Organizational Management and Generation X
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Introduction

"Our research on GenX helped to turn the slacker myth on its head and introduce the world to the real GenX: flexible, adaptable, technoliterate, information-savvy, independent, entrepreneurial, and in perfect sync with the new just-in-time workplace. In thousands of in-depth interviews, we have found a generation devoutly self-confident and thoroughly convinced that the only source of success and security in their adult lives will be themselves,"

(Tulgan, 1999a, p.1).

The business world is a constantly changing one, a phenomenon that has become startlingly apparent within the past two decades. To compound these staggering changes, a new generation of worker has come of age, the age group that has become popularly known as "Generation X" by authors of contemporary literature, the media, and even by social and business experts. An examination of how these new arrivals on the work scene think, behave, and are motivated to perform is important for understanding the corporate and small business and organizational world of the twenty-first century. Theory accepted as fact by Generation Xers like Paul Tulgan can help managers and leaders learn how to best tap the creativity and youthful vigor of these young people. This paper will present an analysis of the needs, issues, and dynamics of leading Generation X members as they become productive and satisfied members of the current and emerging workforce.

Defining Generation X

"The generation of Americans born between 1961 and 1981 - the children of the Baby Boomers - were classified as baby-busters, slackers, twentysomethings, the generation without a conscience, the lost generation, the 13th generation, the me generation, but most commonly and most enigmatically as Generation X, (Slattery, 1999, p.1). Tulgan (1999a) defined this group to be people born between 1963 and 1977. "The definition of Generation X is not clear Depending on who is asked, Generation X is made up of people born between 1965 and 1980, 1965 and 1975, 1961 and 1981, 1964 and 1979 or since the mid-1960s" (Joachim, 1997, p.1).

Basically, the term Generation X refers to the children of the Baby Boomers. Slattery (1999) pointed out the danger of stereotyping every member of an age group by slotting them into a "box" of generational characteristics. She surmised that this slurring of the Generation X group compensated for the lack of fulfillment felt by the Baby Boomers, whose strong ideals and visions for the future petered away, as they become part of the "system" they had so vocally disassociated themselves from, in their youth. Their children, as they matured were branded a spoilt lot, the first generation to have it good, yet who complained constantly about their lives.

Douglas Coupland has been linked with the naming of this age group. He explained, "The book's title came not from Billy Idol's band, as many supposed, but from the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class structure titled , "Class", by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an "X" category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence. The citizens of X had much in common with my own socially disengaged characters; hence the title." (1995, p.72). Coupland further pointed out that "X" was never meant to refer to an age or generation, but a way of looking at the world, a worldview. The media has since labeled people from aged 13 to 39 as Generation X. By 1991, advertisements were presented which used "Generation X" as a code word for the post-Baby Boomer market segment considered so difficult to pin down.(Joachim, 1997).

A stereotype of this young generation emerged, one of withdrawal, contemplation, minimalism, and of living on the fringe of society. 48 million Xers were born between 1964 and 1977 in the United States (Tulgan, 1997a). Control is a basic tenet of Generation Xers' philosophy, their underlying insecurity being somewhat alleviated by being in control, though control itself is never

completely secured (Kelly, 1999). "Insecurity lies at the root of the X generation, perhaps the desire to be in control rather than secure is what leads them to escape. The Xer lifestyle is all about control, employment in a job for which one is over-qualified facilitates extreme control, being fully aware of how far one's job goes in defining 'who-you-are', one is automatically in control in deciding which one of you the world will see, the working you, and thus how one is viewed by the world. Occupational slumming allows for the setting of limits of one's public persona without compromising one's private self, the real-you that is exposed only fleetingly to family and that is full frontal when it comes to friends," (p. 2.).

Generation X Comes of Age

Roughly 42 million (33 per cent) of the American workforce of nearly 125 million people were born between the years of 1963 and 1977 (Tulgan, 1996b, p.1). Tulgan asserted that "the cautious, self-reliant, information savvy Xer - committed to adding value, closely monitoring results, and adjusting daily to changed circumstances, may be a new breed of worker" (p.1). According to Tulgan, leaders who can tap this uniqueness can put their organization way ahead in the strategic and competitive arenas. This group of young people also include close to 80 percent of the American workforce now in the process of establishing their own business (Tulgan, 1997a).

