

Motivation in the Workplace: what meta-programs can tell us about performance & retention?

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Introduction

The findings in this article are based on iWAM test results for more than 5200 persons administered in a telecom firm in Belgium, out of which we have used several subsamples for this paper. The organization has been using the iWAM as a strategic tool for its sales related functions since 2009, which provided us with 3 years of data for this study.

The name “iWAM” is an abbreviation for “Inventory for Work Attitude and Motivation”. The questionnaire is a forced ranking survey which measures people’s preferences for 48 meta-program patterns in the work context. The name of the questionnaire was chosen based on the observation that people’s preferences in terms of meta-program patterns in the work context learn us a lot about their work attitude and motivation. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how work attitude and motivation are linked to retention and performance.¹

The policy of the firm prescribes that all salespeople representing the organization need to have a certificate which proves they have the right attitude, skills and knowledge in order to perform well in their job. Certification is both required for the existing staff as for new people coming on board. For the attitude part of the certification, the firm has been using Models of Excellence based on the iWAM.

Currently there are models of excellence for 4 different types of sales profiles, involving over 800 people, ranging from shop sales representatives over salespeople specialized in working with the SOHO market, to senior sales profiles specialized in serving large or corporate accounts.

For the existing staff the goal is to upgrade the attitude, skills and knowledge using a combination of training and coaching. For this purpose, the coaches were trained in the specifics of using the iWAM (helping to detect on which patterns the salespersons don’t fit the model, check the consequences and set up action plans to help to develop coping strategies).

When recruiting new salespeople, the aim is to check whether a candidate is close enough to the predicted model in terms of attitude and motivation and whether the organization expects that they can further improve this fit through coaching. The use of iWAM is also made available to recruiting partners as well as to agents who employ salespeople who resell the telecom operator’s products. In this context, we have been teaching sales team managers how to use the models for recruiting (recognize to what extent a candidate fits the model).

¹ Some findings of this paper were presented at the Third International NLP Research Conference held at the Hertfordshire University, UK, on July 6-7th, 2012 and at the Third iWAM Conference held in St.-Louis, USA on September 20-21st, 2012.

The research issues

The following questions are asked as a way to raise the awareness of future recruiters during the training. They also provide a good framework for the evaluation of the effectiveness of your recruitment, coaching and management approaches:

1. How many candidates did you interview over the past year?
2. How many people did you hire?
3. How many of those persons are still with your organization?
4. How many of those who are still there are really productive?
5. How many combine this productivity with a service orientation?

Each of these questions points out potential problems with the HR and managerial processes:

1. Were the right people invited for an interview? If not, the process to decide which candidates should be invited is flawed.
2. Were the right people hired? Did they have the right attitude and motivation? Did they have skills which were close enough to the model so that they could get up the learning curve quick enough, and “survive” in the job? If these questions can’t be answered, the recruiting process needs to be audited.
3. Were they coached & managed in the right way? If they don’t fit the profile they should be gone, but if they were a fit, management may be at cause when people leave the organization very quickly.
4. If they have the right profile, both in terms of attitude and skills, they should be productive. If they are not, the question is: “what is the problem?”
5. If the right service orientation is missing, the question is again: “what is the cause?” Do people lack skills, knowledge or resources? Don’t they have the right attitude? Is management stressing sales rather than service?

Solution: Building a Model

In order to minimize these potential problems as far as they can be attributed to work attitude and motivation, an approach of building Models of Excellence based on the iWAM was proposed [Merlevede, 2011]. A model of excellence indicates which patterns are relevant and where the area of excellence can be found on the pattern. For this area the metaphor of a traffic light is used. When a person is in the green, they are in the area of excellence. When they are in the red, they are too far from the model (it’s like running a red light). If a person burns too many traffic lights, they should lose their driver’s license (or should not be hired). In between the green and red, we usually will find a orange zone, indication that the person’s score on the pattern is not perfect, but that the danger of things going wrong remains within manageable limits (probably without requiring extensive attention during coaching).

