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Managing Customer Projects vs. Internal Projects
by Alan Stretton
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Managing Customer Projects vs. Internal Projects: Some under-acknowledged differences, and their relevance for discussing project management in Supplier Organisations vs. Owner Organisations [1]

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

This article revisits and expands on some earlier articles I have written on differences for project managers working in project-based Supplier Organisations (SOs) and in production-based Owner Organisations (OOs). In Stretton 2017e and a couple of subsequent articles I also included a table from Lehmann which showed differences in ten attributes between what he described as Customer Projects vs. Internal Projects. – and which were then related with projects in SOs and OOs respectively. Both my articles, and Lehmann's, pointed out that these differences were under-acknowledged in the mainstream project management literature, and that this should be rectified.

In this article, we first describe Lehmann's two types of projects, the SO and OO types of organisations which undertake projects, and the close links between them, as noted above. We then move to Lehmann's ten-entry typology of Customer and Internal projects, and look in more detail than previously at the differences he has set down. The differences for project managers in all ten entries are substantial, but the differences in two groupings of these entries are seen as particularly significant.

The first of these, and arguably the most critical, are differences which arise out of Customer Projects in SOs being profit centres, versus Internal Projects in OOs being cost centres. This leads to discussions on the former being managed as business projects, and the need for their project managers and teams to have substantial know-how in a wide range of business-related functions – attributes which are not needed by project managers of Internal Projects in OOs.

One of these business-related functions is a focus on external customers, which is the concern of the second group of entries. This focus, and attendant know-how, are not required of Project managers of Internal Projects in OOs – another key difference. Finally, when you add differences in the several other entries proposed by Lehmann, the sum total of these differences is very substantial indeed.

We then discuss the under-acknowledgement of these differences in the mainstream project management literature in a little more detail than previously. It will be argued that, at the very least, it should always be made clear whether the project management topics being discussed are in the OO or SO context – and more particularly, that project management in SOs should be much more widely represented in the literature.

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LEHMANN'S CUSTOMER PROJECTS VS. INTERNAL PROJECTS TYPOLOGY, AND LINKS TO PROJECTS IN SUPPLIER AND OWNER ORGANISATIONS

Customer Projects vs. Internal Projects

In his discussions under this heading, Lehmann 2016 described these as follows.

> *Customer projects* are mostly profit centers. The organizations involved perform these projects for paying customers, and it is the job of the project managers to bring money home. Initiating these projects is far more complicated, as it involves a business development process jointly performed by a buyer and a seller, who will later become the customer and the contractor.

> *An internal project*, performed for an internal requestor, often called "internal customer", is a cost center. There may be future expectations that the deliverables of the project will give the organization monetary benefits, but the project as such costs money and does not earn it. Projects can be performed for a variety of future goals, including new income, cost savings, strategic benefits. ….

I will looking into links between these two types of projects, and two types of organisations that undertake projects, which are now described.

Supplier Organisations (SOs) and Owner Organisations (OOs)

Stretton 2023l distinguished between these two types of organisations that undertake projects, and described them as follows.

> *Project-based Supplier Organisations (SOs)* derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or other benefits from creating and delivering projects/programs to external customers.

> *Production-based Owner Organisations (OOs)* derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or benefits from producing and selling products and services. They utilize projects to create new, or improve existing, products and services; enter new markets; or otherwise improve or change their organisations.

Customer Projects directly link with projects undertaken by SOs

From the above descriptors, it is clearly reasonable to suggest that SOs are primarily in the business of undertaking Customer Projects. These two will therefore be closely linked in following discussions.

Internal Projects can relate to both OOs and SOs, but are primarily linked to OOs

Although Internal Projects can also be undertaken within SOs (as exampled in Stretton 2024d, for instance), the above descriptors indicate that they can be most closely linked with projects undertaken in OOs. In this article, I will focus on the link between Internal Projects and their applications in the OO context.

LEHMANN'S DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INTERNAL AND CUSTOMER PROJECTS

An adaptation of Lehmann's Figure 5

Figure 1 below has made the following adaptations to Lehmann's *Figure 5. Differences in the environment and the requirements that the project managers are facing.*

The ten attributes listed in the left hand column have been re-sorted into three main groups, to facilitate more detailed discussions in following sections.

The upper group of two entries, headed by "Cost or profit centres for the performing organization" (replacing Lehmann's "Are…. for the performing organisation"), is primarily concerned with operational differences directly connected with Internal Projects being cost centres and Customer Projects being profit centres.

The middle group of three entries, which is headed by "Project managers must consider ......" has been grouped separately because the Customer Project sections are primarily concerned with external customers and associated factors.

