

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Statistics on Unproductive Meetings
3. Causes of Unproductive Meetings
4. Impact on Bottom Line of Unproductive Meetings – Can You Afford to Ignore It?
5. Successful Strategies to Overcome Commonly Encountered Problems
6. Conclusion – Reclaiming Control of Your Meetings

Case Study

- *The Utilisation of Various Technologies in Meetings*

Recommended Readings

References

Upcoming Programmes

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Secrets to Super Productive Meetings

1. Introduction

In the workplace, meetings are often used to optimise productivity through the sharing of ideas and improving communication among various individuals within an organisation or a business. These meetings normally involve topics such as collaboration, organising projects, decision-making, developing strategies to improve productivity, problem solving and how to improve team work, etc. However, you would hear many people complaining how unproductive these meetings really are! Though originally intended as a means of increasing productivity, many organisations are finding that such meetings are often regarded as a total waste of time!

From studies conducted, it has been established that the average employee spends approximately six hours each week in meetings. Senior level professionals spend up to 85% of their total work time in scheduled meetings. If truly productive meetings were taking place, would it be likely that employees and management would spend a significantly less amount of time in these meetings or get more things accomplished through them?

In this issue, we will share the answers to this question and the secrets to super productive meetings. If you are ready to optimise productivity, you will find strategies on how to ensure every single meeting that you hold in your company will make the best use of every employee precious time, your company's most valued resources.

2. Statistics on Unproductive Meetings

First, let us take a quick look at some statistics to appreciate the scale of the problem. According to statistics, approximately 25 million meetings take place in the United States each and every single day. As a result of those millions of meetings each day, over \$37 billion is spent on those that are considered to be unproductive meetings, annually. Business executives consider 67% of all meetings to be highly unproductive. Given that 85% of all middle to upper

management professionals spent their work time in meetings and many of those individuals spend approximately four hours each week preparing for these meetings, 67% is considered to be a staggering number! **Is your company experiencing the same problem?**



Figure 1: Statistics on Unproductive Meetings
Source: <http://visual.ly/ugly-truth-about-meetings>

3. Causes of Unproductive Meetings

There are many causes associated with unproductive meetings. It is common to hear of employees who have been active participants in meetings to complain that these meetings seem to drone on – often due to lack of organisation, lack of focus to relevant topics, and the inability to capture the attention of those who are attending. In fact, approximately 92% of all individuals surveyed about workplace meetings admitted that they had multi-tasked and engaged in more than one activity while attending a meeting at work. 69% admitted that meetings were often a time where they were able to catch up on their emails, and 49% stated that they often engaged in other work-related activities during meetings.

With these activities going on, it should be no surprise that so many of these events are labelled ineffective and unproductive. To host productive meetings, you must first determine what causes these unproductive meetings currently being experienced by professionals. We found that the top 10 complaints about meetings shown in Figure 2.