In order to build a model, jobEQ developed a heuristic approach of which the mathematical complexity can be compared to a sixth degree function [Merlevede, Vandamme, 2006]. As a first step, the questionnaire results of high performers are compared with results of low performers, mainly by using F-test and t-tests (see table 1). The whole population (ALL) is also compared to the norm groups of the country (STDGRP), to determine if some patterns have cultural importance (see table 2). E.g. in the example shown, we can determine that culturally speaking a high score for affective communication is unlikely in this given context.

For patterns which prove significant, an in depth study is conducted to determine where to situate the zone of excellence, as indicated by the green zone in table 3. In the pattern shown in this example, all high performers (group 2) fall in the green zone, while many of the low performers fall outside this zone. We can conclude that the best performers are less likely to be influenced by the non-verbal communication. Based on feedback from the customer, the size of the orange zone is determined, by asking from where on the behavior of the counter examples starts to become problematic. Beyond that point, the pattern is colored red. In this case, a score for affective communication which is above the average of the population is a counter indication.

Based on the color coding and the weight of the pattern, a score is calculated. The combination of all patterns withheld for the model yields a model score, which predicts to what extent a person has the right attitude and motivation for the job.

Once a model is made, it is validated by comparing the model score with the performance data. People who are seen as a high performer by the organization should have a model score which is high enough to put them in a category where they would be immediately invited for a job interview. People who are seen as counter-examples should have a model score which puts them in a category of “low chance of becoming good at the job – some serious counter indications”. Statistically speaking, a good model has a predictive power (r^2) of at least 40% (or a correlation $r > 0,63$), e.g. see [Harshman & Appleby, 2010]. Unfortunately, in this particular case we have no calculation of the correlation due to lack of specific individual performance data.

Performance Findings

Table 1 contains the most important patterns from the perspective of comparing high performers and low performers. Two patterns are very significant ($p < 0,01$). Effective salespeople in this context score low on affective (relative average score for group -27%, meaning they score 1,5 Standard Deviation (SD) lower compared to the average of the Belgian standard group) and high on individual environment (relative average of 112% or over 1SD higher than average). These findings mean that 2 key requirements for a good salesperson in this context are that they won't be influenced too much by non-verbal communication (e.g. a customer complaining about past problems) and are able to work alone, without coming to the office each day.

7 other variables are significant ($p < 0,05$). Amongst others, these patterns indicate that high performing sales people care more about the rules (low in indifference), learn from past mistakes and find it important to get paid well. At the same time, they like to take initiative, but also have some patience (average score on “patience”). Too much patience, like one finds amongst low performers, would result in spending too much time in prospects which turns out to be a waste of time. Additionally, while we expect that salespeople are friendly with customers, being friends or being liked isn't an important motivator for them (low score on affiliation).

As discussed above, to this first group of patterns we need to add patterns where the whole population scores similarly, but where they as a group differ significantly from the cultural norms for the country. These cultural patterns predict whether someone has an attitude and motivation that match the overall demands of the job, even if they can't predict differences between high & low performers. To explore this in practice, we look at an extended sample. To the group of high and low performers, we add an

additional group of salespeople, including some additional people who can be seen as examples for the organizational culture.

As table 2 shows, in addition to the patterns discussed in the previous paragraphs, we will find various patterns which prove to be highly significant ($p < 0,01$). A population of salespeople is likely to be goal oriented and to understand that following procedures is required. They will try to be the person the organization needs (high on compliance with rules). In the context of telecom sales, we can also expect that most people will understand that things will evolve continuously and that they will need to keep improving themselves. Learning will be pragmatic, with a focus on new products and services and how they need to be included in the sales-package (high on Use, low on Concept). Unfortunately, no telecom provider is perfect, and a salesperson will need to deal with problems their customers have experienced, but a good salesperson will see this problem as a new opportunity for a future sale (relatively low score on problem orientation, but not too low).

