

## **What do older workers want? Gradual retirement?**

**SARAH VICKERSTAFF**

Professor of Work and Employment, University of Kent, United Kingdom

### **Abstract**

In the context of government concern to raise the participation rates of those over 50 years of age this paper considers whether gradual retirement is a desirable and feasible option for older workers. It provides a review of current patterns of flexible employment in the age group 50+ and considers the views and opinions of older workers in three case study organisations. The paper finishes by considering whether, and in what ways, age discrimination legislation which became law in the autumn of 2006 will facilitate or hinder older workers aspirations. It concludes that the effects of the law are likely to be weak.

### **Introduction**

In the context of ageing populations Governments across Europe are encouraging older workers to work for longer and delay retirement. According to Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates, 47% of men aged 50+ and 32% of women aged 50+ in Great Britain (GB) class themselves as *economically active* (Loretto *et al.*, forthcoming). There is a marked decline in labour market participation with age, the sharpest declines in employment rates occur at age 65 for men and 60 for women, that is as they reach state pension age (SPA). However, there is also a significant drop in the proportions of men and women in their late 50s who are working (see Loretto, *et al.*, forthcoming for further detail). In Great Britain, policy has focused on increasing labour market participation either by encouraging those unemployed or inactive back into jobs or by urging those in employment to delay retiring. The longer term target of government is to achieve an 80% employment rate of the working population. Government is seeking to reduce significantly the numbers on Incapacity Benefit and increase the number of older workers by 1 million (DWP, 2006:141-142). Attention is beginning to turn to how employers may be encouraged to retain older workers (DWP, 2005). Age discrimination legislation, which came into force in autumn 2006, will effect some constraints on employer management of the older workforce. Relatively neglected is the question of what older workers themselves might want.

In a recent review of ageing and employment policies in 21 countries the OECD argued for 'a new agenda of age-friendly employment policies and practices' (2006:14). In addition to the need for pension and benefits reform, improved training and career advice for older workers and an assault on ageist ideas and assumptions the report argued for flexible pathways to retirement as a means of increasing the length of the working life (2006:98-

101). The Pensions Commission in GB (the 'Turner Report') also found evidence of support for phased retirement and argued that it had a role to play in extending working lives (2005: 330-32); a refrain taken up by the Department for Work and Pensions:

Increasing choice and flexibility around retirement will enable people to continue working who might otherwise leave the workforce, due to other demands on their time and energies or their inability to cope with full-time working in their current job. Flexible working...enables people to manage health conditions, balance caring responsibilities, and achieve a smooth transition into an active retirement by allowing the pursuit of other activities alongside working (2006: 150).

In the face of this groundswell of official support for gradual retirement relatively little research has thus far focused on whether older workers themselves favour phased or flexible retirement. Research on retirement decisions suggests that people want to be able to make choices about when or if to retire (Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004). Research on flexible work options, especially part-time working, has been held up as a means of increasing choices for older workers (PIU, 2000). It is hypothesized that increasing flexible work options could impact upon the activity rates of older workers by providing opportunities for older workers to retire more gradually by downshifting at the end of their working careers with their current employer and hence delaying full retirement or by providing 'bridge jobs' between the career occupation and full retirement (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005:1).

This article is in five sections. The first explores what gradual retirement is and briefly looks at international experience. The second considers what older workers might want and introduces the research on which the article is based. The third reveals current patterns of flexible employment in the 50+ age group. The fourth examines the views of employees and retired ex-employees in three organisations. The final section concludes by considering how recent changes to policy and legislation may impact upon the take up of gradual retirement.

### **What is gradual retirement?**

As the Department for Work and Pensions Age Positive website argues:

Flexible, phased retirement helps businesses to prepare for the loss of employee skills. It allows employees to alter the balance of their working and personal lives and prepare for full retirement.

