
Saints or Seducers?

The Role of Management Consultants in Public Sector Organizations

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Summary

Management consultants play an increasing role in public sector organizations. All tiers of government seek the consultants' expertise to reorganize public administration, especially in times of financial crisis. Yet, the awareness of this increasing external influence on governments has been rather low. A conceptual framework that would structure future research is helpful.

This research note answers three questions: (1) Why are management consultants so common in the public sector? (2) In which phases of a reform process are management consultants called in, and (3) what impact do they have on the administrative system and the society as a whole?

The article concludes with a research framework and hypotheses. These hypotheses will be tested by conducting an empirical study in Switzerland next year as part of the EU COST action.

Introduction

In recent years, management consulting for public sector organizations has gained increasing importance. A 2010 report from the National Audit Office (2010) estimates that as much as 789 million Pounds are spent each year in Britain by government departments on external consulting services. In Germany, similarly numbers are reported. The German society of management consultants estimates that in the year 2013 a total of 23.7 billion Euros was spent on management consultant services, of which nine percent are triggered by the public sector (BDU, 2014).

These two examples show that governments seek the expertise of consultants to reorganize their administration; especially in times of austerity. The acceptance of such advice has become more common in public administration since the widespread introduction of New Public Management principles (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001, p.523). Yet, the public and scholarly awareness of this influence on governments has been low so far. Saint-Martin (1998, p. 321) states there are almost no studies on the role of management consultants in the public sector. Much of the available literature is descriptive and little empirical evidence is available (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001). Critical authors such as Hood and Jackson (1991, p.24) use the term *consultocracy*, suspecting the public sector is heavily influenced by non-democratically selected, private consultants. In their view, the excessive use of management consultants could potentially have a severe backlash on political trust in governments.

On the other hand, external backing of a reform might potentially increase the political trust in government. Comparably, the knowledge brought in by consultants may improve public service delivery and therefore citizen satisfaction and finally trust in government.

Management consultants are mandated by governments for different reasons. A coherent, empirically tested framework analyzing the use of management consultants in public sector organizations does not yet exist. Some scholars use the policy (content)-politics (process) and polity (institutional setting) framework to differentiate three stages of external advice. They criticize that consultants influence the early stages of the policy-cycle and thus heavily influence the decision-making process and consequently hamper political trust in the government. However, this explanation does not consider the varying reasons why governments use external consultants, but assumes that external advisers solely pursue self-serving purposes.

There is no scholarly consensus if this external knowledge of management consultants can be considered as a valuable asset or, as Guttman and Willner (1976) fear, rather an indication of a shadow-government. Howlett & Migone (2013) call for a well-established framework that allows a systematic analysis in order to take a firmer position whether external consultants play the role of saints or seducers in the public sector.

This research note aims to answer three principal questions. (1) Why are management consultants so common in the public sector? (2) In which phases of a reform process are management consultants called in, and (3) what impact do they have on the administrative system and the society as a whole?

The article concludes with a research framework and hypotheses. These hypotheses will be tested by conducting an empirical study in Switzerland next year as part of the EU COST action on Local Government Reforms.

Definition of the Term “Management Consultant”

The consultation of political leaders is not a new phenomenon. Already in ancient times, emperors and kings had their personal advisers, in which they trusted. However, the present time consultants are of a different kind. They usually have an employment in a consulting firm or in academia and offer their services in the free market economy.

When reviewing the available discourse, a plethora of variations of role of consultants in the public sector exists, therefore the term must be carefully defined. In the context of this research note, management consultants are not to be mixed-up with policy researchers. The influence of consulting in specific policy areas, such as climate change, environmental issues or health care is discussed extensively elsewhere.

Falk and Römmele (2009) use a polity/politics/policy-framework in order to differentiate consulting in the public sector. They do not offer a specific definition of consulting but rather categorize the consultants into these three dimensions. Their view of consulting is open and tends to be unspecified. Management consultants as we understand them, only fall into the politics-dimension as they deal with processes within an administration.

Becker (2004) distinguishes between institutionalized and ad-hoc consulting, while Cassels (2001, p.78) uses a differentiation between policy consulting and consulting for politicians (i.e. campaign management). The distinction of Becker (2004) is interesting as it clearly states that reforms are mandated on an ad-hoc basis to external actors.

