

NON-STANDARD EMPLOYMENT - WHEN EVEN THE ELITE ARE PRECARIOUS

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*Working Paper 5/03
March 2003*

WORKING PAPER SERIES

ISSN 1327-5216

Abstract

Overall, themes of marginalisation and disadvantage dominate much of the literature on non-standard employment and the studies which underlie these themes are generally restricted to the temporary, casual and part time workforces. This paper presents results from a survey of 240 professional workers who have moved into arrangements of contract employment. A key focus of the paper is the establishment of the Push/Pull Matrix, a tool which analyses individuals' movement into non-standard employment in a way which explicitly recognises and deals with the relationship between both personal and situational factors. The survey results suggest that themes of marginalisation and disadvantage are just as relevant to the professional contractor as they are to other forms of non-standard employment.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents results from a research study of professional workers who have moved into arrangements of contract employment. While the growth in most non-standard work arrangements is most commonly explained as the result of employer demand, there is evidence that some workers choose this form of employment and, are well paid for it. This is especially the case for professionals who work in such fields as freelance editing, engineering or computer programming. Overall though, it is themes of marginalisation and disadvantage which dominate much of the literature on non-standard employment and the studies themselves are generally restricted to the temporary, casual and part time workforces. A common theme of the 135 studies reviewed as the background to this research project, was that:

non standard employment.. more colourfully characterised as ..'marginal' or 'non-standard' ..is directly associated with substantive features of disadvantage.. growth is directly integrated into a general arrangement of marginalisation and deprivation... non standard is directly equated with sub-standard (Campbell and Burgess, 1993:87).

It is this polarisation of the literature on non-standard work, with a mass of casual, part-time and temporary workers in precarious employment on one hand and a smaller, advantaged, professional elite on the other, which is questioned in this study. Overall, the lack of investigation of the professional contractor workforce is at odds with the fact that it is increasing at twice the rate of the well-documented temporary workforce.

Attempting to place the professional contractor within the non-standard workforce further exacerbates this gap in this literature as the view generally presented of this group is of an 'elite' or privileged group of workers who experience little of the negatives of working outside the bounds of standard employment. The types of occupation identified as being involved in professional contracting range from accountants (Sweet, 1994) and computer programmers (Lozano, 1989, Probert, & Wajcman, 1991) to chief financial controllers (Bridges, 1995). The professional contractor workforce appears to be unlike most other non-standard arrangements as it operates in an area characterised by high demand and short supply (Crean, 1995; EPAC, 1996; Jones, 1995; Van Huss, 1995). This provides a strong negotiating position for the individual professional contractor.

Further, drawing together the literature on self-employment, professionals and contracting provides an extremely optimistic picture of the self determined, self actualised worker variously described as a 'symbolic analyst' (Reich, 1992), an 'intelligence worker' (Handy, 1989) and a 'knowledge worker' (Jones, 1995). These terms clearly differentiate the professional contractor workforce and insulate it from many of the negative aspects that surround other non-standard arrangements such as exploitation, marginalisation and the involuntary nature of such. However, a notable feature of the workers in such studies is the domination by subjects in the middle management to professional levels with skills that are in high demand and the speculative rather than empirical nature of these (Bogenhold & Staber, 1991; Warhurst & Thompson, 1998). Further, the contrast presented is so great that it is possible to argue that the professional contractor may represent the high end of a continuum of non-standard work arrangements suggested by Milkman (1998). There are indications that there may be very important similarities between the professional contractor and other non-standard workers - similarities that may in fact be more important than the differences. This paper draws on one similarity identified, that of the reasons for individuals originally entering non-standard work arrangements. It is an area dealt with extensively by studies of self-employment and includes factors such as the push from prior employment because of redundancy or lack of career opportunity as well as the pull of more money and career autonomy.