(<http://www.agepositive.gov.uk/lifecycle.cfm?sectionID=41&id=6>)

A gradual retirement may be effected, as in this quote, with the existing employer or may take the form of 'retiring' from a career job to take up 'bridge employment' with another organisation or by deciding to become self employed. Existing research on, and experience of, gradual retirement is mainly from outside the UK. In some Northern European countries the ability to undertake part-time work and draw part pension and thus retire gradually has existed for some time (for example Finland, see Gould and Saurama, 2004: 78-82; on France and Germany, see Taylor, 2001; on Sweden, see Wadensjo, 1991; on Denmark, see Jensen, 2004; on Holland, de Vroom, 2004: 143). However, evidence from both the Finnish and Dutch cases, suggests that the impact of such policies appears to be marginal in terms of the level of take up of part-time work and pension options (Gould and Saurama, 2004: 82; de Vroom, 2004: 144). In Japan, by contrast, take up of gradual retirement has been relatively

high (Usui, 1998; Taylor, 2002: 22-23). In Japan, gradual retirement typically takes the form of moving from a primary to a secondary career job with the existing employer or being 'loaned' to a smaller subsidiary or affiliate (Usui, 1998: 52-53; Casey, 2005). In the USA, many older Americans take so-called 'bridge jobs', or become self-employed between leaving their career job or employer and retiring fully (Feldman, 1994; Quinn and Kozy, 1996; Bruce, *et al.*, 2000; Taylor, 2002: 23; Benitez-Silva, 2002; Davis, 2003; Cahill, Giandrea and Quinn, 2006). In part this is explained by the fact that as Riach (2006) explains: 'In reality, it appears that the notion of a part-time career is illusive and the workplace remains dominated by a long hours work culture with incidences of part-time work remaining low'. Thus, the option of downsizing with the existing employer may be limited and many older Americans take bridge jobs out of financial necessity.

Reviewing this international literature it can be concluded that experience of gradual retirement is mixed and there is no straight forward association with increasing older workers' participation rates (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005:69). In the Finnish case there is some discussion that gradual retirement schemes simply allow the better off to partially retire earlier than they would otherwise have done (Gould and Saurama, 2004:76, Taylor, 2002:23; Gould, 2006). Another concern with gradual retirement is the risk that it may institutionalise ageist practices by defining older workers as non-core workers, that is as part of the contingent workforce (Taylor, 2002:22; Kalleberg, 1998:97; Riach, 2006 forthcoming).

Hitherto in the British case a number of impediments have existed to the extension of gradual retirement, these range from pension and tax rules, which inhibit taking paid work whilst also drawing a pension from the same employer; the negative incentive of reducing hours or downscaling work activity in a scheme where pension is based on final salary; the long hours culture of British industry and employee lack of understanding of the possible options available (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005:55-56). Some of these barriers are being removed. Changes to tax rules, which came into force in April 2006, allow the individual to draw on an occupational pension whilst continuing to work for the same employer (see HM Revenue and Customs undated). Whilst, age discrimination legislation, which came into effect in Autumn 2006, will require employers to regularise policies in so far as it will be necessary to inform employees 6 months prior to expected retirement date and remind them of their right to request consideration of a continuation of work. The article turns now to consider whether older workers want access to gradual or flexible retirement options and if so whether recent changes will facilitate this.

### **What do older workers want?**

In a review of research on older workers' attitudes to employment McNair found that: 'work is good for people, and that generally people like work, but want more control over what they do and how they do it' (2006). In a postal survey of older workers (50-69 year olds) the same author found that amongst those considering working beyond formal retirement age there was a strong preference of working part-time or on a flexible basis, in addition half of those who were retired would have worked for longer had flexible work options been available (McNair, 2006; McNair *et al.*, 2004; CROW, 2004). In a study of bridge employment Lissenburgh and Smeaton found evidence of 'two nations in flexible employment' with a strong relationship between labour market background and options for decent bridge jobs. The better qualified employees were in a stronger position for finding good quality flexible employment or going self-employed, whilst those with no or poor qualifications were more likely to end up in poorly paid, low quality flexible work (2003:30-31). Qualitative research on employees and ex-employees in three organisations found strong

support for individual choice over the timing and manner of retirement (Vickerstaff, 2006). Other research has indicated that perceptions of having a choice about when or how to retire impacts upon the individual's quality of life (Barnes, *et al.*, 2002; Boyes and McCormick, 2005:7). Those who feel that they were forced to retire earlier than they would have chosen, through redundancy, ill health or 'voluntary' early retirement are more likely to suffer financially and psychologically (Arthur, 2003; McGoldrick and Cooper, 1994; Maule *et al.*, 1996).