The need for change

The iWAM contains a prediction of how long it will take before people need change, in order to avoid a “bore-out”. In the context of this study, staff turnover is high and changes to the organization and to the products are frequent, but not every change will be perceived as motivating. Several factors play a role to determine the effect of change. E.g. is the current team “better” than before? Does the person think it’s a change for the better: does it allow earning more? Does it solve some of the perceived “problems” when compared to the previous way of doing things?

When people are dissatisfied with the current situation (e.g. because the changes didn’t turn out as they had hoped, or because the desired change is not coming), the question is how they will react. Some motivational factors may influence people to leave (such as looking for alternatives and taking initiatives concerning looking for another job). Another factor is the “golden handcuffs syndrome”: if people are well-paid compared to what they expect to earn when looking for another job, it’s not very motivating to leave their current position. In this research, the current fixed salary earned in this context is around the salary midpoint for this type of job, but with the additional bonuses which can be earned, it can become hard to find a better paying job.

That leads to the research question which meta-programs would predict retention.

To answer the question we compared a group ($n=111$) who stayed 2 years and longer with a group ($n=51$) who left very quickly (after maximum 3 months). As shown in table 4, the most significant findings (t-test with $p < 0,01$) had to do with the people staying longer being more convinced by hearing, showing indifference to rules, paying less attention to external sources of reference and being more motivated by power. 11 other parameters proved to be significant ($p < 0,05$).

The data reveals that maximizing performance and retention are not always “compatible” – e.g. table 4 shows that people who stay longer score higher on the pattern “indifference”, while the data in table 1 indicated that top performers score lower. This means that high performers will care more – some people who stay longer and are not performing so well, do care less... Some patterns of the group which stays longer also are not compatible with cultural patterns. For instance, table 4 shows a lower focus on money (relative average of 45%) amongst the group of salespeople with 2 years seniority or more, where the organizational culture (table 2) has a relative average of 69% and the group of high performers (table 1) has a relative average of 109%.

Keeping people longer who don't perform well is clearly not in the interest of the organization. But we hope that people who like doing their job and perform well will be staying reasonably long, provide that management can create the context where the patterns that motivate high performers are satisfied. As the data for "focus on money" shows, there clearly has been a problem in that area.

To what extent does the performance model predict retention?

In the remainder of this paper, several assumptions are tested concerning the use of iWAM:

- iWAM decreases attrition *because*
 1. People who are leaving within short notice because they were "mismatch" are no longer recruited
 2. People who are hired & stay will feel happier (because they better fit the job and thus continue to do the job)
 3. Managers could better motivate (and thus less people get "chased away") as they consider the iWAM

These assumptions can be tested by looking for:

- Links between the performance model & retention (# months that someone remains in channel)
- Relationships between managers & retention
- Relationships between managers & iWAM use

The data we have concerning a population of 312 salespeople who have been working for Business Partners between early 2009 and late 2011, shows us the following figures:

End of 2011: 123 salespeople were employed, of whom

- 43 people (35%): seniority of 2 years or longer
- 43 people (35%): seniority between 1-2 years
- 37 people (30%): seniority less than 1 year

Furthermore, 31 persons left in 2011 (20% on a total of 154).

For the new hires, who represent 200 persons out of the sample, we find the following:

	gone within the first year
No iWAM	74,5%
Completed iWAM, score NOT OK	62,3%
Completed iWAM and score OK	53,0%

Some business partners refused to use the iWAM for recruiting. They clearly have less effective recruiting strategies. Other business partners chose to ignore the iWAM results, and hired people against iWAM's recommendations, often with the results one could expect...

The sample also teaches us that of those salespeople with a seniority of 2 years or longer, 3/4 have a good iWAM (for 1/8 no iWAM is available. The remaining 1/8 have a score which is considered NOT OK).

