



Innovation in government?  
Conversations with Canada's  
public service leaders

## Contents

Executive summary .....	1
Overview .....	2
Our method .....	3
What we learned .....	4
What should change .....	8
The way forward.....	9
Appendix A: Innovation frameworks .....	10
Appendix B: Participants .....	11

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# Executive summary

The Public Policy Forum and Deloitte launched this project with the shared belief that in a post-recession, post-stimulus investment period, governments across the world will face resource challenges demanding innovative responses. We hold the view that innovation in government offers real promise to address many of these emerging challenges.

## What we did...

We engaged nearly 100 public sector leaders in one-on-one conversations about the challenges facing Canada's public service, the measures being undertaken to innovate, and the obstacles to change. We interviewed public service leaders in every jurisdiction in Canada at the federal, provincial, territorial and municipals levels. We also included some external views from academics and others with senior public service experience.

## What we learned...

- 1 The current public debate fails to set the stage for real reforms. New ideas are needed but political direction is required for successful innovation to occur.
- 2 Public service leaders expressed concerns that innovation is being limited to operations at a time when policy reforms are also needed.
- 3 The level of public service innovation in Canada appears low and disconnected. A defined innovation process and strategic approach is required.
- 4 Innovation is being pursued without substantive collaboration or sharing of information across government bodies.
- 5 The capacity to execute an innovation agenda needs to be strengthened. New skills and talent are required.

## What should change...

- 1 More forums and venues for senior public service leaders to be open and frank about the challenges facing government and why innovation is needed.
- 2 Increased recognition of the need for public service innovation to address the full continuum of policy formulation and execution.
- 3 Put 'innovation as strategy' into long-term planning. Greater executive oversight is needed to drive innovation.
- 4 More sharing and replication of innovation is required across jurisdictions and levels of government.
- 5 Increased priority on attracting and developing innovation leaders at all levels across the public service.

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This project was intended to assess the state of innovation in government in Canada and represents the first in a series of projects by the Public Policy Forum, Deloitte and other organizations interested in advancing public service and governance.

# Overview

Public service leaders across Canada, and around the globe, are facing unprecedented challenges. The financial meltdown and subsequent stimulus spending have placed financial straitjackets on many jurisdictions. Yet, aging populations, global uncertainty, and new developments in social media contribute to growing demands on our governments to respond swiftly and more creatively to complex challenges.

While Canada has fared better than many jurisdictions, we are not immune to the serious challenges that threaten the sustainability of many government programs – escalating health care costs, rising debt levels, and lagging productivity, to name a few.

The Public Policy Forum and Deloitte launched this project with the belief that innovation in government holds the promise to address many of these emerging public service challenges.

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Innovation is defined as a commitment by governments to recognize and act upon new ideas, new operating methods and new ways of delivering services. It also includes finding new ways to maximize resources by engaging with the public, taking new risks and harnessing new technologies.



# Our method

We wanted to gauge the state of public service innovation in Canada. Specifically, we sought to determine how innovation was viewed as a possible solution to the challenges governments face. We wanted to identify what innovations might be available to public service leaders. Finally, we sought to understand the barriers that stood in the way of successful public service innovation.

Within this context, the Public Policy Forum and Deloitte set out to engage nearly 100 public sector leaders in one-on-one conversations about the challenges facing Canada's public service, the measures being undertaken to innovate, and the obstacles to change.

While leadership happens at all levels in any organization, our conversations were focused at the upper echelons of the public service – cabinet secretaries, clerks, deputy ministers and city managers. This is where the critical interface between policy and management takes place. We were particularly interested in learning and sharing the insights from those entrusted with translating policy into action, and with achieving the difficult balance between promoting innovation and managing risk.

Participants hailed from every province and territory across Canada and from all levels of government. We interviewed public service leaders at the federal, provincial, territorial and municipals levels. We also included some external views from academics and others with senior public service experience.

Some were new to their roles and others possessed extensive experience across several functional areas and levels of government. We spoke to leaders from a cross-section of departments and ministries.