The differences in the entries in the final group of five derive, directly or indirectly, from the primary differences outlined in the first two sections.

	COMMON DIFFERENCES	
	Internal Projects [OOs]	*Customer Projects [SOs]*
Cost or profit centres for the performing organization?	**Projects are cost centres**	***Projects are profit centres***
Staffing and procurement mostly managed by ………..	Functional units	*Project management team*
Project managers must consider …………	The interests of the own organization	***The interests of both the customer and contractor***
Project selection is mostly made as …………	Internal decision	*Bid / no-bid decision*
Team's familiarity with the target environment at project start is	High	*Low*
[Top] management attention for the project is normally	Rather low	*Rather high*
Project work for the requester is based on …………	Internal agreements	*Legally binding contracts*
Obtaining resources is mostly …………	Rather difficult	*Rather easy*
Reputation inside the own organization is mostly …………	Rather low	*Rather high*
Project managers are mostly …………	Rather weak	*Rather powerful*

Figure 1. Some common differences for project management between Internal and Customer projects, adapted from Lehmann 2016, Figure 5

I have added [OOs] in squared brackets to the *Internal Projects* subheading, and [SOs] to the *Customer Projects* subheading in Figure 1, following links discussed above. I will be particularly concerned with differences between OOs and SOS in the following.

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOs & OOs IN PROFIT VS. COST CENTRE CONTEXTS

Profit-centred Customer Projects in SOs: Managing SO projects as businesses

	Internal Projects [in OOs]	*Customer Projects [in SOs]*
Cost or profit centres for the performing organization?	Projects are cost centres	*Projects are profit centres*
Staffing/procurement mostly managed by	Functional units	*Project mgt. team*

The central theme in this first section from Figure 1 is the difference between Internal Projects in OOs being cost centres, and Customer Projects in SOs being profit centres. In SOs, profit and business go hand in hand. SOs are in the business of "creating and delivering projects/programs to external customers", as described earlier. In other words, Customer Projects are the business of SOs, and most SOs manage their projects as businesses.

However, SOs tend to vary with regard to the levels of autonomy they grant to their project managers, as now briefly discussed.

SOs in which project managers are given high levels of business autonomy

Lehmann's earlier definition of Customer Projects says, "The organizations involved perform these projects for paying customers, and it is the job of the project managers to bring money home". This implies a high level of autonomy being given to the project manager. This was our approach in Civil & Civic (C&C), as is well summarised in Murphy 1984:69, who quoted its long time CEO, R.G. Robinson, as follows:

> "We established a principle of attempting to make people responsible for the work they were given to do. For example, we regarded a site manager, putting up a building, as being the manager of a business. He was given certain targets, and he had to run it as a business".

However, many SOs did not grant such high levels of autonomy to their PMs.

SOs in which project managers are given lower levels of business autonomy

Most of the SOs I knew of also essentially managed their projects as businesses, but usually with somewhat lower degrees of autonomy given to their project managers. Typically, there tended to be more inputs, and sometimes outright interventions, from other sources within their organisations, compared with Civil & Civic. None-the-less, they were still running their projects as businesses, albeit in somewhat different ways.

In both cases, SO project managers need substantial business know-how

Looking first to the Civil & Civic approach, our project managers needed to have substantial business know-how, at least to the level of being able to recognise potential business problems or opportunities, and then enlist appropriate help when not available in the project team. I believe much the same applied across other types of SOs, although evidently at a lower know-how level for project managers with lower level of autonomy.

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Staffing and procurement are only some of many business factors to be managed by SO project managers and teams

The next entry in this first group is concerned with who manages staffing and procurement for the project. However, particularly in the context of managing Customer Projects in SOs, staffing and procurement comprise only part of a broader range of commercial, environmental, financial, contractual, legal, and allied factors involved in running the Customer Project as a business.

In Civil & Civic, our SO project managers were responsible for managing all these business-related factors. We had some supporting functional specialists in certain areas – either for company-wide functions such as payroll, or where actions on company-wide scale offered competitive advantages, such as procurement. There were also some resources available at the parent company level, such as legal specialists. So, to exercise their responsibility for the business-related factors, our project managers needed to have sufficient know-how to be able to recognise potential business problems or opportunities, and then enlist appropriate help from outside the project team when it was not available within the team.

PMs in OOs do not require the major extra SO dimension of business know-how

In summary, the main point to be made from the above is that project managers undertaking Internal Projects in OOs do not need these types of business know-how. This is a major difference – and arguably the main basic difference – in the skills required for effective project management in SOs, as compared to OOs.