This article seeks to develop our understanding of what different older workers might want by drawing on two pieces of research. The first commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission and undertaken with colleagues from the University of Edinburgh, involved an analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to uncover the existing patterns of flexible working amongst those over 50, and a literature review of flexible work options for older workers (see Loretto, *et al.*, 2005). The second, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, was case study based research into the organisational context for retirement decisions. Three contrasting organisations were studied (see the box below). The research involved interviews with 160 employees and recently retired ex-employees from the three organisations. The semi-structured interviews covered respondents' knowledge, understanding and aspirations with respect to:

- the organisations' policies on retirement and pensions
- their pension situation
- retirement plans and activities in retirement, and
- attitudes to the idea of downshifting workload prior to full retirement, either with their existing organisation or through bridge employment (Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004).

It is responses to the last issue that will be reported here (see appendix for further information on the research). In the text respondents are identified by their code number, gender, work status and organisation. Quotations from the respondents are selected as examples representative of views and recurring themes expressed by a number of different respondents.

### **Older workers and flexible work: the current picture**

The most popular form of flexible working for those aged 50 and above is part-time work. Both older women and older men are more likely to work part-time than their younger counterparts; however established gendered patterns of working persist into older age, with older women more likely to work part-time than older men. 52% of women aged 50 and over work part-time although there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of men working part-time, using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data the percentage of 60-64 year old men working part-time increased from 15% in 1964 to 23% in 2004 (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005: 16-17). Part-time work is by far the norm for those who are still working in their 70s.

Looking at the reasons for working part-time the 2004 LFS reveals that the majority of older workers say they have chosen to work part time (85% of men and 94% of women). There are gender differences in the reasons given for working part-time, men are more likely to say it is because they are financially secure and can earn enough working part-time (35%), whereas women are more likely to cite domestic and/or caring commitments as the reason for choosing part-time work (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005: 18). It seems that older women work part-time for the same reasons as younger women whereas men are more likely to choose part-time employment when approaching retirement age.

### **The Case Study Organisations**

#### **CASE 1: LOCALGOV**

The first organisation was a large local authority. Local government serves as a critical case as the sector has a recent past history of considerable early retirement. Staff were able to join the local government final salary (defined benefit) pension scheme.

#### **CASE 2: TRANSPORT**

The second organisation was a private sector organisation in the transport industry with a large manual and routine white-collar workforce. The organisation is in a competitive and turbulent industry, which continues to experience waves of redundancy, mergers and acquisitions. Three different pension schemes were in operation for different categories of employee, all three at the time of the research were defined contribution schemes.

#### **CASE 3: HEALTH PRODUCTS**

The third organisation was a multinational research-based company in medicines and health products with a large highly educated professional and managerial staff. Its approach to human resource management serves as benchmark for other organisations. The organisation offered permanent staff a non-contributory final pension scheme.

Older men and women are more likely than their younger counterparts to be self-employed, although men predominate with more than twice as many men self employed as a percentage of their age group than women. It has also been shown that the self-employed are those most likely to continue working after state pension age (Smeaton and McKay, 2003:30; Barnes, *et al.*, 2004: 33).

With respect to other forms of flexible work, such as annualised hours, flexitime, term-time working there is only a small minority of older employees who have access to these, primarily in the public sector and more commonly for women than men (Loretto, *et al.*, 2005: 35-36). At present it seems that the majority of older workers are working five days a week on standard contracts and working patterns. As Phillipson and Smith (2005: 49) noted: 'men and women aged 50-54 work on average approximately one hour per week less than men and women aged 25-49'. On the basis of the LFS data there is little evidence to suggest that gradual or flexible retirement is common. This is confirmed by the second wave of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), which indicates that up to state pension age women are more likely to go from full-time work to part-time work than from full-time to not working, whereas men are more likely to move from full-time working to not working than from full-time to part-time work (Emmerson and Tetlow, 2006: Table 3A.2). The cliff's edge syndrome of working full time until stopping work entirely at retirement is still common, especially for men, in the UK.

