

Transfer of Japanese Human Resource Management to US Subsidiaries: Resource Dependence Theory and Institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

Japanese corporations are characterized by distinctive management practices which have been nurtured in a culturally homogeneous environment. The transferability of these practices to foreign subsidiaries has been a subject of debate among management scholars. Drawing on resource dependence theory and institutionalism, this study examines the impact of homogeneity in management and parent company control on the degree of presence of Japanese human resource management (HRM) in U.S. subsidiaries. The study uses Walton and Lawrence's classification (reward, selection and promotion, employee influence mechanism, and job design) to measure uniquely Japanese HRM and a sample survey of 138 U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations for data collection. A principal component analysis reveals that three dimensions of HRM (reward system, selection and promotion, and job design), rather than four, are salient among these establishments. An OLS regression analysis also reveals that the degree of homogeneity in management and parent company control has impact on the transfer of these dimensions of HRM. Some implications for future study are discussed.

Key Words: Human Resource Management, Japanese Multinational Corporations, U.S. Subsidiaries, Transfer of Managerial Practices, Homogeneity of Management, Organizational Interdependence

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the Japanese economic presence in the U.S. during the 1980's, researchers applauded Japanese managerial practices and explored the transferability of these practices to the U.S. The extensive literature on Japanese multinational corporations suggests that the degree of transfer of Japanese managerial practices to local subsidiaries is one of the significant factors which explain the successful operation of Japanese multinational corporations in the global economy (Beechler and Yang 1994; Florida and Kenney 1991; Kopp 1994; Matsuo 2000; Tung 1987). While domestic economy in Japan has declined since the collapse of bubble economy in 1990's, Japanese investment in the U.S. economy had a great impact on major U.S. industries, such as the electronics, automobile, and financial industries, forcing some companies to go into bankruptcy (Franco 1983; Kenney and Florida 1995; Sullivan 1992; Suzuki 1991), and its investment has not declined significantly even after Japan's bubble economy has collapsed. (Toyokeizai 2008). However, studies in the 1990's speculated on problems that Japanese corporations face in a racially and culturally diverse society (Abo 1994; Kopp 1994; Yabe 1991), as Japanese paternalistic human resource management (HRM) is possible only with a homogeneous workforce (Ouchi 1981; Lincoln 1990). Normative arrangements, established in an environment with racial and cultural homogeneity, are the most effective and efficient way of assuring transactions of resources among employees (Collins 1975; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Furthermore, Japanese control mechanisms exclude foreign nationals from management positions because Japanese corporate philosophy requires implicit understanding among members, which are nurtured through socialization (Matsuo 2000; Tung 1987). Entry mode strategies (taking over existing U.S. firm or starting a new firm, creating a joint venture with American firms or with Japanese firms, investing directly or indirectly via

local subsidiary which already exists) also have significant impact on the proportion of Japanese managers in the management teams of U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations (Matsuo 2000).

The number of Japanese corporations in the U.S. increased in the past few decades, and there were about 4,000 U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations (Toyokeizai 2008). Considering the number of American workers (about 800,000) employed by Japanese-owned firms (Toyokeizai 2008), it is significant to examine HRM of these U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations. The ideas of HRM, a promising and significant area for the study of multinational corporations, have not been extensively integrated with previous work on Japanese multinational corporations in spite of a large volume of literature on technology transfer of Japanese multinational corporations (Beechler and Yang 1994). U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations suffer from the liability of foreignness due to political, economic, and cultural unfamiliarity with the host country, and this liability of foreignness has a significant impact on successful transfer of HRM (Matsuo 2000).

Although the definition of HRM is far from clearly established in the literature (Brewster 1995), a major focus of the existing studies of HRM is on the recruitment and reward systems of the workforce and the relationships between managers and employees, such as employee influence mechanisms and job design. This study defines HRM as managerial practices to facilitate the effective use of the labor force, including selection, promotion, reward, and job design. Three questions are addressed in this study: 1) Do Japanese corporations transfer unique practices of HRM to U.S. subsidiaries? 2) What aspects of Japanese HRM are not transferable to the American workforce? and 3) What are the factors which affect the HRM practices of these Japanese corporations in the U.S?