To encourage open and frank discussions, the Chatham House Rule<sup>1</sup> was applied. Nothing that was said in these interviews is attributed to an individual or a jurisdiction.

What was said (and not said) may surprise you.

## Interview process

The interview guide used in the interview process focused on the four areas below. The frameworks are presented in Appendix A.

### 1. Innovation context

To understand the context for innovation we asked about the emerging managerial environment that Canada's senior public service leaders expected to face over the next 3-5 years.

### 2. Innovation opportunities

Based on the 'size-up' provided above, participants identified the innovation areas or themes that had the greatest potential. Nine thematic areas of innovation were presented.

### 3. Innovation barriers

We asked participants to reflect on the barriers and other impediments to driving innovation and change across the broader public sector. Three general categories were provided:

- Political leadership
- Public acceptability
- Public service capacity

### 4. Innovation examples

We asked Canada's public service leaders to offer examples of innovation from their jurisdiction or elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk>

# What we learned

## New ideas needed: What role for the Public Service?

Over and over, public service leaders expressed frustration at the disconnect between the level of public discourse that is taking place and the magnitude of the challenges we face as a country. The failure to adequately and completely frame the true nature of the pressures we are under is seen as limiting the ability of leaders to move forward with the innovations they feel are necessary and achievable.

Many interviewees identified the need for an important policy discussion and full engagement of the public regarding the mandate of government. Many acknowledged the relative ease of program and service expansion but the great difficulty in program contraction or rationalization.

Innovation in government must reflect the changing nature and make-up of services and programs. While public service leaders strongly want to be part of these deliberations it was suggested that this would need to be led at the political level.

Without elected leaders initiating the necessary charge for change, public service leaders feel unable to take on the sacred cows that inhibit reforms. They lament the lack of a frank public discussion of lightning rod issues such as the sustainability of our health care system, the effectiveness of our social assistance programs, and our productivity gap. As a consequence, public service leaders find it difficult to garner the political and public support required for meaningful public sector innovation.

There is recognition, however, that more can be done to state the case for change and build the foundation for innovation. Many public service leaders described the difficulty of presenting plans for innovation in ways that their ministers and cabinet tables could easily accept. There is a widely held view that finding the right balance between transformative aspirations and manageable game plans is a key factor in preparing the political level for the kind of public debate that is needed to launch meaningful innovation in government.

But what is the role for public service leadership in the debate? Most have grown up in a system that expects anonymity for public servants and many are comfortable operating behind the scenes. There are some, however, who would be prepared to engage in a broader discussion, if presented with appropriate forums – something we feel is well worth exploring.

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Meanwhile, the public service quietly presses on, applying marginal, across the board, cost-containment; tinkering at the edges of unsustainable programs; waiting for direction on the really big issues. The perceived political intolerance for risk, mistakes, or public backlash has become so high that truly innovative ideas are less likely to be presented or pursued.

### Caught between two roles:

#### Lead policy advisor or chief executive?

The 24/7, social media age is changing the role of senior public service leaders. We sensed a change in their strategic approach. While the focus on near-term results, such as emergency room wait times and average test scores, is making public service leaders attuned to service delivery, strategic challenges in our economy and competitiveness do not receive adequate attention. These bigger challenges cannot be addressed with internet speed, and therefore receive less political attention. Besides, most governments come into power with very clear platforms, focused on a fixed list of policy priorities. Increasingly, new governments expect the public service to implement a pre-sold agenda, not present new policy alternatives.

Some public service leaders look back fondly to the days when large policy shops could study big issues and design robust programs to address societal needs over a longer time horizon. But those days are gone. Some public service leaders commented that in today's world, the permanent public service is no longer the primary source of policy advice for ministers. In fact, newly elected governments increasingly come into office with a healthy skepticism of those who are there to serve.

We heard how many senior executives spend much of their time fighting the political brush fires that, fanned by the power of the internet and instant communications, are constantly at risk of blowing out of control. Meanwhile, political staffers, special interest groups and lobbyists gain greater influence over a policy agenda that is focused on the here and now.

