

## **Managing Customer Projects vs. Managing Internal Projects (2): Further exploration of differences between the two in the context of a range of specific management functions <sup>1</sup>**

*By Alan Stretton*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background**

In an article in the May issue of this journal (Stretton 2024e), I discussed some aspects of differences in managing Internal Projects in Supplier Organisations (SOs) and Customer Projects in Owner Organisations (OOs). These differences focused on ten particular attributes identified by Lehmann 2016. With a couple of exceptions (staffing and procurement), these attributes related to relatively broad issues, rather than differences associated with specific project management (PM) functions.

It occurred to me that it could be interesting to try and extend discussions of differences between managing projects in OOs and SOs to a range of particular management functions, and to see if this added any further insights into these important types of differences.

This article is a tentative exploration of such possibilities. The primary reason for exploring this further was summarised in Stretton 2024e, broadly as follows.

As Lehmann 2016 observed, distinctions between managing Internal and Customer projects have not been well elaborated in the literature and research. In like vein, Taggart 2015 observed that, “Conventionally, either directly or by implication, the project management bodies of knowledge focus on the role of the Owner Organization (OO)....” Further, Stretton 2023I observed that, historically, the project management literature at large has been primarily concerned with PM in production-based Owner Organisations.

However, these under-representations of project management in Supplier Organisations do not appear to align well with the distribution of project managers and SOs in practice. Both Lehmann and Taggart point out that there are evidently at least as many project managers actually practicing in SOs as in OOs. Further, Stretton 2024e observed that SO projects may well exceed OO projects in magnitude, at least in dollar terms.

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On the basis of this apparent imbalance between the OO focus in the literature, and the prominence of SO projects in practice, this further exploration of the differences in managing projects in OOs and SOs would appear to be a potentially useful undertaking.

We start by summarising some of the relevant materials in Stretton 2024e.

### **Descriptors of Owner Organisations (OOs) and Supplier Organisations (SOs)**

The nature of OOs and SOs were described in Stretton 2024e, 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.

### **Descriptors of Internal Projects (within OOs) vs. Customer Projects (within SOs)**

Lehmann 2016 distinguished between Internal Projects and Customer Projects, as shown in the following descriptors.

**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. ....

**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.

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

Although Internal Projects can also be undertaken within SOs, the above descriptors indicate that they can be most closely linked with projects undertaken in OOs. This link was followed in Stretton 2024e, and will be continued in this article

### **Customer Projects directly link with projects undertaken by SOs**

The above descriptors also clearly demonstrate that SOs are primarily in the business of undertaking Customer Projects.

**The following will cover Internal Projects in OOs and Customer Projects in SOs**

In the immediately following Figure 1, which is based on Lehmann’s Figure 5, and is reproduced from Stretton 2024e, I have indicated this coverage in the Internal Projects [OOs] and Customer Projects [SOs] column headings. The comparisons between the two columns are largely self-explanatory. I will add notes about two dominant themes, and two other more indirectly derived, but also highly relevant, themes.

**LEHMANN’S COMPARISONS, AND SOME RELATED BASIC THEMES**

**Lehmann’s comparisons between Internal Projects and Customer Projects**

	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, and reproduced from Stretton 2024e**

**Some basic themes related to Lehmann’s comparisons**

**T1. OO internal projects as cost centres vs. SO customer projects as profit centres**

Stretton 2024e was concerned primarily with the theme of the first entry in Lehmann’s comparison table, namely that Internal Projects in OOs are cost centres, whilst Customer Projects in SOs are profit centres. This difference means that SO project managers need to have substantial financial and other business-related know-how – which an OO project manager simply does not need.

A strongly associated theme headed the second main grouping in Figure 1 – namely:

## ***T2. OO project managers need consider only their OO's interests vs. SO project managers need to consider both their SO's and their customers' interests***

This additional theme of SO project managers also having to consider their customers' interests is expressing the need/opportunity rather mildly, particularly for SOs providing pre-execution services, such as Front End Loading. Satisfying customers' needs in this context is an essential ingredient in ensuring an SO's longer-term profitability.

Both the above themes can be seen as integral components of the broader perspective of SO customer projects being run as businesses in their own right. We now move on to discuss a couple of other themes which enter the picture a little more indirectly.

