do something. The average response was 3.81, with over 69% selecting a 4 or 5 for that survey item. Overwhelmingly, the Millennials surveyed indicated that they expect their opinion to be heard and valued at work, with an average response of 4.26.

Seeing the Big Picture

Recognizing the diversity inherent in the workplace today, it is necessary that managers consider the diverse needs and preferences of employees. When survey respondents were presented with the statement "I need to understand how my job fits in to the big picture," over 76% agreed or strongly agreed. At the same time, there was disagreement as to whether a Millennial's identity is wrapped up in their work. Figure 2 represents the responses to the survey statement "My identity is found in my career."

Figure 2
IDENTITY FOUND IN WORK



Employee-Manager Relationship

The survey also included an open-ended question that asked participants to describe the type of relationship they would like to have with their future boss. From the responses, the following themes emerged: primarily professional, open communication, and friendly but not a friend.

The importance of professionalism and maintaining a professional relationship with the boss was commonly expressed. While some desire a "strictly professional" or "straight business

relationship,” others are open to developing other types of relationships while maintaining professionalism. For example, one respondent described the desired type of relationship in this way, “Easy and friendly, though with clear lines between our positions. I do not want to be friends with my boss, but I don’t want to be at odds with them either.” Another desires “a professional relationship that also involves good comradery [sic].” Though most respondents did not clearly express their interpretation of a professional working relationship, it was the most commonly expressed desire in response to the survey question.

Many respondents explained various types of communication they would like to be engaged in with their boss. Elements such as “healthy communication” and an “open relationship communications wise” were mentioned as desired traits, as well as “the ability to talk” to the boss about work-related problems or concerns. Feeling comfortable asking the boss questions was a commonly stated desire among Millennials. One respondent put it this way, “I would like to have a relationship where I feel comfortable talking about assignments and projects with them [the boss].” Another remarked, “I shouldn’t be scared to go talk to my boss.” Communication should occur on a daily basis according to the perspective of one respondent.

Communicating feedback is important as well. A Millennial commented, “I would hope they [bosses] would tell me what I was excelling in and what I needed to work on to improve myself.” In addition, the sentiment that the relationship between a subordinate and the boss should be “a friendly one that allows guidance” was also expressed.

The idea of the boss being friendly, but not a friend was shared in various ways. One respondent noted the desire for a “cordial and relaxed” relationship and went on to explain that “no one wants to come into work everyday with an awkward relationship.” The sentiment that the relationship between an employee and his or her manager should not be too personal was commonly expressed as well. “We need to be friendly and comfortable with each other but we don’t have to get too personal” was a comment one Millennial made about the type of relationship he or she would want with a boss. Another expressed the desired relationship as “I would like to have a friendly relationship, still keeping in mind that they are my boss.” The relationship should be “not strictly business” but “not very casual.” One respondent said the manager should be “boss first, friend second.” However, another person desired a professional relationship, but stated “I would like for my boss to take an interest in big life goals or accomplishments that are going on” as well.

While in the minority, the following noteworthy responses were also received. One person mentioned the desire for the boss to also serve as a mentor. The lack of frequency of this response aligns with the survey responses that indicate a lack of perceived value from the Millennials’ perspective when it comes to forging relationships with those older than them in the workplace. Other reported sentiments included that the relationship should be “laid back” and “fun,” though this perception was certainly in the minority. A few individuals included “mutual respect” in their response.

Feedback

Providing feedback is crucial to communication success. In the workplace, feedback serves to correct inappropriate behaviors or wrong endeavors, as well as to encourage the employee when they are doing things correctly. In the absence of quality feedback, employees are left floundering, unsure of their status. Course-correcting feedback should be offered in a timely manner in order to ensure the employee does not continue down the wrong path on an assignment for too long.

Feedback in the workplace can come from many different sources. When survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “I am comfortable with negative feedback from my boss,” the average response was 3.81; however, when asked about receiving negative feedback from a coworker, that number dropped to 3.5.

Managerial Feedback

Respondents were asked to describe the type of feedback they expect to receive from their manager. The most common response was related to “constructive criticism,” though many expounded on how they would like the message to be framed. One person commented, “When I do something incorrectly, I would want them to nicely teach me the correct way or talk to me about how to improve it.” “I’d like constructive criticism where I feel like even though I’m doing something wrong, that I’m still learning from the experience” was described by another to explain the desired managerial feedback. A desire for “honest feedback” was also expressed, as well as feedback that includes “both positive and negative so I can work on my weaknesses and continue to grow with my strengths.” “One on one advice that is helpful and makes me learn” is a benefit of receiving constructive feedback from the manager.

Respect was emphasized as well. One Millennial surveyed noted, “If I am doing something incorrectly I expect for my manager to let me know in a respectful way.” “Feedback that is honest yet professional and unbiased” is expected. Another mentioned, “Negative feedback will only make me better at my job, while positive feedback will make me feel like I’m doing something right.” Since “both [positive and negative feedback] are essential to my growth,” both should be provided, in the opinion of many Millennials surveyed. One noted that “any feedback is good feedback.”

The desire for positive feedback was commonly expressed as well. One person desires “mostly positive with some constructive criticism,” while another mentioned that managerial feedback should be “positive and encouraging.” “I do not expect to be rewarded very often but if I am working extremely hard I want my boss to notice” was the sentiment of one respondent. Another person highlighted the desire “to be recognized for my successes.” However, not everyone surveyed expects positive feedback. One person commented “I should expect brute honesty no more no less. I want to know what they think of my work and suggest some ways to help improve if they have any suggestions.” Another expects mostly negative feedback, which was indicated by the comment “negative for the most part. You shouldn’t get praised for doing your job.” However, praise for a job well done was often desired among Millennials surveyed. One respondent expressed a desire for “rewards every now and then when I do something right.” Another wants to be told “what I am doing right.” The sentiment that “I like to be told that they can see how hard I work ... also, that I am a great employee and worker” was noted by another respondent. In the opinion of one participant, “just a nod or a pat on the back is sufficient.” Another Millennial commented “I need to know what I am doing right. A little encouragement will not hurt.” Many of these sentiments support existing literature’s view of Millennials and their need for feedback.