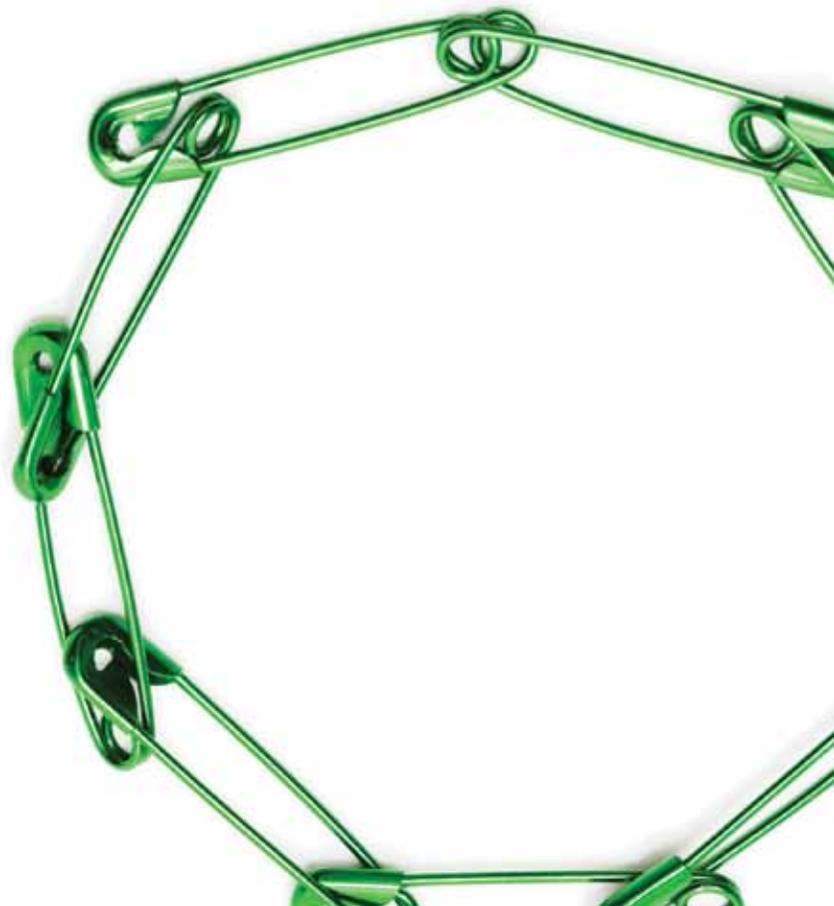
According to the executives we spoke with, the demand for long-term policy setting has almost disappeared. As a result, the organizational capacity for policy analysis has been eroded and the analytic tools being used are outdated. Many are assessing what this could mean for their role as policy advisors. If policy is now developed at the political level, in consultation with individuals and organizations outside of government, what is the role of the public service? In the future, will the deputy head role be more focused on operational excellence, more akin to a chief operating officer?

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“Long-term planning...much of my job is keeping the lids on the pots. A good day is if there's no issue that blows up in my face and I have to spend the balance of the day briefing the Minister.”

We sensed a desire to cultivate a new breed of policy makers – professionals more adept at data analytics, stakeholder engagement, modern risk management, working across boundaries, and crafting policies with a greater chance of successful implementation.

Therefore, public service leaders are faced with the dual challenge of making the case for modernizing the policy function and improving the effectiveness of service delivery and implementation. The challenges being faced by most jurisdictions in Canada dictate that improvements inside government are required on both dimensions, while recognizing the need for increased participation by other stakeholders in policy and delivery.



**An innovation strategy:  
Are we focused on the right things?**

Public service leaders expressed concerns about whether the basket of innovations being pursued is the right size and shape. Large, complex organizations don't stand still. Most leaders we spoke with were able to point to areas where innovation is happening. But, many public service leaders are struggling with separating the wheat from the chaff. They had difficulty distinguishing administrative improvements from more substantive innovation initiatives and determining the type of support needed for implementation.

