



Navigating talent challenges of today while building a profession for tomorrow

Host: **Burt Rea**, managing director, US Culture Transformation leader, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guests: **Lara Abrash**, chair and CEO, Deloitte & Touche LLP
Steve Kimble, chairman and CEO, Deloitte Tax

Burt Rea: Welcome to Capital H, the podcast where we explore the latest trends and developments to make work better for humans and humans better at work.

I'm your host, Burt Rea, a member of Deloitte's Human Capital consulting practice, leader of our US Culture transformation offering, and host of Deloitte's Human Capital HR Executive Dbriefs series.

We've all seen how technology, globalization, increasing regulation, and the pandemic are reshaping the way people work, learn, collaborate, and lead. Organizations are rethinking their talent strategies at all stages of the employee lifecycle and are looking to

the open talent economy to find better ways to attract, access, develop, and retain top talent.

In today's discussion, I'll be joined by two Deloitte colleagues of mine, Lara Abrash and Steve Kimble. Lara leads our US Audit here at Deloitte, and Steve leads our US Tax practice.

We'll discuss how the pandemic has changed how they meet the needs of the workforce today and how they plan to evolve in the future. We'll also dive into how Deloitte is working to move the needle for diversity, equity, and inclusion within the accounting and tax professions.

Stay tuned for more.

Burt Rea: Hi everyone, this is your host, Burt Rea, and I'm excited today to be joined by two of my colleagues at Deloitte; Lara Abrash and Steve Kimble.

Lara is the chair and chief executive officer of Deloitte's US Audit and Assurance business and is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the business, including the execution of its quality, innovation, growth, and talent strategies. She is also a member of Deloitte's US Executive Committee. Welcome, Lara.

Lara Abrash: Thanks for having me.

Burt Rea: Steve Kimble is the chair and chief executive officer of Deloitte's US Tax business. Steve leads all US tax-related services and operations from impacts of ever-changing global and federal regulations, to technology advancements and digital transformation, as well as all facets of the tax practice for the future of work, and the shifting landscape of today's talent models, and the expectations of today's workforce. Steve is also a member of Deloitte's US Executive Committee. Welcome, Steve.

Steve Kimble: Well, it's great to be here, Burt, and thank you for having us.

Burt Rea: Lara, Steve, it's such a great pleasure to have you both together to share your thoughts on how you see the world of work changing. We used to talk about the future of work, but I think it's now, we're in it.

This unique time that we're in with the confluence of emerging from the pandemic, navigating this now, future that we're in, the idea of hybrid work—a concept that we didn't even recognize a couple years ago, as well as what is being referred to as the great resignation or the big quit. And with millions of professionals making significant lifestyle and career changes or choosing to leave the workforce altogether.

So, Lara, I'd love to start with you; in your role, what opportunities do you see to evolve our talent models and meet the needs of the workforce today and looking to the future?

Lara Abrash: Well, I love how you started with the future is now. I think what we've learned in the last set of years is the pace of change that organizations and quite honestly, our employees, people that are joining the workforce—what they're seeing is the most active period of change. And there's a lot of debate about what people want in their lives. On top of all the things you talked about, there are changes around what people want, and we are seeing a confluence of those pressures coming together.

So, a couple things come to mind. As a leader of a business here at Deloitte, I used to think about my role is overseeing the strategy and that's what you just said I do. But quite honestly, in the last four years, it's really become my role as I now refer to myself as the chief talent officer, because if you can't get the talent equation right, all of the other things that you're trying to do, unless you're in a business that's void to people, it's just not going to come together.

And so, spending a disproportionate amount of time on how do we evolve what our people want—and this is a really big change. Four, eight, ten years ago, employees didn't quite have this hold on employers, and you see it today. You see it through the great resignation. Now, there's this concept of quiet quitting which means I'm working, but I'm not really working. I'm not going to put this extra effort in.

So, as you think about what we see—I'm generally an optimist. I really think it's going to start with creating an environment that has your people thrive. It's not just about KPIs, like how many people are here or how many people have left the organization, but this workforce of the future needs to thrive.

They need to know they're part of an organization that cares about them, that they're open to different ways of working, which hybrid is, but also, open to their own development and advancement and they see it. Our people, I'll say at Deloitte, are thriving and asking for flexibility, they're looking for different experiences.