Coworkers

Participants were also asked about the relationship they hope to have with their coworkers. Key findings are summarized in the table below.

Table 1	
COWORKER SURVEY RESPONSES	
Statement	Average Response (1 – 5 scale)
I can learn a lot from older employees who have been with the company for a long time.	4.65
Getting along with my coworkers is important to me.	4.50
I value relationships with coworkers of different ages.	4.17
I am comfortable obtaining information from my coworkers if my manager/boss is not providing information.	3.74

As shown from the results in Table 1, Millennials are not as comfortable asking for information from their coworkers if the boss is not providing sufficient information. As such, it is important that the manager is providing clear directions and carefully articulating expectations, as the Millennial may hesitate to seek out the information elsewhere.

There appears to be a disconnect between valuing relationships and learning from more experienced workers. It seems that Millennials are more likely to want to learn from those long term employees, but do not necessarily want to develop a relationship with them or value that possibility. In response, the manager and organization should help foster a culture of community and encourage younger and older workers to develop friendships with one another, not simply get information. A formal mentoring or reverse mentoring program may help in the development of this.

Coworker Communication

Opinions were mixed when Millennials were asked about the type of communication they anticipate being involved in with their coworkers. The majority reported they expect to be involved in primarily (if not totally) professionally or business focused communication. This open ended data supports the findings of the previous survey question related to feeling comfortable talking with a coworker if the boss is not providing the information. Sentiments such as “constant communication” and “cordial” were expressed, as well as “friendly” and “relaxed” to describe the desired communication environment.

For those desiring primarily professional communication with coworkers, but also open to more personal or relaxed communication, what several people referred to as “business casual” conversation, the following expectations were shared. “I would want to be friendly with my coworkers, but I would not tolerate gossip or mean comments. Most conversations should be professional or relevant [to the workplace].” In addition, it was noted that there needs to be “a healthy balance between friendship and teamwork.”

There were respondents who reported a desire for a combination of professional and personal communication; however, many stated that they desired to be involved in professional communication only. One respondent noted, “I am not here to make friends but will enjoy my time at work.” Another commented that communication should be “about work related things” as well as “bettering the organization.” The ability to ask questions or seek feedback of coworkers was articulated as well. One person commented, “You should be able to ask co-workers questions and have everyone work well together.” The idea of getting help from coworkers was expressed several times, including the statement that “I want to be able to go to them if I have a question or need ideas and I want them to do the same.”

However, there are Millennials who reported wanting to engage in conversation with coworkers that went beyond just the workplace. Some respondents viewed such interactions as “encouraging” or “a break from the stress of work.” One person commented, “I want to be able to talk about work just as much as I can talk about my personal life” to express the type of communication mix he or she desires in the workplace. “I expect to be able to have conversations with my coworkers that do not always revolve around work. I expect to have a deeper connection with my fellow co-workers and be part of their lives” was the comment provided by one Millennial.

Though the minority, extremes in responses did exist. One Millennial surveyed responded that if he or she was not working on a group project “communication with coworkers is not important.” Another mentioned not wanting too frequent communication, “but not so far apart at times where I have to struggle to remember their names.” Regardless of the type of communication preferred, respectful interactions were often mentioned. Avoiding gossip and profanity were included in many responses as well. An environment that is perceived to be “fun” and “supportive” will go a long way in helping Millennials communicate appropriately with their coworkers in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

This study’s findings have numerous implications for business and education. Educators have a role to play in preparing the next generation of the workforce. As such, Millennials can be taught about generational differences within the workplace, as well as how to deal with potential conflicts that might arise as a result of ingrained thoughts on how workplaces function. It is important for Millennial students to learn that they may have to work in situations that may not meet their desired level of communication or feedback from their supervisor. By learning to recognize generational differences, Millennial employees may be better suited to modify their behaviors and tailor their interactions to meet the workplace norms or communication preferences of others. From the business perspective, it is essential that managers are trained how to lead a diverse workforce and recognize the communication preferences of those they are responsible for leading. Armed with such knowledge, managers can help Millennials transition to the workplace and thrive in their new role.

The limitations of this study include surveying only Millennials pursuing higher education, as well as using only five sections of undergraduate business classes at one institution of higher education to compose the sample. Future research is needed to confirm or refute these findings using a broader sample of Millennials, including both those pursuing higher education and those who are not. In addition, future research should consider the perspective of the managers of Millennials. This could be done through quantitative or qualitative methods to better understand the type of communication differences that exist among generations, as well as how the managers effectively lead a multigenerational workforce and the challenges inherent in doing so. These findings could help both managers and educators as the next generation of leadership continues to enter the workplace.

In conclusion, this study’s findings confirmed some previously reported characteristics of Millennials, yet contradicted others. The unique perspectives of Millennials were emphasized while related challenges for managers were highlighted. Through open-ended responses, a deeper understanding of the workplace preferences and expectations of Millennials surveyed was gained, which included both managerial and coworker communication. The culture of the organization was discussed as well, as it contributes to the communication environment

experienced. Millennials are entering the workforce in droves and are challenging management to change the status quo. As organizations and managers work to retain Millennial employees, it is crucial that the communication practices within the organization are reevaluated as well.

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