

## Distance Learning: Quality of Life and Familial Considerations

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**Abstract:** The Canadian military is a large organization that relies upon people to accomplish a variety of tasks. While individual experience might differ, the idea that one needs to continue to learn as they advance within an organization is neither unique to the military nor novel. However, the Canadian military differs from most institutions in two ways. First, they design and deliver almost all their own training and education. Second, most training and education tends to occur elsewhere, which increases the time one spends away from home. Given current issues with recruitment and retention within the military, an issue common in many, it is important to consider how increasing the use of distance learning (DL) might contribute to a reduction in time away. Yet, simply increasing DL without recognizing how this might affect family and partner relationships may not be the solution. This paper describes qualitative research focused on understanding individual perceptions regarding increased DL with a particular focus on what this might mean for the quality of life of military members and their families.

**Keywords:** distance learning; Canadian Armed Forces; military pedagogy, family



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## **Enseignement à distance : qualité de vie et considérations familiales**

**Résumé :** L'armée canadienne est une grande organisation qui compte sur des personnes pour accomplir diverses tâches. Même si les expériences individuelles peuvent différer, l'idée selon laquelle il faut continuer à apprendre à mesure qu'on progresse au sein d'une organisation n'est ni propre au milieu militaire ni nouvelle. Cependant, l'armée canadienne diffère de la plupart des institutions de deux manières. Premièrement, ils conçoivent et dispensent la quasi-totalité de leur propre formation et éducation. Deuxièmement, la plupart des formations et des études ont tendance à avoir lieu ailleurs, ce qui augmente le temps passé loin de chez soi. Compte tenu des problèmes actuels de recrutement et de rétention au sein de l'armée, mais d'une expérience commune dans de nombreux domaines, il est important d'envisager comment l'augmentation du recours à l'apprentissage à distance (AD) pourrait contribuer à réduire les délais. Pourtant, se contenter d'augmenter la AD sans reconnaître comment cela pourrait affecter les relations familiales et conjugales n'est peut-être pas la solution. Cet article décrit une recherche qualitative axée sur la compréhension des perceptions individuelles concernant l'augmentation du AD, avec un accent particulier sur ce que cela pourrait signifier pour eux et pour la qualité de vie de leurs familles.

**Mots-clés :** enseignement à distance; Forces armées canadiennes; pédagogie Militaire, famille

## Introduction

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is a large organization that relies upon people to accomplish a variety of tasks. Military members, from the moment they arrive until they leave, participate in a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities. While the individual experience might differ, the idea that one needs to continue to learn as they advance within an organization is neither unique nor novel. However, the Canadian military differs from most institutions in two ways. First, they design and deliver almost all their own training and education. Second, unlike many vocations, military training and education tends to occur elsewhere, which requires members to be away from home for prolonged periods of time. This time away from home is in addition to other operational (i.e., international deployments) and training (i.e., major exercises) demands. Taken together, these absences negatively affect the quality of life of military members and their families (Sundom, 2012). Further, time away also contributes to retention issues (Laplante & Goldenberg, 2018). Given current issues with recruitment and retention within the military, it is important to consider how increasing the use of distance learning (DL) might contribute to a reduction in time away. Yet, simply increasing DL in lieu of face-to-face opportunities without recognizing how this might affect family and partner relationships may not be the solution. While this paper focuses on DL within the military, the issues identified when someone needs to learn within their home will likely resonate within other professions.

This study draws upon research exploring the relationship between increased DL and individual and familial quality of life. Elsewhere, the author described over-arching findings (Gerbrandt, 2023), along with participant thoughts on DL from the standpoint of instructional design (Gerbrandt, 2024). In this study, the author narrows focus to the home front. Drawing upon experiences within the home, this study shows how increased DL is perceived by military members and what this means to their familial relationships. While this study draws upon the experiences of individual members within the Canadian military, the author suggests sentiments about being away all the time, learning in the home, and competing roles (i.e., parent and student) are not unique to the military and may be experienced to a certain extent by those in all fields involved in employee education.