We can conclude that having an iWAM with a score which is "OK" considerably increases the retention rate. Unfortunately, the data doesn't allow distinguishing between people with an "average" and a "good" score. Secondly, even with an iWAM which is "OK", retention of new hires remains an issue and

feedback from exit interviews learns that some of it is due to lack of management training (e.g. teaching sales team managers how to give feedback).

We can deduce that:

- When using iWAM, some miscasts are avoided
- No iWAM or bad iWAM -> serious additional risk
- The “ancients” have a good iWAM

The Challenge for the organization is to convince business partners that recruitment only leads to retention if you a) choose the right person and b) coach/manage that person well.

Conclusion

An approach based on modeling the work attitude and motivation linked to excellence can help to predict which people will be top performers as well as improve retention. Hiring the right people in terms of performance tends to lead to better retention data. However, other factors play a role as well, and must be managed in order to optimize performance and retention rates. Furthermore, attitudes and motivations linked to retention are not always compatible with those that predict performance. Thus, it's not enough to hire for attitude, coaching will be needed to obtain better performance, and better management is needed to get to good retention rates.

Appendices

Table 1: Key Performance Patterns

Pattern		Absolute Average Group 2	Absolute Average Group 3	Absolute Distance	Relative Average Group 2	Relative Average Group 3	Relative Distance	T-test	F-test
OF6P	Affective Communication	13%	45%	33%	-27%	48%	75%	p=0 t=5.3271 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0.1622 F=2.11
OF7M	Individual Environment	51%	17%	34%	112%	37%	75%	p=0.0006 t=3.7656 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0.0802 F=2.371 - border Significance - BSIG
N2	Indifference	8%	18%	11%	27%	65%	37%	p=0.0157 t=2.305 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.022 F=4.8121 - Significant ! - SIG
OF7P	Group Environment	36%	60%	24%	3%	51%	48%	p=0.02 t=2.1892 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4192 F=1.091
OF1M	Reflecting & Patience	38%	47%	9%	48%	78%	29%	p=0.0262 t=2.0564 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.0048 F=5.0847 - Very Significant !! - VIP
IF5	Focus on Money	57%	34%	23%	109%	52%	57%	p=0.0262 t=2.0563 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.2293 F=1.5509
Mo2	Affiliation	19%	31%	12%	9%	38%	29%	p=0.0262 t=2.0554 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.3728 F=1.1816
TP1	Past	69%	56%	13%	84%	41%	43%	p=0.0303 t=1.9836 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4 F=1.249
OF1P	Initiation	59%	46%	13%	70%	38%	32%	p=0.0422 t=1.8113 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.2714 F=1.4232
OF6M	Neutral Communication	50%	40%	10%	72%	46%	26%	p=0.0736 t=1.505 - border Significance - BSIG	p=0.2584 F=1.4604
IF8	Focus on Activity	58%	69%	11%	43%	68%	25%	p=0.0872 t=1.4058 - border Significance - BSIG	p=0.332 F=1.2703
So2	Evolution	90%	86%	4%	95%	83%	12%	p=0.0978 t=1.3367 - border Significance - BSIG	p=0.1612 F=2.1161

Group 2: high performers (n=8) | Group 3: low performers (n=15)