2. DISTINCTIVE JAPANESE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Distinctive Japanese Management

For almost four decades, scholars on Japanese organizations have argued that there are distinctive characteristics in Japanese managerial practices, especially in the selection and reward systems and job designs (Abegglen 1958; Beechler and Yang 1994; Cole 1972, 1979; Dore 1973; Lincoln et al. 1981; McMillan 1989; Ouchi 1981; Usui and Colignon 1996). Even after the collapse of the bubble economy, Japanese corporations in Japan adopted unique solutions for downsizing their laborforce (Usui and Colignon 1996). In explaining these uniquely Japanese HRM, this study uses Walton and Lawrence's classification (1985) which consists of four domains: reward system, selection and promotion, employee influence mechanism, and job design, because these four areas tap the most significant aspects of Japanese HRM.

Reward System: Japanese firms adopt paternalistic practices by offering many fringe benefits, such as partial coverage of housing and commuting expenses, dormitories for single employees, company housing for married employees, and bonuses offered twice a year to both white- and blue-collar workers. Whenever there is an additional dependent (usually a newborn baby) in the family, an employee receives a pay increase. Employees also receive money gifts as part of benefits on special occasions such as marriage, births, funerals, a child's entrance to higher education, etc. (Cole 1979; Dore 1973; Kishida 1987; Ouchi 1981; Usui and Colignon 1996).

Selection and Promotion: Japanese firms try to create harmony between the management and employees, emphasizing a fit between a candidate's personal qualities and the company's value system rather than simply his/her competence. Executive positions are filled only through internal promotion. Firms accommodate an economic recession by reducing work hours and/or bonuses rather than laying off employees (Dore 1973; Kawahito 1990; Krislov 1989; Nakane 1973; Trevor 1983; Usui and Colignon 1996).

Employee Influence Mechanisms: Firms generally employ "bottom-up" and "participatory" strategies by exercising "ringi" (having consensus among workers and managers from various department) and placing opinion boxes in the hallway. Unions are called "company unions," which consist of all blue- and white-collar workers below the rank of Section Chief. Frequent meetings of union and management leaders, to discuss management conditions and workers' demands, enhance the understanding between the two parties. (Ito and Rose 1994; Kawahito 1990; Kishida 1987; Krislov 1989, Matsuo 1998).

Job Design: Japanese firms try to nurture generalists rather than specialists through job rotation, small group activities, and quality control. The new employees go through "gasshuku" (intensive training) to assimilate the company's values and management philosophy, and receive in-house and on-the-job training prior to job assignment. "Jishu kanri" (proactive management) is an important part of work organization to encourage workers' creativity (Dore 1973; Ito and Rose 1994; Kishida 1987; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1991; Matsuo 1999; McMillan 1989; Ouchi 1981).

Although there are many studies which have theoretically examined HRM of Japanese corporations in the U.S., very little empirical research has studied HRM practices of U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese corporations. A few studies on the transfer of HRM of Japanese corporations emphasize the importance of the issues of homogeneity and heterogeneity of the management and workforce. Beechler and Yang (1994) argued that HRM in local subsidiaries was determined by the homogeneity of the local workforce, the relationships between parent companies and local subsidiaries, and the industrial sectors, with an assumption that a workforce in a rural area was more homogeneous than one in an urban area. Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) used a manager's perception of how different the affiliate's HRM was from the parent company's to measure HRM of subsidiaries in the U.S., and found that startups were more likely than takeovers and joint ventures to transfer Japanese HRM to U.S. subsidiaries. Using a resource dependence theory, Matsuo (2000) found that the entry mode and the percentage of Japanese investment of each firm had significant impacts on the use of expatriates (Japanese managers sent by the parent company) in U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese corporations.

