

# Work Alienation: Role of Organization & Supervisor Support in Indian BPO Sector

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*Attrition has been recognized as one of the principal threats to the competitiveness of Indian BPO sector. More specifically many researchers have identified that it is often the early career professionals who decide against an extended relationship with the BPO. Using the job demand-resource lens, we explored whether work alienation is associated with turnover of the early career employees in the Indian BPO sector. Additionally, we also investigated whether work alienation mediates the relationship between organizational support variables and turnover intention. We found evidence for a full mediation. The implications of the study findings are also discussed.*

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## Introduction

India is an attractive destination for business process outsourcing (BPO). A trivial business in early part of this millennium, of late, the BPO sector is growing at an unparalleled rate (Sengupta, 2011). While, in 2002-03, revenues for the industry were about USD 1 billion (Sengupta, 2011), the figure stood at USD 28 billion in 2016-17 (NASSCOM, 2017). Further, it is estimated that by the year 2020, the BPO industry will be nearly worth USD 65 billion. With 38% share of the global sourcing market in its embrace, the industry employs more than a million people and the number is only expected to grow (NASSCOM, 2017). India's competitive advantage is ensured by an unbeatable amalgam of low costs, deep technical and language skills, mature vendors and supportive government policies (Bhatnagar, 2007).

However, the industry is afflicted with numerous challenges, with the biggest challenge being employee at-

trition (Bhatnagar, 2007; Sengupta, 2011). Hovering around 35% (Mishra, 2007), attrition is worrisome, as it can affect the very sustenance of BPO industry in India. Besides dip in customer satisfaction leading to premature termination of contracts (Budhwar, Luthar & Bhatnagar, 2006), it also causes a serious loss of talent (Mishra, 2007). The cost of training new recruits is estimated to range between USD 900-1000 per recruit (Budhwar et al., 2006) that defeats the low-cost model of the industry. Hence it is imperative that necessary interventions must be made to arrest the exit of valuable manpower. The problem of attrition is particularly acute among the entry-level employees (Bhatnagar, 2007; Budhwar et al., 2006). According to Bhatnagar (2007), sixty percent of the people joining the industry leave within 6 months. Further, she asserts that attrition reaches its peak after an employee is 12-16 months old. Whereas high attrition rate makes the replacement at entry level difficult, it also affects the availability of manpower at the middle management level (Budhwar et al., 2006).

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Extant management literature has identified several factors determining employee turnover intention. For example, a meta-analytic study establishes that factors such as pay satisfaction, job satisfaction, satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with co-workers, satisfaction with promotion, job performance and role

clarity related negatively with turnover (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). Further, studies specific to the Indian BPO sector suggest that employees leave because of better career opportunities outside India, monotonous and stressful work, lack of work-life balance, pursuit of higher studies, health-related reasons, attraction to better known companies, lack of career advancements, and lack of job security (Budhwar et al., 2006). However, scant research exists investigating the relationship between work alienation and employee turnover, especially in the BPO sector.

Thus, in this paper, we seek to examine the role of work alienation as a potential predictor of turnover intention. Further, we seek to investigate whether work alienation will mediate the relationship between organization support variables and turnover intention in the BPO sector. Additionally, in view of the gravity of the problem at the entry level, we chose early career professionals in the BPO sector as the study sample. The findings are along expected lines. Particularly, we found evidence for full mediation by work alienation between both organization support variables (perceived organization support and perceived supervisor support) and turnover intention. Thus, the study proposes a possible mechanism to control employee turnover in Indian BPO sector. Specifically, we suggest that organization support variables can help reduce withdrawal symptoms at the entry level. Therefore, our findings are likely to help develop relevant interventions and strategies to enrich work and work environment, thereby

enhancing the competitiveness of the Indian BPO sector.

### **Perceived Organizational Support**

Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to “employees’ beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) suggest that POS is likely to lead to favorable outcomes for both employees and the organization. According to them while employees are likely to feel satisfied with job and experience positive mood, organizations are also likely to benefit from heightened commitment and performance levels as an outcome of POS. Further, POS may also lessen withdrawal behavior among employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Such consequences have been anchored on the organizational support theory, which suggests that employee perceptions of organization’s benevolent orientation are likely to create a felt obligation to reciprocate with increased effort and commitment (Rhoades et al., 2001).

