

Strategic Thinking and SharePoint

by Jaap Zwart

The characteristics of strategic thinking and strategic leadership are additions to the theories of leadership styles and they are complementary. This short overview of strategic thinking and strategic leadership will be related to SharePoint implementations or using SharePoint as a strategic asset. SharePoint is a huge platform and when its implementation is part of the organizational strategy, research shows that it will have a higher chance to be successful. When it is implemented as an afterthought or side effect and only by the technical layers of the organization, failure is very much waiting to happen.



Introduction

Strategic thinking and strategic leadership transcend plain leadership. Leadership is more about directing the organization to some goal and future, which is set by strategy. This strategy is defined and characterized by strategic thinking and strategic leadership which set the stage for leadership within the organization.

Different layers play a role within an organization when implementing or using SharePoint as a strategic asset. It is not only about the technical implementation or about proper change management and leadership. It is also very much connected with strategic thinking and strategic leadership. Although strategy is a science on its own, this article will try to make the connection between Strategic Thinking and SharePoint a little bit less obscure.



Figure 1: Strategy Triangle

About strategic leadership

Strategic leadership is more than the process of influencing an organization to understand and agree what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively. Strategic leadership is focused on the external direction of the organization and how the organization must be guided to reach strategic goals. It must be decided upfront if SharePoint will be part of that strategy and how it is embedded in these strategic goals.

For example, strategic goals could be: our employees must be connected to all information wherever they are and as easy as possible. All information at their fingertips and all kinds of sources presented through one interface. All existing

information carriers must be enabled to pass the information to where it belongs and we want to make this happen with the SharePoint platform. We want to create a strategic competitive information advantage in comparison with our competitors in the market to be able to react faster to possible opportunities.

When implementing SharePoint it is important to have a vision around it that backs up the strategy. The strategic leader is able to formulate that vision of where to go with SharePoint and how to get there. A good strategic leader knows how to align the formulated strategic leadership style to the context of the organization. If these elements are not connected, it will be SharePoint without a vision. It will be SharePoint at drift.

Strategic Leadership around SharePoint is not a static phenomenon. The style of strategic leadership must be tailored to the context of SharePoint in which it is used and the most successful leaders are able to do that. The SharePoint strategy and implementation should not only start bottom up, as it is done currently in many cases. This narrow minded and not well educated approach is the cause of many SharePoint implementation failures.



Figure 2: Strategic Leadership

Strategy around SharePoint is not a one man show or the sole responsibility of one strategic management layer. Strategic leadership is changing and it becomes the responsibility of many people instead of just one strategic top layer. Different management layers should contribute to implementing, sustaining and exposing the SharePoint strategy of an organization. Analysis of strategic responsibilities among different management layers within organizations related to SharePoint show a fundamental change in how these responsibilities are divided.

Strategic thinking

It is interesting to investigate how strategic leadership around a SharePoint implementation can be improved. Strategic thinking about SharePoint is the foundation of strategic leadership when SharePoint is used as a strategic asset. Strategic leadership is not just leading a company during day to day operations wherein all the members can perform. Strategic leadership is more than just leadership. Strategic leadership is closely bound to visionary guidance around the SharePoint implementation, setting the goals and head to it.

In a sense, strategic leadership is visionary leadership embedded in proper strategic planning to reach the goal. It is understanding and shaping the future in such a way that it secures realizing the SharePoint vision. If the future with SharePoint is not well

understood, then securing and realizing the vision around it is impossible because there just is no well-defined vision where the SharePoint implementation can be based upon.

Strategic thinking is closely linked to the cognitive processes that make it possible to collect and interpret information to form ideas which sustain the competitive advantage of an organization. This is very much needed when using SharePoint to create that competitive advantage. If the collection and interpretation of the information around the SharePoint implementation is not done properly, then the implementation and usage of SharePoint will be based on false assumptions. False assumptions are never a good foundation for success.

Strategic thinking is not a process on its own. It is an interaction between people and together this can result in a collective process. It is besides a process of the head also a process of the heart and partly a matter of intuition. Strategic thinking must be lifted above the visible level of reality and include also the realm of what is not yet visible. This can be the driving force behind unforeseen competitive advantages which can be realized with SharePoint. The heart and intuition can make the difference between failure and success when implementing SharePoint and using it as a strategic asset. When embedded within a justified strategic guidance, it is a save procedure to at least analyze these soft strategic motivations.