### **Experience in the case study organisations**

Personnel and Human Resource Managers in all three of the case studies were interviewed about the pension and retirement policies in their organisations. None of the organisations had explicit corporate wide policies for gradual retirement or specific policies for older workers to request changes to work routines, although LocalGov was in the process of investigating and piloting such a scheme. Job-share possibilities existed in all three organisations for the workforces as a whole. Employees and retired ex-employees from three

organisations were also interviewed and asked whether they thought that there were opportunities to downshift hours or roles in the run up to retirement and whether they thought this was a good idea and something they might have done or possibly would take up themselves.

The majority of those interviewed had never thought seriously about the issue of downsizing, hence they either simply didn't know whether it was an option or imagined that they could ask their line manager if the question arose. The following quotations are representative of these views, expressed in response to a semi-structured question along the lines of '*would you have [did you have] the opportunity to go part-time or decrease your hours prior to retirement?*':

I don't know. I've never considered it. I know that they do training and development packages when you're coming up to retirement where you go on courses and that sort of thing but I've never actually considered so I've never thought about lessening hours or anything like that. So I don't know is the answer. (R35, male employed manager, LocalGov).

I probably could do less hours, I don't know to tell the truth (R87, male white collar employee, Transport).

They are pretty flexible about giving people the chance to adjust their hours, certainly for women with children, so, yes, maybe they would do the same for older people (R92, male employed manager, Transport).

Notwithstanding the fact that most of respondents had not thought much about the question of downshifting in their current organisation, there was widespread support for the idea, even amongst those who felt personally that they wouldn't want to do it. Many respondents mention the cliff edge and shock of going from full time to total retirement. The following quotations are indicative of people's comments:

I think it would be alright if companies would sort of... if they knew you were coming to the end of your period of working time, I think it would be an idea to scale your working hours down sort of thing and say like possibly say like when you're 64 down to 3 days a week or something like that for the last couple of years. So you gradually get into the habit of not... because it's going to be a wrench, coming off of 5 days a week and then all of a sudden boom, that's it, finished (R147, male white collar employee, Health Products).

I mean that would be great. I mean I would probably quite happily work until I was 61 if the hours were halved. But you see drawing your pension and halving your hours would be brilliant. I mean the other option would be to go out self-employed. I mean there's enough work kicking around this area to keep you busy (R106, male, employed manual worker, Transport).

That's something I haven't really give a lot of thought to. I think I might especially if I decided to stay until I'm sixty five. Say from the age of sixty onwards to cut down to doing may be three or four days a week. It would certainly get you used to not working (R54, female employed manager, LocalGov)

Yes. I would have thought it would be an excellent idea and if anyone has got to go to 65 to start reducing it at 60 as a sort of a run in. But I don't think I... I personally couldn't have done that. I couldn't have had someone come in over me and I'd be his assistant (R48, male retired manager, LocalGov).

There was a sizeable minority of respondents across all three organisations who were not interested in reducing their work hours or level before retirement. They wanted to work full time and just stop. The vast majority of this group were men:

I think that [downsizing] would have affected me more ... the transition would have been harder. I'd rather keep running to the end and then jump off the cliff (R70, retired male manager, Transport).

A range of obstacles to downshifting were mentioned by a number of respondents who liked the idea of reducing their hours, chief amongst these were job specific issues, where individuals felt their job was undo-able on a part-time basis or they would have to find someone to job-share and that would be difficult; others didn't like the idea of feeling sidelined and the diminution of status implied by reducing hours. The obstacles most frequently mentioned however were financial; either that they needed to sustain a full-time wage or salary up to retirement and/or that a gradual or phased retirement would have a bad effect on their pensions. Most employees in LocalGov and Health Products were in the organisation's final salary pension scheme and foresaw problems in working less before retirement:

I mean ideally I would like to work just part-time, at least 4 days, have a day to myself but there's no way I can afford to because that affects your pension again doesn't it? (R39, female white collar employee, Local Gov)

I think that is the irritant really at the moment, probably with most people, that in order to keep the final salary pension scheme you can't really do part-time working because you'll miss out on your pension whereas probably the older you get it would be quite nice to have the extra day off a week because I do find working 5 days a week hard going sometimes." (R55: female, employed manager, Local Gov)

The concern expressed about the impact of gradual retirement on pension was often exaggerated (for example believing that working part time would half your pension) and reflected the more general problem that people had understanding exactly how their pensions worked and were calculated (on the question of pension understanding see Vickerstaff *et al.*, 2004, Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005). This suggests that confusion over pension composition and entitlements compounds the difficulties of considering the financial aspects of downshifting, as people often did not understand what the implications of reducing their workload would be.

