

Bridging the Management Employability Gap: Assessing Leadership Readiness and Succession Planning Awareness Among Graduates

Minerva Das

Research Scholar, Dept of Business Administration, Vanivihar, Bhubaneswar, Utkal University

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management and Commerce, PES University, Bengaluru, India

Dr. Sujit Kumar Acharya

Associate Professor, Department of Business Studies, DDCE, Vanivihar, Bhubaneswar Utkal University

Dr. Sarjue Pandita

Professor, Ajay Kumar Garg Institute of Management, Ghaziabad, India

Dr. Ankit Garg

Assistant Professor, Ajay Kumar Garg Institute of Management, Ghaziabad, India

Abstract

This research aims to investigate the level of awareness, perception, and readiness of management students regarding leadership development and succession planning. As organizations operate in an increasingly competitive environment, developing future leaders and ensuring leadership continuity have become strategic priorities. Sowers (2025) emphasized that educational institutions play a critical role in preparing management students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for future leadership responsibilities. This preparation enhances graduates' employability by equipping them with capabilities that align with organizational expectations

In addition to leadership competencies, employability increasingly depends on graduates' ability to work effectively in diverse and inclusive environments. Mohanty and Acharya (2014) highlighted that organizations promoting gender diversity through equitable policies, inclusive workplace practices, and equal career advancement opportunities are more successful in retaining a committed and diverse workforce. Their findings suggest that diversity management is an integral component of sustainable leadership development. Consequently, management graduates who possess inclusive leadership skills, cultural awareness, and the ability to manage diverse teams are better positioned to meet contemporary workplace demands. These competencies not only strengthen their employability but also prepare them for leadership roles and effective participation in organizational succession planning.

Primary data was obtained through a structured questionnaire administered to management students and young working professionals. The survey assessed respondents' understanding of leadership development, participation in leadership-building activities, awareness of succession planning, and perceived leadership

readiness. These dimensions are consistent with competency-based learning approaches that emphasize continuous learning, self-directed development, and technology-enabled capability building in preparing future leaders (Noe et al., 2014; Yadav et al., 2024).

Descriptive analysis shows that respondents are aware of the necessity of having leadership skills and are engaged in various activities aimed at developing these skills. At the same time, respondents demonstrate average awareness of the topic of succession planning and the weak impact of practical experience on the results. According to correlation analysis, there is a positive connection between leadership development, succession planning awareness, and leadership readiness. (Dutra et al., 2021)

The findings highlight a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical exposure, emphasising the need for more experiential learning opportunities. The study concludes that improving leadership development initiatives and increasing awareness of succession planning can enhance leadership readiness. It also provides insights for educational institutions and organisations to strengthen their approaches toward developing future leaders.

Introduction

In an era characterized by hyper-competitive markets and rapid digital transformation, organizational sustainability depends on the continuous development of human capital and the establishment of strong internal talent pipelines. Leadership development and formal succession planning are recognized as strategic mechanisms for enhancing employees' knowledge, skills, and competencies while ensuring leadership continuity (Cascio, 2019; Rothwell, 2010). Leadership development focuses on strengthening individual capabilities, whereas succession planning provides a structured approach for preparing employees to assume critical organizational roles. Together, these practices contribute to human capital development by fostering the competencies required for long-term organizational success.

Human capital development is also closely associated with employability, as organizations increasingly seek graduates who can adapt to change, collaborate effectively, and contribute to organizational performance. Nayak et al. (2016) demonstrated that employee engagement, supported by effective communication, trust, participation, and leadership involvement, is a critical determinant of organizational success during mergers and acquisitions. These practices promote continuous learning, adaptability, and strategic thinking, which are essential attributes of employable graduates. Therefore, management graduates who develop leadership capabilities, change management skills, teamwork, and decision-making competencies are better equipped to meet evolving industry requirements, enhance their employability, and contribute effectively to organizational transformation and succession planning.

A major problem occurs right when young professionals try to enter the workforce, creating what is known as the Management Employability Gap. Even though universities are supposed to teach students the core principles of business and management, there is still a massive difference between what students learn in the classroom and how ready they actually are to lead in the real world (Baruch, 2001; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009).