Generation Xers have come of age in a depressed economy, restricted job market, with more crime on the streets, and growing environmental concerns, which partially accounts for why Xers view the world differently than did their predecessors. Yet they are also the first generation to grow up in a time of relative peace and economic prosperity, with access to technology both at home and at school (Wesson, 1997). They grew up feeling comfortable with using machines and computers, yet may have lacked adult input. Many may have depended more on their peers than their families to fulfill their social and emotional needs, while growing up in the era of latch-key kids, skyrocketing divorce, and two income families.

In the current work arena, there is a growing premium on flexible workers who can:

(a) acclimate quickly to new environments;
(b) take charge of their own skill building;
(c) easily learn new technologies;
(d) seize emerging opportunities;
(e) focus on results;
(f) monitor feedback constantly and adjust rapidly to changing circumstances and
(g) anchor themselves to relationships with individuals, instead of institutions.

Generation Xers have these traits since they are influenced by the same forces which have shaped the changing workplace. With no stake in the workplace of the past, Generation Xers enter the workforce expecting to be sole proprietors of their own skills and abilities, working as independent valuable players on a project by project basis within a select organization, or across organizations as an independent agent (Tulgan, 1997). Organizations that are progressive and forward-thinking often find that Generation X employees can be admirably loyal, adaptive and inventive: a real asset to any business or group.

Management Challenges and Generation X

Tulgan (1999c) described his research on how Generation X employees viewed the process of management. His findings led him to conclude that "The most successful teams - those with high morale, high productivity, and low turnover, are led by coaching-style managers who practice what we call FAST Feedback. F.A.S.T. is an acronym that stands for frequent, accurate, specific and timely. These are the elements employees most often ascribe to feedback they receive from managers whom they describe as "the best manager I've ever had." These are also the four elements employees most often say they need, but don't get, in the feedback they receive from managers." (p.1) As well, members of this developmental group work best when stimulated, both intellectually and socially (Tulgan, 1995).

A learning environment within the workplace is also important for any generation of worker, but

particularly the X generation. Different milieu of teaching materials are often welcomed, including print, videos, audiotapes, interactive DC programs, seminars, discussion groups, the use of mentors and coaches, and direct hands on experience. (Tulgan, 1997a, 1997b). Xers need these resources to be readily accessible with open access. They need to be able to use these resources at their own pace and in their own way. They need ways to study facts and information to gain knowledge, practice techniques to develop skills, and master perspective to gain wisdom and experience.

Tulgan mused that Xers were the perfect employee in this new shifting information age paradigm. "The most ironic misperception of Xers is that they have short attention spans and do not deal well with information. In truth, what characterizes Xers more than any other trait is their great facility with information and technology. For many Xers, who grew up as latch-key kids in an increasingly dangerous world, information and technology were their best friends -- their most reliable problem solving resources. That is why Xers already know how to work in the virtual office, where information drives production, and how to sell in the virtual marketplace, where meaning is the primary commodity. Xers' comfort and skill with the changing information environment is a tremendous asset. But, that asset requires maintenance because Xers have voracious appetites for information and learning. (Tulgan, 1996, p.1). Rules that are seen as arbitrarily enforced, superficial or discriminatory will probably be rebelled against. Gen Xers internalize rules that make sense to them, where compliance seems valuable to them personally.

Generation X Work Expectations, Ethics, and Values

"They plan to work for an employer only as long as they are getting what they need -- marketable skills, exposure to decision-makers, tangible results for which they can take credit, work-life balance, and performance based rewards. Their willingness to walk away from employment relationships failing to meet their needs gives them a strong negotiating position and they know it. History will show that Gen Xers' "free agent" mind set put them in the vanguard of the new economy," (Tulgan, 1999a, p.2). This generation within the workforce demand flexibility, which ties in nicely with flex workers, telecommuting, contracted freelance work, and part time employment mixed with full time employment during peak periods.

Tulgan (1995) described Generation X workers as the ideal job candidates for these changing times. A self-reliant group, Xers can for the most part do without job and pension security, but rely more on their own resources for their security. The literature that promotes becoming cognizant and literate in technology and fit into the information age is redundant with this group - they were born coping with the information tidal wave. Workplace diversity as well feels comfortable and natural to them, and their ability to empower themselves helps them adjust easily to the changing knowledge worker paradigm of the 21st Century. It is as if all of the changes in management and leadership theory over the past decade or two was written with Generation X workers in mind as the perfect participants.

