



E-learning contribution to the building of a multi-generational workplace learning community in an academic library: observations drawn from practice

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Abstract:

Staff in Italian academic libraries come from different walks of life and the same is at the University of Trieste. Though the situation is changing, at the moment not all staff are qualified librarians: differences in age, education and job stability do not help create the sense of belonging to a community, where information is shared and circulated so that the community itself learns. This learning process can be expected to cause an enhancement of awareness and of service standards.

Staff development and training can contribute to spread a sense of belonging among library workers, thus facilitating the integration process; yet attending courses draws human resources from other tasks.

The recent development of an e-learning platform as part of our University services has been taken as an opportunity to develop a different mode of delivering courses: blended learning allows learners to participate more actively than the conventional class, and to stretch the learning experience over a longer period of time. The question is whether this will really contribute to creating a community: we expect some resistances, especially in the response from less skilled and older workers, who might feel intimidated by the new means of communicating. Tutor support and

careful induction sessions will help make everyone more comfortable with the new technology by showing the opportunities it opens up.

The e-learning platform has already been used for a needs assessment survey where respondents seemed to appreciate the tool and to deliver specific courses on the platform use. The results of these experiences will show whether the initial assumption – that E-learning can contribute to creating workplace learning communities- is true. In case the experience is not as successful as expected, it will be possible to draw a lesson as to what aspects have been neglected and what could be changed in the future.

The present paper draws from an ongoing experience at the Library System of the University of Trieste (Italy). Building on previous experiences (Fontanin, Švab, 2007; Fontanin, 2008), the plan was to try and improve the quality of staff training by means of the University Learning Management System (LMS) and to build, through blended learning, a community of practice among multigenerational staff with different education and background.

In order to understand the problem, it is necessary to give a short description of the library staff situation at this University, which could also apply to many other universities in Italy.

In Trieste, the University Library System is composed of 12 different libraries, which in many cases originated directly within faculties and departments, and grew up independently from each other, until they were grouped under the umbrella of a single System. Some libraries are still outside the System, but all of them are due to be blended into it in a couple of years.

Before the start of the Library service (later transformed into Library System) books and periodicals at single libraries were mostly purchased by administrative staff and circulated by generic staff. Librarians and library assistants were actually employed for cataloguing and other services, but they worked at a central level: therefore most libraries were very small, tailored to faculty needs and hardly manned by professional staff. When the need for a simplification and unification of the system started to be felt, many libraries converged into the centralized service, and most of the staff followed their library. Therefore at present the Library System staff have varied professional background and education; moreover, their idea of the library service varies considerably according to their previous experience and often it is the older generations who lack specific LIS education. On the other hand, this generation understands much more clearly the way the University is managed and organized, and is more in touch with faculty. All these people are supposed to work together with more qualified librarians, but of course it is difficult to build for them all a common base of values and aims.

Another important issue in determining differences among staff of different generations is the development of the job market in Italy, especially as regards jobs in the cultural heritage and library area: university budgetary cuts and the general economic framework have made it increasingly difficult to find a steady job in this field in recent years. On the other hand, the founding of LIS faculties and the consequent qualification of librarians since the 1990s, offered a low-demand market a large number of qualified professionals. Many qualified librarians nowadays do not work directly for libraries, but are employed by cooperatives and societies which offer externalized services to academic libraries; alternatively they are offered a fixed-time contract. The paradox therefore is that University staff might be composed of both highly qualified but precarious workers and older employees who drew their LIS skills simply from practice.

This situation of course does not make collaboration easier, yet working collaboratively would be highly advisable within a system which delivers common services in different service points, and, being scattered around the University campuses, makes it more difficult for people to meet and work together. Building on a sense of belonging to the same organization could also help overcome the problems related to managing, training and motivating workforce belonging to different generations; these problems have been widely researched in contemporary business literature (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Appelbaum, Serena & Shapiro, 2005; Polanco Licata 2007) and work values seem to constitute the most significant difference among them. As Polanco Licata (2007) points out:

an understanding of the work values of workers today is significant, regardless of whether differences among generations exist (Polanco Licata, 2007)

Work values can be defined as an individual's belief toward work preferences (Kraimer, 1997): in the case in object we can empirically assume that these workers do have different work values, due to their differences in age but also to their different employment conditions, professional experience and education.