Table 2: Cultural Patterns

Pattern		ALL average (Absolute)	Relative Average	Absolute Distance	Relative Distance	Std.Dev. (abs.val)	T-test	F-test
OF2P	Goal Orientation	91%	86%	12%	36%	10%	p=0 t=4.7899 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=12.0665 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF4M	Follow Procedures	45%	86%	16%	36%	23%	p=0 t=4.7205 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=3.839 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
So2	Evolution	87%	84%	10%	34%	9%	p=0 t=4.4764 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=11.4111 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
WA2	Concept	59%	21%	10%	29%	15%	p=0.0001 t=3.8499 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=4.8354 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF2M	Problem Solving	18%	24%	9%	26%	12%	p=0.0003 t=3.4555 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=8.6458 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF8M	Shared Responsibility	39%	25%	11%	25%	23%	p=0.0005 t=3.2856 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=4.0277 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
WA1	Use	58%	74%	9%	24%	16%	p=0.0009 t=3.1278 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP	p=0 F=5.6266 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF4P	Alternatives	50%	27%	9%	23%	20%	p=0.0012 t=3.0412 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=4.2051 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
N3	Compliance	77%	73%	6%	23%	12%	p=0.0015 t=2.9805 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=4.5104 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF7P	Group Environment	49%	29%	10%	21%	24%	p=0.0028 t=2.7785 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=4.0334 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
Mo2	Affiliation	27%	29%	9%	21%	13%	p=0.0029 t=2.7631 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=9.4146 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
IF5	Focus on Money	41%	69%	8%	19%	24%	p=0.0074 t=2.4387 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=2.8522 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP
OF7M	Individual Environment	31%	68%	8%	18%	26%	p=0.0089 t=2.372 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0 F=2.9943 - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

Extended sample (n=44) including group 2 & 3 of the contrastive analysis for the Key Performance Patterns, being compared to the Belgian Standardgroup 2007 (n=2186)

Table 3: In Detail: Affective Communication

The table indicates the scores of the sample for one of the patterns measured by the iWAM. The first grid or subgroup 1 ($n=21$) contains the people not seen as high performers, nor counter-examples. They are good examples of the organizational culture. The black line on top of the grid indicates the cultural norm group for the country (in this case Belgium). The green, orange & red line indicates the scoring used for the model of excellence. The line at the bottom indicates the standard group for the sample, going from average – 1 standard deviation, to the average + 1 standard deviation.

In a similar way, the second grid shows the scores of the 8 top performers while the third grid shows the low performers ($n=15$).

➤ **Affective Communication** Persons who score high will pay much attention to non-verbal signals and to emotions in communication. Persons who score low consider non-verbals and emotions less important in communication.

SUBGROUP 1																				
OF6P																				
BAG 2011																				VIP
ABS%	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80	85	90	95	100
			12	5	17			7	2	16		9	1		19		6			
			14	10				21	3	20			11				15			
									4											
									8											
									18											
-4%																				93% (AVG:44%)
2. top																				
OF6P																				
BAG 2011																				VIP
	1	2		6	5															
	4	3		7	8															
-52%																				-3% (AVG:-27%)
3. low																				
OF6P																				
BAG 2011																				VIP
			2		15		7	8	11	1		10	6	12						
							9		14	3			13							
										4										
										5										
12%																				83% (AVG:47%)

ALL VS STDGRP -> T-test: $p=0.0107$ $t=2.303$ - Significant ! - SIG

ALL VS STDGRP -> F-test: $p=0$ $F=4.0815$ - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

ALL VS STDGRP -> Effect Size: $z=0.3524$ - Small - BSIG (95% = [0.0538 - 0.651])

G1 VS STDGRP -> T-test: $p=0.3121$ $t=0.49$

G1 VS STDGRP -> F-test: $p=0.0002$ $F=4.159$ - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

G1 VS STDGRP -> Effect Size: $z=0.0721$ (95% = [-0.3576 - 0.5018])

G2 VS G3 -> T-test: $p=0$ $t=5.3271$ - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

G2 VS G3 -> F-test: $p=0.1622$ $F=2.11$

G2 VS G3 -> Effect Size: $z=2.5087$ - Large - VIP (95% = [1.3853 - 3.632])

G2 VS STDGRP -> T-test: $p=0$ $t=4.3909$ - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

G2 VS STDGRP -> F-test: $p=0.0003$ $F=16.7399$ - Extremely Significant !!! - VIP

G2 VS STDGRP -> Effect Size: $z=1.2483$ - Large - VIP (95% = [0.5531 - 1.9435])