### **Perceived Supervisor Support**

The concept of perceived supervisor support (PSS) emerged as an offshoot of research on POS. It is understood as the extent to which the employees believe that their supervisor values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 2002). There is evidence suggesting that PSS is significantly associated with employees’ job-related attitudes and behaviors (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; DeConinck &

Johnson, 2009). In fact, past research has also confirmed the role of PSS over and above POS (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Maertz et al., 2007). It is argued that since supervisors direct and evaluate subordinates’ performance as agents of the organization, employees are likely to perceive supervisor’s favorable orientation toward them as indicating organization’s support (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Employees are therefore likely to reciprocate PSS positive work attitudes and behaviors toward both the supervisor and organization (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010).

### **Work Alienation**

While the concept of alienation has generated considerable academic interest in domains such as theology, philosophy, sociology, psychiatry, and psychology, it has received little attention in organizational studies (Nair & Vohra, 2010). Work alienation (WA) is argued to characterize the degree to which a person is disengaged or estranged from the world of work (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Sarros et al., 2002). It is the psychological state of separation from work, identified by disinterested and dispirited work performance which typically arises due to non-fulfillment of salient personal needs at work (Michaels et al., 1988). In summary, work alienation can be defined as “estrangement or disconnect from work, the context, or the self” (Nair & Vohra, 2012).

### **Turnover Intention**

Taking a cue from organizations that place great emphasis on retention of

worthy talent, researchers have devoted considerable attention to the construct of turnover intention (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Turnover indicates the actual quitting behavior. However, turnover intention is considered by scholars as the best predictor of actual turnover (e.g. Egan et al., 2004; Steel & Ovalle, 1984). The construct is defined as the conscious and deliberate willingness to leave the organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Meta-analytic studies suggest a multitude of factors that have been uncovered as possible predictors of turnover intention. They may include individual factors such as cognitive ability, training, and marital status as well as a host of organizational factors pertaining to compensation, leadership, stress, and co-worker support among others (Griffeth et al., 2000). Eisenberger et al. (1986) even suggests that POS and PSS negatively influence turnover intention. More specifically, they posit POS to mediate the relationship between PSS and turnover intention.

### **POS, PSS & Work Alienation**

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) has been beneficial to researchers in explaining occupational wellbeing. According to it, job demands are those physical, organizational, and/or social aspects of the job necessitating unceasing effort from the employee, hence being associated with physiological or psychological costs. Job demands need not be negative; however, when meeting them requires extreme efforts from the employee from which she/he does not sufficiently recover, then

they may turn to job stressors (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Job demands have been found to be associated with depression, substance abuse, physical health and psychological distress (as mentioned in Bakker et al., 2010).

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On the contrary, job resources reduce demands and aid in the achievement of work goals (Fazio et al., 2017). They can be physical, psychological, social and/or organizational that facilitate one or more of the following: (1) lessen job demands and the related physiological and psychological costs, (2) helps in achieving the work goals, and (3) stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Resources can be divided into two distinct types: internal (cognitive features and action patterns) and external (organizational and social). Organization resources include job control, task variety, participation in decision making etc. (Demerouti et al. 2001), which find strong representation in the construct of POS (refer Eisenberger et al., 1986 for observing the similarity). Similarly, Demerouti et al. (2001) characterize social resources as support from supervisor, colleagues, family and peer groups, which is partially captured by the construct of PSS (Eisenberger et al., 2002).

In summary, job resources are assumed to accentuate motivation and com-

mitment (Fazio et al., 2017). Specifically, Meyer et al. (2002), through a meta-analysis, have shown job resources such as organizational support and transformational leadership are related to affective commitment. Similarly, Holland et al. (2017) have provided evidence that job resources like supervisor support predicted engagement. In light of the above findings, it can be argued that job resources (like supervisory support and organizational support) will reduce negative states such as work alienation. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

**Job resources such as organizational support and transformational leadership are related to affective commitment.**

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). Perceived organizational support is negatively associated with work alienation.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b). Perceived supervisor support is negatively associated with work alienation.

### **Work Alienation & Turnover Intention**

Demerouti et al. (2001) argue that in the absence of resources in the external environment, individuals will find it difficult to cope with the inimical effects of environmental demands. Accordingly, such individuals will experience a reduction of motivation and exhibit a withdrawal from the job (i.e. work alienation) as important self-preservation mechanisms. This is to limit further loss of personal and psychological resources which

can lead to impaired health (Demerouti et al. 2009). We extend the above argument by stating that with exposure to/threat of further loss of personal and psychological resources, individuals will opt to discontinue their association with the organization. Many other theoretical approaches have reached similar conclusions. For example, social exchange theorists argue that withdrawal behaviors (like voluntary turnover) are a response to perceived imbalances in the exchange relationship between an employee and her/his employer (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Work alienation will be positively associated with turnover intention.