Often, the innovations that they cited were viewed as being too narrow and disconnected from each other to have a meaningful impact. To be sure, there are projects at the other extreme – so grand as to shake executive confidence in whether they will succeed.

Most do not have a strategy for innovation or a blue print for change. We were struck by the absence of enterprise-wide strategies and action plans for innovation.

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**While there was great enthusiasm and interest in the topic of public service innovation across all levels of government, there was a general lack of major activity in the area. It appears that there is much more potential for government innovation in Canada.**

This is not to say that leaders are not proud of the innovation they believe to be underway in their organizations. Rather, they acknowledge a limited understanding of the true nature of how much is being invested, where it is being invested, and to what end.

Given the importance that visible leadership plays, there is a need for public service leaders to become more engaged. Setting the strategy for innovation; leading investment allocation decision-making; assessing progress; and removing obstacles are all things that require executive level engagement. The uncertainty being expressed about whether the right things are being done appears to stem in large part from the absence, in many organizations, of a defined innovation process that effectively engages the executive level of the public service.

**Doing more together:  
What are others doing?**

While governments across Canada invest significantly in pan-Canadian consultations, public service executives acknowledge that there is relatively little actual replication of innovations across boundaries, whether within or across jurisdictions.

Public service leaders tend to pursue innovations without substantive collaboration with others who may be attempting to overcome similar challenges. This leaves some to believe they are navigating uncharted waters. In fact, our discussions revealed that many of the challenges they face are the same, both in substance and in process. Yet, these leaders are operating largely in isolation from each other. As a result, the potential advantages of replicating innovations across our cash strapped governments are not being pursued.

There certainly is a growing awareness of the availability of Commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) and other solutions and their applicability to governments at all levels. But, very few executives could point to where their organizations were actively collaborating with other government bodies to reduce the costs of innovation or to increase the return on investment.

Generally, public service leaders agree on the need for more sharing of innovations across governments, especially in times of restraint. While many mused about partnering with over levels of government and even other jurisdictions, there was little evidence of actual collaboration.

The 'not invented here syndrome' is alive and well in governments across Canada. Executives appear to be a long way from changing this culture or introducing mechanisms to ensure their organizations are not reinventing the wheel.

There is an irresistible opportunity for an inter-jurisdictional network that supports the exchange of best practices, processes and innovations for public service organizations. Governments at all levels and regions need to actively consider more collaborative strategies.

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T. S. Eliot said “Always remember you’re unique, just like everyone else.” There appeared to be an assumption that public service innovation needs to be uniquely designed for a particular jurisdiction. The “not built here” syndrome was not the only issue; there was a sense that duplicating a successful innovation from a neighboring jurisdiction did not have the same cachet as pioneering an innovation.

**Capacity building:  
Who leads innovation?**

Public sector executives expressed concerns about the capacity of their organizations to make innovative changes on a large scale. While important innovations are sprinkled throughout most organizations, transformative changes are reported to be much more difficult to launch and sustain.

A critical constraint is leadership capacity. Simply put, there are relatively few senior management and executive level leaders in the public service with deep experience in leading successful transformation projects for Deputies to call on to take charge of innovation strategies.

This shortage of qualified change leaders stems from a number of factors. Lack of public service executive development programs focused on transformation or innovation leadership; the tendency to rotate senior managers out of project management roles before success has been achieved; a limited number of innovative

projects to lead; and, a reliance on external consultants to assume project management roles. All of these contribute to the dearth of senior managers and executives with proven skills in implementing large-scale innovation. There were very few cases where executives could point to rotation or exchange of senior managers between agencies or across jurisdictions as a means of developing transformational leaders.

Furthermore, public service leaders pointed to a limited success rate in bringing in executives from outside the public service to lead transformations. While there are successes to point to, in general private sector leaders can be difficult to attract into the public sector and are often challenged to adapt to the higher degree of ambiguity they experience when working in a public sector environment. Furthermore, there is very limited opportunity for public sector leaders to gain experience through assignments or interchanges with private sector firms.