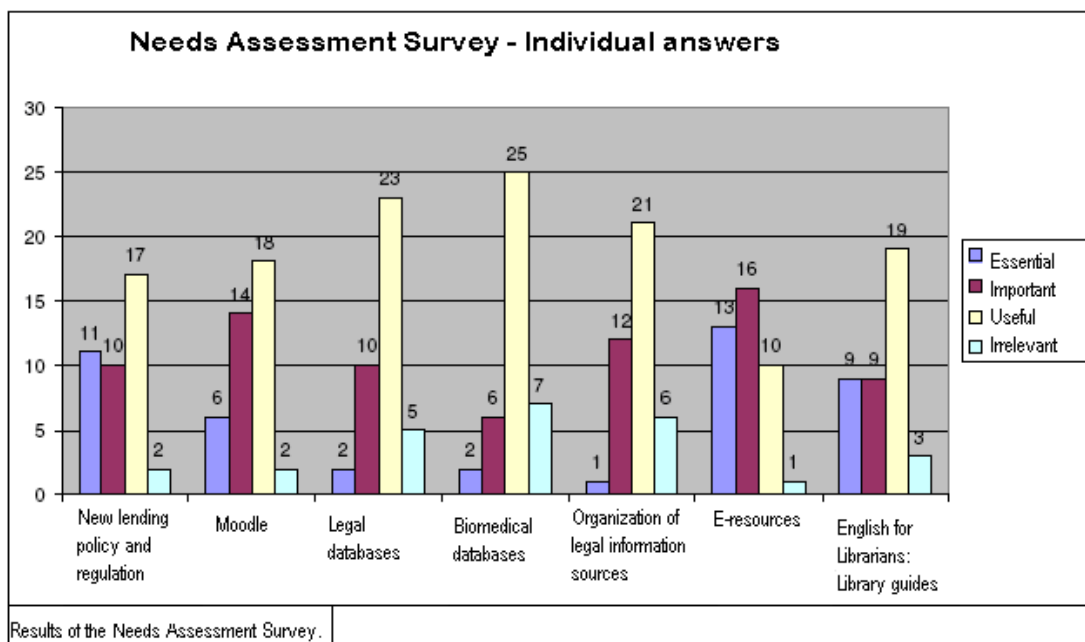
Bearing all this in mind, at the end of 2008 a new staff development program was started. Staff development planning can be a very demanding activity, but if carefully planned and successfully delivered it can build up the basis for continuous individual improvement (Snyder & Sanders, 1978) and for the growth of a sense of participation and belonging to a community. The university had been putting up a Learning Management System (Moodle) and two librarians had been specialising in e-learning courses, therefore it was decided to use the platform to deliver the courses. The plan never envisaged a totally online scenario, rather it veered on blended learning as a means to enhance the sense of belonging to a community.

By integrating learning into daily work activities, rather than segregating learning into something that happens off-site, blended learning can help library staff more quickly apply new skills to their daily work. Blended learning also provides opportunities to provide follow-up learning activities and review of learning materials that can boost retention and offer additional resources for learners needing additional help. (Staley, 2007)

In order to start with the planning, first of all a needs assessment survey was delivered through the e-learning platform. Since the project started at the end of 2008, the results needed to be gathered quickly because it was necessary to sketch a plan for 2009 workplace learning activities. The choice made was to select some members of staff according to their previous experience in the staff training field and interview them about the general training needs; consequently a series of proposals for course subjects were elaborated and on these the participants were asked to express their judgement as to the relevance of the proposed courses.

Apart for this, participants were also asked to make their own proposals for subjects they would like to see included into future staff development programs: they will be used as a basis for proposals for the 2010 in-house training plan.

About 60% of the total staff registered and voted. The low participation rate could have been determined by scarce confidence in technology on the one hand, and by the low level of involvement of certain staff categories on the other. Administrative staff was a very small minority of the respondents (just 4 of them); also workers of the oldest generation participated in small percentage, though larger than the administrative staff. This could be read as an example of differing work values and a low involvement level of certain categories: in fact, among the respondents there were mostly people in charge of library services and all of the members of the IT. On the whole, people with lower qualifications and/or lower IT skills were a minority of the respondents, independently from their working role, but there were workers who did not reply because they did not think the survey was directed to them: among these administrative staff, members of older staff and younger workers with a fixed-time contract.