The needs are different, but there's a real tension change in the last several years that are very different from probably many decades, which is we've got to be geared up for delivering that experience and focusing on what do we do to create the best outcomes for this next generation of people? And in turn, have them feel like this is a place that I want to be.

The average person today may not want to stay at a company for 30 years. That may have been what happened over the last several decades. People today may want to have different jobs three years at a time

over a 30-year lifetime, and can an employer actually provide those experiences rather than lose someone?

The mindset is really changing to really what do you do for those people so that they feel that this is the place that they want to be?

Burt Rea: It really takes it up a notch in terms of the job of managing talent, and how do we create those opportunities? How do we open the aperture?

Steve, I'd love to hear your thoughts as you think about this dynamic and where we are now, and how is your organization dealing with these changes, this shifting landscape?

Steve Kimble:

For sure, I certainly agree and echo many of the comments that Lara made. And as the leader of our tax business here at Deloitte, one of my top priorities is making sure we're attracting, developing, retaining, as well as advancing that most highly coveted tax talent in the marketplace.

And we're clearly operating in an environment where tax is more complex than ever before, our clients are facing more requirements for reporting and transparency than ever before. We see the changes that take place feels like continuously to the tax laws, both globally, as well as in the US most recently with the Inflation Reduction Act as well as the CHIPS Act.

But at the same time, we see that our clients across all industries are challenged for purposes of identifying, recruiting, and retaining that necessary level of talent to sustain their tax operations internally. And all of this is creating a significant increase in demand for skilled talent. That is a talent base that has vastly different needs and expectation than what we just experienced a few years ago.

And to meet these needs, we're focused on our hybrid work model, many of the things that Lara talked about just trying to combine the best of the virtual model along with the traditional model. Yes, getting people to work together and to brainstorm and to

learn from one another, but also, providing people with the remote work option as well to create greater flexibility.

And getting this balance right while understanding there's no one-size-fits-all approach is extremely important, especially for purposes of meeting the needs of today's workforce. And I would just also say that we're enhancing our efforts around rewards and recognition, learning and development, as well as our benefits offering—all of these items represent opportunities to meet the shifting needs of the newest generation of professionals as well as the more experienced professionals.

Burt Rea: Absolutely. It's fascinating to see this change happening over the last several years. And Lara, Steve, you both talked about how we're managing our people, how we're helping them to thrive and operate in these new ways.

Can we turn the lens to our clients; how are you shifting and adapting to our clients' needs and the experiences and changes that they're seeing? How are we continuing to act as advisers to them? Lara, let's start with you.

Lara Abrash: I'll say we're doing it in two facets; one, so many of our clients are navigating the same issues—the shortages that you heard Steve talk about, we're seeing that in spades. When we talk to clients in their finance organizations, in their HR organizations, there's a real wear on their people.

One part of it is making sure we're sharing our best thinking with them around how do they evolve and really start to think about a more customized talent experience for their people. How do they think about what skills they need as the leader of an organization and making sure that they're thinking about how do they bring people in and really help get those skills.

But what we're really pushing them on is really innovative thinking. What do they do to address the pipeline? How do they maybe hire different types of people, like data scientists?

Then in our business, we're in a different environment where the old approach would be we would fly out to clients, drive out to clients, to do the work we do with them in their offices.

And I would say probably 80% of our clients are not in at all, or just on a very limited basis. There's this wide spectrum of organizations just starting to come in, and trying to help them think about how do they come back to work themselves.

And how do we find that sweet spot for helping them to evolve their strategies, be their trusted consultant adviser, and auditor, and tax adviser. But at the same time, respecting that they're trying to figure out their own boundaries.

And I think that that's a tension right now, as you see a lot of organizations coming together—and how do they work together. This hybrid is not for the faint of heart. My general view on it is nobody's figured it out. I know you see a lot of press of companies declaring things.

I think organizations are getting a bit frustrated by what they would like to just be able to mandate, and they're not seeing that work. But I really think we have to evolve our thinking to what's the best experience for the workforce when they're working from home, what's the best experience when they come together; how do you make those the most high-impact and meaningful experiences for everybody?

And that's a lot of what we spend time with our clients on. And everybody right now is trying to find that sweet spot.