## ***T3. OO projects subordinate to main business vs. SO projects as the main business***

It was a reviewer of Stretton 2024e who pointed out that there was a more general theme underlying the comparisons Lehmann had made in his table – namely that, in OOs, projects are invariably treated as subordinate to what is seen as the main business of the organisation – whereas, in SOs, projects are the main business. Another reviewer illustrated a cost-related consequence of this in OOs as follows.

Unless an [OO] organization can actually find a customer to pay, nearly all such internal projects are considered overhead, funded out of profits or reserves. So there is enormous pressure to minimise time and cost, .....

## ***T4. OO projects undertaken in matrix-type format vs. SO as "stand-alone" projects***

Stretton 2015i was concerned with the applicability of general management organisational principles to project management. It specifically discussed the fact that OOs typically adopted matrix-type organisational structures to undertake their internal projects – i.e. formal or informal structures in which projects overlay the typical functional structure of the main organisation.

There is a great deal of material in the project management literature about difficulties associated with matrix organisations. Historically, Cleland & King 1968:172 said that disadvantages of matrix organizations include potential conflicts in balance of power between functional and project units. Mintzberg 1979:174-5 also includes balance of power issues in his four problems of matrix structure. Kerzner 1979 described it well.

The project management organizational structure is an area of continual conflicts and negotiations..... The project manager does not have unilateral authority in the project effort. He frequently negotiates with the functional manager. The project manager has the authority to determine the 'when' and 'what' of project activities, whereas the functional manager has the authority to determine 'how the support will be given'.

This contrast sharply with projects in SOs, in which projects are the main business, and the organisation is structured so as to best support its projects. Each project manager is, in effect, running a business, and is given appropriate authority and autonomy.

## CHOOSING SPECIFIC MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS FOR EXTENDING FIGURE 1

### Background of previous articles on general management & project management

In considering what management functions to pick for this exploration, I referred back to a series of seven articles I published nearly a decade ago in this journal, on the subject of general management (GM) functions and activities, and their relevance for the management of projects (starting with Stretton 2015g).

That series was primarily concerned with the part played by general management skills in effective project management (PM). The series presented a broad coverage of traditional/ classical materials on general management, and discussed the relevance of each of nineteen basic general management functions to the management of projects. I propose to use these functions to further these discussions.

### A framework of basic functions of management

The general management functions and activities in the above series were based on a classification by Allen 1964. This article will follow that classification, as follows.

MANAGEMENT PLANNING	MANAGEMENT ORGANISING	MGT. LEADING	MGT. CONTROLLING
Forecasting	Developing organization structure	Decision making	Developing performance standards
Establishing Objectives		Communicating	
Programming		Delegating	Measuring performance
Scheduling	Establishing relationships	Selecting people	Evaluating performance
Budgeting		Developing people	Correcting performance
Developing Procedures			
Establishing Policies			

*Figure 2. Basic management functions used in this article (based on a classification by Allen 1964)*

I believe most of these descriptors of management functions are self-explanatory – but a few will be discussed in more detail in the following explorations.

### FORMAT OF OO/SO COMPARISONS RE PM OF SPECIFIC MGT. FUNCTIONS

In the following, we will be setting down comparisons of managing Internal Projects in OOs with managing Customer Projects in SOs in relation to each of the above specific management functions, using the following format.

MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS	OWNER ORGANISATIONS (OOs) INTERNAL PROJECTS	SUPPLIER ORGANISATIONS (SOs): CUSTOMER PROJECTS
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The comparisons will be made in four groups of figures, following the four groups of management functions identified in Figure 2. The materials in these comparison tables

are largely my own. Having spent some decades working in Supplier Organisations, I am reasonably comfortable about my contributions under the SO Customer Projects heading. However, I have had no direct hands-on experience with project management in Owner Organisations, and hence my contributions under this heading mainly derive from my interpretation of what I have read in the literature in this domain. I would be more than happy to receive feedback on errors or omissions I may have made under the OO heading.

I have included some of the Lehmann quotations from Figure 1 where they are particularly relevant to the specific management function being discussed.