Being valued as an individual is extremely important to the Generation X worker. There has to be personal gain in an employee-employer relationship to foster commitment and dedication in an Generation X employee. They are continually looking for evidence that investing in a particular work relationship is worthwhile for them (Tulgan, 1995, 1997a). Xers can not thrive in organizations where they feel like "cogs in a wheel". Such an approach to work by organizational leaders only promotes sinking morale, lowered productivity and higher turnover with this particular generation. Xers need to feel that work can be a primary outlet for their creative energy and affords a feeling of personal fulfillment, allowing for diversity. "As the first generation raised from birth and educated with affirmative action, we are not only comfortable with people of diverse origins, but have come to expect social environments which offer a good mix of people and promote a wide range of perspective. We have learned that diversity fosters creativity and innovation" (Tulgan, 1996b, p.1).

Xers are adaptable, entrepreneurial, outside-the-box type workers. Xers are learning to survive in an economy without job and pension security. They recognize that career security can be created by themselves, not through a diehard allegiance to a certain organization, as in previous

generations. Xers prefer to position themselves as free agents in the career arena, being sole proprietors of their time, their work and their creativity (Tulgan, 1997a).

This generation values being able to build marketable job skills and expertise and seeks creative opportunities to prove their value in the work environment. Xers are great at developing innovative solutions but do require clear goals and deadlines to exert their creative freedom within an organization. A focus on tangible end-results rather than the process of achieving them is key in working with this generation (Tulgan, 1995). They also value regular and specific feedback as they work, rather than interim performance evaluations. Rosenberg (1999) pointed out how valuable the technological skills that have naturally developed in Generation Xers are for the current marketplace and for any organization. Many Generation Xers have earned enough money to more than comfortably retire using their technological savvy and creating businesses that use the Internet and other computer applications to deliver their product or service.

The Generation Gap: Generation X and the Baby Boomers

Tulgan (1995) described Generation X'ers as a generation who shared their parents', the Baby Boomers' disillusionment with the way things were, but without a peak time of youthful idealism. He seemed to find it almost amusing that Baby Boomers could view Generation X progenies in a negative light. It was the socio-cultural revolution led in the 1960's by the then young Boomers that set the tone for Generation Xers' childhood, creating different needs, expectations and motivations in Xers as they reached adulthood and entered the workforce (Tulgan, 1997a). As well, Xers grew up during the era of mind-blowing technological invention. Boomers grew up with television, but Xers also experienced the impact of personal computer and other advanced technology throughout their developmental years. Xers now process information differently than Boomers and elders from previous generations do. This very natural affinity with information and technology will prove to be a goldmine survival skill in the 21st Century. As well, Boomers raised the Xers in an environment of high divorce, two parent working families, more permissive parenting and the latch-key kid phenomena. As a result, Xers learned to solve problems more independently, and feel more confident about their ability to adapt to change. Xers often express the belief that their future security depends on their own self reliance, not on some cultural movement or organization.

Coupland (1995) marveled at the way the Baby Boomers could view their grown children in any sort of negative way since their individualism was so in harmony with the "Hippie" or "Flower Child" ideals that many Boomers supported in their youth. Ironically Generation Xers have often been labeled them apathetic and slackers by Baby Boomer managers, leaders, and writers.

Coupland attributed this irony to a misunderstanding of the intent of his novel characters in his 1992 novel, "Generation X: Tales for an accelerated culture". "The problems started when trendmeisters everywhere began isolating small elements of my characters' lives - their offhand way of handling problems or their questioning of the status quo - and blew them up to represent an entire generation. Part of this misrepresentation emanated from the baby boomers, who, feeling pummeled by the recession and embarrassed by their own compromised 60s values, began transferring their collective darkness onto the group threatening to take their spotlight. The result? Xers were labeled monsters. Their protestations became "whining"; being mellow became "slacking"; and the struggle to find themselves became "apathy". Once I understood this boomer angst-transference, their criticism took on its own twisted logic and instantly became benign." (Coupland, 1995, p.73).