Wollmann (2001, p.376) offers a generic definition as he considers the „delivery of information and recommendations for political actor and decision makers through scientists as well as economical and societal experts“ as political consulting. In the same way, Huchler (2009) uses the general term of administration consulting (*Behördenberatung*), which includes besides the government the administration as a potential buyer of external management consulting services. Huchler does not discriminate the background of the consultants, i. e., scientific or for-profit, but focuses on management consultants and excludes a variety of other actors that are sometimes included by other researchers such as communication or public affairs agents, think-tanks, market research institutes, scientific advisory committees or institutionalized committees (expert-commissions) (Falk & Römmele 2009).

Last but not least, Howlett and Migone (2013) use the term management consultant as a proxy, which also includes policy consultants although they underline that these two actors play a different role in the administration.

When looking at the different definitions, some elements of Becker (2004), Wollmann (2001) and Huchler (2009) can be combined together. In our understanding, management consultants are “economical and societal experts as well as scientists, who deliver a mandated, ad-hoc and paid consulting service to the administration or political leaders with a focus on processes or structures of public administration”. A benefit of this definition is that it does not consider unpaid policy-advice to politicians and public administration. However, it includes IT-consulting because IT is considered as a means to public service delivery, rather than a product itself.

What? – Development of a Concept

The research on management consulting in the public sector in the 20th and 21st century can be structured into two periods: A first period was characterized by publications making recommendations on how to organize public administration, inspired by the work of consultants (*Knowledge-Transfer-Period*). During the second period, publications began to reflect the role of consultants (*Meta-Analysis-Period*). The first period began in the 1930s, the latter one in the late 1970s, and both are ongoing.

Starting in the 1930s, first ideas of consultants on how to organize public administration have been published. These consultants publish books and discuss the one best way of organizing public administration. Their thoughts and ideas have directly penetrated the public sector and shaped the way a public administration ought to be run. Inspired by Henri Fayol's general theory of management, the American researcher Gulick (1937) wrote an article as a result of the work of an advisory committee mandated by the US president that defines five essential functions of management in public administration. Even ideas originally developed for the private sector have influenced the public sector: Peter Drucker's *Management by objectives* has become common in public administration (1953). Drucker has always worked as a scientist and as a consultant and did not see these two jobs as dichotomous. A more recent example is Osborne and Gabler's book *Reinventing Government*, which spurred the New Public Management movement. This administrative reform has enjoyed success in various western countries, notably New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Germany and not least Switzerland.

In the late 1970s, first researchers begin to discuss the role of management consultants in public administration. Authors such as Rehfuss (1979), Rosenblum and McGillis (1979), Kline and Buntz (1979) or Guttman and Willner (1976) are representatives of that area. From a practitioner's perspective, Rehfuss (1979) explains important aspects that have to be considered when engaging external consultants. Starting in the late 1990s, the focus of analysis shifts towards a meta-analysis on the impact of management consultants on public sector organizations. Researchers begin to analyze the reasons for the increase of management consultants in the public sector and estimate the size of the market. Specific aspects of the consulting process (such as the client-consultant relationship) are being

conceptualized. Saint-Martin's (1998) historical account of the introduction of management consultants in three countries can be considered as an important publication of this second period. His research tries to explain why management consultants are more common in the UK than in Canada and France.

Why? – Reasons for Management Consultants in Public Administration

Governments and public administration engage management consultants for various reasons. Literature identifies three main triggers. The first two are linked to personnel shortages while the third reason is a structural one.