Burt Rea: I really resonate when you said hybrid is not for the faint of heart. It really does test our resilience and our agility. I think certainly what I've seen in the market is one-size-fits-all, Steve, as you just mentioned, does not apply. And we really have to take each situation, each team, each client working from their own place.

Burt Rea: Steve, I'd love to hear your thoughts on how you're seeing the organizations that you work with, the clients that you serve dealing with this.

Steve Kimble:

When I think about how we can help our clients, the word that really comes to mind is "collaboration." How do we work with our clients to help them identify solutions as it pertains to the workforce?

And I think Lara used a great phraseology, if you will, as really needing to be that chief talent officer, chief people officer. It's just more critical today than ever before for many of the reasons that you mentioned, Burt.

But when we work with our clients to try to address their needs in terms of post-pandemic, what does the talent model look like for the organization, for particular departments in the organization, first and foremost, it's helping them to design it; what does that future model look like? Where does technology fit in with respect to the equation of having a world-class, in my area of the world, a world-class tax organization?

What are the appropriate skills that you want your people to have, whether it be technical skills, process skills, leadership skills, serving as a liaison to the business units to truly understand what's on the agenda, what should be on the agenda, and how the tax organization could add value.

But in terms of looking at the future models, some of the elements that we're focused on is what are the roles and responsibilities, being clear to define them, the structure of the team. How do we supervise team members recognizing that some will be in person, some people will be working virtually. And again, some will fall into that hybrid category.

What are the real estate needs of the organization, as well as the related infrastructure, the career path of people where some spend more time together live, working together, not only with the team, but with the advisers—others are more exclusively working virtually.

And also, how do you train people and develop people over time? So, a lot of these items, there's no clear answers to it. We're learning as we go as well. But to me, it's extremely important to work in a collaborative manner and put yourself in a position to share some of the best practices. You know, what's working, maybe what's not working so effectively.

Burt Rea: I think that's really poignant—the sort of learning together and the collaboration element that you mentioned, I think is so critical.

Steve, maybe you could say more. What are some of the specific success stories that you've seen in really emerging from the pandemic and embracing this new way of working together?

Steve Kimble:

Like all things, the pandemic has brought about a lot of learning. Our profession is dramatically changing, our teams have been adopting, embracing new technologies—technologies that are more collaborative, getting people to work together, have a better experience, using these innovative methods to, if you will, successfully move our business, and that of our clients forward so that we're positioned to provide these best-in-class services when we're not physically present at client locations.

What do they say? In five years, we should all expect to be working with technologies that haven't even been invented. And we just need to be open-minded to these changes, and not hold back, and ensure that we're properly exploring them, evaluating them, and determining where they may fit.

Some of the other things that we're looking at as well is in the past, our clients in our profession, as well as us as a firm, for the most part, we hired accounting majors; folks either having a master's in accounting or tax, an MBA, a law student.

Today, we still hire those folks, but we're also focused on people that have STEM-type skills; whether it's science, technology, engineering, math—all finding ways to more efficiently process data, make use out of

data, being able to do so in a way that as one of our leaders once commented—we find the organizations drowning in data, but still starving for insights. And to us, that represents a significant area of opportunity for us.

And how do we evaluate these trends in a way where we're able to give people a much better experience. And in terms of some of the best practices, I truly, truly believe that what we have done is created a matrix, and in connection with that matrix, we've put forth responsibility, and we've kind of plotted out, traditionally, these responsibilities could be performed in a virtual fashion.

These other responsibilities really need to be performed live with the team together. And then there's kind of that middle area or that gray area. And to really define that, set expectations, set goals for people, at least I can say my personal perspective, I'm a big believer in trying to get to the middle, getting that pendulum to the middle, where people are working part of their workweek together as part of the team where they're live, working shoulder to shoulder, if you will.

But then also, they have the freedom and flexibility to co-locate as well. And either work outside of the client location or work outside of the office, whether it be from home or what have you, to keep themselves as productive as possible. But I believe that combination is really what is going to work most effectively.

Burt Rea: I love that, Steve. I think a phrase that I've heard is how do we give people freedom within a framework so that there is that sense of connection, coordination but yet, still agency and a degree of autonomy, that helps people be their best selves at work, to be most productive.

Lara, I'd love to hear your thoughts. What bright spots have you seen as working effectively in this environment?