Surprisingly enough in this environment, among the courses which were judged as most interesting for the staff stood out the course on the Learning management system: “*Moodle: how to use the tool to attend blended learning courses*”; probably most of the people who actually managed to get to the e-learning platform were interested in the possibility to use it for their workplace learning.

If the learning experience is based on practice, and the people involved are given the chance to interact actively in a more neutral environment, like the Learning Management System, they might be more motivated and ready to exchange experiences and to learn from each other, thus contributing to building a community.

Another advantage of this mode is that it allows to stretch the learning experience over time without interfering with manning of library desks, as online asynchronous activities can be done during breaks between other tasks.

For these reasons the starting point was the tool necessary to deliver this sort of instruction, therefore up to now courses on Moodle have actually been delivered to the whole staff at two levels: one lasting 10 hours (4 in class and 6 online) whose object was to teach people how to use the system to attend courses, and the higher level (8 hours in class, 12 online) aimed for people who intend to use the system as teachers.

The first course involved 58 people who were supposed to learn to use the platform as learners. All of the staff were invited, regardless of their age, their working experience, their education and their tasks: it was a good opportunity to put all of them together and to experiment collaborative learning among people from different generations. Of the people invited, 2 did not participate and 3 did not complete their online work, but the rest were very positive about their experience: of the 21

between administrative and older staff, almost all –except for 3- decided to take the end-of-course voluntary test, and all of them passed.

Prerequisites were very basic: the ability to operate the most common computer systems and to use a browser. Participants were shown how to interact with a collaborative course: how to write messages in forums and how to manage the reception of these messages in their mailbox, how to upload a file on the platform and how to use a wiki. Apart from teaching them to use these tools, face-to-face lessons tended to show them how to organize their time when learning online, because after the face-to-face class they were supposed to spend 6 hours online in the following three weeks doing the activities required. From a random glimpse of their responses in the forums it can be noticed that the majority was enthusiastic about the new tool, yet some declared that they were looking forward to using it for “*practical*” learning. Though the course was based on “learning by doing”, the lack of a problem-focused environment was perceived as a drawback; as Merrill (2002) puts it, “*Learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in solving real-world problems*”.

One of the tasks they were assigned was to open up a new post on the forum. The tutor did not insist on specific topics, he was mainly interested in checking that they were able to perform the action and to manage forum subscriptions; some of the participants at this point used the forum to ask practical questions about working issues. In particular one of the questions regarded a new financial regulation, and was raised by a colleague with administrative tasks who had taken part two months previously to a course for administrative staff on similar issues. The colleague did not address the instructor of the previous course, and did not even write to the internal library system mailing list; she probably felt safe enough to share her problem with other colleagues in a protected environment, and took advantage of the task to apply it to practical situations.