Students and early-career workers are the next generation of company leaders.

However, their future success depends heavily on how well their classroom education connects with real, hands-on experience. Because of this, we need to understand how these young professionals view and learn about corporate succession planning and leadership training. Studying their perspective is the only way to figure out if our current educational and training systems are actually working

Despite the voluminous literature dissecting macro-organizational succession strategies, traditional scholarship exhibits a distinct, organization-centric bias. Extant research heavily prioritizes firm-level systems, metrics, and configurations, frequently ignoring the micro-foundations of individual psychological preparedness and self-efficacy (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). This imbalance reveals a significant empirical oversight: we understand how firms construct pipelines, but we remain largely ignorant of whether the individuals entering them possess the requisite cognitive awareness and agentic readiness to occupy key roles. Furthermore, the precise catalytic role of experiential learning interventions—such as structured internships and work-integrated learning—in mitigating the Management Employability Gap requires deeper empirical scrutiny.

This study addresses these theoretical and practical omissions by empirically evaluating the triad of individual awareness, perception, and subjective readiness regarding leadership development and succession planning architectures. By examining the structural interdependencies among these variables, this paper offers critical insights into the developmental trajectories of early-career cohorts. Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge the chasm between theoretical management education and behavioural execution, offering actionable frameworks to optimize succession planning and accelerate leadership transition metrics in modern enterprises.

Literature Review

Corporate longevity depends heavily on the structural and strategic frameworks that govern internal talent mobility and executive continuity. Foundational models, such as the leadership pipeline architecture advanced by Charan et al. (2011), frame leadership development not as an episodic event, but as a series of critical passages requiring distinct shifts in skills, time applications, and work values. When properly executed, this pipeline functions as a dynamic system where performance at one layer signals readiness for the next.

However, organizational self-sufficiency in talent development is rarely self-sustaining. Conger and Fulmer (2003) argue that traditional succession planning frequently fails because it operates in a silo, isolated from active leadership development initiatives. They advocate for a unified approach that treats succession and development as a single, integrated process. Without this integration, pipelines become rigid, leaving

firms highly vulnerable during sudden market disruptions or executive departures (Kesner & Sebor, 1994).

This vulnerability is exacerbated by what Ready and Conger (2007) identify as the "Ready-Now" paradox: organizations routinely struggle with severe talent shortages despite heavy investments in sophisticated human resource planning systems. This breakdown occurs because traditional frameworks rely on passive tracking rather than active, context-specific capability building. This issue is codified by Rothwell's (2010) classic paradigm of exemplary succession planning, which emphasizes that effective continuity requires a deliberate, metric-driven transition from idiosyncratic talent hoarding to transparent, competency-based talent pools. In the contemporary landscape, this internal pipeline friction is increasingly an upstream problem born outside the organization's walls. Sowers (2025) provides a critical pivot in this discourse, demonstrating that modern higher education institutions are structurally misaligned with this corporate architecture. Higher education often prioritizes isolated academic competencies over integrated, systemic management capabilities. As a result, universities function as detached entities that fail to properly feed corporate pipelines. Graduates enter the market with acute deficits in macro-level leadership readiness, leaving them unprepared for the complex passages outlined by Charan et al. (2011). This gap transforms succession management from an internal optimization exercise into a reactive scramble to fix basic employability deficits, threatening structural talent continuity.

Recent empirical studies conducted in the Indian higher education context further reinforce the relationship between employability, leadership development, and digital transformation. Das and Acharya (2024) found that management education must increasingly focus on competency-based learning and industry-oriented skill development to reduce the employability gap among graduates. Complementing this, Das (2025) reported that Generation Z students perceive sustainable leadership, innovation, and future-of-work competencies as essential for career success, indicating the growing importance of leadership readiness in management education. From a technological perspective, Neena et al. (2025) demonstrated that AI-enabled e-recruitment and digital hiring practices are reshaping employer expectations, requiring graduates to develop digital competencies alongside leadership capabilities. Similarly, Yadav et al. (2024) highlighted that AI-driven adaptive learning systems personalize learning experiences and enhance competency development, while Pandey et al. (2024) emphasized that continuous faculty development significantly improves student learning outcomes and long-term employability. Furthermore, Singhal et al. (2023) established that transformational leadership positively influences organizational commitment and teacher effectiveness, suggesting that leadership-oriented educational environments play a vital role in preparing future managers for organizational succession planning.