Lara Abrash: Just broadly, I'm a big believer that nothing beats culture. When you lead an organization or you show up to work, you could have every list of things to do, you

could have processes, strategies, priorities, but culture always wins the day.

And if we think about the last several years and the bright spots coming into this, I think on one part, there's a vulnerability aspect that people shared so much of their lives with each other over the last several years.

I mean, literally on Zooms, you were at someone's living room, you were in their home, and you were sharing a lot.

So, I think on the positive side, there is an element of vulnerability that I see continuing as we're emerging into this new future. I think, too, it's teaching us that it's okay to experiment and see these different things.

Steve shared a lot about the things that we're doing to figure out where do we land in that middle that he referred to. Experimentation is great. We never would've done what we had to do because of the pandemic. We never would have as a society said we're going to have an experiment where everybody works from home. But now, we're forced to constant experiments to try to figure out what this "new normal" is.

And I think lastly, this focus on well-being, true focus on well-being, mental health is not a fad. So many organizations for years have talked about the concept, they may have a helpline, they may have somebody who talks about it.

But what I've seen at our clients, and I would just say within our own firm, is there is a true care for our employees. So, this well-being focus is a positive.

And I would say on the, how is this all coming together? I think there's also a realization by our clients that there are so many aspects of strategy that you could have all this data at your hands to make a decision, but when it comes to talent and when it comes to doing what this talent group is looking for, this two-way conversation, and this ability to sense how our people are doing—the KPIs are now about sentiment.

It's no longer about a strategic choice, it's so black and white. You're going to be

making decisions for your workforce based upon sentiment. That needs a lot more connectivity, connectivity in different ways.

And playing back to your workforce that you're listening—we talk about learning from each other, and that's a big part of making, back to that culture point, you want to be at a place where someone's actually listening to you and you're part of the solution.

Burt Rea: Yeah, there's an old maxim that says if you want to get someone's attention in business, ask them what they think. And if you really want to shock them, listen to what they say. And I think our employees recognize that and value that so much. In this time of tumult, in this time of change, it's like how can we listen more?

Lara, I love the point that you made about well-being. And I've heard that well-being used to be an antidote for work. And now, we're thinking of well-being as in the flow of work, and it's in the very nature of work. But I think an adjacent topic that I'd love to hear more about is diversity, equity, and inclusion as an extension of well-being.

How are we seeing that becoming a major priority? Not that it always hasn't been, but it does seem to have become more central. Has that been your experience?

Lara Abrash: Yeah, I mean, I'm a child of a mom who grew up and really spread her wings in the early '60s and talked to me about a movement. And I would say in my 50-plus years, I've seen nothing like what I've seen in the last couple years relative to at least a movement.

Now, the skeptics, and there should be many skeptics, could say this could pass. And so, I don't want to declare a success, but I would say there's more energy right now, a lot of it coming out of George Floyd, some of it came out of Asian hate crimes. I mean, so many atrocious events that were occurring that I think for many, many years, the population at large, just sort of accepted and didn't take in.

And once you start to take it and internalize it, then you start to realize that people

around me are hurting. The pandemic was one sort of hurt, societal effects are another sort of hurt—you started realizing that there are connections to all of these atrocious events by the people you join the workforce with every day.

And you can't just come in and talk about the good things. You have to accept that things around you aren't great. And I think that was eye-opening for so many of us, including myself. At our firm, Steve, myself, and some of our other leaders early on, really hunkered down to say this has to be important to us. And we focused in our area, we focused a lot around what can we do to evolve the diversity, not only of Deloitte, but of our wonderful profession.

Being a certified public accountant, it's a noble profession. It's a profession you have to be licensed to do. And when you start to uncover where we are from a diversity perspective, particularly with Black and Latinx individuals, we are woefully underrepresented.

And I'm sure Steve could talk a lot more about it, but it was a groundswell for us as leaders to look at each other and say, we need to do something different, we need to do something bold, but most importantly, it's bigger than Deloitte.

We developed something called Making Accounting Diverse and Equitable [MADE]. It was a \$75 million launch. It's not just the money. This is about real fundamental change. It's about looking at root causes; why is there not enough diversity? And it's about starting with the attractiveness of the profession, it's about the financial disincentives to be in the profession. It's about the extra tax of the CPA, the inability to advance because there's not enough opportunity. The list goes on and on.