# What should change?

The good news is there is a lot of scope for innovation, at a time when we need it most. The bad news is that our most senior public service leadership is not as focused on this topic as we had expected. Fortunately, there is only upside from attempting to do more. Here is what we think needs to change.

- 1 There should be more forums and venues for senior public service leaders to speak frankly about the challenges governments are facing and where innovation is needed. These should involve cross-governmental forums, and include sharing between the public, private and social sectors.

[More open dialogue about the challenges facing our public services and why reforms are needed.](#)

- 2 There should be increased recognition of the heightened emphasis on execution that is expected from senior public service leaders and the importance of operational excellence through innovation. As governments increasingly come to power with formal policy platforms, and look to a wide range of stakeholders for policy input, the role of the senior public servant is evolving to one of policy execution. This is not to suggest that assessing the impacts of policy proposals and offering policy alternatives is no longer a critical component of the Deputy's job. This has implications for the qualifications and professional development experiences expected of future public service leaders.

[Recognition of the need for innovation in policy and delivery.](#)

- 3 Governments at all levels need to incorporate 'innovation as strategy' into medium and long-term planning. Governments need to address more 'new ideas' that will shape the future capacity to deliver high quality programs and services. Public service innovation holds real promise for those governments willing to confront these challenges. Public service leaders should introduce more formal processes to enable executive level oversight of innovation investments and tracking of results. Innovation program management policies and practices driven from the executive level would provide greater confidence in the innovation strategies that are being pursued.

[Innovation embraced as a strategic imperative for governments at all levels.](#)

- 4 Intergovernmental forums and networks should be created to focus specifically on the identification of successful innovations that hold potential for replication elsewhere. Strategic partnerships across government would allow greater opportunity for leveraging the investments that are made in innovation.

[Doing more together.](#)

- 5 Greater emphasis and investment should be placed on attracting and developing the leadership talent required to increase innovation in government. This could include programs for developing transformational project leaders and greater interchange between the public and private sectors to expand the capacity of government to innovate.

[New skills and talent.](#)



# Appendix A: Innovation frameworks<sup>2</sup>

## Context for innovation

- Growing financial concerns
- Increasing debt and deficits
- Constrained capital spending
- Restrictions on hiring
- Increasing demand from the public
- Pressure to reduce the size of government
- Greater pressures from interest groups

## Barriers to innovation

### Political leadership

- Awareness of the requirement for change
- Willingness to support change
- Governing political party congruence
- Opposition party(s) congruence
- Election cycle dynamics

### Public acceptability

- Lack of public awareness
- Need for public engagement
- Need to educate the public
- Stakeholder resistance
- Negative media coverage

### Public service capacity

- Lack of experienced change leaders
- Cultural resistance
- Insufficient or under investment
- Labour agreements / relations
- Challenges partnering with others

## Opportunities for innovation

### Role of the state/citizen

Government mandate, shifting responsibilities, citizen-centered models

### Governance/organization

New forms of organization, new governance arrangements, partnering, collaborations, NGOs

### Policy/strategy

Legislative changes, citizen choice, best practice, policy reform

### Process/procedure

Regulatory reform, internal processes, operating procedures, risk-based permitting

### Structure/design

Program design, regional structures, shared services, outsourcing

### People/HR

Performance management, contracting, workforce redesign, skills development, PS renewal

### Operations management/service delivery

Logistics, LEAN strategies, program improvements, quality assurance, procurement

### Technology/systems

High-tech & low-tech, telecom, info management, enterprise solutions, case management