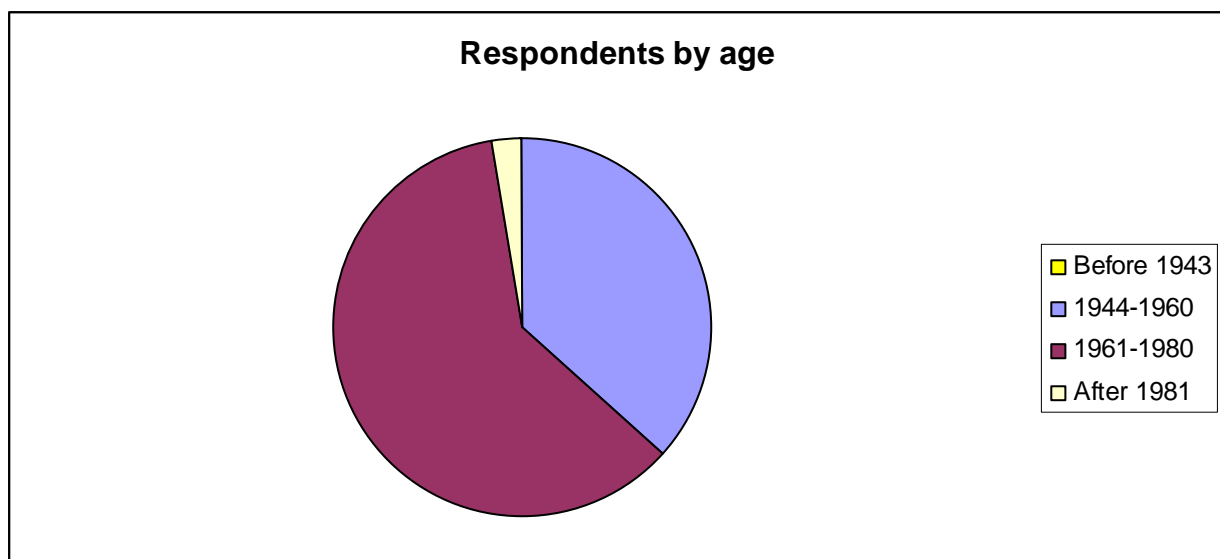
This is precisely what the project was aiming at: delivering courses followed by online activity, thus allowing people to have a place where they could ask for information and advice when, back to work, they faced real problems connected with the skills demonstrated during face-to-face classes. There they could find the material they needed, meet other colleagues and answer their questions in a collaborative environment, and start building a community of co-workers on specific interests. Of course this single episode does not mean that this result was achieved, it is just a quote and must be taken as such, but it means that it is possible to create a collaborative environment among people who are not so used at collaborating, or who in many cases had not had the opportunity of working together before.

Soon people who felt more confident with the tool started helping other participants to solve their problems with the system and to answer their doubts: this happened most naturally and there was no sign that belonging to different generations affected answers or questions.

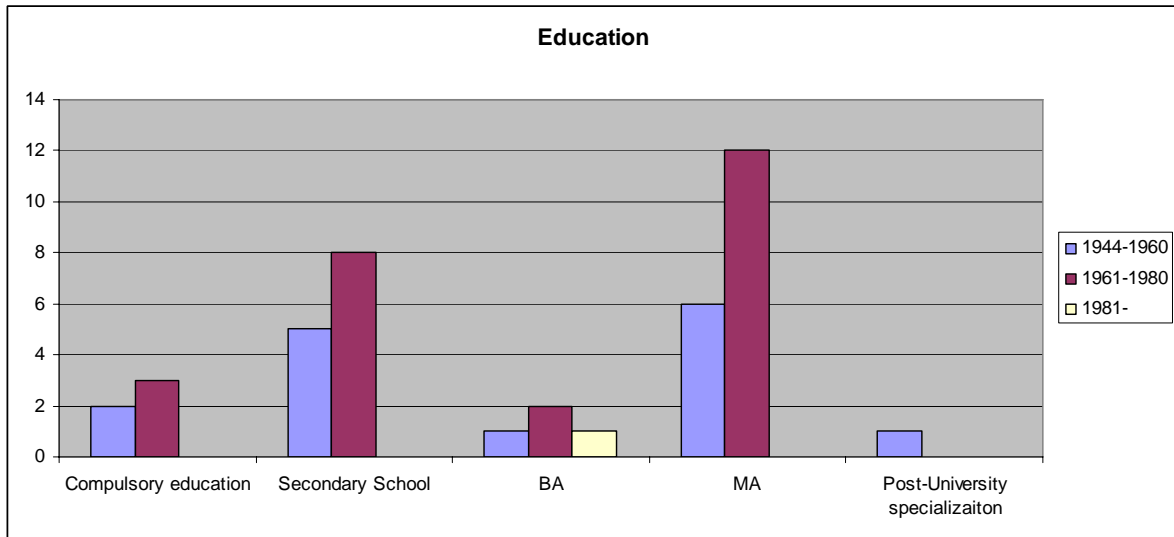
At the end of this first experience, participants were asked to fill in a feedback with the purpose of gathering data about their age and background and their perception of the learning experience. Admittedly, it will prove more fruitful to collect their impressions later on, when courses based on real problems will be held, yet, as this experience was a work in progress, it was interesting at this stage to understand whether their perception of the experience was positive enough.

The first five questions regarded personal data: age, professional area; education, how long they had been working for the Library System. The age categories proposed were 4, following those sketched by Polanco Licata (2007): the Matures (born before 1943), the Baby Boomers (born 1944-1960); generation X (1961-1980); generation Y (born after 1981); professional areas included librarians, IT, administrative staff, and others.

