



REMOTE TEAM MANAGEMENT PLAYBOOK

Automation and Global Workforces
in Export-Driven Ecommerce Businesses



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In 1665, Isaac Newton – then a lowly student at Trinity College in Cambridge – found himself in the unique position of being forced to resume his studies from home due to a global pandemic. During this year-plus of remote study, free from the direct influence of the college curriculum, he used the time to ponder freely the limitations of some of the most widely accepted theories of the time.

The result? He challenged and developed theories on optics and gravity, returning to Trinity in 1667 a fellow and within two more years, a professor.

Perhaps it was this flexibility in environment and work structure that allowed Newton to break the mould so. Regardless, these theories would inevitably come as a direct result of working remotely.

Ecommerce companies enjoy unique benefits when compared to more traditional business models. The opportunity to transact 24/7, heavily diversified customer and audience bases, plus a more concerted and creative approach to the experience offered to those customers.

The nature of ecommerce is also such that these businesses – like Sir Isaac Newton three-and-a-half centuries ago – can find opportunity and growth in the ability to work from home.

But there are also challenges that require a brand to adapt in ways that previously wouldn't have been a consideration.

Welcome to the era of remote teams.

WHO WANTS TO WORK FROM HOME?

Happy workers contribute to productive businesses. Since ecommerce and other digital-first industries are predominantly made up of younger staff, it's important to understand what satisfies and motivates these people. The fact that **69% of millennials would relinquish other benefits if offered greater flexibility** in work time and location speaks for itself.

Moreover, a **staggering 28% would even favour the option to work remotely in lieu of 10-20% of their salary!**

These stats paint a clear picture of what exactly many contemporary workers value. The freedom to work at any time in any place, free of the constraints endured by previous generations, is often romanticised yet still considered unattainable for many despite its emerging popularity.

“ We are in a post-network society, and distributed teams are the new normal for any business—not just technology. We are starting to see an explosion of tools and techniques to manage the growing prevalence of distributed teams. Expect to see more as the idea of work starts to escape the industrial construct of 9-to-5.

”

Businesses have a lot to gain by leveraging remote teams as well.

Let's take Dell – a top-20 brand that hires remotely – as a prime example. As of this year, **58% of Dell's staff have the ability to work flexibly**. In 2016, they achieved **\$12 million (USD) in annual savings** just from reducing office space. This is not to mention the incredible savings related to retention – but more on that later.

Perhaps the daydreams of working from an exotic location have obscured many from realising there are enormous business and human benefits to the revolutionary concept of remote workforces. For this reason, we present an objective examination of the advantages and challenges export-driven ecommerce businesses experience when hiring beyond borders.

AUTOMATION AND WORLDWIDE TEAMS

Two key facets of successfully running an international – or even global – ecommerce business are the abilities to optimise processes through automation and serve your customers wherever, whenever they need. Shopify Plus+ has long acknowledged these facts and equipped merchants with the tools they need to efficiently execute both.

Automated workflows allow businesses to perform tedious tasks triggered by prespecified events in the background, allowing duties that require a more human touch to be picked up by the appropriate team member. To make sure there's no disparity in when and how customers are addressed, hiring and properly training remote staff with the correct permissions (i.e. authority) guarantees smooth, uninterrupted service.

“Automating processes helps team members reclaim time and focus on growing the business – something that helps remote teams avoid miscommunications and maintain productivity. Flow, from Shopify Plus, makes it easier than ever to automate processes not only in sales and logistics, but also in customer management, risk management, loyalty, retention and promotion.”

Sarah Tan, Market Development at Shopify

Remote workforces can both complement these advantages and provide answers to the challenges. For modern businesses that need to maintain agility and relevance within the ever-changing ecommerce climate, a diverse and widespread team may just be the elixir needed.

Need someone at the helm 24 hours per day?

Hire team members from different regions and timezones.

Faced with marketing challenges stemming from cultural nuances?

**Recruit people from target regional markets
and different cultural backgrounds.**

It's also important to accept that there are particular challenges. For example, ecommerce businesses will need to adjust their recruitment processes as a more stringent and discerning approach will be necessary to ensure the right people are hired. There's also the question of work ethic, cultural differences and accountability that will require a lot of attention to overcome.