To bridge the management employability gap, organizations must build systemic processes that explicitly connect individual graduate growth to long-term institutional

planning. This integration requires a shift from subjective appraisal to objective, metric-driven evaluation. Day (2000) distinguishes between leadership development—which expands the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles—and leader development, which focuses purely on individual skill acquisition. Systemic continuity requires balancing both: aligning individual assessment metrics with the broader social capital of the firm.

This systemic alignment is crucial for building robust talent pools. Groves (2007) argues that integrating succession planning with leadership development through structured assessment practices enhances managerial self-efficacy and employee retention. When performance evaluation is transparent and linked to career development and financial incentives, then high-potential employees are more likely to recognize opportunities for advancement, thereby strengthening the leadership pipeline. In contrast, Kim (2003) contends that succession planning becomes ineffective when performance measures are disconnected from organizational strategy, limiting the identification and development of future leaders.

Beyond assessment and development practices, reward and compensation systems also influence employability by shaping employees' motivation to acquire and demonstrate competencies valued by organizations. Acharya and Dash (2024) found that fair, equitable, and performance-based compensation enhances employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational loyalty. Such compensation practices encourage continuous skill development, improved performance, and long-term organizational commitment, all of which contribute to an individual's employability and career progression. For management graduates, an understanding of strategic compensation is therefore essential, as organizations increasingly seek professionals who can align reward practices with talent development, employee retention, and succession planning to achieve sustainable organizational performance.

To prevent leadership pipeline deterioration, Fulmer and Conger (2004) emphasize the importance of continuous assessment and regular calibration of succession systems to align talent capabilities with changing organizational needs. Extending this perspective, Collings, Mellahi, and Cascio (2019) argue that strategic talent management should focus on identifying pivotal positions and developing high-potential employees through competency-based and differentiated human resource practices. Such an integrated approach strengthens leadership pipelines, enhances organizational agility, and ensures sustainable leadership continuity across organizational levels.

In the modern digital workplace, digital learning technologies play a critical role in supporting leadership development and continuous competency enhancement. Al-Fraihat et al. (2020) demonstrated that effective Learning Management Systems improve learner engagement, knowledge acquisition, system quality, and learning satisfaction through well-designed digital environments. Complementing this perspective, Yadav et al. (2024) highlighted that AI-enabled adaptive learning systems provide personalized learning pathways and competency-based assessment, enabling

institutions to better prepare graduates for leadership roles. Consequently, technology-enabled learning ecosystems facilitate continuous competency development, strengthen employability, and support succession planning by generating evidence-based insights into learner progress and leadership readiness.

Problem Statement

Modern organisational sustainability relies heavily on the continuous development of internal talent and structured succession planning frameworks to safeguard executive continuity. While enterprises allocate considerable capital to refine internal talent systems, a structural disconnect persists at the point of labour market entry: the Management Employability Gap. Higher education institutions are tasked with equipping graduates with functional management literacies, yet an operational divergence remains between academic curricula and actual organisational readiness. Universities consistently favour isolated theoretical competencies and individualistic *leader development* over the complex, relational, and systems-based *leadership development* required by modern executive pipelines. This curricular disconnect leaves early-career professionals unprepared for the structured leadership transitions they are expected to navigate. Consequently, corporate succession management often shifts from an intentional strategy to a reactive intervention designed to remedy baseline capability deficits. This imbalance threatens the stability and development of corporate talent benches.

Research Gap

The primary challenge in talent management scholarship stems from an epistemological bifurcation: the severe asymmetry between macro-organizational design and micro-level individual readiness. Strategic human resource literature extensively documents succession planning from a macro-centric, firm-level perspective. It details corporate architectures, technological infrastructures, and evaluation systems from the perspective of institutional leadership. However, this firm-level focus largely overlooks the cognitive awareness, individual perceptions, and subjective readiness of the early-career cohorts entering these pipelines.

Furthermore, current research assumes that introductory experiential learning interventions, such as internships, automatically serve as developmental tools. Yet, empirical evidence suggests that these experiences often yield low operational impact, failing to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and practical execution.

