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# Conceptualising the nexus between macro-level 'turbulence' and the worker experience

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## Abstract

In this article, we introduce the special issue on *conceptualising the nexus between macro-level 'turbulence' and the worker experience*. We discuss 'turbulence' as economic, political, social, technological, and environmental crises occurring in the macro-environment and affecting the world of work. We argue that human resource management plays a critical role in supporting not only the organisation, but also workers, to navigate through macro-level events. Based on the contributions included in this Special Issue, we suggest a novel framework that situates and expands the role of the Human Resources (HR) function in contemporary organisations by proposing a new role, the *Proactive Carer*. We argue that the debates around the role of HR and HR professionals have so far been too narrow and internally focused. It is time to expand this role to be externally facing, proactively monitoring the macro-environment for significant events, anticipating any significant changes for workers, and designing interventions to minimise any negative impact. We conclude by highlighting avenues for future research.

**Abbreviations:** AI, Artificial Intelligence; EU, European Union; HR, Human Resources; HRM, human resource management; UK, United Kingdom; US, United States.

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**KEYWORDS**

crisis, proactive carer, role of HR, turbulence, uncertainty, worker experience

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary volatile external environment within which organisations operate, the way HR departments/functions navigate through and respond to macro-level turbulence is critical for organisational sustainability and workers' wellbeing in the long-term (Collings, Nyberg, et al., 2021). In this special issue, we investigate the nexus between macro-level turbulence and the worker experience. We refer to 'turbulence' as economic, political, social, technological, and environmental crises (or uncertainties) occurring in the macro-environment and affecting the world of work. Such crises or macro-level uncertainties include economic or financial crises (e.g., the 2008 global financial/economic crisis), crises or uncertainties caused by socio-political and economic development, transformation or transition (e.g., in emerging or transition economies), political and social crises or uncertainties (e.g., 'Brexit' in the UK and the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar), the recent health and socio-economic uncertainty caused by the global outbreak of COVID-19, the growing socio-political crisis linked to the climate emergency, the recent energy crisis, technological developments impacting organisations and workers, and natural disasters.

'Workers' are the focal point of this special issue, which is a term that we have purposefully mobilised to be inclusive of job incumbents' experience in various organisational positions (e.g., including first-line employees, non-managerial and managerial staff members) and work structures (Cañibano, 2019). The term encompasses workers in full-time, part-time, fixed-term, temporary, or zero-hours contracts, as well as self-employed or freelance workers (Roper et al., 2022).

This introduction of the special issue seeks to develop the concept of turbulence in human resource management research and practice from an international perspective by: (1) providing an overview of different types of contemporary macro-level turbulence affecting the world of work; (2) theorising how the nexus between turbulence and the worker experience can be managed through a new role for HR, the *Proactive Carer*, which is developed from the contributions of the articles included in this special issue; (3) presenting these articles; and (4) suggesting avenues for future research.

## 2 | TYPES OF MACRO-LEVEL TURBULENCE AFFECTING THE WORLD OF WORK

Macro-level turbulence refers to unplanned and unexpected events that have the potential not only to damage organisational structures and detrimentally affect workers' experience, but also to eradicate the legitimacy of an organisation (King, 2002). Crises and uncertainties negatively impact on how people are managed and experience work (Zagelmeyer & Gollan, 2012). They may affect whole industries, economies, and even clusters of countries. In highly extraordinary situations, a turbulent event may even have global ramifications, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Highly volatile, complex, uncertain, and ambiguous (VUCA) contexts often present insurmountable challenges for workers and their work experience (Mack et al., 2015). Therefore, the way in which HR responds to macro-level turbulence is paramount for the long-term sustainability of an organisation (Collings, McMackin, et al., 2021).

Macro-level turbulence entails several characteristics that directly influence workers' experience: the way organisations choose to respond to an external event; the extent to which organisations are influenced by an external event; and the number, timing, and frequency of experienced external events. Organisations differ in the way they approach turbulence and thus, the same event may influence workers differently across organisations, sectors, industries, or countries. For example, many organisations develop strategies proactively and plan how to respond to future turbulence (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Although such a plan may fall short of workers' expectations in relation to the

gravity of a particular event, the existence of a plan may expedite how they make sense of the event in contrast to workers in other organisations without such plans. In addition, not all organisations are influenced by an external event to the same degree and in the same way (Nyfoudi et al., 2022).