### **Work Alienation as a Mediator**

Extant literature has examined various mediation mechanisms between organization support variables and turnover intention. For example, commitment has been argued to be the intervening variable between POS and TI (Rhoades et al., 2001; Maertz et al., 2007). Similarly, POS is argued to mediate the negative relationship between PSS and TI (Eisenberger et al., 2002; DeConinck & Johnson, 2009). We propose an alternative path to explain this relationship. Our contention is that work alienation (WA) mediates the effects of POS and PSS on TI. Non-realization of expectations vis-

**Work alienation (WA) mediates the effects of POS and PSS on TI.**

à-vis perceived organizational support is likely to trigger alienation, which in turn is likely to affect intentions to quit (Lachman & Aranya, 1986) indicating a possibility of mediation.

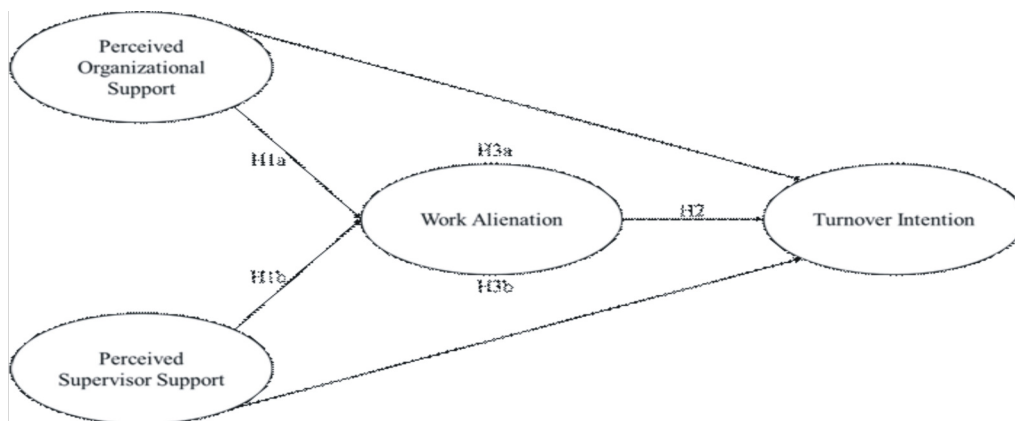
Further, taking an inclusive view of H1a, H1b, and H2, we argue that work alienation will mediate the relationship between the organization support variables and turnover intention. POS and PSS have been found to relate negatively with turnover intention across studies (Fazio et al. 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1986). We argue that an increased presence of these job resources will lead to increased self-expression in the job (i.e.

engagement, Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and by implication, decreased work alienation, which in turn will help decrease turnover intention. In summary, we contend that POS and PSS reduce turnover intention by arresting work alienation. Hence,

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Work alienation will mediate the relationship between the perceived organizational support and turnover intention.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Work alienation will mediate the relationship between the perceived supervisor support and turnover intention.

Fig. 1 Research Framework



### Sample & Procedure

The data for the study was sourced from one large Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) organization located in a metropolitan area of Eastern India. A Delivery Manager assisted the authors by requesting the early career personnel of his team to complete an online survey specially designed for this study. He also forwarded the link to the survey over

electronic mails. The primary job description of the respondents included management of backend operations of an Australian banking major. Specifically, they assisted in outgoing/incoming fund transfers and on-call customer assistance. The respondents were assured of data confidentiality and were permitted to be anonymous in case they desired so. A total of 133 responses were returned and utilized for the study. All the respon-

dents were graduates, average work experience being 26.78 months (Std. Dev. = 16.32). Similarly, the average age of the sample was calculated to be 25.75 years (Std. Dev. = 3.33). 41% of the respondents were females.

### Instruments

The online survey designed for the study consisted of items related to the study variables (Annexure I). The items were borrowed from standard psychometric instruments. The details of the scales are as follows:

*Perceived Organizational Support (POS)*: POS was measured by the eight-item short-form of the survey of perceived organizational support (SPOS, Rhoades et al., 2001). Participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale ('1' referring to strongly disagree and '5' strongly agree). A sample item of the scale reads as "My organization really cares about my well-being".

*Perceived Supervisor Support (PSS)*: PSS was measured by the four-item scale adapted from the SPOS (Rhoades et al., 2001). The responses were collected on a five-point Likert-type scale ('1' referring to strongly disagree and '5' strongly agree). A sample item of the scale reads as "My supervisor strongly considers my goals and values".

*Work Alienation (WA)*: WA was measured by the eight-item scale adapted from Nair & Vohra (2009). Participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale ('1' referring to strongly disagree

and '5' strongly agree). A sample item of the scale reads as "I do not feel connected to the events in my workplace".