**SOME OO/SO COMPARISONS RE PROJECT MGT. OF PLANNING FUNCTIONS**

MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS	OWNER ORGANISATIONS (OOs) INTERNAL PROJECTS	SUPPLIER ORGANISATIONS (SOs): CUSTOMER PROJECTS
<b>MANAGEMENT PLANNING</b>	❖ [T1]. OO projects are cost centres (Lehmann 2016) On the financial side, project planning in OOs focuses on cost aspects	❖ [T1] SO projects are profit centres (Lehmann 2016) SO project focus is both on costs, & on profits, cash flow, etc Projects are effectively run as businesses in their own right
Forecasting	Project objectives are derived from its own OO strategic objectives. They are generally handed down to internal project managers, with little, if any, prior participation by the latter	For many pre-execution SO services, project objectives are jointly planned with customer to directly support achievement of the customer organisation's objectives
Objectives		
Programming	In relation to developing alternative approaches and choosing the best for reaching project objectives, time/cost pressures often reduce incentives to do so in OO projects	Many pre-execution SO projects often have strong incentives for developing alternatives, to help ensure that the best value project approach for the customer can be developed, and confirmed with the customer
Scheduling		
Budgeting		
Procedures	Projects follow Owner Organisation policies and procedures	Projects generally follow SO policies and procedures, except in some mega-projects which may effectively operate as separate businesses
Policies		

**Figure 3. Comparisons of project management of some planning functions between OOs and SOs**

Some of the above entries have been somewhat truncated to fit into this figure. We now discuss some of these entries in a little more detail.

**Planning heading:** The main theme of this Planning function is T1. OO projects as cost centres vs. SO projects as profit centres. I specifically noted that, in addition to project costs, SO project managers must also focus on profits, cash flow, etc. (The latter was very recently discussed by Lehmann 2024 in this journal). Importantly, I also specifically noted that SO projects are, effectively, run as businesses in their own right.

- **Forecasting & Objectives:** The Forecasting function is linked here with setting objectives. The relevant SO contribution above does not discuss Lehmann's "Bid/No bid" situation (see Figure 1), which covers only traditional execution-only project contracting services. However, as discussed in Stretton 2024e, these are only one of several types of services that can be, and are, provided by SOs to external customers. The latter are described as pre-execution services in Figure 3. The corresponding SO contribution in this group of management functions strongly reflects theme T2, which adds considering customers' interests to those of the SO.

- Programming, Scheduling & Budgeting:** The relevant SO contribution for this group of management functions also focuses on pre-execution project services. I have chosen to cover “developing alternative approaches and choosing the best for reaching project objectives” in this section because, throughout my long experience in project management, this aspect of project planning was the one most commonly neglected in practice (and often also in the literature), in spite of its being the one that invariably delivers greater value to the customer.
- Procedures & Policies:** I have nothing to add to the entries in Figure 3.

### SOME OO/SO COMPARISONS WITH PROJECT MGT. OF ORGANISING FUNCTIONS

MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS	OWNER ORGANISATIONS (OOs) INTERNAL PROJECTS	SUPPLIER ORGANISATIONS (SOs): CUSTOMER PROJECTS
MANAGEMENT ORGANISING	<p>[T3] Projects are subordinate to the mainstream OO business. Therefore they are generally given a relatively low priority – e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Obtaining resources is mostly rather difficult (Lehmann)</li> </ul> <p>[T4] Most OO projects are undertaken in matrix-org.-type format</p>	<p>[T3] Projects are the mainstream business of the SO. Therefore they are mainly given a relatively high priority – e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Obtaining resources is mostly rather easy (Lehmann, 2016)</li> </ul> <p>[T4] Most SO projects are stand-alone undertakings</p>
Developing organisation structure	How project structures are developed depends heavily on the type of matrix or equivalent format the OO uses in organising for its relevant functional units to contribute to the project.	SO projects seldom have any restrictions on establishing the most directly appropriate project structures
Establishing relationships	The focus is on establishing the most effective working relationships with the OO’s relevant functional units	Primary focus on SO projects is on effective relationships with key customer representatives, and other external stakeholders
Delegating	Delegating effectively on OO project can be problematic – e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Procurement mostly managed by functional units (Lehmann)</li> </ul>	Effective delegation on SO projects usually straight-forward - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Procurement mostly managed by project mgt. team (Lehmann)</li> </ul>

Figure 4. Comparisons of project management of some organising functions between OOs and SOs

- Organising heading:** This first quotes theme T3. OO projects subordinate to main business vs. SO projects as the main business, which is relevant to the broad issue reflected in the following “obtaining resources” quotations from Lehmann. This is followed by theme T4. OO projects undertaken in matrix-type format vs. SO as “stand-alone” projects, which is relevant to the first and third component organising functions.
- Developing organisation structure:** As just noted, the entries in this section are directly concerned with theme T4.
- Establishing relationships:** The key stakeholders for projects in the OO and SO domains are quite different – more numerous in the latter, and normally considerably more demanding for SO project managers to engage with.
- Delegating:** The T4 theme is also very relevant to the entries against this management function. I have included the procurement management quotations

from Lehmann, as a specific example of problematic situations with delegation in OOs, as opposed to its straight-forward applicability in SOs.