In other words, the extent to which an organisation is impacted by macro-level turbulence could be viewed as a continuum. Some organisations are positively influenced by an external event (e.g., pharmaceutical companies during a pandemic), others are not affected that much (e.g., e-commerce during wildfires), and others are heavily impacted (e.g., agricultural organisations after 'Brexit'). Thus, albeit all workers may be influenced by a macro-level event in terms of their life prospects outside the organisation (e.g., high unemployment rates), the way they experience work may vary as organisations are impacted differently.

Furthermore, it is possible that an organisation is situated within 'a constellation of crises' (Christianson & Barton, 2021, p. 574). For instance, businesses across the world were faced with multiple crises in 2023, including the aftermath of the global pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine which generated high uncertainty in business activities (OECD, 2023). The existence of multiple external events accentuates the difficulty in distinguishing the effects of a particular event on workers' experience and highlights the need for more comprehensive and holistic frameworks.

Taking into consideration the above, it is evident that the HR function plays a key role in influencing the worker experience at the nexus of macro-level turbulence. Indeed, workers perceive HR practices as organisational signals of their employer's intentions during times of turbulence (Guest et al., 2021).

In terms of the different types of turbulence, there is a plethora of research that has demonstrated how macro-level crises and uncertainties have affected the world of work. However, previous work has been largely undertaken from a strategic or organisational perspective focusing on organisational-level outcomes (e.g., Collings, McMackin, et al., 2021; Ezerdi et al., 2022). Although recent research on the impact of the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment offers some insights into how 'employees' experience work, the experience of 'workers' is largely absent, while other types of macro-level turbulence affecting work and employment around the world have not received much attention. This is problematic since workers are a key source of competitive advantage for all organisations (Kryscynski et al., 2021). Workers can help organisations cope in difficult times (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012), even more so in economically and politically challenged contexts that otherwise may lack institutional support structures. Some examples of macro-level turbulence follow.

The work outcomes of the 2008 global financial/economic crisis were widely documented, including downsizing, restructuring work, changing working time arrangements, reduction of pay and rewards, and a decline in employee voice (e.g., Gollan & Perkins, 2010; Naude et al., 2012; Teague & Roche, 2013). Workers across the globe were confronted with detrimental working conditions (Psychogios et al., 2019), such as increased working hours, work intensification, job insecurity and stress (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2019; Harney et al., 2018; Maley, 2019), with severe impact on employees' psychological contract (Conway et al., 2014) and physical and mental health (Datta et al., 2010).

Beyond the 2008 global financial/economic crisis, many countries are currently under socio-political and economic development, transformation, or socio-political transition and facing high levels of uncertainty, volatility, and structural change. For example, emerging market economies experience an expanding role both in the world economy and on the political frontier, often creating an informal economy of considerable size (Williams, 2014) which may significantly impact the employment opportunities available to workers. Other types of political and social crises or uncertainties can also affect institutionally stronger economies. For example, influential nationalist and ethnocentric movements such 'Brexit' in the UK and 'America First' in the US (Cumming et al., 2020) mean significant changes to immigration policies sending negative signals to the skilled, multi-cultural, workforce (Hobolt, 2016; Horak et al., 2017). In addition, the growing socio-political turbulence linked to the climate emergency puts pressure on pursuing an agenda for transitioning to a greener economy. This not only implies the creation of new jobs in environmentally friendly production processes and outputs, but also poses a risk to existing jobs (ILO, 2020) and has consequences on labour markets, jobs, and workers (Olsen, 2009).

The global outbreak of COVID-19 is another example of socio-economic turbulence that tipped many economies into a recession and affected global production chains, financial markets, industries, sectors, organisations, and workers. Evidence abounds as to the short-term impact of lockdown and social distancing measures on workers (Clark, 2022), alongside a significant rise in unemployment and record highs in redundancies (Powell et al., 2022). Key workers found themselves more likely to contract COVID-19, experience interpersonal conflict, and struggle with maintaining their mental health (Topriceanu et al., 2021). For workers whose homes became simultaneously places of work and of childcare and home-schooling, intense time pressures were created, and fatigue, overwork, and strain ensued (Adisa et al., 2022).