Similarly, digital tools like Learning Management Systems (LMS) offer granular data tracking but frequently prioritise administrative compliance over true adaptive capacity. Without empirical data examining how incoming professionals perceive succession systems, and how experiential and technological platforms influence their readiness, management education and corporate talent frameworks remain disconnected. This study directly addresses this intersection to explore how individual readiness aligns with institutional talent continuity.

Objectives

1. To examine the level of awareness and understanding of leadership development and succession planning among individuals.

2. To analyse the relationship between leadership development, succession planning awareness, and readiness for future leadership roles.
3. To evaluate the extent to which educational experiences and exposure contribute to individuals' preparedness for leadership positions.

Scope

The present study focuses on examining leadership development and succession planning from an individual perspective, particularly among students and early-career individuals. It aims to assess their level of awareness, perception, and readiness for future leadership roles. It also considers the role of educational and experiential learning in shaping leadership capabilities. The study is limited to data collected through a structured questionnaire from diverse educational backgrounds and fields from respondents in the Bengaluru area .

Research Design

To investigate the mechanical dependencies driving the Management Employability Gap, this study operates within a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and correlational research framework. we have evaluated real-world phenomena by capturing data at a single point in time. This approach explicitly isolates three primary vectors within the upcoming talent supply chain: structural exposure to foundational leadership development activities, individual cognitive awareness of formal corporate succession planning concepts, and perceived self-efficacy or immediate readiness to execute managerial mandates.

Our analytical stance prioritizes individual-level perceptions and psychological preparedness.. The research design maps how traditional educational setups and introductory experiential learning pathways—such as corporate internships—interact to shape core leadership capabilities. By assessing a demographically diverse sample of respondents across multiple fields of study, the design builds a comparative foundation for diagnosing the systemic alignment between current academic outputs and the criteria used in corporate talent pipelines.

Sampling Technique

Data collection was executed using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy. Data was collected from 300 participants. The target population consists of graduate students across management, commerce, engineering, and arts disciplines, alongside early-career professionals possessing limited initial internship or organisational tenure. These individuals constitute the core incoming talent layer for modern enterprise pipelines

Primary data collection relied on a digital, closed-ended questionnaire deployed via secure online survey channels. The instrument consists of two clear parts: a baseline demographic module tracking academic specialisation and work history, followed by thematic sets measuring the core constructs through a uniform 5-point Likert response format (where 1 signifies Strongly Disagree and 5 denotes Strongly Agree).

To address common-method variance and reduce response bias, survey items were structured to run across multiple distinct sections:

- Leadership Development Module: Tracks the perceived availability of leadership training opportunities, self-reported participation rates in workshops, overall confidence metrics, and individual evaluations of how leadership skills affect career progression.
- Succession Planning Awareness Module: Measures explicit familiarity with corporate succession planning theories, perceptions of its institutional importance, and the respondent's direct exposure to talent pipeline concepts during formal schooling.
- Leadership Readiness Matrix: Captures immediate self-perceived preparedness for professional roles, beliefs regarding candidate selection criteria, and the direct developmental impact of work-integrated learning or internships.

Data Analysis Framework

Descriptive Analysis:

Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine respondents' perceptions regarding leadership development, succession planning awareness, and leadership readiness. The mean scores were calculated for each statement to understand overall trends.

To evaluate the operational relationships between the independent constructs—Leadership Development (LD) and Succession Planning Awareness (SP)—and the dependent variable, Perceived Leadership Readiness (RD), while accounting for the contextual influence of control variables (educational background, work/internship experience, and field of study), this study tests two competing hypotheses regarding the precursors to institutional talent pipelines.