2.2 Resource Dependence Theory and Institutionalism

Two organizational theories guide the current study: Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer 1982; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), and Institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Resource dependence theory argues that organizations which are not internally self-sufficient become interdependent with other organizations to obtain necessary resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), through joint ventures and exchange of corporate directors. Multinational corporations suffer from "liability of foreignness" (Caves 1982; Dunning 1977; Hymer 1976; Kogut and Singh 1988; Matsuo 2000; Zaheer 1995) because of the economic, political, and cultural unfamiliarity of the host country. This liability of foreignness is a driving force for multinational corporations to employ various entry mode strategies, such as engaging in joint ventures with American corporations, starting up a new enterprise instead of taking over an existing firm, or establishing "spinoffs" in which parent companies invest indirectly via local subsidiaries (Ito and Rose 1994; Lorange 1986; Matsuo 2000; Yoshida 1987). While Japanese corporations benefit from joint ventures with American firms, which provide knowledge of local customs and political regulations, and access to the sales market (Kujawa 1986; Tsurumi 1984; Yoshida 1987), they desire to have majority ownership to avoid potential constraints on decision-making from American partners (Beechler and Yang 1994). In this study, organizational interdependence is conceptualized as the degree of control that a parent company in Japan exerts over U.S. subsidiaries and the degree of influence that U.S. subsidiaries receive from American firms as a result of joint ventures. This organizational interdependence is assumed to have impact on the degree of transfer of uniquely Japanese HRM to a U.S. subsidiary. Thus the hypotheses are:

H1a: Implementation of Japanese HRM is positively related with the degree of parent company control.

H1b: Implementation of Japanese HRM is negatively related with the degree of local input.

Institutionalism argues that organizations are embedded in a society, thus they need to conform to the rules and norms of the society for their survival (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). This cultural organizational theory assumes that organizational agents are able to transfer rules and norms within an organization through socialization over generations (Zucker 1977). One of the reasons for the large presence of Japanese managers in multinational corporations is that these managers function as agents of cultural transmission across borders for successful implementation of Japanese HRM (Bosch, Matsuo, & Kanegae 2011; Matsuo 2000). An underlying assumption of this cultural transmission is that institutionalized practices to deal with particular problems and situations are maintained through homogeneity of the dominant members' shared values, and such shared values are further reinforced by organizational socialization (Tolbert 1988). Furthermore Japanese corporations try to create a homogeneous work group in U.S. subsidiaries by excluding minority groups, because Japanese HRM is possible only with a homogeneous management and workforce (Lincoln 1990; Ouchi 1981; Tung 1984). Other studies also argue that the presence of a Japanese CEO is one of the significant factors for such construction of a homogeneous management team (Hosler 1991; Tung 1987; Ushio 1990). In this study, cultural transmission is conceptualized as the degree of homogeneity in management that U.S. subsidiaries create. The degree of homogeneity in management is assumed to have an impact on the degree of transfer of Japanese HRM to U.S. subsidiaries. Thus the hypotheses are:

H2a: Implementation of Japanese HRM is positively related with the degree of homogeneity of management.

H2b: Implementation of Japanese HRM is positively related with the presence of a Japanese CEO.

3. METHODS

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

Based upon a literature review, scales were constructed to measure the degree of implementation of Japanese HRM. These items were carefully examined through a pilot study with the presidents and personnel managers of ten selected firms and were further refined based upon their comments and suggestions. This study included about ten most necessary items in each domain (Reward System, Selection and Promotion, Employee Influence Mechanism, and Job Design), because adding more items than necessary would contribute little additional reliability (Cramines and Zeller 1979; Nunnally 1978). These items used a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree." Homogeneity of management was measured by the percentage of Japanese managers among managers, and the percentage of whites among non-Japanese managers, and the nationality of CEO. The degree of parent company control was measured by the percentage of investment by a parent company, whether a company was invested directly by a parent company or indirectly via existing subsidiaries in the U.S., and whether a company was a startup or take-over of an American company. The degree of local input in U.S. subsidiaries was measured by whether or not a company was a joint venture with American companies. The data were collected through a sample survey of 600 U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations in the manufacturing and non-manufacturing sectors with 50 or more employees. The sample was drawn from the section on the U.S. of Kaigai Shishutsu Kigyo Soran (List of Japanese Corporations Abroad) (Toyokeizai 2000). Of 163 responses, 138 cases were usable for this study after adjusting for missing variables (82 establishments in the manufacturing sector and 56 in the non-manufacturing sector).