Recently, new trends in the use of digital and artificial technology have brought pervasive and omnidirectional changes to businesses (Larkin, 2017). Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the way work is designed and how workers are engaged (Budhwar et al., 2022; Prikshat et al., 2023). AI's benefits do not come without potential threats of job losses, and this is a challenge for organisational leaders who are tasked with governing the AI adoption processes (Basu et al., 2023).

Most recently, a global energy crisis has emerged due to the rapid economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, weather conditions in various parts of the world, maintenance work that had been delayed by the pandemic, and earlier decisions by oil and gas companies and exporting countries to reduce investments. This crisis was exacerbated following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Retail electricity prices increased by almost 50% year-on-year from July 2021 in the EU, affecting not only households but businesses as well, pushing many to implement restructuring plans (Staffa, 2022).

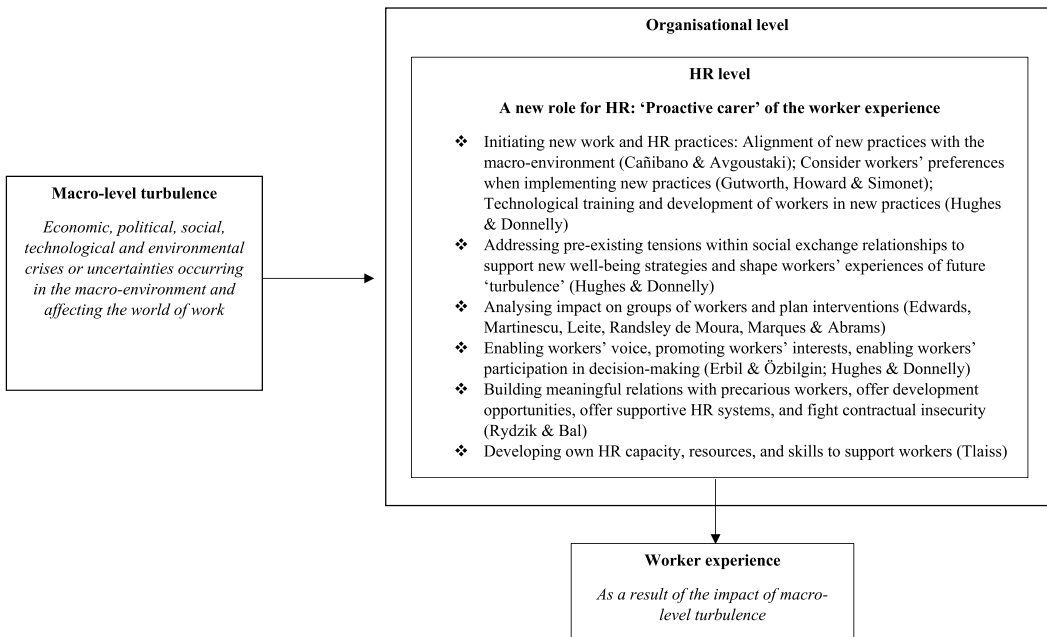
What is clear from the above discussion is that the world of work is increasingly experiencing significant macro-level turbulence events, often consecutive and/or simultaneous, negatively impacting on workers' experience. Organisations and HR need to be proactive with appropriate responses and mitigations. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that such events with wide impact will be a regular phenomenon from now on, given the interdependence of our 'global village' (Biron et al., 2021). In this respect, for HR interventions to be successful, a thorough understanding of the impact of such events on the worker experience is necessary.

### 3 | A NEW ROLE FOR HR IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANISATIONS

The constantly evolving external business environment alongside the multiple, consecutive, and/or simultaneous crises and uncertainties occurring at the macro level have rapidly transformed the internal organisational landscape and have led to a paradigm shift in the HR function. This transformation has been taking place over the last few decades when we observed the evolution of HR departments from pure function-oriented entities to business-oriented ones (Ulrich et al., 2008).