DIFFERENCES FOR PMs in SOs & OOs RE ORGANISATIONAL AND EXTERNAL CUSTOMER INTERESTS

External project customers directly link with SO projects as businesses

	Internal Projects [in OOs]	*Customer Projects [in SOs]*
[Interests] project managers must consider	Interests of own organization	*Interests of customer & contractor*
Project selection is mostly made as	Internal decision	*Bid/no-bid decision*
Team's familiarity with the target environment at project start is	High	*Low*

From an SO perspective, the main theme of this section is that, with its Customer Projects, project management must consider the interests of the project's external customer, as well as those of his/her own contracting SO. Where SOs manage their Customer Projects as businesses, it is natural for them to focus on the customers' interests. One such association of business with customers is summarised in the old saying, "If you don't have a customer, you don't have a business" – or, as has also often been said, "The customer is the business".

This natural focus on external customers is not directly relevant for project managers undertaking Internal Projects in OOs.

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Project selection for SOs goes well beyond "Bid/no-bid decision"

Moving on to the second entry above, we note that Lehmann's entry under Customer Projects in SOs shows selection as a "Bid/no-bid decision".

However, this is relevant only to traditional contracting services. The latter are only one of several types of services that can be, and are, provided by Supplier Organisations to external customers. I have discussed these in many previous articles in this journal, and most recently in Stretton 2024a. The key attributes of these types of services are summarised in the following adaptation of figures from Stretton 2024a.

A BASIC ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK					
1. Establish/ re- establish organisational strategic objectives		*2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best*	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	*4. Execute strategic initiatives*	*5. Achieve org'l strategic objectives.*
Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)	Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs	Develop strategic initiative (and component project) options to achieve outcomes, evaluate, and choose the best	Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes	Develop and execute strategic initiative component projects & *other strategic work*	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits
EXTERNAL SO STRATEGIC PLANNING SUPPORT SERVICES		EXTERNAL SO STRATEGIC INITIATIVE SUPPORT SERVICES Front End Loading (FEL) or Client Needs Determination (CND) types of external support services to help organisation develop and choose best strategic initiatives, and component projects, to best contribute to outcomes		EXTERNAL SO Project execution/ delivery (traditional contracting) SERVICES	
Help establish organisation's SBOs	Studies to help shape strategies				

Figure 2. Representing external SO project-related services in a basic org. strategic mgt. context

All of these services are undertaken in practice, and are represented in more specialist domains of the project management literature, particularly the major project domain.

However, more detailed discussions of many of these services have not yet found their way into the mainstream project management literature. I have long been advocating that they should, and can only continue that advocacy in this article.

Low initial SO familiarity must be rapidly redressed with pre-execution services

Whilst SOs' project teams' initial familiarity with the customer's environment is often low, it must be quickly brought up to a very high level when undertaking pre-execution types of customer support services such as strategic initiation (e.g. Front End Loading – FEL) and/or strategic planning (e.g. pre-FEL), as broadly summarised in Figure 2.

PMs in OOs do not need know-how about external customers & extra SO services

As indicated above, an external customer orientation is simply not directly relevant to the project managers undertaking Internal Projects in OOs. This applies also to know-how about the types of pre-execution services provided by SOs, as just discussed

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SOME OTHER DIFFERENCES FOR PMs BETWEEN SOs AND OOs

I have made the following summarised comments on differences for project managers between OOs and SOs nominated in the remaining five Lehmann-derived entries from Figure 1. All five differences appear to derive, directly or indirectly, from the two primary types of differences discussed in the previous two major sections of this article. However, they are all substantial differences in their own right, as can be seen in Figure 3 below.

	Internal Projects [in OOs]	Customer Projects [in SOs]	
Management attention for project is mostly….	Rather low	*Rather high*	**It is natural for SO managers to pay high attention to their customer projects, because this is where their profits come from. This is not the case with internal projects in OOs.**
Project work for the requester is based on	Internal agreements	*Legally binding contracts*	**Most, if not all, types of SO customer support services are based on legally binding contracts, but they can be of varying kinds, depending on the type of service, and the customer's disposition.**
Obtaining resources is mostly ………..	Rather difficult	*Rather easy*	**Obtaining resources is rather easy in SOs because customer projects are their business, and therefore demand high priority.**
Reputation inside own organization mostly….	Rather low	*Rather high*	**The PM reputation in SOs is high simply because customer projects are their business,**
Project managers are mostly ………	Rather weak	*Rather powerful*	**PMs in SOs are rather powerful because customer projects are the SOs business,**

Figure 3. Summarised comments on five other differences for PMs between OOs and SOs

DIFFERENCES FOR PMs BETWEEN SOs AND OOs ARE VERY SUBSTANTIAL

The sum total of all the above differences for project management between SOs and OOs is very substantial indeed. Perhaps the most important are those appended to discussions on the first two sections of the Lehmann-derived Figure 1, namely:

- PMs in OOs do not require the major extra SO dimension of business know-how
- PMs in OOs do not need know-how about external customers & extra SO services

These are major differences in their own right, and Figure 1 gives more details of these, and their many consequential, differences.