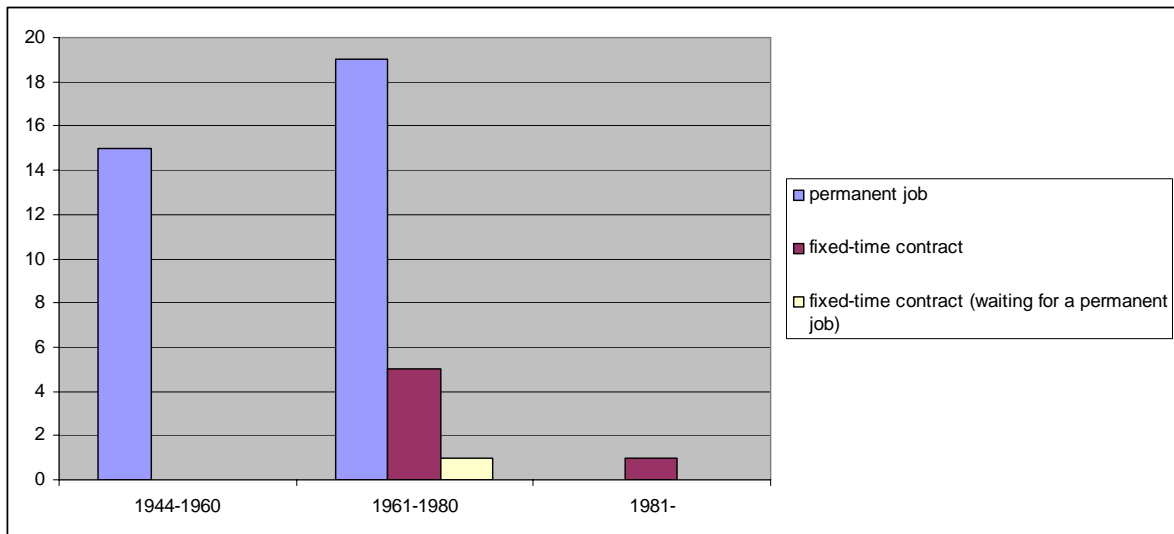
Not everyone responded, but the percentage was much higher than on the previous survey (79% of the people who took the course): probably the awareness of the system had increased, in fact some people who had not even registered for the needs assessment survey in October, did it this time. The largest majority of the course participants, 25 people, belonged to Generation X (born between 1960 and 1980), and 17 were born between 1944 and 1960. Only one of the workers belonged to the so-called Generation Y, and was a fixed-time worker.



It might be interesting to take a look at the education data. The chart refers to the total number of individual responses broken down by age: if we look at the percentage the results vary slightly, anyway it is indisputable that the average level of Generation X is higher than that of Baby Boomers.



The next chart shows how working conditions vary: in the case of Baby Boomers we have a 100% of permanent positions, whereas Generation X includes a good number of precarious working contracts (about 20%), and the only representative of Generation Y who answered the feedback is employed with a fixed-time contract.