But rather than just offering clumsy exposition on precisely the effects that remote teams have, there is plenty of research to support it.

A SNAPSHOT OF REMOTE STATISTICS

- **40%** of people feel the greatest benefit of remote work is the flexible schedule
- **16%** of companies exclusively hire remote workers
- Companies allowing remote work have **25%** lower employee turnover than those that don't
- **76%** of workers would be more willing to stay with their current employer if they could work flexible hours
- People who work remotely at least once a month are **24%** more likely to be happy and productive
- The number of people who work from home has increased by **140%** since 2005
- **4.3 million** people in the USA work from home at least half the time

WHAT ARE REMOTE TEAMS AND HOW DO THEY FUNCTION?

Like so many terms in ecommerce and other digital industries, people love to assign nifty compound vocabulary to the concept of remote operations.

Telecommuting. Distributed teams. Cloud Work. Virtual Teams.

As long as one understands that these terms are all associated with the same overall concept, the chosen nomenclature is irrelevant. **Remote teams consist of employees and independent contractors dispersed throughout different locations and of different backgrounds.** Despite the differences, the team functions in unison toward common business goals.

What's more important than where they work is how they work. Remote workers need a tremendous level of proficiency in what they do, and they need to have a suitable personality and work ethic to maintain communication and productivity long term.

“Fully remote teams are typically made up of individuals that are spread out multinationally – and this is intentional. This allows the business to ensure that their bases are covered as far as marketing, support, and distribution in different regions. There's always a risk with shipping internationally, so this is especially important for export-driven businesses that need someone on the ground to facilitate regional logistics.”



Remote teams should function with agility and diversity. Overcoming language barriers and cultural subtleties while having the advantage of operating 24/7 will better equip ecommerce businesses to handle the paradoxes in global marketing.

The top industries that utilise remote teams are as follows:

- **Information Technology**
- **Marketing**
- **Business Administration and Management**
- **Shopping**
- Other*
- Education and Training
- Arts
- Human Services
- Correction and Security

You'll notice that the top four are integral to any ecommerce strategy. This should be an indication of the strength that agile dispersed teams bring to the table. So what are the responsibilities of a business when leveraging a remote team? How can they optimise and prepare to implement this groundbreaking strategy? Check out the fundamentals below.

REMOTE MANAGEMENT BEST PRACTISES

Stack Technology Wisely

Voice, video, instant messaging, and file-sharing platforms are ubiquitous, and all help to facilitate a smooth connection within remote teams. Choosing and investing in the right software will enable consistent communication and productivity.

Refine Onboarding Processes

Businesses need to put a lot of trust in their remote staff due to a reduced ability to directly supervise and monitor performance. Make sure that hiring and training processes are airtight to maximise the potency of your remote strategy.

Develop an Inclusive Virtual Environment

Don't just leave your remote staff to their own devices – literally. Make sure there are regular meetings and hold events that include everyone. This fosters a spirit of belonging and motivates remote workers to be a stronger part of the team.

Get Together Periodically

Many successful remote companies organise team retreats regularly throughout the year. This is a great way to build cohesiveness, collaborate more closely and to reinforce personal relationships within your remote team.

Fortify Company Culture

Get everyone on the same page as far as the values of the business go. Shared vision and direction are the fuel that drives remote teams, so establishing loyalty and pride in the company will encourage workers to go above and beyond.

Be Flexible

Flexibility is the name of the game. You can't expect remote teams to adhere to the traditional 9-5 work schedule, so setting overlap expectations should be first, followed by allowing team members to manage their own time.



Many businesses have concerns around trust when allowing their teams to work remotely. If you have trust issues with your team, you have to ask yourself why did you hire these people in the first place? All good leadership stems around trust. But as a business, you have to be clear on how your team can build trust. At Shopify, we use the concept of 'The Trust Battery'. Everything you do can charge your trust, or detract your trust. The more trust you have, the more leniency you get. It's important to be clear with your team on this concept and how they can build trust over time. Once a company has a high trust environment, you should expect to see everything go in the right direction, faster.



Rhys Furner, Head of Partnerships & Sales Development (APAC) at Shopify Plus

A UNIFIED GLOBAL WORKFORCE: ADVANTAGES OF REMOTE TEAMS

The solidarity of working under one roof has its own advantages, but in the digital space being locked into one office can be counterproductive. In fact, **the number of people who work from home has increased by 140% since 2005**, demonstrating that businesses are recognising the flexibility and dynamism of this emerging business strategy.