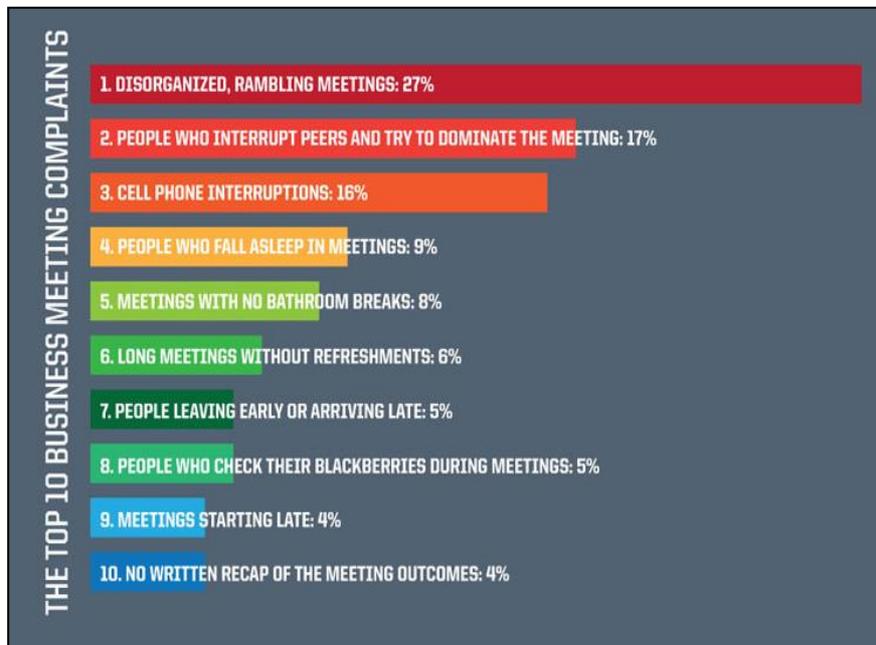


Figure 2: The Top 10 Business Meeting Complaints

Source: <http://blog.socialcast.com/how-3-billion-meetings-per-year-waste-time-money-and-productivity-in-the-enterprise/>

In the paragraphs below, we explore the **3 most common causes of unproductive meetings**.

- Multitasking is considered to be the top cause for unproductive meetings. While attending meetings, many attendees will check emails and engage in other work-related activities. These distractions result in the meeting exceeding the original scheduled time and causes participants to lose focus. When focus is lost, the objectives of the meeting are typically lost, too!
- Lack of engagement among remote attendees is the second cause for meetings that are considered to be unproductive. It was found that 80% of the communication that we receive through others came from body language. However, if we are unable to see those who we are speaking and engaging with, it could be exceptionally challenging to reach a satisfactory level of effectiveness when it comes to communication.
- The third leading reason why most workplace meetings are considered unproductive is because of a general lack of planning and an absence of structure. When these two elements are missing, a meeting generally lacks the effectiveness that the organisers desire to achieve.

4. Impact on Bottom Line of Unproductive Meetings – Can You Afford to Ignore It?

Mentally, the cost associated with unproductive meetings is considered to be relatively high; however, the actual physical costs are even higher. When you consider the fact that the average person spends about six hours each week in work-related meetings that are considered to be unproductive, it is the equivalent of giving each of those people approximately 12 days of paid vacation, annually, on top of the annual leave that is already given each year.

According to a study by Group Vision, many of the companies on the Fortune 500 list spend and waste approximately USD75 million each year on unproductive meetings. Despite their standing in the Fortune 500, could most of these businesses have the ability to waste this much money each year? Ineffective meetings have a highly detrimental impact on a company's bottom line. And for businesses like yours, can you afford to allow unproductive meetings to continue?

5. Successful Strategies to Overcome Commonly Encountered Problems

So, what are the secrets to super productive meetings? In the paragraphs below, we provide a comprehensive list of activities that should be performed in order to optimise the effectiveness of every meeting that is held in your company.

Secret #1 - Create and Publish an Agenda

To run productive meetings, you must take the time to carefully plan for the meeting and take steps that will allow you to manage it well. One of the most effective steps in achieving success is to ensure that you create and publish an agenda. This agenda should outline the exact topics and issues to be discussed, with the appropriate duration for each item. In today's world, professionals are busier than ever. Reviewing topics and issues that lack relevance to them personally, an agenda will help ensure that only the right people are in attendance at the right time. In addition to outlining the topics, issues, and duration associated with each part of the meeting, schedule regular breaks so that the attendees may come and go as is relevant to what is most important and necessary to them, without disrupting the meeting.

Secret #2 - Initiate the Meeting at the Time Stated in Your Agenda

If you desire to have productive meetings, it is essential that you initiate the meeting at the time that was stated within the agenda that you created. While it is true that interruption and changes to schedules could detrimentally impact the successful completion of the ideas, topics, and issues outlined on the agenda, it is critical that a prompt start to the meeting is initiated. If you fail to start at the stated time, it is quite possible that the overall effectiveness and the general quality of the meeting will deteriorate.

Secret #3 - Provide Regular Summaries throughout the Event

When hosting productive meetings, it is imperative that you provide regular summaries throughout the meeting. By reviewing what has been covered and requesting that the attendees summarise the information, you have the ability to ensure that everyone understand what has been covered. If a lack of understanding is experienced by anyone, you may quickly bring them up to speed and move on with the next agenda item.

Secret #4 - Delegate

A sign of a true leader is the ability to delegate. The same holds true for productive meetings. When hosting meetings, you should delegate certain tasks to those who will be in attendance. You should determine each individual's unique strengths, talents, and skills and maximise on those. This will help effectively manage the meeting and keep everyone alert.