The most cited reason is the lack of internal expertise. Governments and public administration identify a gap between the internal and the required knowledge and therefore buy the needed knowledge from outside. Critical authors note that in certain cases the government is reluctant to use the existing internal knowledge and rather favors external experts, which is considered more objective by some stakeholders (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001). A similar argument by Momani (2013) and Perl and White (2002) is the shortage or absence of in-house capacity. Due to the increasing public pressure to strive for a lean administration, the number of public employees is kept at a minimum. Additional projects such as an internal reorganization exceed the existing capacity of the staff and, therefore, external help is needed. These ad-hoc engaged external management consultants do not show up on the payroll and are a convenient way to circumvent possible hiring-stops. Lapsley and Oldfield (2001, p. 541) report that in the UK management consultants are used "almost as short term staff", albeit at higher costs. Rosenblum and McGillis (1979) add that under tight deadlines, additional (external) staff might be needed in order to finish a project on time. This temporary support might be provided internally from another department or, more likely, is brought-in from an external consultant. Momani (2013) critically notes that management consultants are perceived by the public officials as being better at the same task, although, as Lapsley and Oldfield (2001) discusses, they draw heavily on internal knowledge and sometimes sell or implement the administration's own ideas just in a repackaged version.

A third reason to engage external management consultants is due to the perceived objectivity of an external consultant. Unpopular reforms endanger the chances of re-

election. The external management consultant legitimizes a chosen reform and may reinstall public trust in the political leader. The external consultant adds credibility to the measure and may guide some part of the blaming. On the other hand, an organizational change in the administrative system can also spur internal resistance. The external consultant is then used to confirm a chosen course of action internally and counterbalance administrative resistance. In such a scenario, it is doubtful that the political leader is interested in an expertise contradicting the leader's own opinion. It is more likely that he may attempt to steer the management consultant towards a preferred direction. This may be common due to the large number of smaller firms or experts involved in the public consulting market and the weak position they have when consulting a large client (Sturdy 1997). The management consultant can be selected on the probability to influence the outcome of the final product.

The reasons to hire an external consultant are conceptually explained along two lines. Transaction-cost theory is used to explain the hiring in the first two cases of personal shortages and lack of specialized internal knowledge (Armbrüster, 2006). Instead of boosting staff numbers or knowledge inside the administration, temporary relieve is rather hired on a short-term bases. If the cost for external knowledge compares favorably to an internal solution, management consultants are hired. Fueling the use of management consultants in the public sector is the fact that the costs for hiring and monitoring these actors are not easily quantifiable and thus tend to be underestimated or neglected. This leads to the situation that the external solution in many cases looks favorably even though unanticipated costs may later appear.

The critical paradigm (Pemer et al., 2014) recognizes the politician's need for an external, neutral confirmation of a chosen course of action. This paradigm is further divided into two groups regarding the position of the client. The first group describes a situation of a weak politician, that is being portrayed as a helpless victim of the consultant's position of power. The consultant tries to foster ambiguity while simultaneously providing a remedy for the situation. By reiteration ideas and praise specific models the politician is convinced to buy the provided solution. The strategy is particularly successful if an improvement of a reform is not easily assessable as it

is often the case in the public sector. The second group of the critical paradigm assumes a strong politician, which pushes a hidden agenda. In this case the external consultant is used to confirm a specific course of action or take some part of act as a scapegoat of an unpopular reform. The politician will attempt to predetermine the result of the consultant and dominate the consultation process. Surprisingly, Perner et al. (2014) do not consider that situation to be prevalent in the public sector. In their view, the general public acts as a watch-dog and will effectively prevent the spending of public funding on wasteful consulting projects. We, on the other hand argue, that this situation could be quite common. Firstly, many consulting projects are not publicly communicated as they might treat only in internal problem. Secondly, inside reports from public sector consultants suggests that this situation could be quite prevalent. However, it will be difficult to research this situation since both the politician and the public sector consultant have an interested to mitigate their influence in the consulting process.

When and How? – Phases and Applied Practices of Management Consultants in Public Administration

When analyzing the process of management consulting in the public sector, two questions need to be examined: (1) In which stage of a reform are external consultants mandated?, and (2) What are the practices management consultants apply?

Analyzing the timing of management consulting, the policy-cycle can be applied. The six phases of the cycle are 1) problem definition, 2) goal formulation, 3) development of reform strategy, 4) selection of reform strategy, 5) implementation, and finally 6) evaluation. Similar phases are being used in organization theory (e. g. Grochla 1978). We argue that external management consultants can be mandated in every phase of the reform process depending on the intention of the government and public administration.