### Financing

P3s, government bonds, cost-sharing, revenue-sharing, capital financing

# Appendix B: List of interviewees<sup>3</sup>

<b>Reg Alcock</b> Executive-in-Residence Asper School of Business University of Manitoba	<b>Claire Dansereau</b> Deputy Minister Fisheries and Oceans Government of Canada	<b>Graham Flack</b> Associate Deputy Minister Public Safety Government of Canada	<b>Shelly Jamieson</b> Secretary of the Cabinet and Clerk of the Executive Council Government of Ontario
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<b>Bill Baker</b> Deputy Minister Public Safety Government of Canada	<b>Glen Davies</b> City Manager City of Regina	<b>Denis Garon</b> Secrétaire associé Sous-secrétariat aux technologies de l'information et bureau du dirigeant principal de l'information Ministère des services gouvernementaux Government of Quebec	<b>Greg Keefe</b> Deputy Minister to the Premier and Clerk of the Executive Council Government of Nova Scotia
<b>Penny Ballantyne</b> Deputy Minister of Executive Council and Secretary to Cabinet Government of the Northwest Territories	<b>Kelliann Dean</b> Commissioner Public Service Commission Government of Nova Scotia	<b>Giles Gherson</b> Deputy Minister and Associate Secretary of Cabinet Government of Ontario	<b>John Kershaw</b> Deputy Minister Education Government of New Brunswick
<b>Penny Ballem</b> City Manager City of Vancouver	<b>Tony Dean</b> Professor School of Public Policy and Governance University of Toronto	<b>Francois Guimont</b> Deputy Minister Public Works and Government Services Government of Canada	<b>Robert Lapper</b> Deputy Minister Labour Government of British Columbia
<b>Rory Beck</b> Clerk of the Executive and Secretary to the Cabinet Government of Prince Edward Island	<b>Ron Dedman</b> Deputy Minister Government Services Government of Saskatchewan	<b>Sandra Hardy</b> Deputy Minister Culture, Heritage and Tourism Government of Manitoba	<b>Judith Larocque</b> Deputy Minister Canadian Heritage Government of Canada
<b>Gilles Bernier</b> Former Deputy Minister Ministère du Développement économique, de l'Innovation et de l'Exportation Government of Quebec	<b>Gilles Demers</b> Former Deputy Minister Développement économique, l'Innovation et l'Exploration Gouvernement du Québec	<b>Vicky Harnish</b> Deputy Minister Finance Government of Nova Scotia	<b>Glen Laubenstein</b> Chief Administrative Officer City of Winnipeg
<b>Janice Charette</b> Deputy Minister Human Resources and Skills Development Government of Canada	<b>Cassie Doyle</b> Deputy Minister Natural Resources Government of Canada	<b>George Haynal</b> Vice President Government Affairs Bombardier Inc.	<b>Yvon Leblanc</b> Deputy Minister Justice and Consumer Affairs Government of New Brunswick
<b>John Clarkson</b> Deputy Minister Innovation, Technology, Energy and Mines Government of Manitoba	<b>Simon Farbrother</b> City Manager City of Edmonton	<b>Jean Houde</b> Former Deputy Minister of Finance Government of Quebec	<b>Don Leitch</b> Former Deputy Minister Government of British Columbia Former Clerk Government of Manitoba
<b>Doug Clow</b> Deputy Minister Finance and Municipal Affairs Government of Prince Edward Island	<b>Don Fast</b> Deputy Minister Science and Universities Government of British Columbia	<b>Bonny Hoyt-Hallett</b> Deputy Minister Environment Government of New Brunswick	<b>Louise Lemon</b> Deputy Minister Supply and Services Agency Government of New Brunswick
<b>Murray Coolican</b> Deputy Minister Energy Government of Nova Scotia	<b>David Ferguson</b> Clerk of the Executive Council and Secretary to the Cabinet Government of New Brunswick	<b>James Hughes</b> Deputy Minister Social Development Government of New Brunswick	<b>G. Sandy MacDonald</b> Deputy Minister Education and Early Childhood Development Government of Prince Edward Island
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Development and Tourism  
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**Robert Thompson**  
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City Manager  
City of Calgary

**Annette Trimbee**  
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## Public Policy Forum

### *Building Better Government*

The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, non-partisan facilitator; capable of bringing together a wide range of stake-holders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in our country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

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