To explain how Baby Boomers came to their present day way of thinking, Howe and Strauss (1997) mused, "Over the past five decades, as Boomers have charted their life's voyage, they have consistently aged in a manner unlike what anyone, themselves included, ever expected. They began as the most indulged children of this century, basking in intensely child-focused households and communities. Benjamin Spock mixed science with friendliness and instructed parents to produce "idealistic children" through permissive feeding schedules. To most middle-class youths, poverty, disease, and crime were invisible-or, at worst, temporary nuisances that would soon succumb to the inexorable advance of affluence. With the outer world looking fine, the

inner world became the point of youthful focus. Their parents expected Boomers to be, in William Manchester's words, "adorable as babies, cute as grade school pupils and striking as they entered their teens," after which "their parents would be very, very proud of them." In 1965 Time magazine declared that teenagers were "on the fringe of a golden era"--and, two years later, described collegians as cheerful idealists who would "lay out blight-proof, smog-free cities, enrich the underdeveloped world, and, no doubt, write finis to poverty and war." (p.1).

Baby Boomers began as the most indulged children of this century, basking in intensely child-focused households and communities. To most youth of that era, poverty, disease and crime were invisible. And with the outer world looking fine, the inner world became the focal point for Baby Boomers. The outer world was not so fine for Generation X as they moved through childhood.. The Baby Boomers were the last generation to enjoy a certain sense of innocence. When the Boomers were young, America was a safe, prosperous country. Older generations had delivered a nation of seemingly limitless possibilities and promise, with the Camelot-era of John F. Kennedy a strong sign of the times. Back then, everything seemed possible. By contrast, Generation Xers are a generation of diminished expectations.

Holtz (1995) targets the introduction of birth control in the sixties as one of the major reasons Generation X is different from that of their parents' generation. Also, when the Baby Boomer generation was trying to teach their children that "you can be anything you want to be" in reality opportunities for a bright future looked pretty dim greyed by the damage done during the 1980's economic difficulties. After the Vietnam war, the country's morale never recovered, and cynicism among youth ran rampant. Baby Boomers were able to experience the free love movement while Generation X has been burdened with the threat of AIDS.

Now that the Baby Boomers have matured, and many have moved into management positions in organizations of all types, the cynicism has often been turned on the upcoming generation just entering the work force. Expectations and the world view expressed to Generation X employees can often be negative and prejudiced. Zustiak (1996) described the typical Baby Boomer manager has having an IBM mentality, where one devotes everything in their life to their career. Family may be neglected, since their work week is horrendously long, and work is even brought home. The X generation is not willing to work this way, unless it is for themselves, and done in their own way. Generation X workers resist committing themselves to standard and traditional institutions. Baby Boomers have learned to thrive this way. Relational aspects of work are also important to Generation Xers. They are more visual and experiential in their learning and more casual in their approach.

According to Joachim (1997) Generation X members have to work twice as hard as Baby Boomers have. Generation X employees are constantly being downsized by Baby Boomer managers and have to work doubly hard to prove themselves. Generation Xers are commonly unafraid in challenging authority. Where Boomers tended to stick it out at work, even if unhappy, Gen Xers will move on to another job. Boomers are more interested in materialistic physical objects, Generation X's value peace of mind and leisure time more. As well, Generation X youth are more environmentally, economically and socially conscious than previous generations.

Yet, their concern and commitment is often overlooked. "This generation--more accurately, this generation's reputation--has become a Boomer metaphor for America's loss of purpose, disappointment with institutions, despair over the culture, and fear for the future. Many Boomers are by now of the settled opinion that Thirteeners are--front to back--a disappointing bunch. This attitude is rooted partly in observation, partly in blurry nostalgia, partly in self-serving sermonizing, but the very fact that it is becoming a consensus is a major problem for today's young people. No one can blame them if they feel like a demographic" (p.5).

As one Generation Xer disclosed to Joachim, "We're frustrated and cynical because of Baby Boomer's censorship and unwillingness to understand what we are about. We are angry at the system that created our anger. Because we are intelligent enough to realize that it is unrealistic to directly confront these issues, we use our minds to get around them by lobbying, etc." (Joachim, 1997, p. 1).