In the first phase (problem awareness), for example, management consultants may discover risks in the public administration which have not been recognized by the government beforehand. In the second phase, the goals of a reform are being defined. Rehfuß (1979) notes that objective goals and criteria are hard to come by. As a result, the management consultant might attempt to influence the expectations about his contribution. During the third phase, different reform strategies are

generated. The management consultant may deliver justifications for one or another option. In the following selection and implementation phase, external process knowledge can be a valuable addition and facilitate the implementation process. In the evaluation phase, external consultants may be considered more objective, as the evaluator is from outside the administration.

Management consultants can deliver results or just moderate the reform process. If they have the role of a content expert, the management consultant develops different scenarios and suggests a preferred solution to the political leader. If the management consultant is a moderator of a reform only, he may apply a specific tool or instrument and bring this into the administration. The application of a SWOT-analysis is an example for this category. Especially in larger consulting projects, both roles may be observed.

So What? – Impact of Management Consultants on Public Administration

What is the impact of the increasing number of management consultants in the public sector? We can distinguish between a (1) direct effect on the administration and (2) an indirect effect on society.

As a direct effect, public administration may provide more effective and more efficient public services, because management consultants promote and implement innovative concepts. They may help to unblock the organizational structure and processes and reduce red tape. However, this positive impact is not guaranteed: The work of management consultants can have a negative impact. A new concept such as the implementation of a new controlling concept may increase red tape. – Whatever impact we can observe, consultants will probably not be responsible alone, but it is a combination of actions taken by the consultants, the administration, and the politicians, which causes the effects.

As an indirect effect, the job done by management consultants may affect the attitude of society towards public administration and government. If public services work better after a reform implemented by consultants, the trust of individual citizens in public administration may increase. Additionally, if evaluations done by consultants confirm the legitimacy of governments' actions, public trust in administration is increased as well. But there are two coins of a medal as well: If management consultants promote unpleasant reforms such as austerity programs, society's trust in government will probably decrease. Finally yet importantly, the intention to hire a management consultant might come from a need for an external backing and blame avoidance of the leader himself.

Therefore, it is not surprising that critical authors draw a rather pessimistic picture and blame management consultants as witchdoctors (Peet, 1998 cit. in Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001) or warn against a consultocracy.

Framework for Analysis

Figure 1 summarizes the discussion above and allows the development of a coherent framework, based on three pillars: The first pillar focusses on the different reasons for the engagement of management consultants. These are the lack of resources, the lack of knowledge, and the role of management consultants as a scapegoat.

The second pillar of the framework discusses the timing and the role of the management consultants in the public sector. Consultants may advise the public sector organizations in the phase of problem definition, goal formulation, development and selection of reform strategies, implementation, and evaluation. Consultants develop a solution (content-providing role) or moderate the process (moderator-role).

In pillar three, we focus on the impact of management consultants on the politico-administrative system and on society. As a direct impact, consultancy can improve structure and processes of the public organization and finally change the quality and costs of service delivery. As an indirect impact, consultancy may increase trust of society in administration. The opposite can happen as well: Red tape and distrust may occur.