A critically important area in the HR literature is the role that HR professionals play in response to macro-environment dynamics. Scholars have for some time been offering HR role categorisations in this respect (e.g., Burns et al., 2012; Lawler & Boudreau, 2009; Ulrich et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2011). However, the debates around the role of HR alongside the typologies suggested have so far been narrowly and internally focused. Given the increasingly volatile external environment, the impact of HR's inward focus is increased worker (including manager) susceptibility to the effects of macro-turbulence. It is time to expand the HR remit by also becoming externally facing, effectively navigating the internal worker experience that is directly impacted by turbulence occurring at the external macro level.

It is no surprise that HR professional bodies call for increased attention towards the wellbeing of employees and workers, as mental health issues can increase staff sickness absence and turnover and reduce engagement (CIPD, 2021). A focus on wellbeing was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a plethora of resources, advice, and support mechanisms suddenly appeared to help organisations address a range of issues including workplace safety, remote and hybrid working, absence management, wellbeing and inclusion, and legal advice for



**FIGURE 1** A new role for the Human Resources (HR) function in contemporary organisations.

government 'furlough' schemes (CIPD, 2023). Beyond the argument that organisations need to care about their staff due to the many benefits they can reap through staff participation and engagement, the moral argument is becoming increasingly stronger. Organisations, now more than ever, have a fundamental duty of care to their employees 'that must sit alongside a responsibility for delivering value to financial stakeholders' (CIPD, 2016, p. 2).

In this respect, based on the evidence that the articles in this special issue present, we suggest an additional role for HR professionals: the *Proactive Carer*. Significant macro-level turbulences are likely to become more frequent, consecutive, and/or simultaneous, and are likely to impact workers drastically and negatively. HR professionals are increasingly called upon to proactively anticipate changes, prepare for impact, design interventions, and monitor the worker experience. Thus, HR professionals need to develop greater sensitivity towards workers' concerns and address them in line with the dynamic nature of the turbulent macro-environments within which they operate. The *Proactive Carer* HR professional follows the logic of anti-fragility (Taleb, 2013) which involves identifying the characteristics that will not only mitigate against the realisation of hazards, but enable growth in protection, strength, and anti-fragility over time (Bendell, 2016). Thus, to respond to macro-level turbulences, the HR system itself needs to be equally volatile, exhibiting agility rather than permanence. The evidence from the contributions of this special issue provide direction in this respect and enable us to present a framework for this new role for HR in contemporary organisations (see Figure 1).

Six key themes/responsibilities characterise this new HR role. The first of these is initiating new work and HR practices. This includes the alignment of new work and HR practices with the macro-environment (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, this issue), consideration of workers' preferences when implementing new practices (Gutworth, Howard & Simonet, this issue), and technological training and development of workers in new work practices (Hughes & Donnelly, this issue). The second responsibility is addressing pre-existing tensions within social exchange relationships to support new well-being strategies and shape workers' experiences of future turbulence (Hughes & Donnelly, this issue). The third is analysing the impact of macro-level turbulence on groups of workers and planning interventions (Edwards, Martinescu, Leite, Randsley de Moura, Marques & Abrams, this issue). The fourth responsibility is enabling workers' voice, promoting workers' interests, and enabling workers' participation in decision-making (Erbil & Özbilgin, this issue; Hughes & Donnelly, this issue). The fifth is building meaningful relations with precarious workers,

offering development opportunities, and offering supportive HR systems, and fighting contractual insecurity (Rydzik & Bal, this issue). Finally, the sixth is developing own HR capacity, resources, and skills to support workers (Tlaiss, this issue).

In relation to previously published models of HR roles, the *Proactive Carer* role extends the 'employee advocate' or 'employee champion' roles previously suggested by David Ulrich in two ways. First, it broadens HR's role from focusing on 'employees' towards focusing on all 'workers' in the organisation, regardless of contractual agreement. Second, it moves beyond dealing with and responding to the needs of employees by representing their interests to management and by having responsibility for health and safety, risk management, and equality and diversity at work, towards proactively protecting workers from significant macro-level events that influence the world of work. Our proposed new HR role addresses Ellehave and Ulrich's (2021) recent call for HR to improve its ability to grasp the consequences of external shocks, changes, and volatility, and to anticipate future challenges and their effects on organisations and workers. This special issue paves the way to operationalise this new role which we have conceptualised based on the research contributions of the articles included in this volume.