ELITE OR PRECARIOUS: DERIVING THE PUSH/PULL MATRIX

Examination of the nature of the move into contracting necessitates consideration of the process of how individual professionals change or move from their previous jobs. The literature on self-employment and

future of work suggests professionals initially move into contracting due to advantageous labour market conditions and for career reasons. Furthermore, a fundamental assertion of much of the theoretical literature on the future of work is that professionals are well suited to take advantage of the changes occurring (see for example Broadbent, Dietrich & Roberts, 1997; McRae, 1996; Rifkin, 1995). There are two presumptions which underlie these views of the professional contractor. Firstly, it is assumed that a privileged labour market position is inherent in professional occupations and secondly, that these particular professionals have a strong and proactive affiliation with a chosen 'career'. The notions of labour markets and individual careers obviously do not operate as completely distinct factors and the push/pull dichotomy is the concept that this study uses to unite them and provide the basis for the theoretical framework of the Push/Pull Matrix.

Briefly, the push/pull dichotomy arises from the classic economic theories of 'career' (Knight, 1933) and 'default' (Schumpeter, 1934) and is essentially a self-employment/paid-employment choice, based on the individual identifying the opportunities and constraints associated with each (Rees & Shah, 1986:95). A common theme of mainstream views is that professionals have an advantaged labour market position and that this advantage is primarily the result of skill shortages. Supply side factors were found to cause employers considerable difficulty, especially where labour market conditions were tight and skill levels high. Contract work with high levels of pay becomes more prevalent under such conditions, particularly for the specialist skills associated with information technology, telecommunications and information systems (Atkinson, Rick, Morris & Williams, 1996: 27-28). However, there are suggestions relative scarcity in some professions may, in fact, be giving way to surpluses (Atkinson et. al., 1996; Bosworth, Broadbent et al, 1997). Job loss through redundancy, either actual or perceived, is now the single major factor associated with the move from previous employment (ABS, 2000; EPAC, 1996). Relating this to the professional contractor workforce, it seems reasonable to assume there will be a proportion who experience increased vulnerability due to redundancy. Furthermore, in common with general studies on non-standard employment, such moves are likely to be associated with downward mobility, particularly for childbearing women (Dex & McCulloch, 1997; Morris, 1995). This notion of contracting as a planned, versus an unplanned move, is important as it introduces the concept of career.

Both traditional career theory and the professional worker are the subject of well developed bodies of literature which focus on concepts familiar to writers on the future of work (see for example Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; Reich, 1992; Rifkin, 1995). One well-known example is where professionals in the first stage of their career seek self-actualisation and autonomy by changing jobs and/or organisations. This is called the 'trial' stage and lasts to about 35 years of age. The next stage lasts about fifteen years and is characterised by individuals seeking achievement. After the age of 50, security becomes the dominant concern (Hall, 1986:113). More recent studies of professionals have also added an age and stage factor, proposing 'routine busting' as a mid-career identity change process, facilitated by the desire for autonomy, feedback and support (Mirvis & Hall, 1995). However, challenges to the traditional notion of career arise as the importance of unemployment and, particularly for females, the role that caring for dependents may have prior to entering contracting, impact on the world of work. Furthermore, while childbearing has typically been associated with life stages for females, more recent moves towards paternity leave and caring for the elderly and disabled within the family home, now challenge the validity of traditional career models. These have been further weakened by the organisational restructuring of the 1980s and 90s and the large-scale retrenchment of management and professionals within organisations (Buchanan et. al., 1992; Holbeche, 1997; Warhurst & Thompson, 1998).

A key contribution from the career literature is that endemic, dynamic change and individual insecurity no longer have to be examined against supposed norms of stability, upward mobility and self-actualisation. Removing these constraints provides the basis for combining the concept of career with that of labour market movements and asking whether professionals make the move to contracting by choice, because they are drawn by the intrinsic 'pull' of the potential benefits. This is what Bogenhold and Staber (1991) call the "logic of autonomy", or because they are 'pushed' into it by economic necessity arising out of their poor labour market standing or redundancy for example. While this summarises the 'push' versus 'pull' dichotomy of the self-employment choice, it also explicitly assumes that the decision to enter an employment arrangement is the result of rational, calculative decisions.