Secret #5 - Ask the Right Questions

If you want to ensure that participants are engaged in a manner that is productive to your meeting, you should make certain that you ask the right questions. First, open-ended questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" response should be used at all times. Secondly, you should inform your attendees that you will be asking random questions to all in attendance at random times throughout the meeting. This will keep people alert and ensure that everyone is focusing on the task at hand, instead of other tasks.

Secret #6 – Tips on Managing Unproductive Behaviours at Meetings

Be firm when managing unproductive behaviours at meetings. You may find these tips from the 'Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter' by Harvard Business Review useful.

- a. Lack of Punctuality and Attendance
 - Begin and end meetings on time. You will build a reputation for well managed meetings.
 - For late comers, catch up with them after the meeting, or leave it to them to figure it out on their own. This will discourage perpetual latecomers.
 - To get better attendance at meetings, make it explicit that decisions will be made by those who attend.
 - Follow-up with those who miss the meeting, turn up late or leave early to find out the underlying causes for the behavior and obtain a commitment for a change in behavior.
- b. Unpreparedness: Incomplete Pre-Work or Deliverables
 - Request those who have prepared to provide a quick brief for the group. Appreciate them to reinforce positive behaviours.
 - When assigning work, obtain commitment on deadline by requesting person accountable to set the deadline.
 - Follow-up with those who miss deadlines to find out the underlying causes for the behavior and obtain a commitment for a change in behavior.
- c. Disruptive Behaviours
 - If some participants disturb the meeting, request them to refocus on the meeting objectives.
 - If the problem continues, call for a break to find out in private the cause of the behaviours and obtain a commitment for a change.
 - If necessary, directly ask the offending parties to stop. Tell them you will address any legitimate concerns after the meeting.
- d. Silence or Non-Participation
 - Wait for a minute for them to provide a suggestion. The members may need time to reflect on an idea.
 - Check if people need clarification.
 - Think about whether your own behavior might be the problem. Reflect if you came on too strongly in an opinion or a preconceived solution.
 - Take a short break to refocus and find new energy.
 - Go around the room (round robin) to obtain inputs.
 - If the group just seems worn out, consider ending the meeting and rescheduling.
- e. Avoidance of Tough Issues
 - If the group is avoiding an issue or focusing on one issue to the exclusion of others, it may be because they may be afraid to bring up particular subject. Raise the issue to get the group's attention (that is, name the elephant in the room) and ask for views.
 - Request contributors to be clear on the nature of the problem, issue, or opportunity.
 - Thank a participant if he brings up a controversial viewpoint. You can reinforce the idea that constructive debate is often a good start to find solutions.
- f. Domineering Participants
 - Thank domineering person for his input and call on someone else.
 - When someone interrupts another, encourage the speaker to finish his point and tell the interrupter to wait for his turn.
 - For chronic interrupters, meet with them off-line to hear their concerns.

- g. Broken Record
 - To avoid repetition of points, record them on a flip chart, whiteboard, or projected list.
 - When someone repeats an idea, point to the item and ask if it is different from what was covered already.
 - Confirm your understanding of the ideas shared with active listening. Paraphrase to confirm if you have provided a fair and accurate summary of what he said.
- h. Conflicts
 - Let all members know that it is alright to be passionate, but ask people who are unable to control their emotions to deal with their issues outside the meeting room.
 - Focus on the substance of the ideas or opinions, not on the contributor's personal style.
 - Encourage members to keep their comments constructive, and each to share their perspective on a contentious issue.
 - Use probing questions to draw out underlying reasons for their positions and brainstorm to explore alternative solutions.

Secret #7 - Utilise Various Technologies

According to many professionals, one of the best methods of ensuring productive meetings is to utilise various technologies. One of the most effective forms of technology used by corporations who have highly successful meetings is video conferencing. Earlier within this newsletter, we stated that multitasking was one of the leading causes to unproductive meetings. Those that attend face-to-face meetings and those that take part in phone-based meetings are more likely to become distracted and would multitask. However, those that take part in meetings through video conferencing are less likely to engage in these tasks. Video-based meetings have been proven to improve the focus of attendees and optimise engagement. Any type of decision-making is instantly enhanced. Additionally, teams that utilise video conferencing often find that their team productivity is enhanced.



