Global Projects: A Conceptual Review on Execution Attitude in Multinational Corporations

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Abstract

Global projects are remarkably emerging all around the world, whether at the mega level such as Oil & Gas projects or at the micro level such as in specific R&D projects. Global Projects can be very complex or can be quite simple, they might involve huge investments or rather be at low budget, they can have a diverse spectrum of stakeholders or a limited community of beneficiaries. Accordingly the definition of Global Projects is actually far from being obvious.

It is suggested that several factors are favoring the emergence of Global projects, such as globalization of business environment, cost driven project execution strategies, national requirements for local presence, dispersion of expertise, joint venture projects and corporate mergers & acquisitions. However Global Projects are thought to be associated with some side effects, such as integration and/or coordination difficulties, statutory and regulatory issues, uncertainty in project controls, and the drawbacks of remoteness and potential cultural differences.

Through this conceptual paper, the gap in knowledge about Global Projects is highlighted and areas for potential academic research are suggested. The paper also proposes a series of research questions that are formulated from the literature review conclusions. The outputs of this conceptual literature review & analysis suggest that there are insufficient research and academic publications written on the subject. The discussions presented in the literature about global projects are actually fragmented and segregated with a clear biased drift toward the focus on cross-cultural aspects, virtual teams and project organization.

It is intended that this conceptual research paper help researchers and projects stakeholders in international business environment better understand the opportunities and threats in global project execution, such as on innovation, on inter-transfer of knowledge and organizational resources and their relation to value creation in multinational corporations.


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1. Introduction and Research Context

According to a report published by the consultancy service at PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2012, the need for major cross-border post-merger integration is growing, resulting from unprecedented degree of change in global business environment. This is driven by the shift in global growth and wealth allocation trends (PwC, 2012). HSBC commercial banking think tank also published a recent report further to conducting the largest global SME (Small to Medium Enterprises) survey of its kind, indicating that 40% of SMEs expect to be operating globally in the next coming years (HSBC, 2011). In fact globalization is...
profundely changing the institutional business environment in MNCs (Multinational Corporations) (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006).

On the other hand MNCs are increasingly facing more challenging and more complex cross-border projects and market competition is becoming remarkably fiercer. Also there are extensive efforts by governments across the globe in encouraging local presence of multinational corporations as a necessary qualification requirement for the execution of attractive mega national projects. Such demands for enhanced local content is actually not quite matching with other qualification requirements such as high level of competency. One of the contemporary applied solutions to those challenges is organizational, in which the project execution plan partially engages remote virtual teams (Hertel et al., 2005) from other operating centers or subsidiaries in various phases of project execution; or in other cases, share a split of scope of work as a sub-project; a process that can be described as global project execution, multicenter project execution, CBC (Cross-border Cooperation), virtual integration by CMC (Computer Mediated Collaboration) using GVT (Global Virtual Teams), internal outsourcing…etc. In addition MNCs are developing resource management systems that cannot simply be reduced to national institutional contexts (Boussebbaa, 2009). Efficient global project execution; necessitating the cooperation between dispersed teams and the application of VPM (Virtual Project Execution), became essential nowadays for MNCs for enhancing the chances of project success (Zhang et al., 2008).

The apparent aim behind applying the multicenter project execution strategy is financial, in an objective to optimize project performance by integrating “low-cost” centers or subsidiaries; however it seems that the decision makers have more in mind in adopting such a project execution strategy; that is, unrevealed corporate level strategic targets such as enhancing local presence in emerging markets while providing competency support from headquarters. Binder (2007) indicated that 90% of large companies are conducting global projects to take advantage of distributed skills, around-the-clock operations and virtual team environments. Powell et al. (2004) argued that virtual teams are revolutionizing workplace allowing for a responsive and flexible execution of global projects by virtual integration, and offering corporations a competitive advantage (Bergiel et al., 2008).