The first part of this paper examines literature related to DL and well-being. Given the individual nature of learning, this represents a challenge if we want to recognize and adapt to an individual's circumstances. The second half of this paper describes qualitative research focused on understanding individual perceptions regarding an increased usage of DL and what this might mean for the quality of life of military members and their families. Thus, the question that we should ask ourselves and that this study seeks to answer is:

- *How do our training and education systems respond to the realities people experience as part of their daily lives?*

## Literature Review

Consisting of around 68,000 full-time and 27,000 part-time members spread amongst the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force, Canadian Army, and Canadian Special Operations Forces, CAF members are employed in approximately 100 different occupations. This section briefly describes DL within the Canadian military. Then, the attention turns to people to show the effect absences from home create for military members and their families. Taken together, one might conclude that increasing DL within the military is a simple solution. However, in the research that follows, we will see how existing DL affects military members and their families.

### Military Distance Learning

The CAF delivers a wide variety of training and education throughout numerous institutions designed to support the professional and academic advancements of military members throughout their careers. Limited scholarly research exists focusing on the delivery of training and how students perceive that training within the CAF. Scoppio and Covell's (2016) qualitative examination of pedagogical approaches being used within the CAF, combined with Jones's (2020) exploration of student DL satisfaction, represent the two largest studies focused on military training and education within the Canadian military.

Most articles and research tend to focus on DL or learning technologies. Thorne (2011) examined the individual and organizational costs of distance

education and found part-time students needed institutional support to enable learning and prevent burn-out. Vaskovics (2012) discussed the affordances of asynchronous computer-mediated communication and synchronous web-conferencing as potential options for improving the DL experience for students enrolled within staff college (mid-career officer course). Jones (2020) expanded Vaskovics's (2012) theoretical examination through research focused on CAF member satisfaction with DL experiences. Jones's (2020) exploration of member satisfaction within CAF DL is particularly important given the lack of scholarly research focused on individuals within the CAF training and education system.

Jones's (2020) study on the DL experiences of CAF members examined their greatest satisfiers (remaining in location and flexibility being most cited) and dissatisfiers (lack of peer interaction). Reflecting upon their experiences at the Canadian Forces College during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to switch in-person learning online, Chapnick (2023) identified successful pedagogical practices that they have retained (i.e., flipped classroom). Finally, the author's research looked at DL and well-being within the Canadian Army (Gerbrandt, 2023) and drew upon Garrison et al.'s (2010) Community of Inquiry as a framework for improved instructional design within the Canadian military (Gerbrandt, 2024).

Outside of the CAF, countries such as the United States (Roy & Schumm, 2011), Taiwan (Tung et al, 2009), and Brazil (Brauer et al, 2018) found DL in the military yielded results comparable to face-to-face delivery. As in Canada, DL

research in these other countries tends to focus on the delivery of advanced military education aimed at developing senior leadership (Fortuna, 2017; Judy, 2016; Tung et al., 2009). Fortuna (2017) discussed DL perceptions within the organization and countered common misconceptions such as DL being less effective. Comparable to Hadziomerovic et al.'s (2014) finding on work-life balance, both Fortuna (2017) and Judy (2016) highlighted difficulties associated with balancing full-time work, family, and education. Brauer et al.'s (2018) study is unique as it focuses on non-commissioned officers (sergeants) and they found achieving less resistance to DL is associated with student perception. Specifically, Brauer et al. (2018) consider it essential for an organization to understand the learner profiles of its students prior to moving courses online.

## **Quality of Life**

In contrast to the limited research dedicated to training and education within the CAF, significant research focused on the quality of life of members and their families is evident in the literature (Manser, 2018; Sudom, 2010; Thériault et al., 2016). Multiple studies, despite differing aims and participant focus, highlight that frequency and duration of absences from home are negatively associated with both individual and familial quality of life (Dursun, 2006; Sudom, 2012; Thériault et al., 2016). While not all absences can be mitigated, reducing residential portions of individual training represents a

potential opportunity to improve quality of life through a reduction in overall time away from home.

Thériault et al. (2016) noted “time away from home is disruptive to family life” (p. 221) and can also be associated with lower levels of well-being. These periods of absence fall within one of three general categories: operational deployments (domestic and international), individual career courses, and collective military training. Combined or in isolation, absences contributed to familial stress and a sense of isolation and loneliness (Burrell et al., 2006, as cited in Thériault et al., 2016, p. 221). When they considered all types of absences, Thériault et al. (2016) found military members spent 25% of their year away from home, and noted military courses (59.5%) and military training and exercises (52.7%) were the most common reasons for absences from home, with deployments (18.2%) a distant third.