*Turnover Intention (TOI)*: TOI was measured by the three-item scale developed by Colarelli (1984). The responses were collected on a five-point Likert-type scale ('1' referring to strongly disagree and '5' strongly agree). A sample item of the scale reads as "I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months".

*Control Variables*: Information on respondents' age, gender and work experience was also collected.

### Results

Table I presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (internal consistency reliability estimate) of all the study variables. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for all the measures were calculated to be greater than 0.7 (as required by Nunnally, 1978)<sup>1</sup>. Work alienation reported a negative and moderate correlation with perceived organizational

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<sup>1</sup> The initial Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the three-item TOI scale was calculated to be 0.351. Therefore, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the offending item. It was found that the negatively worded item loaded poorly on a different factor, thereby lowering the internal consistency of the scale. Accordingly, this item was dropped from further analyses. This finding and subsequent revision of the scale is consistent with the experiences of many management and psychological researchers who report haphazard factor structure upon incorporating negatively worded items in their research (e.g. O' Leary, Wilson & Metiu, 2014; Henn, Hill & Jorgensen, 2016).

support ( $r = -0.531, p < 0.01$ ) and perceived supervisor support ( $r = -0.525, p < 0.01$ ), while a positive correlation with turnover intention ( $r = 0.601, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, H1a, H1b, and H2 are supported. Further, turnover intention exhibited a low negative correlation with perceived organizational support ( $r = -0.387, p < 0.01$ ), while a moderate negative correlation was calculated with perceived supervi-

sor support ( $r = -0.446, p < 0.01$ ). This is in line with the findings of Eisenberger et al. (1986). In summary, the pattern of correlations obtained is consistent with the first two conditions required to provide evidence for mediation, i.e. the exogenous variables (PSS and POS) should be related to both the mediator (WA) and the outcome variable (TOI) (Kenny, Kashy & Bolger, 1998).

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics & Inter-correlations**

S. No.	Constructs	No. of items	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4
1.	POS	8	3.29	0.51	(0.712)			
2.	PSS	4	3.50	0.66	0.576**	(0.784)		
3.	WA	8	2.64	0.64	-0.531**	-0.525**	(0.819)	
4.	TOI	2	2.49	0.98	-0.387**	-0.446**	0.601**	(0.789)

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; POS is perceived organizational support; PSS is perceived supervisor support; WA is work alienation; TOI is turnover intention; Numbers in diagonals are Cronbach's Alpha

Separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate evidence concerning the mediating role of WA in the organization support variables – turnover intention relationship. As given in Table 2, age, gender, and work experience were entered in the first step

as control variables, POS in the second step, and finally WA in the third step. The third mediation requirement from Kenny et al. (1998), that the mediator variable (WA) should be associated with the outcome variable (TOI), while controlling for the causal variable (POS) was met in Step

**Table 2 Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Turnover Intention on Perceived Organizational Support and Work Alienation**

	Variables	$\hat{A}$	$\bar{A}R^2$
Step 1	Age	0.104	0.012
	Gender	0.047	
	Work Experience	-0.093	
Step 2	Age	0.116	0.151*
	Gender	0.036	
	Work Experience	-0.091	
	POS	-0.388*	
Step 3	Age	0.174	0.197*
	Gender	0.067	
	Work Experience	-0.092	
	POS	-0.086	
	WA	0.572*	

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; Dependent variable is turnover intention (TOI); POS is perceived organizational support; WA is work alienation

3 ( $\hat{\alpha} = 0.572, p < 0.05$ ). Finally, the last mediation requirement, that the relationship between exogenous variable (POS) and the outcome be reduced when the mediator (WA) is entered into the model, is suggested by the non-significant relationship between POS and TOI ( $\beta = -0.086, n.s.$ ) in the final step.

The above steps were repeated with PSS being the causal variable. As can be observed from Table 3, similar results

were obtained. In conclusion, our data suggest that work alienation mediates the relationship between organization support variables and turnover intention. H3a and H3b are thus supported.