Successful remote employees present some obvious benefits that add to job satisfaction immensely

- **They don't need to commute to work**, saving time and money while allowing them to uphold family and home life commitments more easily
- **They can finish their work on their own time** – they're dedicated to meeting deadlines because they have a greater work-life balance
- **They aren't distracted by their coworkers** or other disturbances and they can create a workspace conducive to focus and quality
- **They can take breaks when they need to** and rejuvenate themselves without facing scrutiny from managers or coworkers
- **Their schedule is more flexible** adding a greater sense of freedom and accountability beyond rigid office schedules
- **They are self-motivated** and take ownership over what they deliver, improving quality and stabilising motivation

Even if companies can save money, boost morale, and find the most skilled talent – there still might be lingering doubts.

There are some major misconceptions that mostly arise from a lack of direct supervision among remote workers that should be dismissed before truly understanding the benefits. Let's try to address some of the main questions that an organisation might ask before considering hiring remotely.



ARE REMOTE WORKERS LESS PRODUCTIVE?

No – well, not usually. Studies show that remote team members can actually be **10-20% more productive than standard in-office staff**. The trick is in finding the right balance and identifying the correct roles that suit the remote style.

The responsibility of the business is to have the right systems in place for communicating with remote staff and making the responsibilities crystal clear to avoid unnecessary interruptions. Analysts have predicted that **this year over 50% of skilled workers will be part of a remote team in some capacity** – think hybrid remote/in-office – because more organisations are seeing the value and increase in productivity.

ARE REMOTE TEAMS MORE EXPENSIVE?

When managed correctly, the answer is a decisive no.

There are two sides of the coin here, each directly correlating with the other: the cost savings to the employee and the cost savings to the business. The most evident being that many **remote workers report higher levels of job satisfaction**, in turn contributing to less employee churn for the business.

If we look at the numbers, **working from home saves employees an average of \$11,000 USD per year**. These savings go a long way toward retention, and when **losing a valued employee costs between \$10-30,000**, the value becomes self-evident.



As for more superficial savings, remote teams also cut down on overhead by minimising the need for physical office space and tangible assets.

IS IT DIFFICULT TO MANAGE REMOTE STAFF?

Although remote work inherently requires a level of accountability and self-management, giving staff the autonomy and space they want can be highly motivating. The company offers flexibility, and the employee works hard to maintain that freedom.

As communication can become tedious, there are abundant tools designed to deliver the flexibility and reciprocity needed to keep track of remote workers. **Trello** or **Basecamp** are prime examples that facilitate project management and communication within remote teams.

Slack is a favoured messenger application that creates a virtual workspace with the ability to integrate multiple teams. Equipped with the right tools, businesses will find monitoring remote workflows less tedious in contrast with a more hands-on approach.

After all, we can conclude that  *measurable timelines and job conclusion are a lot more telling than out-of-date proxies like “is my employee in his seat?”* 

HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE?

Think about it this way: when you adopt a remote strategy, the labour pool increases exponentially. Opening the doors beyond local prospects triggers an influx of hundreds if not thousands more qualified workers all with varied strengths and ideas.

If you take a platform like **LinkedIn** as the paragon of professional digital networking, **the almost 600-million-strong user base** filled with hungry job seekers is an asset for businesses looking to diversify their talent sources.

If LinkedIn's enormous labour pool proves daunting, consider some of the most popular websites dedicated to building and understanding remote teams:

- **Remote.co**
- **Remotive**
- **Workew**
- **Angel.co**
- **NODESK**
- **We Work Remotely**

There are also extensive communities of remote contractors and freelancers like **UpWork** and **Fiverr** that can be hired on a project-to-project basis.

Sure, you'll need to implement more stringent recruiting processes to weed out any undesirables, but you'll also have a vast sea of potential from which to choose from.

The business model also needs to suit remote teams. For example, labour jobs would obviously not complement remote work, but we're discussing ecommerce and other digital industries where telecommuting is a driving force for growth and expansion.

On that note, there are certain roles that are ideal for working from home, especially with international customer bases in export-driven business. For ecommerce businesses, the following positions are fundamental.