Exploring retention and attrition, Laplante and Goldenberg (2018) noted how an individual’s decision to leave the CAF is influenced by family members, and that time available with them or away from them was cited as the main reason behind the decision to leave. These data confirm previous findings showing that time away from families negatively influences retention (Dursun, 2006; Sundom, 2012). The Standing Committee on National Defence (2019) found women within the CAF often faced the need to balance family obligations, childcare, and elder care. Alongside work, family obligations can be affected negatively by prolonged absences from home. Increased use of DL

within professional military education was recommended as a means of improving gender equity by increasing opportunities to participate in required military courses and thus progress professionally.

A balance is needed between achieving a high quality of life and accomplishing the missions of the CAF. As the research discussed above indicates, time away from home represents a consistent issue for military members and their families and contributes to retention issues. Increasing DL or blended learning options within the military represents a possible opportunity to improve individual quality of life while decreasing time away in a practical manner. Yet, how increased DL might affect one's family is not fully understood.

## **Research Design and Methods**

Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems model provides a way to think about the systemic and structural factors that shape learning and influence an individual's quality of life. When applied to adult learning in general and DL more specifically, Bronfenbrenner's work helps us understand the relationship between the individual and DL through a holistic and contextual approach. Put another way, it allows us to think about how the learning experience is influenced by five interconnected systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. As a system, it is important to consider the individual learner alongside their environment.

Adopting case study methodology (Yin, 2009), this study explored the relationship between DL and quality of life with individuals working within a regular force (i.e., full-time) artillery regiment. The author's experience as both an artillery officer and instructor-in-gunnery led them to select this occupation. Case study methodology provided an opportunity to conduct an in-depth examination within a real-world context. Further, it allowed the study to identify categories across multiple sources of data (Yin, 2009). The research reported received approval from the University of New Brunswick's Research Ethics Board along with the CAF's Social Science Research Review Board. Given the author's military rank and position at the time of research, attempts were made to mitigate both potential and perceived conflicts of interest through the anonymous nature of the electronic questionnaire, combined with a lack of any formal or informal authority over military members asked to participate. While this mitigated professional conflicts of interest, the author's previous positive experiences with DL represented a potential bias. This became evident during data analysis due to the number of diverging opinions and experiences. Individual experiences with DL varied considerably, which resulted in unexpected responses.

This study relied upon an anonymous questionnaire, along with individual interviews, to collect data. Potential participants were identified through purposeful sampling which focused on identifying individuals who:

- Were currently serving within two of the five regular force artillery regiments; and
- Attended a face-to-face course at the Royal Canadian Artillery School between January 2018 and August 2020.

By removing duplicate students (i.e., those who attended more than one course in that period) and accounting for individuals who were deployed on international operations, 53 potential participants were identified. Seventeen (30%) individuals completed the anonymous questionnaire, a sample size that was comparable to Jones's (2020) much larger study on DL satisfaction (n=368 of 1310 invitations, or 28%). Upon completing the questionnaire, respondents were invited to participate in an individual interview. Of five volunteers, only two were interviewed because two were no longer willing and one was selected to deploy.

The depth of responses provided insight as to the effects of increased DL across multiple ranks and family situations. Yet, a key limitation is the overall demographic scope. Participants were predominantly male (n=16), failing to reflect female representation within the Canadian Army. The majority were either married or common-law (n=14), and the average number of people within a single household was three. Of the respondents, most were Senior Non-

Commissioned Officers (n=10) and Junior Officers (n=6) which aligns with the inclusion criteria.

The electronic questionnaire focused on understanding four things:

- Experiences of individual training;
- The effects of individual training on the military member and their family;
- Effects of personal tempo, which are the sum of demands military service imposes upon the member; and
- Individual perceptions on an increased use of DL.