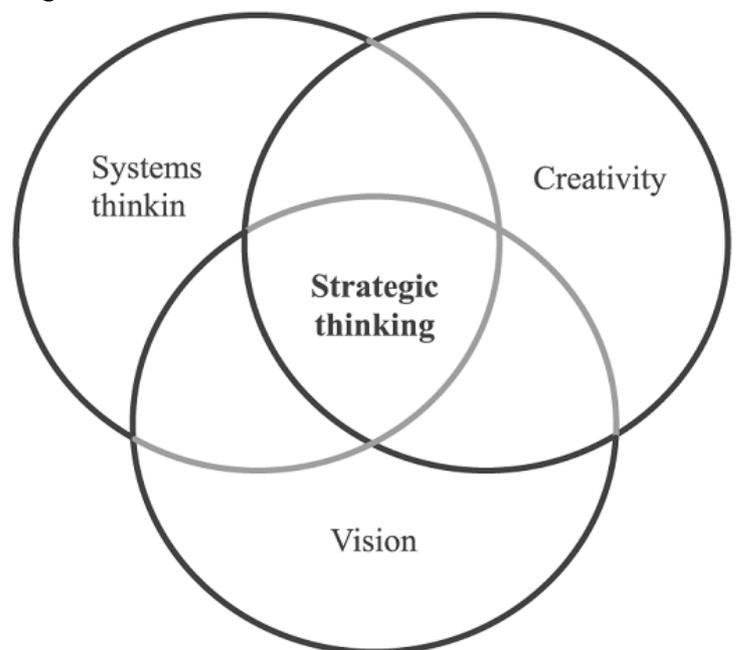


Figure 3: Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking must also include possibilities which only can be defined when the personal mental models are exceeded. In this sense, strategic thinking is a creative and innovative process where thinking outside the box is a key element of successful strategy implementation. SharePoint is all about innovation and thinking outside the box. SharePoint is equivalent to a new way of working and old mental models must be adjusted to make it work to its full potential. When SharePoint is used strategically, then cognitive maps must change on different levels and often this include the cognitive map of the organization itself.

Pestle, SWOT and Competition

External factors are important for an organization and are of influence on the strategic choices. This is also often the case when SharePoint is chosen as a strategic asset. There are two main characteristics of strategy and they are free choice or imposed. A free chosen or imposed strategy is based on internal and external forces like important stakeholders or political, economic, sociological, technological, legal and environmental (PESTLE) elements.

When the SharePoint implementation is a result of an imposed strategy, then the start is less attractive than acting on a free chosen strategy with SharePoint. An imposed

strategy with SharePoint should be avoided. A way to do this is analyzing the PESTLE forces on a regular basis and check if SharePoint is a positive competitive strategic choice to be used and implemented. This regular strategic analysis is much better for the organization than being forced to include SharePoint in an imposed strategy because in such a case the organization will often not be in a leading position but will be led by what the PESTLE forces are dictating.

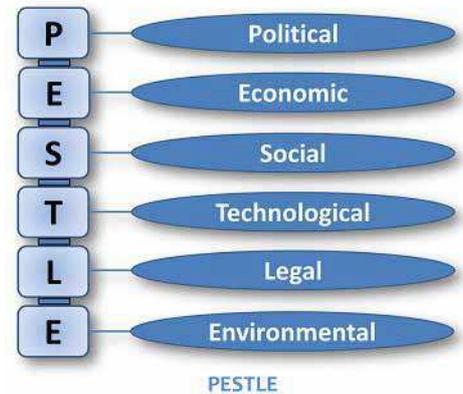


Figure 4: PESTLE Forces

The PESTLE elements can be used with a SWOT analysis to check the score of the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the organization. If SharePoint is part of the strategy, then it should be part of this analysis. This SWOT analysis based on the PESTLE forces can make it clear where and how the participants in the industry, also known as competitors, are stronger and where the strategy must take note of. If SharePoint is a main strategic asset within those other competitors, the SWOT must make it clear where the organization must be optimized to harden its strategic strength. Else the SWOT can be used to analyze how SharePoint as a strategic asset can create the most competitive advantage possible.