Table 4: Retention patterns

Pattern		Absolute Average Group 1	Absolute Average Group 2	Absolute Distance	Relative Average Group 1	Relative Average Group 2	Relative Distance	T-test	F-test
Co2	Convinced by Hearing	21%	13%	8%	46%	26%	20%	p=0.0032 t=2.7672 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0.0039 F=1.9808 - Very Significant !! - VIP
N2	Indifference	14%	9%	4%	48%	32%	16%	p=0.004 t=2.6829 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0.0253 F=1.6442 - Significant ! - SIG
OF3M	External Reference	35%	43%	8%	33%	55%	23%	p=0.0045 t=2.6481 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0.4841 F=1.0171
Mo1	Power	43%	35%	8%	54%	34%	19%	p=0.0081 t=2.432 - Very Significant !! - VIP	p=0.5023 F=1.0059
IF5	Focus on Money	45%	35%	10%	78%	54%	23%	p=0.0101 t=2.3448 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4144 F=1.0617
OF8P	Sole Responsibility	61%	53%	8%	68%	51%	17%	p=0.0105 t=2.3324 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.3853 F=1.0651
Co5	Convinced by a Number of Examples	49%	55%	7%	38%	56%	18%	p=0.0147 t=2.199 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.484 F=1.0172
Co3	Convinced by Reading	41%	50%	9%	70%	89%	19%	p=0.0174 t=2.129 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.3097 F=1.1187
N3	Compliance	78%	82%	4%	74%	90%	16%	p=0.0175 t=2.1265 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4693 F=1.0114
OF5P	Breadth	68%	61%	7%	52%	37%	15%	p=0.0176 t=2.1247 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.2949 F=1.1492
OF4M	Follow Procedures	41%	48%	7%	78%	93%	15%	p=0.0222 t=2.0268 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4602 F=1.017
OF1P	Initiation	55%	49%	6%	62%	46%	15%	p=0.0226 t=2.0193 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.1591 F=1.26
WA3	Structure	65%	59%	6%	45%	30%	16%	p=0.023 t=2.0103 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.4369 F=1.0469
WA1	Use	52%	58%	6%	59%	75%	16%	p=0.0259 t=1.9591 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.1371 F=1.3191
OF8M	Shared Responsibility	42%	48%	6%	30%	43%	13%	p=0.0464 t=1.6907 - Significant ! - SIG	p=0.3956 F=1.0582

Group 1: salespeople > 2 year's seniority (n=111) | Group 2: people leaving within less than 3 months (n=51)

Abstract

This paper details the findings from an exploratory, mixed-method study on the motivation and work attitude of salespeople who perform well and have a higher retention rate.

This research focuses on detecting the effect that meta-programs have on job performance and retention. In this longitudinal study, various teams of salespeople working for a large organization have been followed from April 2009 till the end of 2011. The sample was homogenous, in the sense that all 312 salespersons involved were selling the same range of products to B2B customers and everyone was given the same training in terms of product knowledge and sales skills.

The salespersons were asked to complete a forced ranking survey which measures preferences on 48 meta-program patterns in the work context. Subgroups of people were selected based on performance data and retention data, and compared to the meta-programs data. As a result, several models were built to predict performance and retention.

A first research question was which meta-programs could predict job performance. A subset of the top 8 performers was compared with the 15 of the low performers. The most significant findings (t-test with $p < 0,01$) had to do with high performers being more able to work individually (without other people around) and paying less attention to affective communication. 7 other parameters proved to be significant ($p < 0,05$). Based on these findings a model was built to predict job performance.

A second research question was which meta-programs would predict retention. To answer the question we compared a group ($n=111$) who stayed 2 years and longer with a group ($n=51$) who left very quickly (after maximum 3 months). The most significant findings (t-test with $p < 0,01$) had to do with the people staying longer being more convinced by hearing, showing indifference to rules, paying less attention to external sources of reference and being more motivated by power. 11 other parameters proved to be significant ($p < 0,05$).

Apart from explaining the research methodology used, which combines methods from statistics and psychological testing with principles from NLP modeling, this paper will discuss the implications of these findings for the organization in terms of recruiting, coaching, training and management of the sales people.

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