I discussed problems relating to effective delegation in matrix contexts in OOs in Stretton 2015i, in which it was shown that two fundamental principles of delegation from general management do not apply to projects undertaken in matrix contexts in OOs. However, these two principles do apply for projects undertaken in SOs.

In short, delegation in SO projects is straight-forward. Each project manager is, in effect, running a business, and is given appropriate authority to delegate as needed. For example, in the construction industry, delegation to low levels of the project is common. As Borcharding 1976 pointed out, “... primary responsibility for project work falls on the craftsman, for he is the prime mover in the building process.”

### SOME OO/SO COMPARISONS WITH PROJECT MGT. OF LEADING FUNCTIONS

MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS	OWNER ORGANISATIONS (OOs) INTERNAL PROJECTS	SUPPLIER ORGANISATIONS (SOs): CUSTOMER PROJECTS
MANAGEMENT LEADING	<i>T3. Projects are subordinate to the mainstream OO business</i> Therefore they are generally given a relatively low priority This can constrain many aspects of leading OO projects	<i>T3. Projects are the mainstream business of the SO</i> Therefore they are usually given a relatively high priority There are few constraints to effective leadership of projects
Decision making	❖ <i>T2. Project managers must consider the interests of the OO</i> (Lehmann 2016)	❖ <i>T2. Project managers must consider the interests of both the customer and the SO</i> (Lehmann 2016)
Communicating	Focus is on internal communications, particularly with functional units contributing to project	Focus on both internal communications, and on effective communications with customer representatives/stakeholders
Motivating	❖ Project managers are mostly rather weak ❖ Reputation inside the own OO is mostly rather low ❖ [Top] mgt. attention for the project is normally rather low (Lehmann 2016) Consequently, motivation on internal projects can be a very substantial challenge for OO project managers	❖ Project managers are mostly rather powerful ❖ Reputation inside the own SO is mostly rather high ❖ [Top] mgt. attention for the project is normally rather high (Lehmann 2016) Consequently, motivation on external client projects is relatively straight-forward for SO project managers
Selecting people	❖ Staffing mostly managed by functional units (Lehmann 2016)	❖ Staffing mostly managed by project management team (Lehmann 2016)
Developing people	Limited scope for effective people development with temporary internal projects in OOs	Substantial longer-term scope for developing project team members working on successive SO projects

Figure 5. Comparisons of project management of some leading functions between OOs and SOs

- **Leading heading:** The main theme represented in the leading functions is *T3. OO projects subordinate to main business vs. SO projects as the main business*, with the consequence that OO projects tend to be accorded relatively low priorities, as opposed to high priorities given to SO projects.
- **Decision making:** I have restricted contributions re this leading function to the quotations from Lehmann about priorities of interests in relation to decision making, which is essentially a statement of the *T2* theme.
- **Communicating:** The contributions here reflect both the *T2* theme, and *T4. OO projects undertaken in matrix-type format vs. SO as “stand-alone” projects*



- **Motivating:** The three sets of quotations from Lehmann relate very directly to theme T3. *OO projects subordinate to main business vs. SO projects as the main business.* There are very obvious consequences in relation to project managers' ability to effectively motivate their people in OOs, as opposed to SOs.
- **Selecting people:** I have restricted the contributions here to Lehmann's quotes on responsibilities for selecting people, which is directly associated with the T4 theme, as quoted above.
- **Developing people:** The differences between the OO and SO environment as regards scope for effectively developing people appear to be relatively straightforward.