## 4 | ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This Special Issue includes five contributions that capture the experience of workers within a range of economic/financial, political, and social events internationally (Spain, Lebanon, UK, and Turkey), and two contributions that are focused on the turbulence caused by COVID-19 (UK and US).

### 4.1 | Financial crisis and new teleworking practices in Spain

Cañibano and Avgoustaki (this issue) investigate how workers make sense of telework and respond to it in turbulent times based on a study of a consultancy firm during the 2008 financial crisis in Spain. They explore employees' interpretation of organisational signals exhibited through HR practices, whilst taking the external context into consideration. The findings reveal how workers may interpret teleworking—an otherwise employee-centric practice—as a threat during times of macro-level turbulence, leading to the rejection of the practice. The authors draw attention to the need for organisations to implement HR practices that align with the macro environment.

### 4.2 | Long-term political and economic uncertainty in Lebanon and impact on women HR managers

Tlaiss (this issue) studies women HR managers as 'employees', focusing on their coping strategies in the context of the Lebanese long-term political and economic uncertainty which was further impacted by the 2020 port explosion in Beirut. The findings reveal how women HR managers cope by mobilising a range of multi-dimensional strategies across emotion-focused and problem-solving strategies, various types of silence, and the doing/re-doing of gender. This study considers the complexity of the worker experience in contexts of long-term macro-level turbulence and raises questions about the ability of HR professionals to respond to such uncertainties.

### 4.3 | The political and social 'Brexit' crisis in the UK and its impact on employees

Edwards, Martinescu, Leite, Randsley de Moura, Marques, and Abrams (this issue) offer evidence with respect to how different categories of employees (EU/UK citizens) experience mental health (depressive states) and how these relate

to their work outcomes (engagement and turnover intentions) during a turbulent event like 'Brexit'. Their findings reveal that during 'Brexit', EU citizens in low-skilled jobs reported higher levels of depressive states than those in highly skilled jobs. The authors highlight the need for HR to identify the groups of workers likely to be impacted by macro level events and to plan interventions to support these workers.

#### **4.4 | The mass privatisation of previously state-owned enterprises and worker silence in Turkey**

Erbil and Özbilgin (this issue) study turbulence induced by the mass privatisation of sugar factories in Turkey within an unregulated market, where macro-national and meso-institutional mechanisms enforce worker silence. They demonstrate that worker silence deepened in the process of privatisation through three distinct organisational mechanisms: dismissal of democratic demands, marketisation of everything, and decline of solidarity. The authors argue that HR professionals play a role in enabling workers' voice and in promoting workers' interests to improve the worker experience with such turbulent events.

#### **4.5 | Rapid political-economic changes and insecure youth labour markets in the UK**

Rydzik and Bal (this issue) study student-workers who are on zero-hour contracts in the hospitality industry. The authors argue that pre-existing personal insecurity, reinforced by limited state protection, inexperience, and socio-economic background, is intensified by the addition of job insecurity, underpinned by transactional employment relations, and workplace power asymmetries. This can cause the further precarisation of already insecure individuals, sustain existing inequalities, limit social mobility, and shape perceptions of insecurity in relation to future labour market outcomes. The authors advocate for the role of HR in building meaningful relations with such precarious workers, offering development opportunities and fighting contractual insecurity.

#### **4.6 | COVID-19, enforced teleworking and impact on employees in the UK and US**

Two contributions relate to this theme. First, Hughes and Donnelly (this issue) study the repercussions of COVID-19 on the worker experience. They argue that such turbulence can disrupt social exchange relationships formed at work and adversely affect work-life balance. Through an examination of how staff experiences are shaped by interactions and tensions between a range of different boundaries and complex social exchange relationships between parties, Hughes and Donnelly conclude that generic well-being initiatives are unlikely to address individual worker and line manager needs when workers seek to manage exchange relationships and boundaries, particularly when the parties may be suffering in silence. They posit that addressing pre-existing tensions within social exchange relationships, involving staff in decisions, incorporating technology into working practices and offering training on the use of this technology can shape workers' experiences of future turbulence.