KEY REMOTE ROLES WELL-SUITED FOR ECOMMERCE



Customer Service Rep



Marketing Advisor



Content Writer



Social Media Expert



Digital Marketer



Logistics Specialist

WHERE THE DIGITAL NOMADS ARE

There are certain destinations that spring to mind when idealising remote work. For different reasons, Vietnam, Indonesia, Mexico, Germany and the Netherlands all top the list in terms of climate, affordability, and community of like-minded people. Remote staff thirst for the transitory lifestyle, and often hop around the globe through the course of their careers.

“*While any locale can be a great setting for virtual teams, taking a look at a region that is exemplary of where virtual teams will become a potent force for growth is the perfect place to start. Once we establish the kind of market environment that is ideal, it can be used as a benchmark for one’s own consideration when adopting a remote philosophy.*”

When examining the concept from a business perspective, there is a certain region that stands out. As an emerging ecommerce titan, Singapore meets several significant criteria that should pique the interest of export-driven ecommerce businesses.

SINGAPORE: A BENCHMARK EXAMPLE FOR REMOTE ADOPTION

Singapore checks many boxes as an example of where businesses can benefit from remote teams. Based on a Google study, **the combined regional ecommerce market (SEA) is set to reach the equivalent of \$200 billion USD by 2025.**

” With 630 million people, a growing middle class and rising internet penetration, SEA is often considered to be the next gold rush for ecommerce. Singapore and Malaysia generate one third of total online retail sales in the region, even though they only account for 8% of the region’s population.

If ASEAN were a single economy, it would rank third in population size with over 600 million people and seventh in GDP output with \$2.5 trillion recorded in 2016. Yet, in most ASEAN nations (with the exception of Singapore), ecommerce accounts for a small slice of total retail which presents many opportunities for growth. ”

EDB Singapore

These statements should leave ecommerce merchants jumping for joy, but how does this relate to remote teams? Well as this region expands, having a dispersed labour force will become a necessity.

If we take a look at some of the core reasons, there will undoubtedly be similarities drawn between Singapore and many other countries globally.

Young, Tech-Savvy Workforce

Millennials make up **22% or the Singaporean population**. This means that much of the workforce not only has time on their side, but also possesses the abilities and experience to drive innovation and embrace 21st-century concepts. These trends lend themselves to the adoption of digital-first industries – ecommerce always being in the discussion.

Space Constraints

Being a city-state located on an island makes Singapore an extreme case for lack of space. Already having developed outwards into the sea and upwards via myriad highrises, planners now consider **going subterranean with construction planning**. This seems almost humorous at first (in-real-life mole people??) and shows the desperate measures that are being brought up – but the solution doesn't need to be so severe. Any business in a country facing space constraints would be right in considering remote teams as a solution.

Export Reliance

Singapore is ranked as the **14th largest export economy in the world**. Though the majority are commodities, goods suitable for ecommerce sales include electronics components and computers. As mentioned above, having remote marketing and logistics people on your side is a great asset for any ecommerce export activity.

Ecommerce Boom

Revenue from ecommerce is expected to show an **annual growth rate of 9.5%, resulting in a market volume of US\$5.7 billion by 2022**. Unsurprisingly, the same young workforce that will drive innovation will be the ones contributing to the growth in ecommerce by purchasing online. Ecommerce brands would be wise to open their doors to international employees with a greater breadth of knowledge on how to sustain growth in an increasingly competitive industry.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF DISPERSED PERSONNEL

Remote teams come with their own unique set of hindrances that must be acknowledged and overcome. As with any other business challenge, they must be counteracted through the right set of strategies and efforts from all sides.

From the employees perspective, it really comes down to the values of the individual. For example, around **40% of workers feel that telecommuting worsens collaboration** while 30% feel meetings are less productive. A less obvious consequence of working remotely can be demonstrated by the fact that around **50% believe that lack of face-to-face interaction would harm their promotion potential** and employers' awareness of their achievements.

These attitudes solidify the fact that remote teams require a very specific type of person and team. The ugly truth:

Not every individual and business will reap the benefits of telecommuting.

There must be a comprehensive assessment of the business and it's goals, as well as the people working for it to determine if this strategy is worth adopting. Employers should rightfully have concerns about whether dispersed workers will have the accountability needed to maintain growth and foster closeness within the team despite geographic distance.