However, the important differences between managing Internal Projects and Customer Projects on the one hand, and managing them in Owner Organisations (OOs) and Supplier Organisations (SOs) on the other, are both under-recognised, and under-represented, in the project management literature.

We now move on to discuss these in more detail.

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UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN THE LITERATURE OF DIFFERENCES FOR PMs IN CUSTOMER PROJECTS AND INTERNAL PROJECTS IN SOs AND OOs

Differences for PM between Customer & Internal Projects are not well elaborated

In concluding his discussions of *Customer Projects vs. Internal Projects*, and his *Figure 5. Differences in the environment and the requirements that the project managers are facing*, Lehmann 2016 makes the following comment.

> While the distinction along the typological dimension is very obvious and easy to observe in practice, it is surprising that it has not been better elaborated in the literature and research.

Lehmann made that comment in 2016. To the best of my knowledge, there appears to have been little further elaboration since then.

There has been an equally poor elaboration in the project management literature of the differences for project management in Owner Organisations (OOs) and Supplier Organisations (SOs). The former are much more prominently represented than the latter, as now discussed. A consequence has been that materials which are more specifically directed to project management in Supplier Organisations are substantially under-represented.

Compared with PM in OOs, PM in SOs is under-represented in the literature

Taggart 2015 made the following observation about an imbalance between materials in the literature regarding OOs and SOs.

> Conventionally, either directly or by implication, the project management bodies of knowledge focus on the role of the Owner Organization (OO)……

As I pointed out in Stretton 2023l, historically, the project management literature has been primarily concerned with PM in production-based owner organisations (OOs). For example, this was the case with Cleland & King's pioneering book on *Systems Analysis and Project Management* (Cleland & King 1968), and also with Kerzner's classic book *Project Management: A systems approach to planning, scheduling and controlling* (Kerzner 1979).

I also noted that, from the point of view of an SO project manager, as I had been for most of my career to those times, I found a good deal of the contents of these books irrelevant to my work. Further, many of the skills needed for project management in SOs were given scant attention – not only in these books, but in the project management literature at large.

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Under-representation of PM in SOs also applies to the roles of external customers

The under-representation of project management in SOs has evidently contributed to an under-representation of the roles of external customers in the project management literature – as implied in earlier discussions in this article.

These under-representations do not match the distribution of PMs in practice

There are evidently at least as many PMs actually practicing in SOs as in OOs

Taggart 2015 made the following observation about the distribution of project managers in the world of practice.

> So, for each significant project there may be many PMs employed by SO, but there may be only one PM employed by an OO. It is my contention that this ratio is repeated across most projects and so most of the individuals engaged in the management of projects do so for Supplier Organizations (SO) rather than Owner Organizations (OO).

Taggart's contention is evidently supported by Lehmann's findings regarding Customer and Internal Projects. He surveyed some 246 project managers, and found that some 51% of respondents worked on Customer Projects, 44% on Internal Projects, whilst the remaining 5% said that the setups of their projects didn't fit either category. Lehmann's findings were summarised by him as follows.

> One can say that the project managers are roughly divided 50%-50% amongst the two types [Customer Projects and Internal Projects]

If this situation is broadly representative of the project management domain at large – as it appears to be – project managers in SOs and/or Customer Projects clearly do not get the coverage in the literature that their numerical prominance appears to warrant.

SO projects may well exceed OO projects in magnitude, at least in dollar terms

It is further noted that it is SOs, and not usually OOs, which deliver most of the outputs of environmental, social and infrastructure projects, as well as other longer-term assets. I have not seen any relevant comparative data, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the volume of projects delivered by SOs may far outweigh those delivered by OOs, almost certainly in terms of money value, and quite likely in other terms as well.

IT IS THEREFORE ARGUED THAT THERE IS A STRONG CASE FOR PM IN SOs TO BE MORE WIDELY REPRESENTED IN THE PM LITERATURE

In light of both the large numbers of project managers working in SOs, and the sheer magnitude of SO projects, it appears more than reasonable to suggest that project management bodies that can readily access an appropriate range of resources could undertake the task of putting together more specific guidelines for project managers who work in project-based Supplier Organisations.