Second, Gutworth, Howard and Simonet (this issue) focus on the US context and examine those employees who were suddenly mandated to work virtually on a full-time basis but had rarely done so before the pandemic. The authors explore virtual work preferences and how they interact with specific organisational practices. They found that when relational management practices are present and target those employees that are keen to work from home, less burnout and turnover intention are observed. In contrast, when managerial support, feedback, and information sharing are missing or less available, there is a negative impact on employees' well-being. The authors argue that not only do HR practices need to be tailored to employee preferences, but these preferences need to be



periodically re-evaluated by HR to ensure that personalised practices remain relevant with changes in workers' life cycle, job design, or job context.

## 5 | DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We offer five directions for future research. The first direction is to capture the workers' experience with a variety of contemporary macro-level turbulences affecting the world of work. This special issue did capture some important international examples, but more research from the Global South as well as the Global North is needed. A prime example is the current energy crisis that is affecting the globe, albeit unequally. In addition, research needs to capture the experience of a range of workers with macro-level turbulence, looking beyond traditional full-time employees to workers on part-time, fixed-term, temporary, or zero-hours contracts, and to the experience of self-employed and freelance workers. Six of the contributions we present in this special issue are focused on the experience of traditional employees/workers, while one elaborates on the experience of zero-hour workers. This imbalance and scarcity of empirical evidence can and should be addressed by future research. Specifically, studies can investigate how HR can build meaningful relations with precarious, peripheral, and external workers (Rydzik and Bal, this issue). With a growing HR literature on non-traditional workers (e.g., Oyetunde et al., 2021) and increasing debates regarding the role of HR in managing these workers (e.g., Cross & Swart, 2022), it is important that research focuses on capturing the experience of a wide range of workers. Similarly important is capturing the experience of workers across occupations, industries, economies, and nations (Hughes & Donnelly, this issue), and comparing workers' experience before and after turbulent events (Edwards, Martinescu, Leite, Randsley de Moura, Marques & Abrams, this issue).

The second direction is to study how workers interpret and react to HR interventions in times of macro-level turbulence, particularly via comparative studies between different types of interventions in a variety of contexts (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, this issue). Understanding workers' response to what HR may consider to be 'good practice' is critical in shaping HR interventions that positively impact workers during uncertain times.

The third direction is to examine how well-equipped HR professionals are in dealing with uncertain events and guiding workers through turbulent times. Tlais (this issue) demonstrated that HR professionals in economically and politically challenged contexts, and during significant turbulence, may be lacking the capacity, resources or skills to drive the organisation, and workers, forward. Current research tends to ignore that HR functions and HR professionals are lacking development and resources in many sectors, industries, and countries around the world. It would, therefore, be sensible to also engage in research that looks to evaluate the readiness of the HR function, and of HR professionals, in different contexts.

The fourth direction is to study how workers interact with employers and with HR during macro-level turbulent events, particularly whether and how they voice concerns, ideas or contribute to organisational decision-making, including contributing to decisions relating to the initiation of new working practices (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, this issue; Erbil & Özbilgin, this issue; Gutworth, Howard & Simonet, this issue; Hughes & Donnelly, this issue). Research can also focus on how HR professionals can enact their role in enabling workers' voice and promoting workers' interests via collaboration with leaders, unions, and other parties to improve the worker experience through such turbulent events (Erbil & Özbilgin, this issue).

Finally, the fifth research direction is related to the proposed *Proactive Carer* role of HR. Research is needed to theorise and further investigate the nature of this role. For example, how do HR professionals see themselves as *Proactive Carers*? How do they make sense of this role in their organisational and socio-cultural contexts? What are other features (if any) of this role? How can this role be evolved and expanded over time? By tackling such research questions, we may shed further light on this new role of HR, a role beyond reactively responding to macro-level crises or uncertainties and towards proactively keeping HR ready to adapt and respond to turbulence.

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