Double the Gap: Generation X and Historical Generations

Tulgan (1995) pointed out the obvious gap in leadership between the senior generation and the new Generation Xers entering the workfield. He pointed out that their most common solution for dealing with this newest "upstart" younger generation was to place them under the leadership of Baby Boomers, who tended to misinterpret Generation Xer's behavior in terms of their own youth. The older generation, still mired in bureaucratic and even Taylor-style management only got in the way of the Xer's creativity and ability to self govern. They have found that old tactics of external control and rigid rules often send Xers packing in no time. This style of leadership impacts on morale, diminishes the quality of work as well as a feeling of loyalty and commitment and boosts staff turnover. The view held by this older generation that Xers are cynical, slackers, whining, have short attention spans and lack concentration, are nihilistic and can not stand deferred gratification was challenged by Tulpan (1996a).

Generation Xers grew up with media images of financial success and aesthetic lifestyles, an image not enjoyed by the youth of the 1930s to late 1940s. Xers thrive on challenge and personal opportunity. These qualities were also enjoyed by the youth of the older generation, but not rewarded within organizations, unless they could fit into the corporate structure. Xers work to achieve comfort and abundance through their own creative even maverick efforts, building their personal portfolio of knowledge, talents, and skills rather than climbing the linear ladder of corporations and organizations as their grandparents did. Success and its rewards are more important than just paying one's dues and climbing the ladder rung by rung. Generation Xers were raised in the era of "self-help" and have learned to embrace the concept and practice of networking, a practice that gained popularity in modern management circles for the Boomers, has not caught on as strongly as expected by older generations. (Rosenberg, 1999). Memories of war and the Great Depression helped to shape a different type of worker in the grandparent generation to the current Xers (Rosenberg, 1999). "For many of today's young people, the priority is personal fulfillment," (p.10).

The "Silent Generation" includes those born between 1925 and 1942. Too late for World War II combat and too early to feel the heat of the Vietnam draft, these were the children of depression and war who came of age in the newly built suburban society of the 1950's. Full of affordable homes, entry-level jobs and terrific career prospects, the optimism of an achievable American Dream was pervasive. By today's standards, this society seems too simple, conformist and bland. Such a protected lifestyle left the Silent Generation ripe for the full effects of the Baby Boomer-inspired consciousness raising movement which began in the late 1960s. Xers have become the "Repair Generation," not by choice, but by necessity. They are the ones who will be hurt most by fallout from the debt crisis, disintegrating families, growing racial disharmony and a poisoned environment. While they are ennobled by a sense that they are the ones who must and will make the world a better place, they are embittered by the belief that they are fixing the problems not for themselves but for the generations behind them.

To Lead Generation X, The Needs are Specific

"A whole lot of things that management theorists have been talking about for decades are now absolutely imperative. Good management is no longer a luxury. It is absolutely essential in a workforce that is downsized and restructured and reengineered, where there is no job security and where increasingly people are working in a telecommuting context or in other, more atomized environments. It's no longer the case that, you know, good management is a touchy-feely subject. Human Resources are the most valuable resource in the company. And, these things absolutely have to be done. There is an emerging workforce that can no longer function in an environment of bad management. Because we have to fend for ourselves and we have to be working in institutions that contribute to our self-building. In order to do that, companies need to be practicing better management." (Talpin, 1996).

Tulgan's advice to managers is to embrace the free agent style of Generation X and learn to "thrive on a fluid talent pool," (1999a, p.3). To ask themselves, "How do we get the best work out of the best people on a consistent basis?", instead of trying to get young people to "climb the

corporate ladder." Learn to manage performance instead of time; to manage results and have concrete goals, deadlines and allow freedom for the employee to get the work done in their own way (Tulgan, 1995). "The most talented workers today are also the ones pursuing the most liquid "free agent" careers. Understanding and supporting that career path is the most important key to being an employer of choice in the new economy. That means providing maximum learning resources in a culture of knowledge-work; regular exposure to decision-makers and good working relationships with day-to-day managers; clear goals and deadlines for tasks and responsibilities; a steady flow of credit and rewards for value added; and a healthy work-life balance." (Tulgan, 1999b, p.1).