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However, this is undoubtedly easier said than done. I have discussed some aspects of managing projects in SOs in several previous articles in this journal, including Stretton 2023l, 2022a, 2019g, 2019e, 2017h, & 2017e. As long ago as 2006, Winter et al discussed "Focusing on business projects as an area for future research". In more recent times, Lehmann and others have also contributed substantially to more practical aspects of these and related topics. But there is still much more to be done to represent details of managing Customer Projects in Supplier Organisations to the degree of detail that its importance in practice appears to merit.

In the meantime, perhaps the most useful addition to existing materials on project management would be to ensure that, where applicable, it is clearly stated whether it is being discussed in the OO or SO context. The main motivation behind this suggestion derives from my own experience. In previous articles in this journal I have not always made it clear that I was discussing project management in the SO context, and have occasionally received negative feedback from readers who have viewed my material through an OO lens. I know I am not alone in having experienced this type of mis-understanding – hence my advocacy of positively identifying which of the two organisational contexts is being discussed, to help avoid wider misunderstandings.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

This article has been concerned with differences between managing Customer Projects in project-based Supplier Organisations (SOs), and Internal Projects in production-based Owner Organisations. We first defined both the two project types, which were based on a Lehmann typology, and the two types of organisations, based on a number of authors, and then showed key links between the two groups.

We then turned to a table from Lehmann which showed differences between Internal and External Projects in respect of ten different attributes, which we also directly associated with OOs and SOs respectively. We then moved on to look into these differences in more detail, in three groupings.

The first grouping of two entries was concerned with internal projects in OOs being cost centres vs. customer projects in SOs being profit centres. The latter effectively entails projects being managed as businesses. In practice the degrees of autonomy granted to project managers vary, but in any event SO project managers need to have substantial business know-how.

Regarding the second entry in this first group, it was pointed out that SO project managers and teams have many more business factors to manage than just staffing and procurement – other commercial, environmental, financial, contractual, legal, and allied business-related factors must also be managed when running the project as a business. This contrasts with managing projects in OOs, which do not require project managers to have the extra SO dimension of business know-how. This is a major difference between the two.

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The second group of three entries centred around there being external customers for SO projects, but not for internal projects in OOs. External project customers directly link with managing SO projects as businesses – the latter having already been discussed in some detail in the first group . Regarding the second entry in this group, it was pointed out that project selection for SOs goes well beyond "Bid/no-bid decision", for the wide range of pre-execution services provided by so many SOs. This links with the third entry in this group, and it was pointed out that low initial SO familiarity must be rapidly redressed when pre-execution services are involved. Discussions of this second grouping concluded with the observation that project managers in OOs do not need to have the additional know-how required by project managers in SOs about external customers, nor related pre-execution SO services.

The third group had five entries showing further substantial differences, which appear to derive, directly or indirectly, from the main differences identified in the first two groups.

The above discussions clearly demonstrate that the differences for project management between managing internal projects in OOs, and customer projects in SOs, is very substantial indeed – and far greater than is normally acknowledged, or recognised in the literature. This led to further discussions of their under-representation in the literature.

We first quoted from Lehmann, who noted that differences for PM between Customer & Internal Projects are not well elaborated in the literature. It was then noted that, compared with project management in OOs, project management in SOs is under-represented in the literature. This under-representation also applies to the roles of external customers in project undertakings.

It was then pointed out that these under-representations do not match the distribution of project managers in practice, on two counts. The first is that there are evidently at least as many project managers actually practicing in SOs as in OOs. The second is that the magnitude of SO projects evidently exceeds that of OO projects, at least in terms of dollar value, and probably by some other criteria as well.

It was therefore argued that there is a strong case for project management in SOs to be more widely represented in the project management literature. It was also noted that this may be easier said than done – but a good start would be to ensure that it is always made clear whether the project management topics are being discussed in the OO or SO context.

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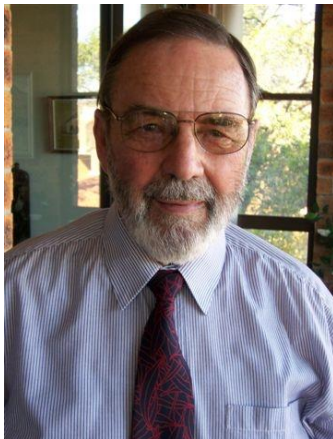
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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program.   Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. Alan has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published 270+ professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.

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