Most of these drawbacks rise from the fundamental concern of communication – the main sentiments including the following:

- **Employers allow people to work remotely without giving them the proper training or resources to do so productively**
- **Supervisors are untrained on how to properly manage and monitor remote workers and find it easier to manage someone face-to-face**
- **Some supervisors – perhaps because they feel they must be in control or don't trust their workers – are uncomfortable having employees work offsite**
- **Employers find that remote workers and the teams with which they work aren't as productive as when they're onsite [\[shrm.org\]](https://www.shrm.org)**

In summary, the key challenges include staying connected, keeping on track, having accountability and avoiding cultural and/or work ethic conflicts. Thankfully, equipped with outstanding virtual workspace tools and the right recruitment processes, businesses can easily overcome these issues.

SHOPIFY PLUS: THE BEST TOOLKIT FOR REMOTE TEAMS

Automation and remote teams go together like bread and butter, making Shopify Plus the ideal platform for complementing both. Every Shopify Plus store features unlimited staff accounts, each with specific permissions. This allows businesses to grow their teams while making sure each team member stays within their designated functions.

Shopify Plus clients also get 9 additional stores on top of the original, creating a fantastic environment for expanding internationally.

The most remarkable, though, are Shopify Launchpad and Flow. Both powerful applications for boosting automation and giving teams more time to focus on tasks needing a human touch.



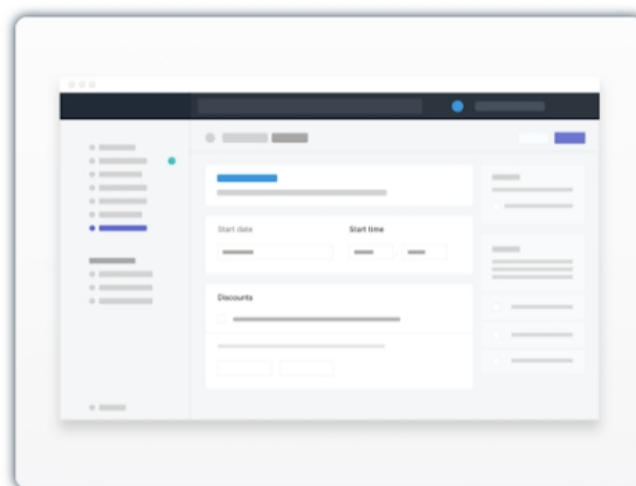
LaunchPad

Launchpad is a scheduling tool that lives inside your Shopify admin allowing you to schedule product visibility, Shopify Scripts, themes, discounts, and more with a defined start and end time. You can now prepare your Shopify store for any event, without all the headaches.



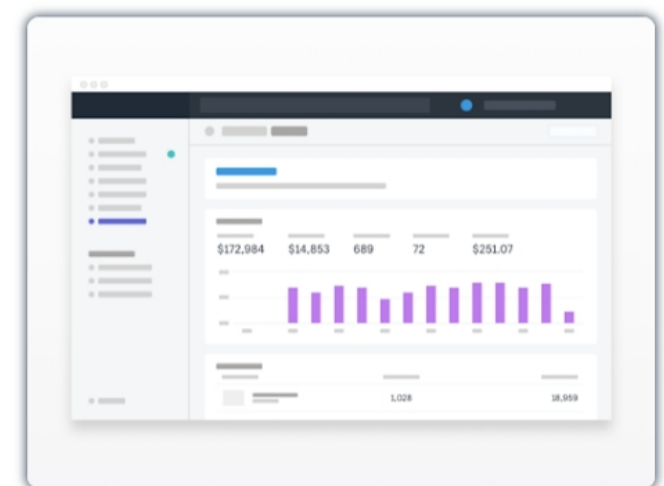
Simplify execution

Automate your event checklist to reduce time spent and risk for error while executing an event.



Drive conversion

Schedule front-end customizations to deliver a smooth customer experience from product page through to checkout.



Monitor in real-time

Track performance in real-time and better understand customer behaviour during events.