Figure 3: Benefits of Video-Based Meetings
Source: <http://visual.ly/ugly-truth-about-meetings>

The Utilisation of Various Technologies in Meetings

In Belgium, a study was conducted regarding meetings and the utilisation of various technologies within those meetings. The largest complaint about workplace events was that a lot of time was spent with very little achievement. Instead of focusing on what was contributing to this problem, the individuals that were questioned were asked to provide insight on ways that they felt could lend to more productive meetings. The response to integrate various technologies into meetings was overwhelming. Most had a desire to bring their own devices to meetings so that they could connect to the presentation equipment at the meeting, wirelessly. This would allow attendees to share information easily from their tablet or even the smartphone that they possess. A large number of individuals stated that video conferencing solutions should be utilised to increase the productivity of meetings. In addition, technology requests included:

- The request for a wireless connection directly to any screen used in a conference room so that attendees could access that information directly on their devices.
- Technology that would permit for successful collaboration among attendees wanting to share visual-based and content-based information from various internet-ready devices.
- It was also important to individuals to have the ability to all be on the same presentation screen at the same time.

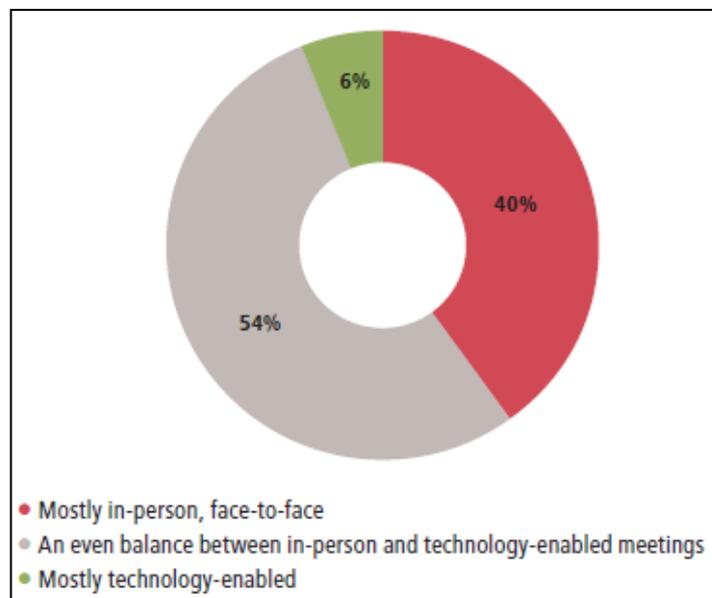


Figure 4: Opinions on the Ideal Meeting Execution Strategy
Source:

http://www.forbes.com/forbesinsights/Business_Meetings_FaceToFace/

The trend known as “BYOD” or “Bring Your Own Devices” is gaining an immense amount of popularity among professionals. In fact, 73% of the European-based managers believe that this is a highly useful idea. By incorporating the use of personal devices – such as tablets and smartphones – those attending meetings would be able to share a larger amount of information in a faster amount of time. Unfortunately, only 14% of today’s businesses allow this type of technology within meetings. It is believed that using technology within a meeting room with a base presentation system will optimize the efficiency of such meetings.

Not only will this allow participation by connecting personal electronic devices to the main presentation system, but, it would allow for a faster start up time with a wireless connection to the main projection system.

Today, approximately 83% of all managers use their own laptops to share information within meetings. 53% of the managers use a tablet, and 41% use a smartphone. If only one electronic device is being used to share information in a meeting room among many, it takes more time for that information to be viewed by all. If participants were able to connect wirelessly to a display or projection unit being used in the meeting, it would move more quickly and would encourage participation at a faster rate. One of the most effective means of optimizing collaboration is through the use of a program called, "ClickShare". Not only is this collaboration system exceptionally easy to use, but, it is easy to set up, connects a wide array of devices with exceptional speed, and keeps all information shared secured. It also eliminates the need to have an on-site technician to assist with the meetings. Points may be made with ease and participation is heightened.