The aim of this conceptual research and literature review is to highlight on the gap in knowledge about the global project execution in relation to multinational corporation managers attitude, by exploring what has been presented in the literature about the drivers, the adopted management processes and their relation with the context. It is also aimed at compiling the available knowledge on this subject from the contemporary literature, in an attempt to raise research questions necessary for exploratory type research on the subject and ultimately enhance the understanding about this essential emerging topic.

| Nomenclature                        |
|-------------------------------------|
| CBC  | Cross-border Cooperation          |
| CMC  | Computer Mediated Collaboration   |
| FAST | Function Analysis System Technique|
| FFC  | Face-to-Face Collaboration        |
| GPMO | Global Project Management Office  |
| GVT  | Global Virtual Teams              |
| ISM  | Interpretive Structural Modelling |
| MNC  | Multinational Corporations        |
| SME  | Small to Medium Enterprise        |
| VPM  | Virtual Project Management        |

2. Terminology and Definitions

Perkmann (2003) defined cross-border cooperation as institutionalized collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities across national borders. Global projects were also defined as a transnational project, a temporary endeavour with a project team made up of individuals from different countries; working in different cultures, business units, and functions; and possessing specialized knowledge for solving a common strategic task as reported and cross-referenced by (Anantatmula and Thomas, 2010). Orr et al. (2011) defines a global project as a temporary endeavour where multiple actors seek to optimize outcomes by combining resources from multiple sites, organizations, cultures, and geographies through a combination of contractual, hierarchical, and network-based modes of organization. It is though that all those proposed definitions are actually missing to mention one of the most important aspects of Global Projects namely the differences in regulatory frameworks. On the other hand some parts of the proposed definitions are lacking proper justification, for instance mentioning that global projects particularly possess specialized knowledge actually requires validations, also mentioning that global projects seek to optimize outcomes is not very accurate; knowing that projects deliver outputs while only programs are concerned with outcomes!

According to Windsor (2007), the terms cross-border, global, and multinational are used generically and do not correspond necessarily to any specific types of enterprises or business strategies. However those terminologies are actually distinctive; for instance a multcentre project may not be necessarily a cross-border project if executed by different operating centers in the same country, and a cross-border project might not be considered as a global project if executed from within two countries with same legislative framework and/or common economic zone (ex: between France and Belgium).
So speaking about cross-border projects mainly indicates differences in rules and regulations between the different operating centers is existing, while speaking about multicenter projects highlights that the project is executed by geographically dispersed centers in contrast to co-localized/centralized projects. On the other hand a project described as multinational indicates that the project context; including the four groups of stakeholders (Bryson, 2004), beneficiaries and sponsors, are actually not limited to one single national identity. Figure 1 shows a Stacked Venn diagram clarifying the concentricity of the different terminologies used in the literature. Accordingly it is suggested that researchers shall pay attention not to confuse the correct terminology and clearly match it with the actual scope of their research.

It is also quite important to differentiate between integration and coordination in global projects execution. Integration is aimed at standardizing work flow procedures between all the involved operating centers; whereas coordination does not look at aligning work procedures but at harmonizing tasks to optimize project performance and achieve project success.

3. Literature Review Methodology

Normally any new research activity is triggered either by intellectual curiosity or by contemporary issue perceived as a problem that needs a solution. In both cases, it is the research imagination (Wright, 1978) which stimulates the researcher to kick-off his research work. The research imagination will then need to be focused and bounded by setting the research scope and boundaries. In this conceptual research, it was decided to only explore what has been addressed in the literature about global projects, with special attention on the execution attitude in MNCs. Thus several related topics were eliminated from the scope of review; for instance global corporate integration in MNCs, global project taxation...etc. were all excluded. The keywords for the search were then selected based on what most obviously relates to the topic of Global Projects. The search for articles and books was an online internet based activity, where several academic electronic databases were consulted (such as Sage Journals, EBSCO...etc.). Also some commercial websites were used to track the book publishing activity (such as Amazon, Google Books ...etc.). The read literature was classified by categorization based on the specific focus in each article, the categories were linked-up to map the ideas and reach conclusions. It was because of the curiosity to understand how the knowledge on the subject has developed, the chronologies of publications were tracked; however for this conceptual paper only the latest up-to-date literature have been presented without listing unnecessary details about superseded literature.

The literature review methodology that was adopted for this conceptual paper is visualized in a FAST Diagram (a graphical representation first conceived by Charles W. Bytheway in 1965) shown in Figure 2, where a graphical display is presented with respect to “how?” and “why?” relationships between the various literatures review phases and steps.