Within the individual interviews, the study used the same topics as probes to spark discussion. Coding was an iterative process that started with the respondents' own words and changed as similar codes were identified and consolidated (Elliott, 2018). This process resulted in a refined list of eight codes captured within three over-arching categories. The three categories are:

- Family and Partner Relationships, consisting of absence, partner pressure, and parental presence;
- DL, consisting of instructional design, DL beliefs, and networking/socialization; and
- Quality of Life, comprised of well-being and personal tempo.

This study focuses on the first theme, whereas quality of life (Gerbrandt, 2023) and DL (Gerbrandt, 2024) are addressed elsewhere.

## Findings

As a theme or category, family and partner relationships captured how absences related to military training affect military members and their families. This resulted in a refined list of three codes:

- Absence;
- Partner pressure; and
- Parental pressure.

Partner pressure and parental presence are distinct codes which emerged throughout analysis. They represent over-arching issues and are the result of an increased understanding of data.

### Absence

Absence encompasses responses that describe the effects of being away from home on both the individual and their family. Absence is the fourth most coded item, selected 27 times of out of 148 total responses. Most respondents recognized absences associated with face-to-face military training resulted in an increased personal tempo. Questionnaire Respondent (R) 6 and R10 indicated they were away from home a lot. R6 noted a sense of “being gone all the time” due to “[Collective Training] or Support to [courses].” R2 identified absences related to individual training (courses) should be considered along with their Regiment’s “high tempo” which contributed “to being away from home for a long period of time.” R10 believed military members “spend a considerable

amount of time away from home to begin with,” which included both “teaching at the school and attending courses.” These constant absences led to increasing both the military members’ personal tempo and “stress and tension” (R10) at home. These examples highlight how individual training is not the only factor that influences personal tempo, and that both collective training and incremental tasks contribute to a feeling of constantly being away.

Few respondents specifically identified absences as an accepted “part of the job” (R14) and highlighted the belief that “sacrifice definitely comes with rewards” (R2). R20 demonstrated conflicting views as they suggested reducing the time away associated with career courses “would be useful at times”, but their family prefers that they “physically attend the course” to avoid a sense of “home but not at home.” R20 continued to compare the negative and positive attributes of absences in that “quality of life is degraded in terms of separation but learning improves.” In contrast to this view, most respondents took a negative view of absences due to military courses, whereas absences associated with international and domestic operations were described positively. R3 went so far as to say they are “all for” operational opportunities that permit the implementation of their skills. In contrast to their positive attitude towards operational deployments, R3 questioned the purpose of courses they have attended, stating that they “never actually use the thing [they are] learning,” though this may best represent individual perception.

R16 discussed the positive aspects of being at home. At home, they could assist and “[being] there for them is a big part of being a family.” Whereas when they are gone, R16’s partner is required to “pick up the slack.” The flexibility associated with both partners being home also influences the daily lives of military members and their families. R15 is the sole driver within their family and their absence means their partner is unable to see their children due to a split custody situation. R10 identified challenges associated with having a partner working as “a shift worker” and the challenges associated with “finding after hours child care” (R10).

Both R1 and R16 identified difficulties associated with being “away from those life moments” (R1) and missing children’s events both “in and out of school” (R16). More positively, R10 experienced value in being home for a prolonged period; noting specifically that the “pandemic kept me home for the longest single stre[t]ch of my career and it imp[ro]ved the quality of my home life significantly.”

## **Partner Pressure**

Partner pressure describes the effects on the military member’s partner and that specific relationship. Though similar to parental presence, partner pressure focuses on the increased demands placed on the member’s spouse and was coded 20 times out of 148 total responses. There is some overlap between these two codes in that, during periods of work-related absence,

members most often described their partners experiencing an increase in pressure or stress due to the change in responsibilities. R16 described their partner's need to take on additional responsibilities during absences, while R2 is more specific and speaks to the partner's need to "take care of the homefront chores alone for long period[s] of time." Most specific are R1 and R14. Both identified chores as a stressor, with the latter highlighting outdoor maintenance such as "lawn and snow care." R20 added, "winter months are tougher due to the level of maintenance required." In total, seven different respondents identified their inability to assist with chores as an issue.