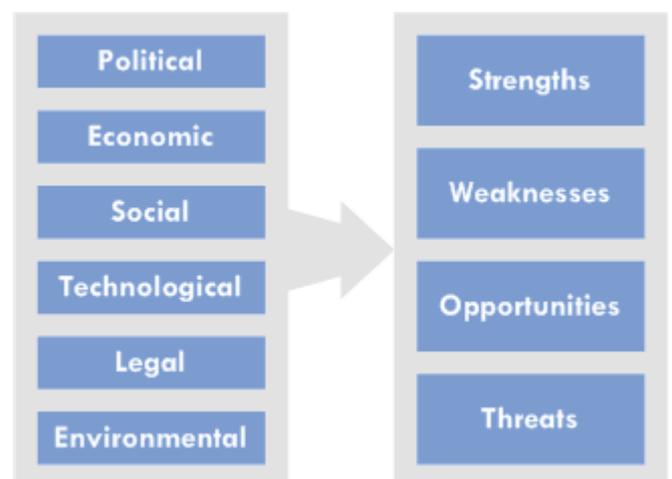


Figure 5: PESTLE and SWOT

This analysis is furthermore very useful when a strategic map must be created and taking advantage on competitors is the goal. The strategic map, mainly based on the PESTLE elements and driven by the SWOT outcomes and embedded in competition thinking, can help focus the strategy needed to relate the strategic vision around SharePoint to the internal and external reality of the organization.

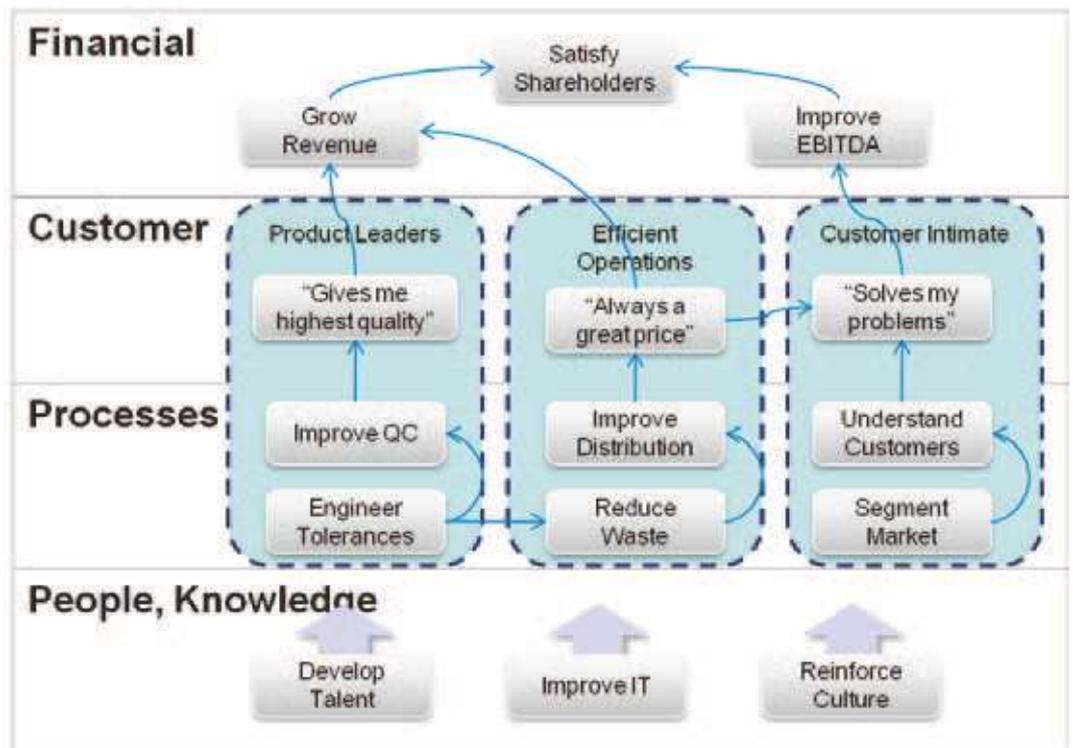


Figure 6: Example of a Strategic Map

Linear and Adaptive strategy

Linear strategy can be called a simple sequential view on the strategy process. It has often to do with planned strategy and logical thinking. It was concluded in later times that strategy is not just a linear process where only objective and rational numbers play a role.