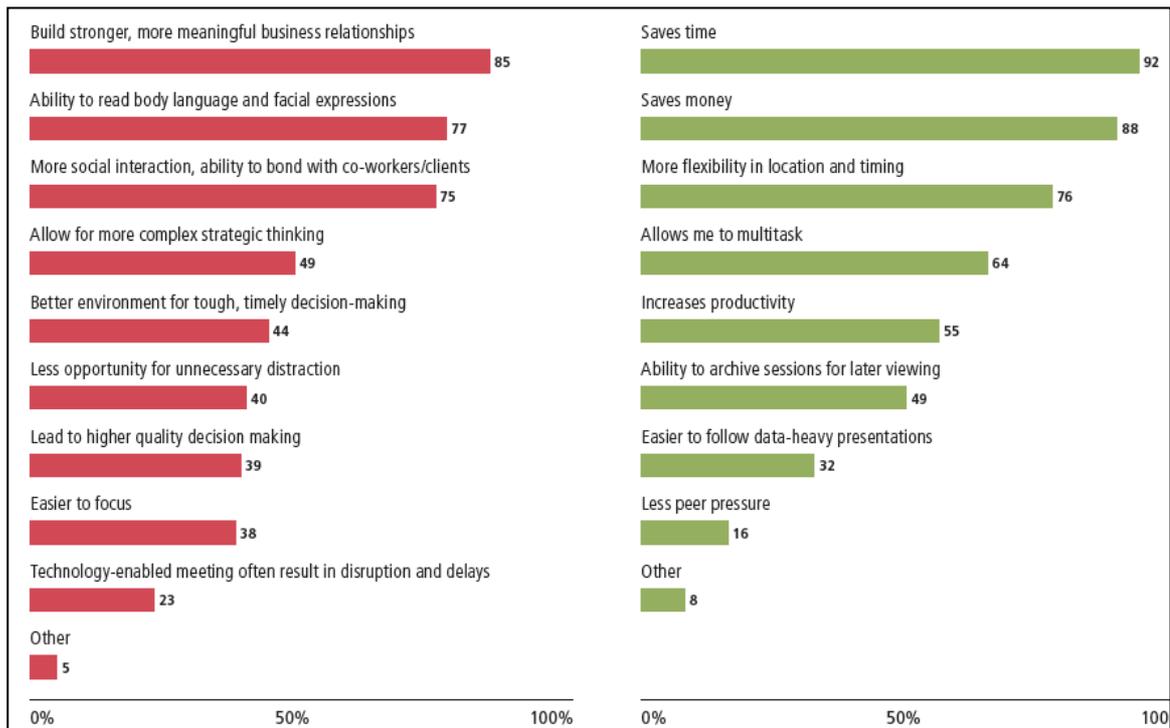


Figure 5: Reasons Supporting Preferences for Face to Face Meetings

Figure 6: Reasons Supporting Preferences for Technology-Enabled Meetings

Source: http://www.forbes.com/forbesinsights/Business_Meetings_FaceToFace/

Forbes Insight recently conducted a study which surveyed over 700 executives. In this study, the topic of virtual meetings came up. This stems from the fact that the recession resulted in many companies transitioning to virtual-based meetings in an effort to save on traveling expenses. While it has been established that virtual meetings have the potential to be highly productive, most prefer face-to-face meetings. There are many benefits to both virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings. As a result of this, many businesses have combined these elements in order to enjoy the best of both worlds. The method that has been used to accomplish this task is video conferencing. Not only can you save money by using the internet, you can also have the level of personalisation that most people seek while engaged in a meeting.

“ClickShare” may also be used in an effective manner at virtual-based meetings. Not only does it permit participants to connect their devices to the main technology device at the meeting, but, it compresses the process of going to the market for new and possibly highly expensive products. The digital work environment quickly gains a high level of flexibility, and it has a high return on investment due to the fact that clients participate at higher rates. Even better, an immense amount of money is saved on travel expenses and common conference calling techniques. In addition to “ClickShare”, there are other programs and technological advancements that may assist in the increased productivity of meetings. Examples include “LessMeeting”, “UberConference”, “iMeet”, and “Zoho”. If you want to optimize your meetings, increase productivity, optimize participation, and save money, these digital products are absolutely necessary for virtual meetings.