R16 stated "[being] there for them is a big part of being a family," while R14 noted "[separation] causes [additional] stressors that [cannot] be avoided." R16 identified the need to rely upon "other people to help your family" as the "biggest thing for [geographical] separation." Beyond the mechanical or administrative, R1 found their inability to act as "role model" as a key concern. Multiple respondents noted that employed partners face increased pressure as the sole parent. This may also include an increased financial burden associated with childcare. The remaining parent is now responsible for "[handling] all family issues" (R6) such as "finding childcare" (R10) during the day when children are unable to attend school or after-hours when the parent is a shift-worker. Regardless of the reason, there are "financial impacts" (R16) to either missing work or seeking additional childcare.

In contrast, some respondents thought full-time DL would be challenging at home. Respondents believed their “spouse would expect [them] to be responsive and assist in home life” (R11), or despite being on course, your “family doesn’t see it that way . . . . Spouses and kids have the tendency to distract the member while at home” (R13). R14 and R13 highlighted the stressors associated with DL and the friction it causes within a family. R14’s family “would actually prefer if [they were] away.” This geographic separation would allow them to deal with absence, whereas being unable to “attend to their needs” while working at home caused confusion and anger. In contrast, R5 thought that when completing courses from home, “family life would be easier, whether childcare or spouse work cycle.”

Individual interview participant (P) 1 contrasted the advantages and disadvantages of being home. When away, many of the same responsibilities remain, which “puts more onus on her to get things done around the house that typically is a shared responsibility.” He goes on to note his absence puts “more work on [his] coworkers.” Additionally, occasions existed where working from home presented mixed messages with his partner as they were also home due to COVID-19. In this situation, he “wanted to interact” but still understood “9-5 was really [the] workday to work on DL.” In contrast, P1 discussed previous examples of DL which allowed him “to do more things” while at home and positively considered future DL scenarios which would permit him to “spend more time with [his] girlfriend” and “spend more time with [their] friends.”

Ultimately, he believes “having less residency time is a good [thing] so long as all the instruction is delivered successfully.”

## Parental Presence

Parental presence describes the effects of being away on dependents and those partner responsibilities associated with having dependents. Parental presence is the sixth most coded item, selected 19 times of out of 148 responses. Noted previously, one’s partner may experience additional pressure related to finding childcare specifically due to employment. When a military member departs for a course, the parent remaining at home becomes a single parent (R10). Contrasting the comments coded for partner pressure, this category focuses on childcare and responsibilities or comments related specifically to the demands of being the sole parent.

R10 highlighted the difficulty finding “after hours childcare,” while R5 identified the lack of daycare availability on the weekend. R16 identifies a loss of income by their partner when their “child stays home from school,” whereas R15’s absences prevented their partner from seeing their stepchildren as they are the only driver within the family. In contrast to the parent remaining at home, the respondents noted that as the absent member they face pressure due to missing “events” (R16) and “life moments” (R1), and are often faced with having “limited hours and focus” (R5) dedicated towards their family when away.

Geographic separation is complicated by a lack of daycare options on the weekend and the increased financial costs associated with seeking care outside of the traditional work week. As a result, the child either needs to go to work to be looked after or “weekend work is not achievable” (R5). R5 thought full-time DL could ease the childcare burden. As a parent, R1 considered absences associated with military training caused them to be “away for those life moments” and makes it difficult to be a “role model.” Absences associated with military training increase the responsibilities of R6’s partner, which is made more difficult because they “work full time” and now have “to handle all the family issues.” R10 added their partner is a shift worker and absences resulted in additional “stress from single parenting,” along with “issues with finding childcare for after hours” (R10).

## **Discussion**

By examining a particular occupation, this research intended to discover how increasing DL within individual training might affect the quality of life of individual military members and their families. This study focused on one of three categories identified within the research project: family and partner relationships. A common sentiment described was a sense that full-time DL would not be respected by a student’s workplace or understood by their family in the same way as face-to-face learning. This is often based upon the member’s experience with part-time DL and how their respective units enabled their work-

life balance or the ways in which family viewed DL. At the same time, participants noted the difficulties experienced when they are away.