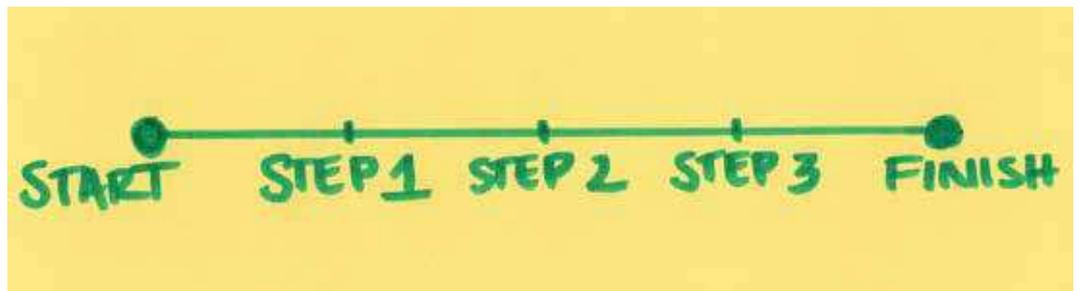


Figure 7: Linear Thinking

Because linear strategy implementations showed flaws in usefulness on the long term, organizations tried other variations and one of them is adaptive strategy. It is obvious that PESTLE forces make it a tedious task to come up with a static planned sequential strategy. It often occurs that external and internal forces change down the strategic road and flexibility to adapt is needed.

This is especially true when using and implementing SharePoint. SharePoint is on its own innovative, complex and difficult to formulate in one overall definition. SharePoint is a very dynamic product and it demands an even so dynamic strategic approach.

Being adaptive to internal and external forces almost automatically brings an organization to the use of incremental strategy; implementing strategy in iterations. After defining the initial strategic vision around SharePoint, the road towards that vision can be done in increments after which single loop or double loop learning can be used to make the next increment, or iteration, more effective than the previous increment.

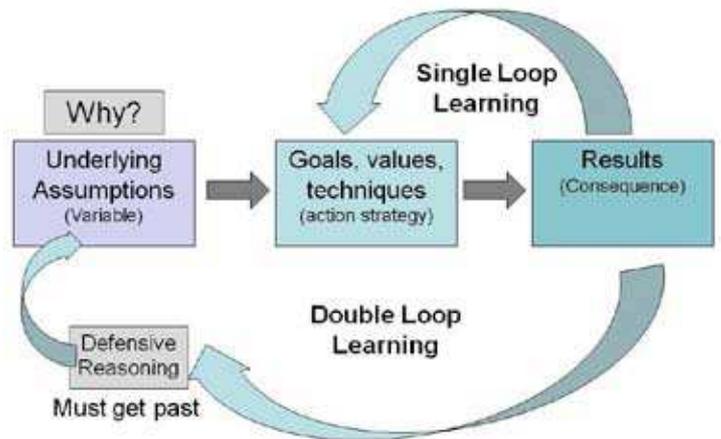


Figure 8: Single and Double Loop Learning

For this behavior to be most effective some intelligent opportunism is needed or else the organization is less able to adapt new strategies when using SharePoint. It is this adaptive behavior that can help organizations face the challenges of the current fast changing competitive world and make the transformations needed to survive. When SharePoint is used and approached in this way, the strategy around SharePoint will stay dynamic and vivid; else it will end in a costly and useless burden.



Figure 9: Adaptive Strategy

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Interpretive strategy

Lateral thinking is related to problem solving through indirect and creative processes. Lateral thinking makes it possible that identification with external and internal forces is done by thinking outside the box. Lateral thinking can be linked to interpretive thinking in the sense that they both are concerned with the perception of the stakeholders interpreting internal and external forces that influence the strategy around SharePoint. Lateral thinking can be a very useful approach to a SharePoint implementation or the use of SharePoint as a strategic asset. Again, thinking outside the box is very important when using SharePoint.