Fig. 2. FAST Diagram on Literature Review Methodology
4. Analysis of Literature & Suggested Areas of Exploration

4.1. Origins and definitions of the topic

4.1.1. Multinational Corporations

Global Projects are mainly executed by Multinational corporations; accordingly this was one of the keywords for the literature search. MNCs have been addressed by authors of academic and best practice books in numerous publications but from different perspectives. The main focus area in books dealing with MNCs is on financial management, financial strategies and financial politics in MNCs in relation to global projects. Shapiro (2013) and Eiteman et al. (2012) elaborated on the financial management specialty while other authors such as (Jensen, 2008) and (Cohen, 2007) focused on the political and strategic side of financial matters in MNCs executing global projects. This trend was almost the same for books dealing with cross-border management in which there was a clear bias towards dealing with commercial (Satterlee, 2009) and legislative (Bartlett and Beamish, 2013) matters. It has been also reported that MNCs are becoming increasingly “footloose” without any true home country of allegiance or regulation (Goerg & Strobl, 2003).

Some books such as (Cullen & Parboteah, 2013) also dealt with general management of MNCs from a strategic approach, and also reserved dedicated sections for discussing the cultural aspects in MNCs. On the other hand, Ungson and Wong (2008) tackled the process of making strategic decisions in MNCs with global context. Other authors such as Carpenter & Sanders (2008) focused on strategic management and strategic leadership which are also considered applicable to the management of MNCs. Cullen & Parboteah (2013) contributed to the research efforts on MNCs in discussing the issue of negotiation and cross-cultural communications in MNCs.

On the other hand, MNCs are nowadays facing additional challenges of benefiting from global knowledge networks and multicultural project teams that are interacting and collaborating across borders using CMC (Soderberg & Nigel, 2002). Windsor (2007) discussed the multidimensional resource allocation problem faced by MNCs and defined four types of politically relevant strategies and their possible interactions. Reisman (2005) also confirmed the existence of extensive literature on inter-firm transfer of organizational resources. Further, it has been noticed that very few publications looked at the human aspects and human factors in relation to MNCs. (Dowling et al., 2007) did actually address this topic but only from an international human resources management perspective, as did Tayeb (2005).

In their book about the nine schools of project management, Turner et al. (2010) argued that organizations need governance and that its governance needs to be linked to the governance of parent organization; which is actually applicable for subsidiary-headquarters relationship in MNCs in the context of globally executed projects.

4.1.2. Global, Cross-Border and Multicenter Projects

It has been noticed that very little publications in the literature explored the subject of global projects (Ainamo et al., 2010). For instance Anantatmula & Thamos (2010) did a breakthrough by conducting a survey study using ISM (Interpretive Structural Modeling) to identify the common factors that are considered important for global projects success. On the other hand, Kardes et al. (2013) identified through his research studies some key characteristics of global mega projects including failure and success factors and accordingly suggested a risk management framework.

When it comes to books published on global projects, multicenter projects or cross-border projects, the return key displays very few results; indicating the scarcity of books publishing activities on this topic. It is suggested that one of the appreciated efforts in book publishing on the subject is the Global Project Management Handbook: Planning, Organizing and Controlling International Projects by (Cleland & Gareis, 2006). This book illustrates on the project management techniques that can be applied for global project execution. Also Lientz and Rea (2003) have discussed global projects in their book but from a complexity perspective.

Kerzner (2010) was also one of the very few who published on this topic. In his book Project Management – Best Practices Achieving Global Excellence, he discussed the issue of how corporations are integrating project management into their strategic global projects execution with projects characterized by distant and diverse project execution task forces. Another attempt to write on the subject was by (Binder, 2007), in which the author indicated that large multinational companies are taking good advantage of virtual integration in global projects execution.

4.1.3. Global Virtual Teams

GVTS are the core elements in global project execution, involving cross-border cooperation and multicenter virtual engagement between various team members and groups in a project. Accordingly the research on global projects shall always be associated with a clear link to global virtual teams.