### SOME OO/SO COMPARISONS WITH PROJECT MGT. OF CONTROL FUNCTIONS

MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS	OWNER ORGANISATIONS (OOs) INTERNAL PROJECTS	SUPPLIER ORGANISATIONS (SOs): CUSTOMER PROJECTS
MANAGEMENT CONTROLLING	❖ [T1]. <i>OO projects are cost centres</i> (Lehmann 2016)	❖ [T1] <i>SO projects are profit centres</i> (Lehmann 2016)
Developing Performance standards	Financial focus in OO projects is on establishing performance project standards for the control of the project costs	Financial focus on SO projects is not confined to project cost control, but includes establishing performance standards for overall financial control of the project as a business
Measuring performance	These controlling functions relate to the direct project costs.	These controlling functions add financial control of the project as a business to the control of direct project costs
Evaluating results		
Taking corrective action		

Figure 6. Comparisons of project management of some controlling functions between OOs and SOs

- **Controlling heading:** Following the lead of the Planning group of management functions, the main theme of this Controlling function is T1. *OO projects as cost centres vs. SO projects as profit centres.*
- **Measuring performance; Evaluating results; Taking corrective action:** These entries are concerned with cost and financial performance, and subsequent actions in relation to such performance. The differences between OO projects and SO projects in these contexts could be seen as essentially the difference between managing SO projects as businesses in their own right, and managing OO projects in roles which are seen as distinctly subsidiary to the main business of the organisation, and of relatively minor importance, as in theme T3.

However, it should be noted that there are other performance domains beyond cost and financial which also need to be considered in managing projects in both OOs and SOs, as will be briefly discussed in the following, and concluding, section of this article.

## SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

Overall, the above comparisons clearly indicate that managing projects in OOs and managing those in SOs involve a large number of differences in what the project managers have to actually do. In particular, they require substantially different ranges of skills from the project managers and their teams.

However, the above comparisons still cover only some aspects of the differences between project management in OOs and SOs, as now further discussed.

- First, the above exploration has been concerned with only the nineteen basic functions of management shown in Figure 2. However, it should be noted that the Lehmann comparison table in Figure 1 also directly uses the more specialised *procurement management* as one of its attributes for comparison. It also uses *obtaining resources* as another such attribute – which, in turn, suggests that *resources management* would be another appropriate specialised attribute for comparison purposes.

This further suggests that there are likely to be other more specialised types of management which could be similarly appropriate for further investigation of differences between managing projects in OOs and SOs.

- It has already been noted that one of the main concerns in the above exploration has been on differences connected with performance in the cost and financial domains. However, there are many other types of project performance domains for which differences between OO and SO projects have not been specifically covered.

2.1 Stakeholder performance domain  
2.2 Team performance domain  
2.3 Development approach and life cycle performance domain  
2.4 Planning performance domain  
2.5 Project work performance domain  
2.6 Delivery performance domain  
2.7 Measurement performance domain  
2.8 Uncertainty performance domain

**Figure 7. The 2021 PMBOK Guide  
Project Performance Domains**

These can be exemplified by looking at the project performance domains which are nominated and discussed in substantial detail (some 150 pages) in the 2021 PMBOK Guide (PMI 2021). The eight domains in that document are headed as shown in Figure 7.

This suggests to me that one could go a good deal deeper into examining differences between OO and SO projects by looking at them in more detail in the context of at least some of these eight performance domains.

For example, if we consider domain 2.8 *Uncertainly performance*, this rather immediately suggests that specialised items such as *Risk management* and *Change management* may also be appropriate attributes for further exploration of comparisons

between managing projects in OOs and SOs. It seems likely that several other such attributes would emerge from further scrutiny of the eight project performance domains.

Unfortunately, further significant investigation of such possibilities is beyond my limited resources and capabilities in this late autumn of my rather long life. But I believe that such investigations should be well worth-while, to help give a clearer picture of differences in managing projects in OOs and SOs.

I would most certainly encourage those who have the inclination and resources to pursue such investigations to do so, and to make their findings available to all in the project management field. As noted in the Introduction to this article, there are very good reasons for identifying and highlighting the many key differences between managing projects in OOs and SOs, and in making sure that SO projects are as widely represented in the literature as those in OOs.

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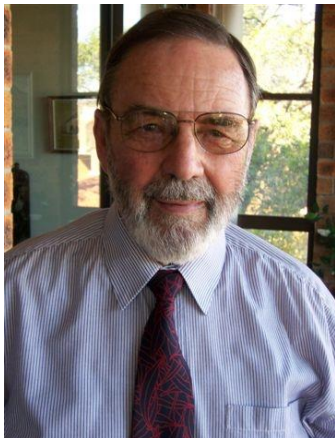
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## About the Author



### **Alan Stretton, PhD**

Life Fellow, AIPM  
Sydney, Australia



**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](mailto:alanailene@bigpond.com.au).

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