Figure 10: Lateral Thinking

It is also about orienting metaphors or frames of reference. This is done to let stakeholders understand the organization and its environment to get motivated for more favorable behavior towards the organization and its use of SharePoint within its strategy. Influencing the perception of the stakeholders concerning the internal and external forces related to SharePoint as a strategic asset, can be a key element in increasing the acceptance of the product. Interpretive strategy is on itself a new approach to strategy and this by definition can be called a lateral oriented strategy.

Changing your cognitive map is part of lateral thinking because it makes you able to approach problems in a different way. SharePoint is doing things differently than most people are used to and indeed problems and opportunities can and will be approached in different ways. Changing the cognitive maps of subordinates is a very important element of the success of SharePoint within an organization. When this focus is part of the organizational strategy, then SharePoint is already halfway of being a success.



Figure 11: Creative Thinking

Creative and innovative minds are often capable of changing their cognitive map to think outside the usual box. These minds must be put in front of the SharePoint focus. Using SharePoint as a strategic asset is also about creating a shared vision and aligning mental models of several stakeholders. Interpret the environment in combination with the inner processes of the organization and make all elements a part of the strategy around SharePoint. When this is not done properly, failure will come from unforeseen sides. Often organizations are not aware of these dimensions when implementing SharePoint or using it as a strategic asset. It is very important that this attitude change and that awareness is improved.

Interpretive strategy is also related to having a holistic understanding of the organization and its environment to create a vision of the future of the organization related to how SharePoint will be used and how it can increase the competitive position of the organization. It is about true systems thinking based on the organization's values, opportunities, possibilities and values related to using SharePoint as a strategic asset.

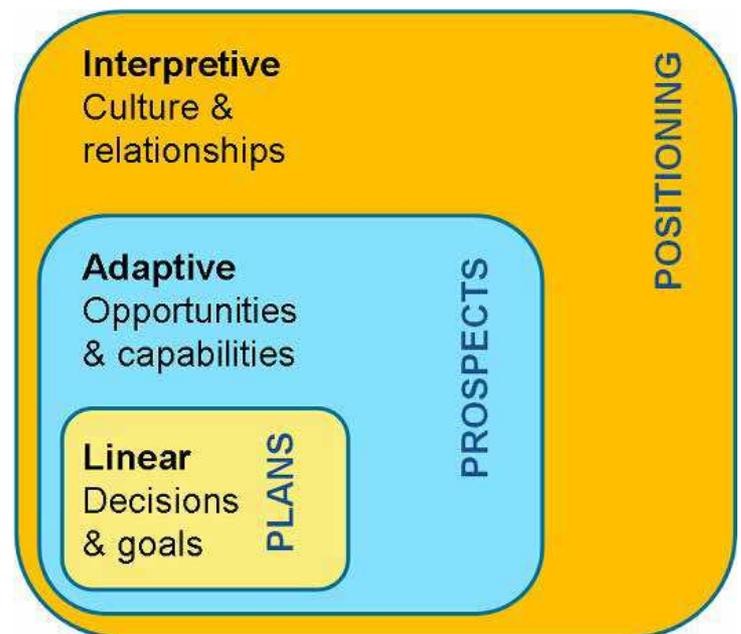


Figure 12: Interpretive, adaptive and Linear Thinking Areas

Associative thinking can be useful for correct interpretation of distant opportunities when using SharePoint. It helps to associate with businesses in other industries which also use SharePoint as a strategic asset for better alignment of own strategy and for the interpretation of yet unknown realities which would otherwise stay invisible and under the strategic SharePoint radar.

Strategy and Innovation

It is reckoned that highly formalized strategic systems of planning tend to be rigid and rather static. When this is combined with detailed mechanisms of control than it can result in an inflexible and hierarchical organization where innovation is made difficult to come to fruitiness. For this to prevent it is important to get people outside their working environment, for brainstorming new ideas which otherwise would stay under the surface.

When things get rigid and rather static, then SharePoint as a strategic asset is in danger and the implementation loses its vividness. SharePoint is equivalent to innovation and bringing people outside their working environment and changing their mental modals will help to prevent entering the phase of flux wherein SharePoint is stuck to the organizational wall without effectiveness.

Innovation is needed to go beyond your cognitive map. Your cognitive map guides your priorities during certain situations and determines which issues get priority. It is important that a strategic leader is able to align his cognitive map to the strategic situation of the organization and act accordingly. This is even more important when SharePoint is involved because SharePoint hits the cognitive maps of its users and demands mental flexibility. The strategic leader is prepared for this situation and will prevent deadlocks.