- Null Hypothesis H_0 There is no significant relationship between leadership development exposure, succession planning awareness, and individual leadership readiness.
- Alternative Hypothesis H_1 A statistically significant positive relationship exists among leadership development initiatives, succession planning awareness, and subsequent leadership readiness

Table 1

Comprehensive Computation Blueprint for Independent, Dependent, and Supporting Constructs

Step	Computational Focus	Applied Mathematical Formula	Practical Dataset Execution
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Step	Computational Focus	Applied Mathematical Formula	Practical Dataset Execution
1	Item-Level Mean (μ) Calculation	$\mu = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N X_i}{N}$	Sums individual Likert scale ratings (1 to 5) across all active respondents for a single question, dividing the total by the absolute sample volume (N).
2	Leadership Development Composite	$LD_i = \frac{Q_5 + Q_6 + Q_7 + Q_8 + Q_9}{5}$	Averages the item means (Opportunities = 4.03, Participation = 4.07, Confidence = 3.89, Importance = 4.18) along with Q_9 to yield the final construct metric of 3.94.
3	Succession Planning Composite	$SP_i = \frac{Q_{10} + Q_{11} + Q_{12} + Q_{13}}{4}$	Averages the operational item means (Familiarity = 3.82, System Importance = 3.84, Linkage = 4.04, Curricular Exposure = 4.04) to produce the construct score of 3.82.
4	Perceived Leadership Readiness Composite	$RD_i = \frac{Q_{14} + Q_{15} + Q_{16} + Q_{17}}{3}$	Averages the operational item means (Readiness Perception = 4.08, Corporate Preference = 3.99, and Internship/Work Experience Impact = 3.07) to produce the overall construct baseline of 4.08.
5	Organizational Strategy Expectations Metric	$\mu = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N X_i}{N}$	Captures the independent target response tracking the direct graduate mandate for structured corporate funding and pipeline resource allocation, yielding a standalone mean of 4.03.

Note. X_i represents the discrete numerical response value from participant i , while N tracks the total sample size across the study. Using unweighted item averaging creates a balanced composite variable, preventing individual survey items from skewing subsequent hypothesis tests. The lower metric for internship exposure (3.07) within the Readiness construct highlights the operational friction point defining the Management Employability Gap

Leadership Development

The analysis indicates that respondents have a good understanding of leadership development, with a mean score of 3.94. The availability of opportunities to develop leadership skills recorded a mean of 4.03, while participation in leadership-related activities showed a slightly higher mean of 4.07. Confidence in leadership abilities was observed to be relatively moderate with a mean of 3.89. Notably, the importance of leadership skills for career growth received the highest mean score of 4.18, indicating strong agreement among respondents.

Succession Planning Awareness

With respect to succession planning, respondents demonstrated moderate awareness, with familiarity scoring a mean of 3.82. The perceived importance of succession planning recorded a mean of 3.84. However, the understanding of the relationship between leadership development and succession planning was stronger, with a mean score of 4.04. Similarly, learning about succession planning during education or training also recorded a mean of 4.04, indicating reasonable exposure to the concept.

Leadership Readiness and Perception

The results show that respondents generally perceive themselves as ready for future leadership roles, with a mean score of 4.08. The perception that organizations prefer candidates with leadership potential also showed a relatively high mean of 3.99.

However, the impact of internship or work experience on leadership skill development was comparatively low, with a mean score of 3.07, suggesting limited practical exposure.

Organizational Expectations

Respondents strongly agreed that organizations should invest in structured leadership development programs, as reflected by a mean score of 4.03. This indicates a clear expectation for organizations to actively support leadership growth initiatives.

Overall Interpretation

The descriptive analysis reveals that respondents recognize the importance of leadership development and demonstrate a reasonable level of awareness

regarding succession planning. While self-perceived readiness for leadership roles is relatively high, the lower mean score for practical experience highlights a gap between theoretical understanding and real-world application. This suggests the need for increased experiential learning opportunities to strengthen leadership preparedness.

Table 2
Mathematical Formulation, Variable Mapping, and Construct Verification

Target Construct	Primary Variable Classification	Scale Item Range	Mathematical Aggregation Formula	Descriptive Baseline Metric (μ)	Empirical Verification Matrix
Leadership Development	Independent Variable (LD)	Q_5 to Q_9	$LD_i = \frac{Q_5 + Q_6 + Q_7}{5}$	3.94	Rejects H_0 via $r_{LD,RD} = .5502^{**}$
Succession Planning Awareness	Independent Variable (SP)	Q_{10} to Q_{13}	$SP_i = \frac{Q_{10} + Q_{11} + Q_{12} + Q_{13}}{4}$	3.82	Rejects H_0 via $r_{LD,SP} = .6783^{**}$
Perceived Leadership Readiness	Dependent Variable (RD)	Q_{14} to Q_{16}	$RD_i = \frac{Q_{14} + Q_{15} + Q_{16}}{3}$	4.08	Rejects H_0 via $r_{SP,RD} = .6013^{**}$
Control / Supporting Covariates	Contextual Controls	—	Categorical Tracking (Major, Tenure, Background)	—	Tracks structural sample variance