Tulgan (1997) summarized that Generation X workers do not mind being told what to do, but how to do it was valued when they could decide the process for themselves. Xers know that their appetite for on-the-job learning is the key to their success. In today's knowledge driven economy, that voracious appetite is also the key to an organization's success. The knowledge and ideas of employees can quickly become product and service innovations, shaking up markets and keeping an organization on the cutting edge in today's market. In the post-information revolution economy, market leaders in every industry will be the organizations populated by knowledge workers at all levels: Workers who routinely leverage information and knowledge in their work will lead. To grow knowledge workers at all levels, an organization must support employee efforts to acquire expertise and transform themselves, the roles they play, the work they do, and their value in the organization and on the open market. "Free agents are much less likely to leave the organization altogether if they can reinvent themselves within the organization. Provide opportunities to move into new geographical areas, new skill areas, work with new people, take on new tasks and responsibilities, and work new schedules." (Tulgan, 1999b, p.2).

Gen-X managers tend to side-step rules with no connection to mission, disdain authority for the sake of authority, focus on results, respect individual effort and reward individual excellence. Gen-X managers prefer to lead teams in which every player understands the goal and his or her connection to it, and everyone gets to be a "star". This leadership style is in perfect keeping with the new economy. It is also the only way to maximize the new "free agent" knowledge-workers who are in such demand these days. (Tulgan, 1998, p.1).

Generation Xers are fiercely independent, so much so, that sometimes managers assume that Xers are not interested in having mentors. The truth is that most Xers place a high value on opportunities to build lasting relationships with those in the workplace who have grown wise through experience. While information and technology have usually been Xers' most reliable problem solving resources, teachers have usually been Xers' primary human supporters outside of family. Most Xers welcome the chance to create long term bonds of loyalty with teaching managers and mentors, especially in a world where Xers cannot believe in long term bonds of loyalty with established organizations.

Xers rarely turn to mentors for raw information they can find elsewhere. What Xers look for from mentors is the kind of learning that is not available from other sources. They require someone who:
a) they can look to as a role model;
b) will teach them and share experiences with them;
c) will care about them and help answer some of their deepest questions;
d) will push them and demand more of them than they may demand of themselves;
e) believes they are capable of achieving the impossible and is willing to help them do it;
f) will provide them with unique opportunities to prove themselves;
g) will introduce them to others;
h) will value their opinions and ideas, seek their input and learn from them. "
(Tulgan, 1997).

"Xers want much more than money out of work. Work is critical to Xers' self definition and sense of well-being because it is our greatest opportunity to build a new kind of success and security from within ourselves. That means that managers have it within their power to provide non-financial incentives which are profoundly important to Xers. The non-financial incentives most

sought by Xers are self development opportunities. If you are an empowering manager and create conditions for effective delegation, you can send Xers' motivation level into the stratosphere with bonus incentives," (Tulgan, 1997b).

Generation X's have grown up forming strong family like bonds with friends and peers. This can be converted to the workplace by forming dynamic work-teams of like minded individuals to get select work projects done. Teamwork oriented organizations often appeal to Generation Xers, as does profit-sharing and employee ownership compensation packages. Other incentives that are important to workers of this generation include:

a) Learning new marketable skills.
b) Building long term relationships with individuals who can help them.
c) Tackling creative challenges and collecting proof of their ability to add value in any workplace.
d) Greater responsibility for tangible results.
e) Increased creative freedom.
f) More power to plan their own work schedules.
(Tulgan, 1997b).

Summary

Although considered a challenge, and even a threat by the current echelon of Baby Boomer and senior Silent Generation managers common to most organizations, the emerging workforce of Generation Xers offers an exciting and dynamic solution to current workforce needs. Precisely when technological know-how, being able to easily adapt to change and diversity, and the move towards telecommuting, time sharing and downsizing have become organizational issues, a unique brand of worker who is amenable to these needs is coming on the workplace scene.

Learning to hire, educate, motivate, inspire, and retain these young workers is a painful process in many organizations, but theorists like Bruce Tulgan is helping to ease that transition. As more and more Generation Xers mature to become leaders, an entire facelift to the way organizations do business is eminent. The children of the Baby Boomers have the characteristics, skills and world view necessary to lead society onto a more adaptive and satisfying course. Dropping the labels, and embracing the strengths will help to ease this movement of young people into the workaday world, tapping their creativity, their ingenuity and their insights to create the organizations of the future.

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