Nader et al. (2009) reported that literature related to virtual teams revealed a lack of depth in the definitions. However it is thought that the definition given by (Powell et al., 2004) is quite elaborately descriptive: “Groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks”. Even though until the year 2000, it has been reported that there had been little research on the multicultural aspect of virtual teams (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) and then the same was repeated and reconfirmed after eight years by
(Badrinarayanan and Arnett, 2008), indicating that many areas of virtual teams have not been examined, Mateev & Nelson (2004) indicated that a substantial research has been focused on cross-cultural communication in relation to virtual teams. It has been also noticed that most of the research on virtual teams was following a quantitative research approach. It has been also indicated that an increasing number of CBC initiatives have been subject to case studies in the literature (Perkmann, 2003).

It has also been reported in the literature further to extensive studies and research reviews, that researchers did not really differentiate and segregate properly between the individual and cultural level measure in their research work (Kirkman et al., 2006), which would have an implication on the results of their research work. Accordingly the research on virtual teams shall necessitate non-association between a particular individual and his general cultural orientation. Bal et al. (1999) argued that the discussion on virtual teaming is not limited to the mere application of CBC; it actually requires the synergistic attention to process and teaming factors.

It might be expected that the performance of virtual teams that are usually characterized by cultural differences (Staples & Zhao, 2006) is adversely affected by cultural diversity associated with differences in attitudes and behaviors. However, Mockaitis (2012) argued that cultural differences are not concealed by virtual means of communication. He added that the results of his studies suggested that a collectivist orientation is likely to adapt to global virtual team processes, pointing at the fact that the particularity of an individual is much more influential than the cultural aspects. Moreover, Lewicki et al. (2006) argued that based on some research studies, it was concluded that higher trust levels are even achieved by less prior contact, favoring the concept of interpersonal confidence between virtual team members, minimizing relationship conflicts (Langfred, 2007). It was also reported that over time, virtual teams develop a solid cohesion regardless of their cultural differences (Randel, 2003). On the other hand Katz (1982) was the first to argue that beyond a certain level; trust can have negative effects on virtual team performance, acting as a barrier to new ideas (Edelman et al., 2004) and creativity (Sethi et al., 2001).

4.2. Major issues and debates about the subject

Kerzner (2014) argued that MNCs shall include strategic planning for project management in global projects. Global project management approach must focus more on a framework, templates, checklists, forms and guidelines, rather than rigid policies and procedures to assure that the approach can be used equally well in all remote teams in subsidiaries, sub-contractor and for all clients (Kerzner, 2014). Rice et al. (2007) indicated that it is necessary to adopt formal procedures and structured processes to increase the effectiveness of global project execution by virtual teams. Turner et al. (2010) added that an organization may in fact have several methodologies for different types of projects.

Gressgard (2010) suggested that virtual teamwork is an important form of work in modern organizations because of its capability of meeting the emerging demands of new business environments. Ritter & Gemunden (2003) confirmed that by indicating that network competencies are crucial to work process innovation success in corporations.

Even though practitioners are starting to highlight on the subject, academic researchers still did not elaborate on the establishment and operation of GPMO (Global Project Management Office) in MNCs, the special project management techniques and tools necessary for the successful implementation of global projects and an effective performance management mechanism (PwC, 2012), to identify areas that require changes and initiate corrective actions (Parker et al., 2013).

It has been also reported in the literature about the observed increase in coordination costs of global projects due to the projects becoming more multicultural, multi-organizational, and multi-tiered (Ahrne, 2014). The results of further studies show that the main organizational challenges are managing the external stakeholders in the global project; the local government in the country, local content demand, local authorities, local industry, and lack of support from the base organization and management (Aarseth et al., 2014).

4.3. Key concepts, theories and ideas

Financial and competitiveness advantage has been reported in numerous publications for executing projects globally in MNCs, by (Rice et al., 2007), (Bergiel et al., 2008) and (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2007). The advantages of having virtual teams in global projects are summarized and tabulated by Nader et al. (2009). One of the advantages is to conveniently unite experts in highly specialized field (Rosen et al., 2007). On the other hand, the ability to execute projects using virtual team and virtual integration gives a clear competitiveness advantage to MNCs that require cross-functional and cross-boundary skilled inputs (Lee-Kelly & Sankey, 2008). The disadvantages were also listed Nader et al. (2009), reporting a main drawbacks such as the lack of FFC (Face to-Face Collaboration) allows for less conceptual understating of problems (Rice et al., 2007), communication break-downs (Rosen et al., 2007) and variety of practices due to work process diversity (Chudoba et al., 2005). It has been argued that an effective project management shall follow an informational management approach (Czuchry and Yassin, 2003).