From the chart below, you can see that selecting the most effective method conducive for the purpose of the meeting is one key secret to boost the productivity of your meetings.

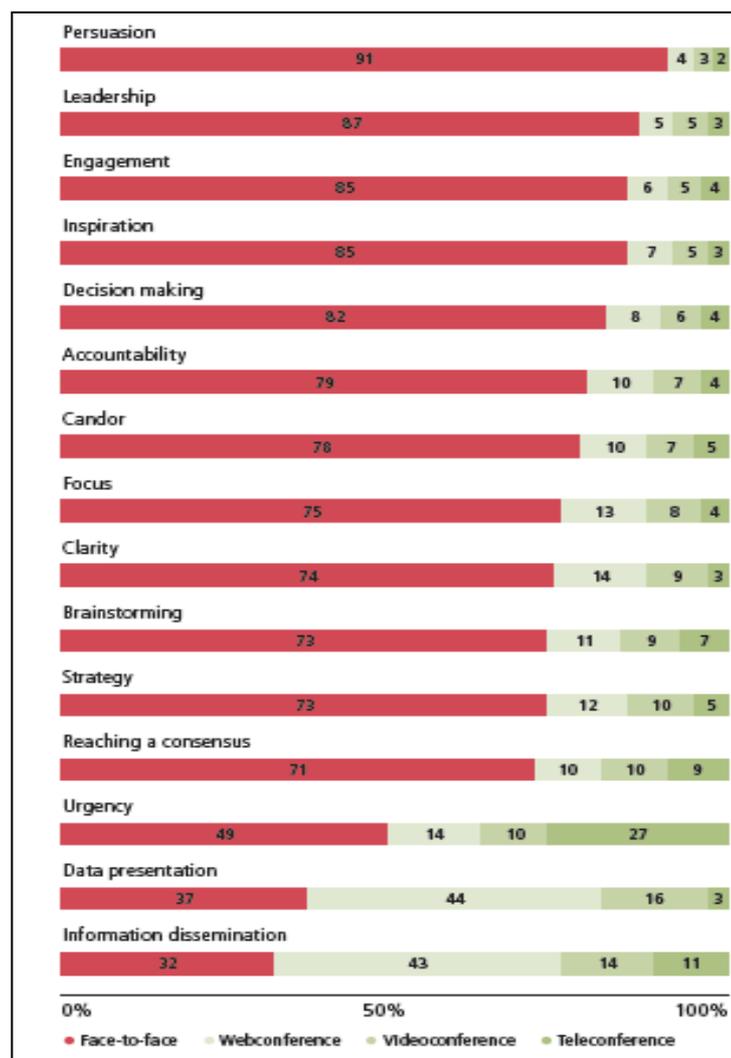


Figure 6: Meeting Methods Most Conducive to Meeting Purposes
Source: http://www.forbes.com/forbesinsights/Business_Meetings_FaceToFace/

6. Conclusion – Reclaiming Control of Your Meetings

If you are ready to reclaim control of your meetings and enhance the level of productivity associated every meeting, you should harness the power of technology when appropriate. Your meeting should always have a clearly defined agenda, a set time, a specific action or set of actions that should be completed, and end on time. Meetings should only be held when necessary and have the “right” people invited to attend for the specific agenda item. In addition consider integrating technology, such as video conferencing, into your meetings, you will find that your attendees could be more focused and engaged.

You may find the following checklist a useful guide on conducting productive meetings.

| What to do During a Meeting | What to do During a Meeting | What to do After a Meeting |
|---|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify purpose and aims 2. Create an agenda 3. Schedule the meeting 4. Post and send out agenda 5. Circulate supporting information 6. Make room arrangements 7. Arrange for recorder | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Start on time 2. Ensure a quorum 3. Review agenda 4. Keep discussion focused 5. Encourage participation 6. Help group come to decisions 7. Summarise decisions 8. Agree on action plan 9. Draft agenda for next meeting(s) 10. Evaluate meeting | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Distribute minutes 2. Archive meeting documents 3. Check for action |

Figure 7: Checklist on How to Lead Effective Meetings

Source: <http://quality.wisc.edu/before-a-meeting.htm>

Productive meeting is not just a fancy idea. By taking affirmative actions today and using relevant technologies, you and your business can accomplish more with the same resources!

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