Nevertheless, there were examples in all three organisations of successful downshifting, where individuals had negotiated a change in work routine:

I've been talking to Tim who is my boss and we've decided that as of next April when I shall reach the grand old age of 62 I shall start working less hours. We're thinking about cutting it to 4 days a week (R174, male employed manager Health Products).

At the moment we've got one leccy [electrician]... who is going to job share with another bloke .... So he's going to work one week in 5, I think it is. It will be week on working so he'll have one week on and 4 weeks off I think it is. It works quite well. That will be good (R106, male manual employee, Transport).

Last year I was working full-time and my husband was still working here then as well. I knew he was going to think about retiring and I didn't want to be full-time while he was at home and also I found the job was getting too demanding and I was getting too tired and also I've got elderly parents who were taking up a lot of my time at the weekends and so I approached my manager about doing less hours, which from August I did. I only came in 4 days a week from August. So I reduced my time from August. My husband retired at Christmas so from Christmas I am working 3 days a week until I retire (R141, female white collar employee, Health Products).

With respect to bridge employment between retirement from the organisation and state pension age or full retirement there were a number of different themes, which emerged in the research. Firstly, expected or actual level of income in retirement was a major source of differentiation; higher salaried employees who have decent pensions may consider continuing work for the interest, or to pick up something new or different.

Well actually probably I'll have enough to do when I do [retire] because if I keep my NVQ assessing up to date there's no reason why when I retire I can't do that. So there is that option. I also do an awful lot of dressmaking and that and I might do it more professionally than as opposed to now. (R36, female employed manager, Local Gov).

Lower incomes groups are more likely to need to try to find employment to bridge the income gap before receiving the state pension.

Well the chaps I've worked with who have recently retired... not all of them but I would say 3 out of 5 who have recently retired have got themselves another job for 2 years to make up the difference between the pension they're getting off of [Transport] and their old age pension because you're going to be 2 years without an old age pension. You'll get that one but you won't get an old age pension. So if you've got other commitments you could be a bit short couldn't you? "(R108, male employed manual worker, Transport)

Individuals on lower incomes are likely to be able to find only even less well paid and/or casual work. Many of the male manual workers from Transport talked about picking up work in sectors such as security, or driving. Managers and others with professional expertise are much more likely to benefit from the organisation's discretion in letting an individual continue work, or come back on a consultancy basis.

I could have carried on until I was 65 and indeed many people, foolish though they may be, then carry on as consultants. So they finish at 65 and then become a consultant the following Monday which I think is just stupid but there you are, people do it." (R124, male retired manager, Health Products)

In all three of the case studies there was broad support from personnel managers and employees for the idea of downshifting or gradual retirement, although in practice there were



relatively few examples and no specific policies to facilitate this. Organisations could and did allow individuals to retire gradually if they chose to do so, but this was typically at the request of the individual and at the discretion of line management. The attractiveness of bridge employment was sharply differentiated between those who were in a position to contemplate taking up something of interest and those whose financial position would force them to take whatever was available. In the final section we consider recent changes in policy and their implications for the take up and attractiveness of gradual retirement.

### **Conclusions: the future**

In some senses it would appear that the era of gradual retirement may be just around the corner. The idea is attractive to employees and increasingly to some large employers (Vickerstaff, 2005; Employers Forum on Age/IFF Research Ltd, 2006). The research reported here suggests that the change in tax rules to allow people to draw some pension whilst continuing to work reduced hours with the same employer will be popular. It is likely to encourage the uptake of part-time work (Phillipson and Smith, 2005: 53). As the HM Revenue and Customs advice to employers states: 'Your employees will still be able to contribute their skills and knowledge on a part-time basis without being penalised by an associated drop in income' (undated). However, as Yeandle has commented, this will depend upon the willingness of managers to see requests to go part-time in a positive light rather than as a nuisance (2005:18). Individuals' ability to contemplate this route will be constrained by their pension status and their financial situation overall. There are also major considerations about the information and understanding that employees have. Recent research by the Employers Forum on Age and IFF Research Ltd reports that employers have identified successful communication of policy to staff as a barrier to the take up of flexible options (2006: 7). It is also worth remembering that opportunities for part-time work are far more typical in some sectors of employment than others, for example services rather than manufacturing and at different levels of the occupational hierarchy (elementary occupations rather than managerial and professional jobs, see Loretto, *et al.*, 2005:28).