**Our data suggest that work alienation mediates the relationship between organization support variables and turnover intention.**

**Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Turnover Intention on Perceived Supervisor Support & Work Alienation**

	Variables	$\hat{\alpha}$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1	Age	0.104	0.012
	Gender	0.047	
	Work Experience	-0.093	
Step 2	Age	0.063	0.196*
	Gender	0.018	
	Work Experience	-0.107	
	PSS	-0.446*	
Step 3	Age	0.153	0.197*
	Gender	0.058	
	Work Experience	-0.097	
	PSS	-0.154	
	WA	0.525*	

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; Dependent variable is turnover intention (TOI); PSS is perceived supervisor support; WA is work alienation

## Discussion

This paper reported a study of the relationships between perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, work alienation and turnover intention in the context of early career professionals in the Indian BPO sector. Our findings revealed that work alienation fully mediates the relationship between organization support variables and turnover intention. From a job-demand resource perspective, it means that as employees perceive that their

organization and supervisor provide support and care for their well-being, they may not feel the demand to expend their personal and psychological resources. Further, they may experience little need for self-preservation. With little experienced resource deprivation, they may not find any reason to alienate from their work which in turn will sustain their association with the organization. Thus, the study contributes an alternative mechanism to explain the incidence of turnover amongst early career professionals.

Since work alienation mediates the relationship between PSS and turnover intention, it means that organizations must educate their managers about the significance of their role in keeping early career professionals motivated. This is in line with the suggestion of Erickson and Roloff (2008), that managers drive most effective levers of employee retention (e.g. accurately assessing employee potential, clearly articulating organizational goals, encouraging employee development etc.). It also means that BPOs must include retention of subordinates, especially early career professionals, as a performance metric for their managers (Bhatnagar, 2007). In addition to business performance, processes must be incorporated to evaluate people management skills of the managers. This is also echoed by Bhatnagar (2007) who affirms that quality of supervision is an important variable in bringing about engagement of BPO employees. In fact, she asserts that one way to keep direct reports engaged in the BPO sector is for the manager to keep working with them to expand their skills and empowering them to do more.

At the same time, the focus on generating and maintaining POS cannot be lessened. The findings from this study suggest that organizational leaders must adequately communicate to the early career professionals on various organizational supported programs such as rewards, job conditions, and operating procedures. Extant literature suggests a wide variety of practices to be empirically linked to POS, i.e. job security (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), fairness of rewards and participation in decision

making (Allen et al., 2003). Organizational leaders must make enough effort to embrace such practices in order to be perceived favorably by the employees. It must be mentioned at this juncture that Frenkel et al. (1999) term Indian BPOs are “electronic sweatshops”, with first-timers in the call center industry leaving due to dissatisfaction in work culture (Budhwar et al., 2006). This is even corroborated by Bhatnagar (2007) who revealed that organizational culture explains most of the variance (43.15%) and hence is the principal cause of attrition. Hence embracing such practices may reinforce the supportive image of the organization.

The principal strength of our study is that it draws data from a single organization. This controls for organizational factors that could influence the findings. It must be understood that every BPO has their “way of doing things” (Budhwar et al., 2006). Nevertheless, our study has its limitations. First, we investigated the effect of only two job resources variables on turnover intention. The effect of other job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007 for a list of all job resources) towards explaining variance in the model may be examined in future studies. The second possible drawback of our study is the use of English language in communicating the survey instruments. Since English is not the native language of Indians, there is a possibility that respondents had misunderstood or misinterpreted the items while responding (Pati & Kumar, 2015). Especially it must be borne in mind that early career BPO employees are typically fresh graduates from various streams (Bhatnagar, 2007), with little or no train-

ing in English language. In fact, many of the graduates are trained in voice and accent once they join the BPO (Budhwar et al., 2006). Third, the theoretical model was tested over a sample of early career professionals. It may be further tested for generalizability over other employee levels in the BPO and also a full range of possible occupations. Last, the study was conducted with a limited sample size. However, this was all that the Delivery Manager could identify and provide from his team. Future studies could try replicating the finding over a more representative sample.

### Acknowledgements

A preliminary version of this manuscript was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Organization and Management held at Abu Dhabi between November 19-20, 2017.

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**Annexure I**

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**Perceived Organizational Support**

My organization is willing to help me if I need a special favor.  
My organization cares about my opinions  
My organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part  
My organization shows little concern for me  
My organization strongly considers my goals and values  
Help is available from my organization when I have a problem  
If given the opportunity, my organization would take advantage of me  
My organization really cares about my well-being

**Perceived Supervisor Support**

My supervisor shows very little concern for me  
My supervisor cares about my opinions  
My supervisor strongly considers my goals and values  
My work supervisor really cares about my well-being

**Work Alienation**

Over the years I have become disillusioned about my work  
I do not enjoy my work  
I do not feel connected to the events in my workplace  
I often wish I were doing something else  
Work to me is more like a chore or burden  
Facing my daily tasks is a painful and boring experience  
I do not feel like putting in my best effort at work  
I feel estranged/disconnected from myself

**Turnover Intention**

I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months  
If I have my own way, I will be working for this organization one year from now  
I frequently think of quitting my job

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