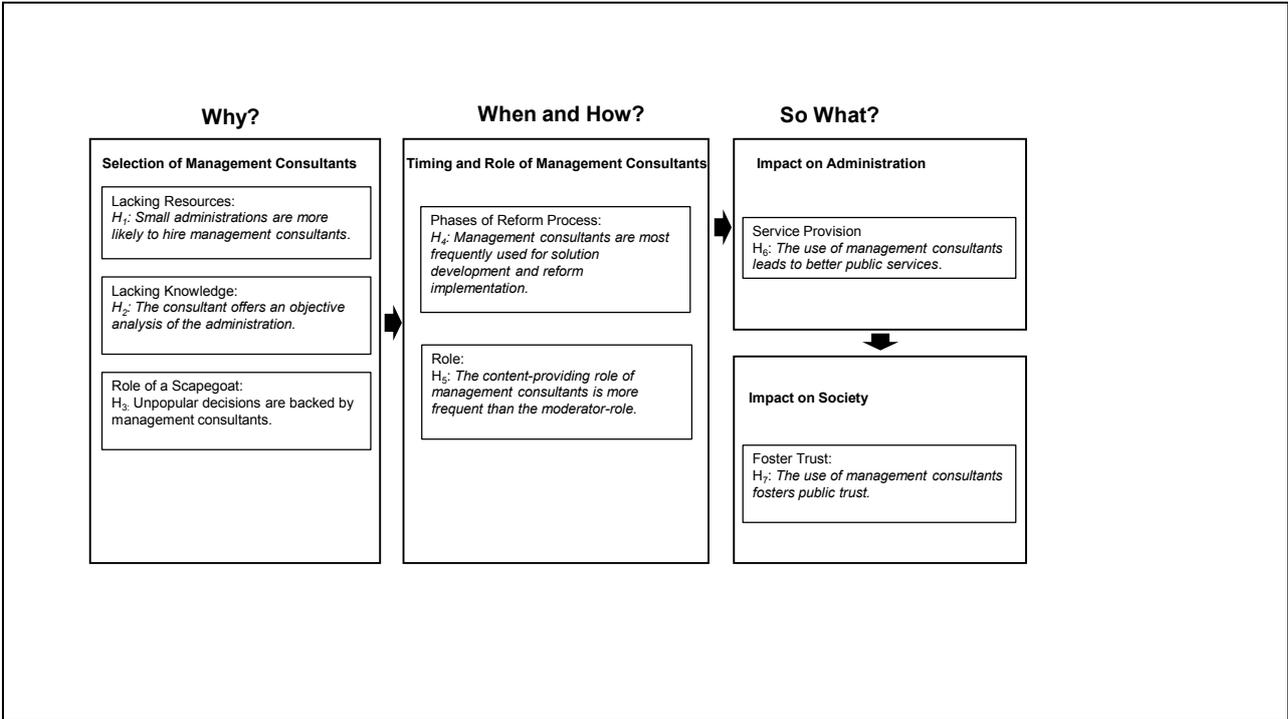


Figure 1: Framework for Analyzing the Role of Management Consultants in Public Sector Organizations

Empirical Project

The framework will be used for an empirical study at the local tier of government in Switzerland. The 2'324 municipalities account for about one third of the public spending in Switzerland and are characterized by a manifold of tasks and high

autonomy. Based on the discussion and the framework, the study will test the following hypotheses.

H₁: Small administrations are more likely to hire external management consultants. The argument supports the claim that management consultants are hired in case of a (temporary) shortage of work force or expertise. Bigger administrations can better handle peak demands internally with a (temporary) shift of work force within an organization. Smaller organizations on the other hand do not have the option to compensate peak demands internally and therefore have to rely on external support through management consultants.

H₂: We argue that consultants bring-in knowledge into the administration. Consultants can overcome lacking expertise of an administration and bring-in ideas unknown to the mandating public administration.

H₃: Politicians are more likely to use external consultants if faced with an unpopular decision. In case of unpopular decisions, management consultants play the role of a scapegoat. Part of the blaming can be shifted towards the consultants, and therefore increases the politicians' chance for reelection.

H₄: We argue that management consultants are most often mandated during the reform strategy development phase and during the implementation process. These are the two phases when governments need the help of their administration. Because they cannot or do not want to engage their employees (lack of knowledge or working force), they will mandate consultants during these phases.

H₅: To provide content is the most sought-after role of a consultant. This is closely linked to hypothesis 4 because consultants can be justified if knowledge or working force is lacking and therefore the knowledge of the consultants has to be bought. Consultants will usually play the role of a moderator in case of tensions or requested neutrality during a process.

H₆: The most important expected impact of consultancy is the improvement of public services, e. g. an increase in effectiveness and efficiency. We formulate this hypothesis, although there is a chance the contrary may happen.

H₇: Due to the expertise of consultants and the improved service delivery, society will have more trust in government and public administration. As a counter-hypothesis, consultants may also destroy trust because they promote negatively connoted

reforms such as austerity programs, generate high costs and the way they work may not always be transparent.

Operationalization of the first four hypotheses in questionnaire

In a first step, a survey of all 2324 Swiss municipalities will give an impression of the use of management consultants by local governments. In-depth case studies allow the further analysis of the impact of management consultants. We will analyze the way politicians and senior staff of administration estimate problems before the consultants have started their work and how and why these opinions shift during the reform process.