Is it as yet unclear what impact the Age Regulations, which became law in autumn 2006, are likely to have on the prevalence of gradual retirement. The Law will maintain a default normal retirement age of 65. It will not be legal to retire someone before they are 65 unless it is by agreement or for a reason with 'objective justification'. The employer must inform the employee 6 months in advance about the expected retirement date and remind them of their right to request a continuation of employment. It is a duty on employers to consider requests from employees to stay on after 65; if the correct procedures are not followed an older worker can take an unfair dismissal claim (DTI, 2005:55-73). However, although an employee can appeal against the employer's judgement with regard to continuing work after 65, the employer is not required to justify the decision (DTI, 2006: 39-41).

In effect the law is weak as it fails to change the current situation in which employers have the discretion to allow people to carry on working after normal retirement age on existing or changed contractual terms if they want to. There is now simply a duty to consider such requests. The main likely benefit is to signal to older workers that they have the right at retirement age to request a continuation. For many who might value gradual retirement this could be too late; it is a few years earlier that they would want to initiate such discussion with their employer. Nevertheless, publicity around the new legislation may serve to encourage older workers to make requests for a change in working arrangements prior to reaching 65. Extension of the right to request flexible working to those who care for adults

from April 2007, (currently available for parents with young children), may help older workers with caring responsibilities, which inhibit their ability to work full-time. Combined these measures may also spur employers into thinking more creatively as a whole about how they manage their older workforce (Vickerstaff, 2005). However, there are also those individuals who need greater flexibility in work patterns in order to manage a health condition and as yet no right to request consideration from their employers is on the horizon.

Two key factors remain the same notwithstanding these changes in the law and pension rules. First on the employee side, current financial situation and/or the effect of reduced hours on their pensions will remain a major constraint on considering gradual retirement, however much desired. The ability to take up the flexibility implied in gradual retirement is rooted in individual financial circumstances and, as we have seen throughout the discussion here, there is a major distinction to be made between those who might want to continue working out of interest and those who feel they must carry on working to sustain income. Second on the employer side, decisions about whether an individual can downsize their work hours or change their role are typically in the hands of line managers, responding to immediate operational pressures and in the prevailing organisational climate in which they operate. Research on the operation of family-friendly or work-life balance policies more generally have found that the role of line managers is crucial and as one study concluded: 'Managers liked to have discretion' (Yeandle *et al.*, 2003:41).

For gradual retirement to 'take off' as an option for many older workers it will be necessary for them to have better knowledge and understanding of the legal situation, their pension position and their employer's policies. It will also require employers to start taking seriously the need to manage their older workforces more creatively and proactively. Combined this might help to increase the sum of human happiness, whether it does anything to support the Government's aim of increasing the employment rates of older workers remains to be seen.

## **Appendix A: Methodological Note**

For the case study research a total of 160 retired and employee respondents were interviewed at work, in their own home, or at the interviewer's place of work in the period May 2002-May 2003. In addition Human Resource and Pension Managers and Trade Union shop stewards were interviewed about the policies in their organisations and where available policy documents about pensions and retirement were collected. The interviews with employees and retired employees were semi-structured and typically of forty-five minutes to one hour's duration. The interviews were transcribed and the data searched manually for biographical data, comments about factors affecting retirement decisions, retirement aspirations and attitudes towards downsizing. The interviews were coded and put into the qualitative data analysis software package NUD\*IST QSRN6.

Gender and status of the sample

	Employees		Close to retirement		Retired	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
LOCALGOV	7	13	4	16	11	9
TRANSPOR T	14	2	9	5	16	2
HEALTH PRODUCTS	13	5	13	2	18	1
Totals	34	20	26	23	45	12

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