3.2 Variables and Factor Analyses

Table 1
Selected Factors (factor loading)

Reward	Alpha=0.69	Variance=23.63%
Housing expenses		(0.749)
Allowance for dependents	(0.650)	
Commuting expenses		(0.625)
Stock options		(0.530)
Health insurance	(0.605)	
Selection and Promotion	Alpha=0.68	Variance=9.65%
Recruit college graduates	(0.538)	
Use of temporary workers		(0.637)
Promotion based on seniority		(0.531)
Bonuses	(0.557)	
Job Design	Alpha=0.75	Variance=15.93%
Shared knowledge about management	(0.642)	
On-the-job training		(0.532)
Rotation of jobs and tasks	(0.542)	
Quality control	(0.570)	
Proactive management	(0.691)	
Suggestion system		(0.582)

A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was performed to determine if the assumed four dimensions were in fact present. Examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues revealed that there were three dimensions, rather than four, which were related with HRM of these establishments. As shown in Table 1, these three dimensions were Reward (housing expenses, allowance for dependents, commuting expenses, stock options, and health insurance), Selection and Promotion (recruitment of young college graduates, use of temporary workers, promotion based on seniority, and bonuses), and Job Design (shared knowledge about management, on-the-job training, rotation of jobs and tasks, quality control, proactive management, and suggestion system). Percentages of variance explained by these factors (Reward, Selection and Promotion, and Job Design) were 23.63, 9.65, and 15.93 respectively, and Chronbach alphas of reliability for these factors were 0.69, 0.68, and 0.75 respectively. These three factors meet the general requirement that there should be at least three items in each factor.

Besides the measurements of homogeneity in management and parent company control, age (length of operation) and size (the total number of employees) of establishment were used as control variables. Three separate regression analyses were conducted, using three factors as dependent variables.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 2, the mean percentage of Japanese managers in management is relatively high (33.26%). The mean percentage of whites among non-Japanese managers is also high (81.48%). The mean percentage of investment by a parent company is 90.59%. The means of age and size are 16.58 and 537.98 respectively.

Table 2
Independent Variables (Mean and SD for ratio variables)

Homogeneity in Management	
% of Japanese managers	(Mean 33.26, SD 30.13)
% of whites among non-Japanese	(Mean 81.48, SD 22.21)
Nationality of CEO	Japanese=1 Non-Japanese=0
Parent Company Control	
% of investment by a parent company	(Mean 90.59, SD 17.73)
Joint venture with American company	Joint venture with American company=1 Independent investment or joint venture with Japanese companies=0
Direct or indirect investment	Direct investment by parent company=1 Indirect investment by U.S. subsidiary=0
Startup or take-over	Startup=1 Take-over=0
Organizational Characteristics	
Length of operation	(Mean 16.58, SD 8.91)
Total number of employees	(Mean 537.98, SD 905.17)

4.2 Regression Analyses

Table 3
OLS Regression Analyses: Impact of parent company control and homogeneity in management on HRM

	Reward	Selection & Promotion	Job Design
(standardize coefficient)			
Parent Company Control			
% of investment by parent company	-0.0042 (-0.078)	0.0041 (-0.079)	0.0015 *** (0.212)
Direct or indirect investment	0.3380 *** (0.170)	0.138 (0.071)	0.0308 (0.015)
Joint venture with American company	0.2200 (0.065)	-0.0729 (-0.022)	-0.105 *** (-0.031)
Startup or take over	-0.196 (-0.040)	-0.531 (-0.110)	0.835 ** (0.165)
Homogeneity in Management			
% of Japanese	0.0081 ** (0.259)	0.0083 ** (0.032)	0.0011 *** (0.035)
% of whites	0.0031 (0.073)	0.0018** (0.244)	- 0.0054 (-0.127)
Nationality of CEO	0.158 ** (0.063)	-0.286 (-0.117)	0.0219 (0.009)
Organizational Characteristics			
Age	0.0089 (0.084)	0.0346 ** (0.336)	-0.0764 (-0.071)
Size	-0.003 * (-0.231)	-0.0018 * (-0.178)	0.0030 ** (0.283)
Constant		-0.549 *	-0.211 * 0.910*
R ²	0.233	0.255	0.283