The following paragraphs will show how we intend to operationalize the first four hypotheses in the questionnaire and what the expected results might be. The other three hypotheses cannot be answered with the questionnaire alone.

<i>H₁:</i>	<i>Small administrations are more likely to hire external management consultants.</i>
Q:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of local government (number of citizens) • Did your local government contract specific tasks to external experts or university affiliated research centers in the past 3 years? • If yes, what was the total amount of these contracts?
R:	It is expected that smaller local governments will need the external help of management consultants more often than larger local governments. However, Huchler (2009) was not able to find a linear relationship between size local government and amount of consulting projects. He identified four clusters with a varying degree of openness to external consulting. This could also be the case in Switzerland when taking into account the varying reasons to engage external consultants. It could be very well true that smaller municipalities engage external consultants because of a lack of knowledge and staff, but the external backing of a political decision is usually not dependent of the size of government.

<i>H₂:</i>	<i>Local governments are hiring external consultants because of the lack of knowledge and resources.</i>
Q:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which tasks are contracted out to external actors? (List of tasks)
R:	It is expected that external consultants are rather hired for their expert knowledge than a lack of personal resources. Although hiring stops due to austerity programs are becoming more frequent also in Switzerland, the administration is rather reluctant to

	hire external consultants as temporary relieve. The instrument of global budgeting (only lump sum is in budget) helps to allocated excess resources within a department in order to cope with temporary peak demands in the administrative process.
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<i>H₃:</i>	<i>Politicians are more likely to use external consultants if faced with an unpopular decision.</i>
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| Q: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the usual tendering process structured? (Open tender, 5-7 were invited, 2-4 were invited, based on previous working mandate) • Which type of external consultant is usually hired in your local government (Research Institute, known consulting firm, specialized consulting firm/expert) • Frequency of contacts/meeting during consultation process (only a few contacts after initial meeting, meeting according to predefined project-milestones, weekly contacts regarding the state of the project) • Who structured the consulting process? (The consultant had a defined process in mind, the local government could give feedback on predefined milestones, the local government had a specific process in mind) • Was the local government able to give input into the project? (The consultant acknowledged some inputs/warnings form the local governments during the consulting process, Demands by the local government were met) • The outcome of the consulting process contained unexpected results for the local government/ The outcome of the consulting process was more or less expected from the beginning. |
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R:	<p>This hypothesis is expected to be both the most interesting and most difficult to research. Both parties have an interest to mitigate their role in the consulting process. The strong politician needs the result of the consultant to at least appear to be impartial and objectively the best solution. The consultant on the other hand could loose his credibility as a neutral, external source, which could hamper future contracts. Under such circumstance it is evident that a direct questioning of the administration would not yield objective results. Different facets of the consultation process could however give evidence of a strong politician. For example is a strong politician adamant to select a weaker consultant. How many consultants were invited to send in a tender? Was the consultant chosen based on previous positive experience with the administration? The hiring of a smaller firm or single expert is thus more likely than a known consultant brand or a university affiliated research institute. How often did the two parties meet? How receptive were the consultants for inputs from the administration? Did the final result of the consultation contain surprising elements for</p>
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	<p>the administration? Was it clear from the beginning how the result would look like? These are all questions that could indicate a situation of a strong politician that uses the consultant to push for a hidden agenda. However, single elements might not be sufficient to determine whether or not such a situation occurs. Only the interplay with different elements could give a clearer picture. Therefore it will be difficult to solely assess the situation based on a survey alone. In-depth case studies are needed to further support the initial hypothesis.</p>
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<i>H₄:</i>	<i>Management consultants are most often mandated during the reform strategy development phase and during the implementation process</i>
Q:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In which phase during a reform process are the external management consultant hired (problem definition, goal formulation, development of reform strategy, selection of reform strategy, implementation, and evaluation)
R:	It could be interesting to see whether the introduction of NPM has led to a higher demand of external help during the evaluation phase. The governments are increasingly forced to show the impact of their measures. External experts could be hired in order to ensure an objective review process.

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