The key message that I would leave with Burt, is one, I think this is more than a moment in time. I think it's a movement, but it's going to take so many of us to come together and not let this moment pass and just stay on it. And our commitment is bigger than Deloitte. We want to make this about what we could do in society.

Burt Rea: That's wonderful. I think it's so poignant to think of this as right at the center of our business and so critical to our talent and our talent strategy. Steve, I'd invite you to say more about how tax is approaching this and the role that our tax organization is playing.

Steve Kimble: Sure. And I just comment that, I think Lara's being a little humble because she really championed the effort with respect to MADE.

And just to emphasize a couple of points, first and foremost, we're reaching into high schools as well as of course, colleges, state CPA societies, various nonprofits, to bring the accounting profession to life for underrepresented and underserved youth across the country.

We're building upon our existing relationships with HBCUs [historically Black colleges and universities], Hispanic-serving institutions [HSIs], by supporting the faculty, the administration with funding for curriculum—just the developments focused on the evolving skills that are needed by accountants. And just, again, making people aware of the opportunities that are available more broadly in the accounting profession.

Under Lara's leadership, as well as the overall leadership of the firm, this is a key priority for us in terms of making our profession more diverse and equitable, and giving people the opportunity to thrive in our organization.

And as leaders, you really take great satisfaction from recruiting people to our organization, training them, developing them, sponsoring their careers. And Lara and I are together today in Florida, where we're going to be celebrating the promotions of partners, principals, and managing directors. And the number of new partners, principals, and managing directors that are diverse, today, is much greater than it has been in years past.

And I think that's attributed to the hard work of leadership and the commitment to change people's lives for the better. So, it's extremely gratifying.

Burt Rea: That's wonderful to hear and such inspiring progress, and a demonstration of commitment to make a difference. With that vision in mind, with that aspiration, what would you offer as action steps for other organizations that want to also take steps in this direction?

Steve Kimble: I would say first and foremost, under the leadership of our chair, Janet Foutty, as well as our CEO, Joe Ucuzoglu—Lara and I were part of an exercise where we listened to outside experts talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

One of the inspirational moments is how we talked about looking at the data in totality versus breaking it out between different diverse cohorts.

Whether it be Blacks, Hispanic, Latinx communities, Asians, and as well as the other cohorts, and trying to understand what is the composition, what should be appropriate? How do we make sure that we're making our ourselves available to educate these communities about the careers in our profession?

And then, how do we make sure we're attracting people that are motivated and that want to come to work for us and pursue opportunities. And once they're here, then how do we then craft a plan to give them an excellent experience with the wonderful mentoring and relationships, and sponsorships, all with the view towards developing their careers or developing their skills, and sponsoring their careers for further advancement.

So, again, it takes a lot of hard work, it takes a commitment. It's not only about making a financial commitment to achieve this in form of internship opportunities, as well as scholarships and things of that nature, but creating relationships with people, and getting to know people, and understanding what their goals, their ambitions are. And then again, the fun part of this job is playing a meaningful role to help those dreams become a reality.

Burt Rea: Absolutely. Thank you, Steve. Lara, back to you—very inspiring to hear this story of leadership and setting an agenda, and setting a path forward. How would you share that with other organizations in a similar fashion? How would you help leaders set that stage?

Lara Abrash: I would think about this in a couple of levels. I think Steve mentioned tone at the top and intentionality is critically important. So, having your board, your C-suite, your middle layers, and management committed to the change that you want to take is by far one of the most important things you could do. And it's not easy.

It takes courage, it takes laying up the burning platform and putting on the table what the organization stands for. So, I would start with that. And then you start to think about, well, what are my goals in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion?

And often what you find, and I mentioned earlier that nothing stumps culture, is in the early days for an organization to be successful, they need to understand the root causes; what is preventing them from not attracting, retaining, and advancing individuals that are of a different diversity?

So, really, looking at the different types of diverse cohorts and getting under and thinking about what are the root causes around every element of the talent cascade, and starting to implement strategies.

We've looked at the coaches we have assigned, the work that our individuals are doing, we have top talent reviews, just things that have become really tactical that are focused on the needs of that group.