Prior research has explored risk factors associated with global project execution; however there is a lack in the literature in investigating whether reconfiguring project networks might mitigate such risks (Kenny et al., 2010). On the other hand, Aaltonen & Sivonen (2009) reported; based on their qualitative analysis of four case studies, five different types of response strategies against global projects risks, namely: adaptation strategy, compromising strategy, avoidance strategy, dismissal strategy, and influence strategy.
4.4. Issues not traced in the Literature

Further to the literature review and analysis, it has been noticed that global projects are poorly addressed in the literature (Orr et al., 2011) and that the existing knowledge on the subject of global project execution is segregated and fragmented. The topic is discussed from separate perspectives without bridging and linking all the aspects of the execution of global projects. For instance, when the literature is addressing virtual teams, there is a clear focus on the cross-cultural aspects in handling cultural differences that are assumed to be sources of conflict and miscommunication (Sodeerberg & Nigel, 2002) and team work performance (Hosseini et al., 2013), with complete ignorance on how the virtual team organization is structured, why it was decided to have a virtual work in the first place, the leadership model in such modern form of work (except very few and recent publications such as the one done by Hosseini et al, (2013)) or even the issue of quality of work perceived by GPMA and potential rework that might be associated with perceived low quality.

Even though not traced in the literature, it is also suggested that one of the main advantages of virtual teams is the ability of assuring local presence in needed locations, for example to satisfy local regulations for nationalization of local subsidiaries of MNCs. On the other hand, it has been reported that headquarters in MNCs seek to organize and integrate the firm by imposing on subsidiaries its home grown rationality and practices (Boussebaa, 2009), inhibiting the enhancement of local presence. It is also noted that the contractual aspects of having virtual teams in global projects in a form of internal outsourcing/subcontracting has not been discussed in the literature. Also the relationship model between the GPMA and virtual teams in such a contractual working environment with the potential rise of conflict has not been explored. The areas of research are illustrated in Figure 3, in which each star proposes the need for further research studies on those sub-topics.

![Fig.3. Suggested Research Areas (highlighted with a star symbol)](image)

5. Proposed Research Questions

It is suggested that further research is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding on the subject combining rigor and pragmatism by conducting in-depth conceptual data and information analysis from various relevant resources. As indicated by Anantatmula & Thomas (2010), depending on the type of industry in which the global project is executed, the relative importance of the performance factors may vary. It is also suggested that cross-data analysis shall be performed to trace a chain of evidence and to try investigating possibilities for generalization.

Listed below is a list of proposed research questions which are thought to be necessary for enhancing the knowledge and scientific understanding about the issue of global project execution in a global context:

- What are the drivers for implementing a multicenter/ global project execution strategy?
- How does the decision making process go in choosing to execute a project globally with the engagement of multicenter and/or cross-border subsidiaries and/or subcontractors?
- How do the decision makers anticipate creating value by the implementation of a global/ cross-border project execution strategy?
- Who are the actual decision makers in multinational corporations in this process?
- What are the common aspects that are shared by all contemporary globally executed projects?
- What patterns and practices must virtual teams follow to achieve effectiveness in global projects execution?
- What are the success criteria and success factors for such a global project execution strategy?
- How is the commitment level of subsidiaries managers and their remote teams towards the overall project success affected by the context?
- How is the performance of global project execution controlled and measured?
- How are the hierarchy, authority levels and reporting lines decided and managed between the corporate management and the project management organizations of global projects?
• What are the adopted special project management processes, techniques and tools that are necessary for assuring a successful implementation of global projects execution?
• How is the context of a global project affecting the adopted cross-border project management processes?
• How are the requirements of local responsiveness for subsidiaries managed in global projects?
• What are the managerial prescriptions; grounded in micro level research, for proper execution of global projects?
• How is the global project execution strategy driving the inter-transfer of organizational resources in Multinational Corporations?
• How is the global project execution strategy affecting creativity and innovation in Multinational Corporations?