Launchpad offers a simple way to automate and schedule a sales campaign, product release, or flash sale. Some examples include:

Merchandising

- Select the specific products to publish for your sale, and update inventory as needed
- Set a collection discount to take effect when the sale starts; no coding required

Themes

- Build a campaign-specific theme to highlight on-sale products
- Optimize themes prior to the sale so there are no surprises
- Drive conversion by creating a seamless customer experience

Shopify Scripts

- Develop line-item scripts to automatically offer a gift with purchase during the sale
- Automatically offer free shipping when a customer spends over \$100
- Track customers who have refunded items that are over \$100 in an order by adding customer tags

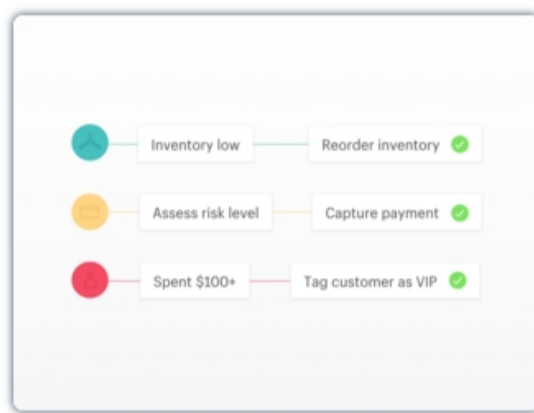
Flow

Shopify Flow is an ecommerce automation platform that helps you reclaim your time and focus on growing your business. With Flow, it's easy to automate tasks and ideas within your store and across your apps.



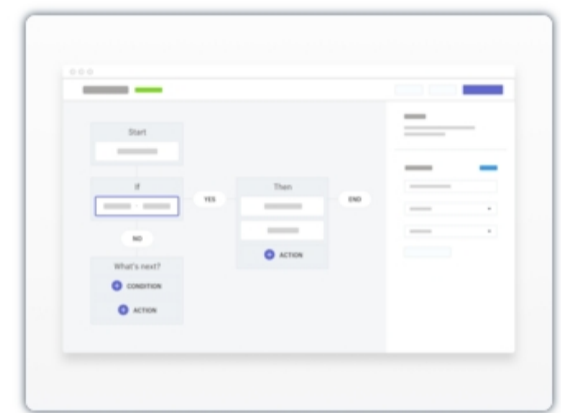
Get more done, in less time

Start automating in seconds with easy-to-use templates so your team can get back to business



Automate tasks and ideas

Reduce manual tasks by filling the gaps between apps and processes that power your business



Make room for growth

Grow your business with the flexibility to put new campaigns and ideas into action

Choose from a library of templates you can get started with right away, or use the visual builder to customize a workflow for your business. Let Flow do the work so you can get more done, in less time.

Here are a few of the business areas Flow can help you automate:

Buyer experience

- Create a support ticket when you receive a negative review
- Track negative products reviews in a spreadsheet
- Send daily top searches and results notification

Customer management

- Personalize marketing by tagging customers based on purchasing behavior
- Organize customers by lifetime-spend tiers
- Tag and track conversion of customers who order samples
- Track customers who refund items over \$100

Inventory and merchandising

- Get notified when products are low in stock and merchandise them on your store
- Hide and show products based on inventory level
- Standardize tagging for new products

Risk management

- Add high-risk orders for review to Asana
- Send a high-risk order notification before capturing payment
- Cancel and restock high-risk orders

Order management

- Add international orders to a spreadsheet
- Send an expedited shipping notification to the logistics team

Loyalty & retention

- Reward loyalty points for adding items to a wishlist
- Start a win-back email sequence when customers are at risk

Promotions

- Add a free gift to orders over \$100
- Text a discount code after a second order
- Mail handwritten note after a third order

The times are changing. Rapidly, substantially, and unequivocally.

Having a future-proof and adaptable ecommerce strategy is no longer exceptional, but expected. Utilising an agile remote team can offer major advantages but only when executed with a complete understanding of how it fits into each business.

After all we can conclude the following:

- **The younger workforce places tremendous value on flexible work**
- **Remote teams offer diversified solutions**
- **Not every role is suitable for telecommuting**
- **The right company culture and industry are fundamental**
- **Businesses need the right tools to ensure continued remote success**

Ecommerce practitioners need to keep an open mind and embrace new philosophies to continue to grow in a more globalised, flexible future.

Happy selling. Bonne chance!





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