The first three levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems theory are microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. These levels provide a useful way to consider making sense of the relationship between DL and quality of life. Many comments and observations by respondents spoke to their concerns regarding the effect military training has on them and their families. Their experiences spoke to three codes—absence, partner pressure, and parental presence—with the first directly contributed to the latter two. One's microsystem captures the immediate learning environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). When military members conducted DL at home, their microsystem, or immediate learning environment, included their family.

Participants spoke to the ways DL affected those around them at home. This is often based upon their experience with part-time DL and how their respective units enabled their work-life balance. Considering the participant's microsystem allows us to understand the interconnectedness of an individual's immediate environments. When military training is conducted elsewhere, such as face-to-face learning in a different geographic setting, the military member's immediate environment no longer includes their family, but it remains influenced by it. While respondents identified negative aspects about training away from home, they also demonstrated mixed feelings on increasing full-time DL. Some believed this would cause additional tension at home. They attributed this to a

belief that their family would have difficulty rationalizing a partner being both home but also unavailable.

Military training is one of three things that can increase a military member's personal tempo, the others being international operations and deployments along with military exercises. Respondents were quick to identify that individual training, combined with collective training and incremental tasks, contribute to the sense of constantly being away. The mesosystem considers how different microsystems interact with one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Understanding the increase in responsibilities at home, military members recognized both the benefits and pitfalls of being away to conduct training. Geographic separation provided an opportunity for military members to focus on their educational tasks (i.e., their new microsystem) without familial distraction. Yet, they still viewed separation negatively due to the increase in demands and stress placed upon those at home.

While respondents highlight their inability to assist with reoccurring chores, increased tension is often the result of unforeseen events. Here we see how different microsystems (i.e., the home front and learning environment) influence each other. In general, increased time at home with family is seen in a positive manner, resulting in an improved quality of life. This observation aligns with the second greatest satisfier in CAF-delivered DL as identified in the Jones's (2020) research, which was the ability to stay home with one's family. Individual experiences vary, but in general respondents spoke to a rise in stress at home

due to their partner's increased responsibilities, whereas the military member's experience away from the home unit mostly resulted in a reduced tempo. Absences tend to lead to changes in responsibilities at home and what had once been shared then became the responsibility of the partner remaining at home.

The exosystem makes visible the external factors that influence the microsystem, such as institutional policies alongside parental responsibilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). A reoccurring sentiment showed respondents do not believe full-time DL can provide a separation from workplace responsibilities comparable to what they experience during face-to-face learning. The suggestion of conducting DL at home but not within the home or workplace (i.e., a third space) was raised, but had not been experienced by any of the participants. While respondents believe home could increase quality of life through more time with family, their primary concern remained. Specifically, they were concerned with how their chain of command would respect DL. This echoes the findings of both Thorne (2011) and Jones (2020), who found the potential for increased quality of life is often offset by the integration of household responsibilities in addition to a full-time DL commitment.

## **Conclusion and Way Ahead**

Quality of life is adversely affected by the time military members spend away from their families. Much of this time is spent attending military courses within the individual training system. While this study intended to focus

specifically on absences associated with individual training, respondents expanded the discussion within their open-ended responses to encompass all types of absences from home. It soon became clear that being absent for any reason contributed to tension at home. These comments support prior research which negatively linked time away with family quality of life (Sudom, 2012) and overall CAF retention (Laplante & Goldenberg, 2018).

This study sought to understand how increasing DL within the Canadian Army's individual training system would affect the quality of life of individual military members and their families. This research is limited in terms of its sample size and focus on a specific profession within the Canadian army. While respondents generally agree increased usage of full-time DL could positively affect the quality of life of individual members and their families, they brought forward several concerns related to learning at home. Simply increasing the use of DL may solve issues with individual personal tempo. Yet, an unintended consequence might be increased friction at home. Combine this with previous part-time DL experiences and perceptions of full-time DL that are not entirely positive, and those charged with instructional design and implementation must take a more holistic view and consider how changes might affect both the military member and their family. One suggestion raised by participants, but not experienced personally, that deserves further attention is the creation of a third space for learning. This might address tensions within familial spaces; however, it is unclear whether it would foster the same degree of workplace separation that

is experienced when training occurs elsewhere. While this study seeks to extend the limited body of knowledge on DL within the CAF, the lack of female and single-parent representation was not captured. This is a key limitation that needs to be further understood.

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