But I mentioned culture, I don't want to close out before this; you could have a lot of effort put into create more diversity within your workforce. You could do a lot of processes to push the right decisions. You should challenge your performance management structures to make sure there's not biases in there—inherent, or conscious, or unconscious—get your general counsel involved in that.

But by far, the thing you can't just assume is happening is good intent from inclusion. Inclusion is about your entire workforce feeling like being different isn't a bad thing, that they don't need to assimilate into being like someone else. They could actually come in and be who they are and make things incrementally better.

That particular effort is one of building capabilities, making sure everybody in the organization understands how to be a good teammate, how to be a great ally, and how to help others. And then it's also about accountability. It's about making sure people are held accountable for doing the right things. And that aspect around inclusion is incredibly important.

It will not solve for all the sins of not getting the right people in the door, but once you do, if you don't have that, you'll be back to the drawing board.

Burt Rea: I think that's so important, Lara. I think that environment, that culture of inclusion, really comes from the top, as you said. Leaders have to believe this. And I think it also comes from whatever majority population has been traditionally incumbent within the organization; what is the action and the responsibility across the organization to create that sense of inclusion and not to assume that it will just flow from these other things that we're doing.

Wonderful discussion. Thank you both. I think you've offered some really thoughtful insights for our audience and some hard-won experience from our own firm and how we develop our people, attract and retain top talent, and serve our clients. So, thank you both. I will give you another few minutes just to offer any closing thoughts, and Steve, I'll turn to you.

Steve Kimble: Burt, it was wonderful to have this discussion with you, as we talked about—we're in a period of time where we're experiencing more change as a result of what we've learned during the pandemic.

And I do believe that we will figure this out as a business community, as a profession, in terms of striking that right balance to accomplish the goal of being able to develop the next generation of talent, to be able to create close personal relationships, building that sense of community, the culture of an organization.

And by doing so, in terms of finding that right balance in connection with a hybrid model, offering people the flexibility, but also, giving them the experience by investing in their careers, especially our younger professionals, and helping them develop the competencies and the skills that will serve them extremely well as they mature and ripen into more experienced professionals.

And I think the future is very exciting. I think technology is going to play an incredible role as well. And I think also, those organizations that truly emerge as leaders are the organizations that are going to be able to capture the hearts and minds of their people, and have them understand by incentivizing good behaviors and rewarding good behavior as it relates to playing a meaningful role as leaders just to set up the right talent model that takes into consideration what's necessary, the purposes of creating that continuity, the skilled workforce, the one that embodies the culture of the organization and represents what it stands for.

And also, creating opportunity for people, especially by changing the nature and

makeup of the accounting profession and making it more diverse through our MADE program, as well as the actions of the leaders, the partners, principals, managing directors, and the people at our firm at Deloitte, as well as more broadly, in the profession.

So, again, we certainly see challenges, but we really look at those challenges as tremendous opportunities.

Burt Rea: Absolutely. And Lara, I think that was a key theme in one of your comments that we've taken the opportunity to try things, to do things that we never would've attempted before because we've been faced with this crisis, multiple crises. Say more about that in your closing thoughts. We'd love to hear your wrap up for us.

Lara Abrash: I keep harping on culture—culture is how our people feel as showing up every day. And so, when you're trying something new, not telling everybody you've got all the answers.

You can buy yourself a lot of time by saying, we're going to try something we haven't tried before, and then we're going to listen to you and see how you feel about it. And then we're going to tell you what we see.

That's an example of culture coming to life that makes people feel like this is a place we want to see, or we're going to take the time to make sure we really listen to your experience from working from home, and

we're really going to hyperfocus on that. And if we don't like something, we're going to talk about it.

It's that vulnerability and openness. And I would say, lastly, for us as leaders, it's walking the talk. If we're going to go and talk about some of these things and how we're going to try and experiment it, we have to commit to it and we have to do it ourselves.

So, if we're going to talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, we ourselves need to live in a place that shows that we're committed to it. So, that's a few things of what I meant by trying things differently, but it all comes under the context of are people knowing that we don't think we have all the answers, we're in this together, and we're all going to come together to come up with the best answers.

Burt Rea: Well said, thank you.

Lara, Steve, thank you so much for taking some time to speak with us. It's been a pleasure to have you share your thoughts and insights, and I wish you all the best and thank you again for joining us.

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