Schumpeter's (1933) theory of default adds another dimension to the dichotomy with the suggestion that push factors associated with self-employment can be extrapolated further to reflect structural constraints. Building on this notion of self-employment as a default option, Philips (1962 cited in Carr, 1996:29) concluded that it acts principally as a defence against unemployment or as a refuge for groups such as older workers, ethnic groups and the disabled. The difference between push and default is developed further in Carr's (1996) examination of self-employed women which found that women do not default to self-employment because they have no option. Rather, they opt for self-employment because of structural constraints (most notably, young children) and the opportunity for flexibility and greater autonomy.

The push/pull dichotomy, with the addition of the default, provides a diversity of motives for professional contracting. While there may be some individuals who are pushed into contracting as a defensive move against unemployment, for the most able and ambitious it may be a proactive career option. Furthermore, there could also be professionals whose moves "may actually be seen as a default career choice - the result of organisational retrenchment rather than individual initiative" (Carr, 1996:48). It is an option distinct from those clearly pushed as it still suggests that either some choice or control may be exercised – as opposed to the lack of both choice and control for those pushed. Another aspect of the decision process is less explicit and this is the timing of the move, either direct or delayed.

As the focus of this research is the antecedents to the original decision, the timing of the move is important. It is this aspect which should differentiate between individuals who make a planned career move straight into contracting, perhaps from an 'incubator' organisation (Birley & Westhead, 1993), and those who move for reasons such as caring for dependents or a return to study. It is a distinction made clear in the matrix structure illustrated in Figure 1 below. This translates the aspects of the push/pull dichotomy and default theory into a structure that can then be applied to the arrangement of professional contracting. The factors of timing and the choice provide clear distinctions between the four options in Figure 1 as well as between each pairing and expands Schumpeter's default hypothesis to distinguish between two quite distinct alternatives.

Figure 1: The Push/Pull Matrix

	Left to Become a Contractor	Left and Later Became a Contractor
Contractor By Choice	PULL	DEFAULT 1
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT 2	PULL

The first, the Default 1 option is where the individual professional became a contractor by choice but only some time after the termination of the prior employment arrangement. Reasons for such a profile may be an individual choosing to return to studies or caring for dependents. It is quite distinct from the Default 2 option, where the move into contracting is immediate but not by choice. Examples from the literature suggest that such a profile may be the result of organisational outsourcing, where former employees are transferred to the outsourcing company with the functions or, where employees are forced into becoming 'pseudo-contractors' (Casey, Metcalf & Milward (1997).

The matrix also makes explicit the large-scale uncertainty about ongoing employment within the ranks of the professional workforce and makes it clear that the plans and motivations for exiting one form of employment may not be the same as those for entering another form. A number of studies have investigated non-standard employment options as a 'trap' or a 'bridge' (Burgess & Campbell, 1999; Carr, 1996, 1989; Natti, 1993; 1995). Interpreting this in the context of the professional contractor, contracting is seen as a 'trap' if it is associated with unemployment, is involuntary and provides few opportunities for more permanent employment. If the converse should be true, it is seen as a 'bridge'.

SURVEY RESULTS

Five hundred surveys were distributed to professionals currently in contract employment. Of the 240 returned, 179 were from males and 61 from females. The results discussed in this paper arise from the first four items of the survey and these establish the individuals exit point from prior employment as well as the point of entry into contracting. The items build consecutively on each other to provide a snapshot of the original move as one of either being ‘pushed’ by constraint or ‘pulled’ by opportunity. Together, the four items develop the basic structure of the Push/Pull Matrix illustrated in Figure 1.

Date of Initial Move into Contracting

The first item established the date of the original move into contracting. Note that this date may not necessarily relate to a continuing or unbroken career as a contractor. As shown in Table 1, the elapsed time since first entering contracting reveals some clear patterns when age and sex of respondent are examined. There appear to be two distinct groupings for males. The first of is a cluster of 58 who entered contracting between two to three years ago and the second, a group of 60 who entered between five to fifteen years ago. These two groups account for over 56 per cent of the total male population.