* p<0.05
 ** p<0.01
 *** p<0.001

Three separate linear regression analyses were conducted in order to examine the impact of several variables on Reward, Selection and Promotion, and Job Design (Table 3). The first model, with dependent variable Reward, indicated that three variables had significant positive impacts. These were percentage of Japanese managers in management ($B=0.259$, $p<0.01$), nationality of CEO ($B=0.063$, $p<0.001$), and whether a company was a direct or indirect investment ($B=0.170$, $p<0.01$). Hypothesis 1a, the degree of parent control has a positive impact on HRM, was partially supported. Hypothesis 2a, the degree of homogeneity of management has a positive impact on HRM, was also partially supported, and hypothesis 2b, the presence of Japanese CEO has a positive impact on HRM, was supported. Furthermore the size of a company also had a significant negative impact ($B=-0.231$, $p<0.05$), indicating that the smaller the size of a company, the more likely it was to implement Japanese HRM in Reward.

The second model, with dependent variable Selection and Promotion, indicated that two variables derived from Institutionalism, the percentage of Japanese among managers ($B=0.032$, $p<0.01$) and the percentage of whites among non-Japanese managers ($B=0.244$, $p<0.01$) had significant positive impacts, supporting hypothesis 2a, that the degree of homogeneity in management is positively related with the implementation of Japanese HRM. No variable derived from resource dependence theory was significant. However, age had a positive impact ($B=0.336$, $p<0.01$) and size had a negative impact ($B=-0.178$, $p<0.05$) on Selection and Promotion, indicating that the smaller the size and the longer the operation of a company, the more likely it was to implement Japanese HRM in Selection and Promotion.

Finally, the model, with dependent variable Job Design, indicated that one variable derived from Institutionalism, and three variables derived from resource dependence theory had positive impacts on Job Design. These were the percentage of Japanese among managers ($B=0.035$, $p<0.001$), the percentage of investment by parent company ($B=0.212$, $p<0.001$), whether or not a company was a joint venture with American company ($B=-0.031$, $p<0.001$), and whether a company was a startup or take-over ($B=0.165$, $p<0.001$). Only one variable derived from resource dependence theory, whether a company was a direct or indirect investment, did not have a significant impact on Job Design. Hypothesis 1a, the implementation of HRM is positively related with the degree of parent company control, and hypothesis 1b, implementation of HRM is negatively related with the degree of local input, were supported. Hypothesis 2a, the degree of homogeneity of management has a positive impact on HRM, was partially supported. Furthermore, the size had a positive impact on Job Design ($B=0.283$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the larger the company, the more likely it was to implement Japanese HRM in Job Design.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of these data analyses provide some implications about HRM of Japanese multinational corporations in the U.S. One of the major factors, Employee Influence Mechanism, is absent from the HRM of these establishments. This factor consists of items, such as "bottom-up management," "Ringi (consensus building)," "existence of unions," "Dantai Koushou (collective bargaining)," "Roushi Kyougi (unofficial labor-management discussions)", etc. These items might be measuring the concept of industrial relations between management and labor, rather than HRM. Furthermore, the literature suggests that Japanese companies try to avoid unions because Japanese managers have a very adversarial image of American unions (Kawahito 1990; Suzuki 1991). Under Selection and Promotions, although two items, "promotion based on seniority" and "bonuses," are very characteristic Japanese managerial practices, two other items, "recruitment of college graduates" and "use of temporary workers" are not necessarily unique to Japanese managerial practice. In fact, the

item “bonuses” is under the Reward system in the original questionnaire. Bonuses might be considered as a part of promotion in HRM in U.S. subsidiaries. The third factor, Job Design, includes several practices unique to Japanese HRM, such as “on-the-job training,” “job rotation,” “quality control,” “proactive management,” etc. It is also worth noting that six of seven items are loaded on Job Design, indicating that transfer of job design is salient in U.S. subsidiaries.