Note. Q_k denotes the individual item raw scores measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The mathematical transformation produces unweighted composite variables, minimizing structural bias during subsequent inferential testing. $p < .01$.

Correlation Analysis:

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between leadership development, succession planning awareness, and leadership readiness. The results show a moderate positive relationship between leadership development and readiness ($r = 0.5502$). Succession planning awareness also shows a moderate to strong relationship with readiness ($r = 0.6013$). The strongest relationship was

observed between leadership development and succession planning awareness ($r = 0.6783$), indicating that both concepts are closely interconnected.

Findings and Interpretations

The highest mean score was recorded for the importance of leadership skills (4.18), indicating that respondents strongly recognize leadership as essential for career growth.

Mean scores for opportunities (4.03) and participation (4.07) suggest that respondents are actively engaged in leadership-related activities.

Despite good exposure, leadership confidence (3.89) is comparatively lower, indicating a gap between learning and self-assurance.

Respondents show average familiarity with succession planning (mean $\approx 3.82-3.84$), suggesting that awareness exists but is not very strong.

Higher mean scores (4.04) indicate that respondents clearly understand the relationship between leadership development and succession planning.

The readiness score (4.08) reflects that respondents feel prepared to take on leadership responsibilities in the future.

The lowest mean (3.07) for internship/work experience suggests that practical exposure is not significantly contributing to leadership development.

Correlation results show moderate to strong positive relationships ($r = 0.55$ to 0.68), indicating that leadership development and succession planning awareness significantly influence leadership readiness.

Managerial Implications :

The findings of this study have important implications for both organizations and educational institutions. Organisations should recognise that leadership development and succession planning are closely interconnected and play a crucial role in building a strong leadership pipeline. The positive relationship between these factors and leadership readiness suggests that companies must invest in structured leadership development programs, including training, mentoring, and coaching initiatives.

Additionally, the relatively low impact of practical experience highlights the need for organizations to provide more hands-on learning opportunities such as internships, live projects, and job rotations. This will help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Organizations should also focus on increasing awareness of succession planning among employees at an early stage, ensuring transparency and engagement in leadership development processes.

For educational institutions, the results indicate a need to enhance curriculum design by incorporating experiential learning methods such as case studies, simulations, and industry interactions. By aligning academic programs with industry requirements, institutions can better prepare students for leadership roles. Overall, a collaborative

effort between academia and industry is essential to develop competent future leaders.

Conclusion:

The present study aimed to examine the awareness, perception, and readiness of individuals regarding leadership development and succession planning. The findings reveal that respondents have an understanding of the importance of leadership skills and show active participation in leadership development activities. However, while awareness of succession planning exists, it remains moderate, indicating the need for greater emphasis on this concept within educational and professional contexts.

The study also highlights that respondents perceive themselves as prepared for future leadership roles. However, the relatively low impact of practical experience suggests a gap between theoretical learning and real-world application. This indicates that while individuals may possess some conceptual knowledge, they require more experiential learning exposure to effectively develop leadership capabilities.

The correlation analysis further confirms that leadership development and succession planning awareness are positively related to leadership readiness. This implies that enhancing these factors can significantly improve individuals' preparedness for leadership roles. The strong relationship between leadership development and succession planning also emphasizes the need for an integrated approach in developing future leaders.

Overall, the study concludes that leadership readiness is influenced by both educational exposure and awareness of organisational practices. To strengthen leadership preparedness, there is a need to focus on practical learning opportunities and structured development programs. The study contributes to existing literature by shifting the focus from organisational practices to individual preparedness. It also provides valuable insights for institutions and organizations to improve their leadership development strategies, ensuring a more effective transition of future leaders in a dynamic business environment

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