6. Suggested Research Philosophy & Research Paradigm

Being an exploratory subject, it is suggested that researchers follow a grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in a structured approach (Partington, 2000) by conducting a series of data exploration and information investigation from various data and information resources in similar and contrasting contexts. It is proposed that the unit of analysis be all the parameters that are related to the conception and implementation of the global project execution. It is suggested that data which are extracted from interviews be audio-taped and that the interviews be unstructured. The interviews will have to be in-depth; that is, of long duration and spontaneous allowing questions to be raised momentarily as they come in the researcher mind with the conversation flow. In addition, unstructured questions allow for exploring areas in the topic which are not thought about by the researcher before, especially because the topic has not been addressed well in the literature and includes many unexplored elements.

The data will have then to be reduced in different stages; in each stage a progress toward a higher level of theoretical abstraction which is achieved by explicating relationships between categories and sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher will have to map multiple sources of evidence to assure construct validity of his data and use as well the constant comparative qualitative analysis in which the researcher can establish a chain of evidence through consecutive case studies contributing to the construct validity.

It is assumed that data exploration will be dominating on information investigation in this research because the knowledge on the subject is still at the early conceptual stage. Data will have then to be converted into information by the researcher but keeping a social constructivist epistemological approach. In this epistemological approach the reality is considered as socially constructed and might change with the change in the social construct that is affected by both the researched context and by the researcher’s context as well.

7. Contribution to Knowledge

Being a contemporary subject with so many mega projects being executed by globally dispersed execution teams and so many small to medium projects are very likely to adopt such an execution strategy in the coming few years (HSBC, 2011), the research in this subject is considered to be essential.

By successfully answering the research questions through illustrative data exploration, cross-data analysis and inductive information bridging, it is supposed that a recognized contribution to the knowledge will be achieved. In fact, the anticipated contribution to knowledge at this stage will be mainly in the generation of theories and propositions on the subject rather than testing propositions and validating assumptions. It is also expected that the investigation on the subject; in an effort to try answering the research questions, will also trigger even more research questions on additional matters on the topic.

The research on the subject will pave the way for understanding the particularity of global projects and what distinguishes them from non-global projects. It is anticipated that by understating the drivers, the decision makers, the management processes, the organization, the success criteria, the success factors, the interrelationships and human factors all in relation to the context in globally executed projects, managerial prescriptions and best practices can then be recommended for optimizing project performance and enhancing the chances for overall project success.

8. Conclusion

The research on the topic of Global Projects and the execution attitude of multinational corporations for such type of projects is actually at the very early conceptual stages with no existing theories which might suggest even a preliminary model. Moreover the definitions on the subject are scarce and actually those which are proposed would essentially need to be validated and justified.

However it has been also noticed that there is a recent interest in dealing with the subject of global and cross-border project execution by MNCs from a scholar perspective with few new books being published in the recent years. The interest in researching global projects is also starting to emerge among the academics and researchers in the field of project management to explore the unrevealed knowledge in this domain of management sciences. It is proposed that the research shall be initiated starting from the roots, that is, to fundamentally determine what are the characteristics that differentiate global projects from other non-global projects and agree on a basic validated definition for such type of projects.
It is then advised that the success criteria and success factors for the execution of global projects be determined, then compared and contrasted with those related to non-global projects. This shall be examined by assessment of benefits realization, global & local regulations, project scope, global & local governance, project funding and cross border resource management which are all supposed to be the core to project implementation success (PwC, 2012). Finally it is suggested that the special project management techniques that are being adopted and/or recommended for successful implementation of global project execution are investigated, as global project execution is not simply following a project plan to completion, but rather it is an intricate commingling of management across all project parameters (PwC, 2012).

It is thought that the research methodology to be adopted shall follow a grounded theory approach. The fundamental reasons for choosing such a theory-building approach is the lack of existing theories on the subject and the exploratory nature of the research questions (what & how) as well, both of which are the determinant factors for choosing grounded theory-building approach as a research methodology. The research paradigm shall follow a social constructivist epistemological approach in which reality is considered as socially constructed and might change with the change in the social construct that is affected by both the researched context and by the researcher’s context as well.

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