Reward System is an important aspect of Japanese HRM, and the uniqueness of these practices is frequently noted in the literature on both Japanese companies in Japan and U.S. subsidiaries (Besser 1996; Kenney and Florid 1995; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1991; Rinehart et al. 1997). Although two hypotheses derived from Institutionalism are supported, the degree of homogeneity in management measured by percentage of whites does not have a significant impact on the Reward System. Resource dependence theory does not explain the transfer of the Reward system of HRM adequately. Only one variable, whether a company is directly invested by a parent company in Japan or indirectly invested via local subsidiary, indicates a partial support for the hypothesis. The items loaded on the Reward System indicate paternalistic aspects of Japanese HRM; only managers who are socialized with these values may attempt to transfer these HRM practices. American workers also prefer salary and wage increases to good benefits (Matsuo 1999), so it might be difficult to transfer this aspect of Japanese reward system to U.S. subsidiaries.

Transfer of HRM in Selection and Promotion presents mixed results. Although a homogeneity hypothesis is supported, a resource dependence theory does not explain the transfer of this aspect of HRM. One of the reasons for these mixed results might be due to the items loaded on Selection and Promotion, which are not necessarily uniquely Japanese HRM. In fact two items also represent American style HRM, therefore a positive impact of the percentage of whites in management on Selection and Promotion might indicate the assimilation process of HRM of U.S. subsidiaries of Japanese corporations rather than the degree of homogeneity of management. From this assimilation perspective, this study also notes that age has a significant impact on Selection and Promotion. The older a U.S. subsidiary, the more likely it is to be assimilated into American style HRM. This assimilation of the management’s values and expectations should be explored in future research.

Transfer of Job Design of Japanese HRM indicates strong support for the resource dependence perspective. As hypothesized, when U.S. subsidiaries are subject to strong parent company control, and when American input in these subsidiaries is less, they are more likely to implement Japanese style HRM in the area of Job Design. One variable under resource dependence theory, whether a parent company directly or indirectly invests in its subsidiary firm, does not explain the transfer of Job Design. Affiliate firms with direct investment are frequently called local subsidiaries, and those with indirect investment via other local subsidiaries are called spioffs. The parent company, local subsidiaries, and spinoffs become interdependent and create a hierarchical control structure across the ocean (Ito and Rose1994; Matsuo 2000; Yoshnida 1987). Aspects of Job Design in Japanese HRM (on-the-job training, rotation of jobs and tasks, quality control, and proactive management) are so distinctive and important to Japanese HRM that these aspects might be transferred to U.S. subsidiaries regardless of this hierarchical control structure. The impact of percentage of Japanese in management on the implementation of Job Design is the only significant variable from a perspective of Institutionalism. This variable is also significant in two other models, suggesting the importance of the presence of a large percentage of Japanese managers in the transfer of Japanese HRM to U.S. subsidiaries.

Although size is used as a control variable, it has a negative impact on the Reward system and Selection and Promotion, and a positive impact on Job Design. Small companies may be less restricted in implementing unique aspects of HRM in their Reward system and Selection and Promotion, considering the items loaded on these factors. These items require substantial financial resources to

implement. On the other hand, unique practices in Job Design might require structured organizational forms, which could only be established by with a large numbers of employees.

Although the results of this study present some implications about the transfer of Japanese HRM to U.S. subsidiaries, they should be interpreted with caution. First, only one quarter of the U.S. subsidiaries sampled for this study were analyzed here, which suggests some bias may be involved in the sample. Second, the cross-sectional data do not provide information on the process of change in HRM in these U.S. subsidiaries. Organizational structures and practices evolve over time and it is very important to examine how HRM has changed with the changing political and economic climate in the U.S. Case studies might be appropriate to study such change in HRM within the context of global change. Finally, the results of this study must be different from those for HRM in Japanese multinational corporations in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, where political, economic, and cultural environments are quite different from those of the U.S. Future research should address these environmental differences, which must have impact on the transfer of HRM.

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