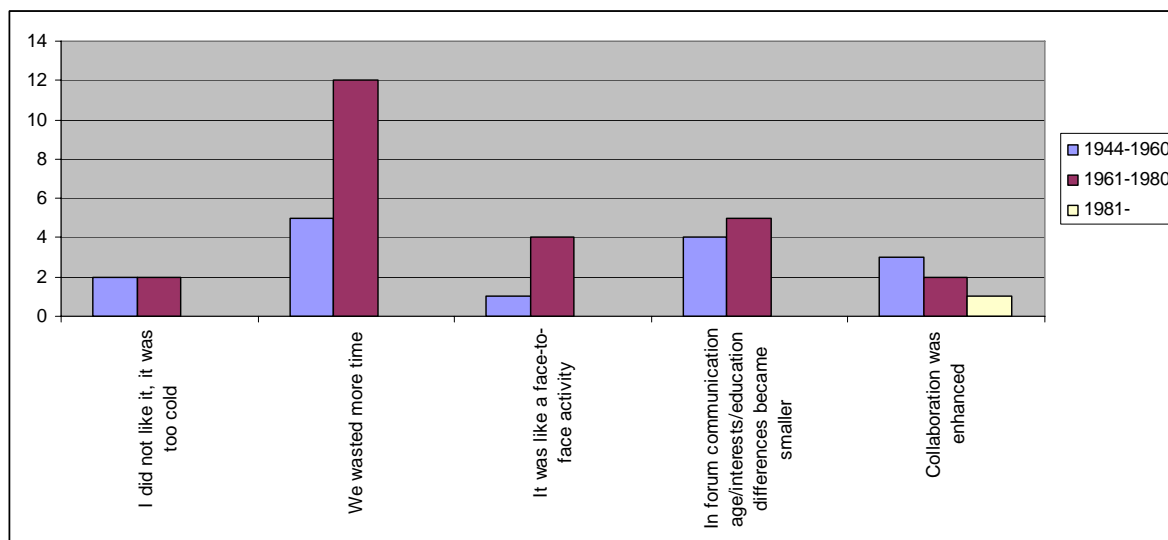


As long as it regards their perception of the relation to their colleagues and of the online learning experience, it must be said that almost the totality of the participants declared that they are not normally influenced by age difference in professional relations, as long as they are dealing with common issues. This fact seems to underline that sharing a common goal seems to be more important than sharing other personal values.

Another question regarded their perception of the relation to their colleagues during online activity. Here 50% of the Generation X reported that they felt they wasted more time, whereas, surprisingly enough, Baby boomers seemed to be less worried of wasting time and gave more

varied responses: they seemed to be very open to new means of communicating, and less afraid of wasting time communicating online.

Anyway, 21% of the total respondents pointed out that in online communication differences in age, education and interests were perceived less strongly than in conventional classes.



The high rate of people declaring they felt they wasted more time communicating online could be due to the fact that the object of this course was to learn to use the tool in itself, and application to real situations was lacking; it will be interesting to observe whether the implementation of blended learning courses on “real” subjects will bring along an enhanced collaboration among staff.

The first example was a course on Electronic resources management, which was to explain the nature of e-resources and the way they are purchased, taking into consideration how acquisition choices influence the use of the resources and how these resources interact among themselves and with the library catalogue. The subject attracted 27 participants of different ages and different qualifications; the discussion during the face-to-face lecture had to be limited because of the vastness of the subject, therefore participants used the online environment to ask all the questions they had not had time to ask in class, and the forum discussion was lively. This could happen because the course was carried out collaboratively and the tutor in the first place encouraged online communication.

It is not clear whether in this case we could speak of a proper community of practice, yet “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1999), and the number of posts in the forums and the number of people who completed the tasks assigned showed that the participants were very active regardless of age and job tasks.

The role of the tutor was fundamental in building up a collaborative environment: materials which are simply uploaded on an e-learning platform, be they audio or video files, or simply text documents, do not make the learning experience interesting and collaborative. Collaboration passes through the tutor's assistance and planning, the tasks set, the way they are regularly controlled and marked, and above all the use of the forum to encourage, set tasks and answer doubts encouraging the participants to do the same.

Age differences may be overcome thanks to a careful course design and, above all, by choosing a topic which interests all participants because it is connected to their job. In the above mentioned post-course survey 90% of the participants declared that age difference does not influence their professional relations as long as these take place on a common ground and 29% of them declared that communication during the course was easier. Putting these two facts together, it might be inferred that exchange of information and collaboration among colleagues are enhanced when treating common subjects, and that the blended environment – for a considerable part of them – might favour communication even more.

Paradoxically, it could turn out to be easier to communicate online for people who have never met than for people who have been working together for years: learning to communicate online could be seen as pointless extra work. A careful planning could help overcome this problem and the advantages of working at one's own pace and of having a place where specific questions can be asked and answered will help build up a community of practice and consequently this community will learn.

The conclusions we can draw from this experience are that blended workplace instruction could actually be an asset when trying to build cohesion among a multigenerational workforce; yet it is necessary that the learning experience is carefully planned and the themes treated are related to work experience, because the thing which draws different workers together above the rest seems to be solving real-world problems. The advantage of blended courses could be that participants are given a place where they can meet and discuss their ideas for a longer period of time, and, most importantly of all, when they are back at work and can put in practice what they learnt in theory. Through this process, they start building up a core of common values, which might help overcome age differences.

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