Figure 13: Strategy and Innovation

Lateral thinking has everything to do with thinking outside the box. It needs some mental creativity to be able to use it. Innovation happens also through using unorthodox think patterns and that is where Lateral thinking can be of help. Using unorthodox think patterns can be very useful when using SharePoint as a strategic asset because it brings many new things into the organization.

A learning organization is often able to see more than its own perspectives. Through learning and adapting it is putting organizational thinking in a wider context and tries to see the whole picture. This ability for a wider view is perhaps comparable with the systems thinking perspective and also with associative thinking, to create better innovative ideas and stimulate creativity. This could be a very profound and useful foundation for a SharePoint implementation or using SharePoint as a strategic asset. When SharePoint is put in a wider context, then often its full potential can enter the consciousness of the organization.

Strategy and Change

It is being said that today's leader needs to be that lateral thinker which is better equipped for fast and discontinuous change. The more conventional leader is better suited for command and control and slow and incremental changes. The lateral leader is more focused on initiating the innovative and creative parts of the team by taking some risks and entrepreneurial endeavor. This should be the driving force behind the strategy around SharePoint. Innovation and creativity are both a natural fit with SharePoint and without these elements using SharePoint within your strategy is asking for rigid troubles.

Change is managed by making it happen through innovative subordinates. Followers are important and the vision of change must be constantly communicated to make it a permanent element of the creative and innovative mind of the organization.



Figure 14: Strategy and Change

Change is an important element of the strategy around SharePoint. This change is often difficult because of organizational culture and heritage of resources. Change even gets worse when there is a top strategic management layer afraid of taking hard decisions and lower layers with a lack of taking accountability for certain actions. These are killing characteristics for a SharePoint strategy. Hard decisions are almost unavoidable when using SharePoint as a strategic asset and SharePoint decisions can flow through all layers. When the raw guts are missing and responsibilities are being avoided at key moments, then be prepared for failure and money down the drain.

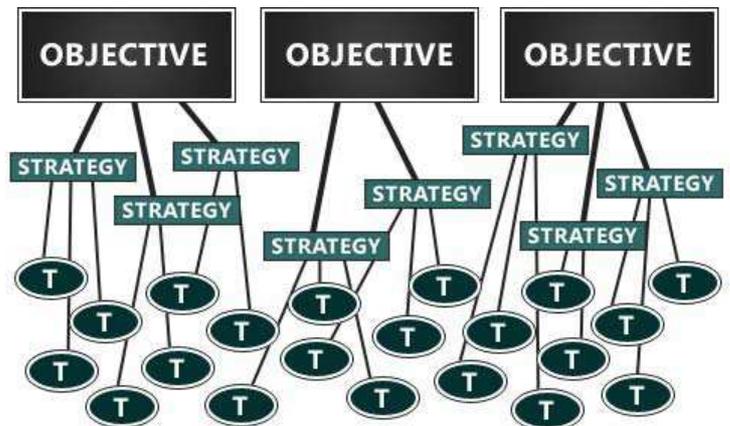


Figure 15: Strategy Tree

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Strategy trees can help to clarify how the elements of the organizational strategy are related to each-other and why they are related in such a way. Furthermore this strategy tree can also make it more clear who is responsible for what and how these responsibilities relate. This strategy tree can be the guidance when choosing SharePoint as strategic asset and the implementation can be followed through all branches and leaves.



Conclusion

Figure 16: SharePoint Strategy and Governance Plan

Even this short introduction into strategic thinking and strategic leadership related to SharePoint makes it clear that these elements can be beneficial when SharePoint is part of the overall strategy of the organization or if it is implemented on a wide scale. If SharePoint becomes the main platform of communication within the organization, then strategic thinking and strategic leadership do play their separate and important roles. Research show that when a collaboration platform enters the regions where it is of influence on the strategic performance of an organization, if it is not included in the strategic vision and goal formulation it can have a negative effect on the realization of these strategic goals. Having thought about this possible relationship of SharePoint with the strategy of the organization can help avoid many unforeseen problems down the strategic road. It is better to be aware and prepared, than to be ignorant and fall into very frustrating and expensive traps.

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