Examining the composition of these two clusters in Table 1 below reveals a fairly general distribution over the age range for the first cluster (of 58) but two concentrated age groupings within the second (of 60). The 30-39 age range in the 5 to 10 years of contracting option captures 11 of the 39 responses while 40-44 year old males with 5-15 years since entering contracting account for 22 of the 60 responses. These two age related clusters within the male population provide evidence of a solid nucleus of male professionals dedicated to working as contractors and who made this decision in their early to mid thirties.

Women also fell into two distinct groupings, one at between 1 and 2 years since entering contracting and a second at between 4 to 10 years. While this second grouping falls in a lower “time spent contracting” option than it did for males, these two clusters of women account for 18 per cent and 41 per cent respectively, making up 59 per cent of the total female population of the survey. As with the results for males, females in the first cluster are distributed throughout the age groups. Twelve of the 15 females who entered contracting 5 to 10 years ago are aged between 35–44. Prior results from an earlier study indicate that dependent children are a feature of female professional contractors within this age ranges so both occupation and dependents need to be included in the analysis.

Table 2 combines occupation, gender and date of entry into contracting. The main point to arise from these results is that only a small proportion of the total population appear to have a long-term attachment to contracting. Also, the concentration of males in Information Technology (IT), Business, Management and Administration (Bus/Man/Admin) and Engineering identified as dominant occupations, display quite distinct patterns in terms of initial time since first entering contracting.

Firstly, Bus/Man/Admin. Professionals are fairly new entrants in the contractor workforce. Combined with the fact that this occupation represents over 25 per cent of the total contractor population in the survey, there is indication that growth in this occupation within contracting is the result of recent labour market activity. Whether this is the result of push or pull factors will be examined shortly.

Table 2 displays quite a different distribution for the IT profession where the overall is one were longer-term attachment reflects the widely cited position of labour market advantage as well as perhaps providing evidence of an occupation where contracting is sustainable as a long term employment arrangement. The results also support the ‘occupational norm’ explanations of contracting expressed by the IT participants in the interviews that assisted in the development of this survey. This is demonstrated for the occupation of engineering in Table 2 where a group of 18 males entered contracting in this profession 5 to 10 years ago.

Table 2: Entry into Contracting by Occupation & Gender

Occupation	Gender	Time Since First Entered Contracting									Total	
		Under 6 months	Under 1 year	Under 2 yrs	Under 3 yrs	Under 4 yrs	Under 5 yrs	5 to 10 yrs	11 to 15 yrs	15 to 20 yrs		Over 20 yrs
SCIENTIST	M	1		1						3		5
	F											0
ARCH/DRAUGHT/ BUILD	M		1	1	4	1	2	6	3	4	3	25
	F						1	2				3
BUS//MAN/ ADMIN	M	6	5	10	11	2	5	7			1	47
	F		3	2	3	3	2		1			14
IT	M	3	6	12	4	3	3	8	9	4	2	53
	F			4			1	4	2	1		12
HEALTH & WELFARE	M											0
	F		2	3	1	1	4	6				17
EDUCATION	M		1	1								2
	F		1	1		1	2	1				6
ENGINEERS	M			4	3	1	1	18	7			34
	F	1			3			2				6
ACCOUNTANT	M		2	3	1		2		1		1	10
	F			1								1
TOTAL		11	22	43	32	12	23	54	25	9	8	238

* 2 respondents who were "unsure" of their occupation have been omitted

NB: The Totals include data omitted within the body of the Table due to small sample size

Overall, 67 per cent of Engineers entered contracting between 5 to 15 years ago. As with IT, Engineering emerges as an 'older' contracting profession but one where labour market opportunity, or other 'pull' forces, may no longer be operating as strongly as they once did. While the lower numbers make it difficult to extrapolate, the totally female occupation of Health & Welfare also demonstrates concentration in years contracting, this time for those with 4 to 10 years in contracting. Overall, the results from the survey provide evidence of labour market explanations for the initial move into contracting but also indicate other factors need to be explored.

Prior Employment Status

The focus now moves to the second survey item, employment status immediately prior to contracting. The aim of this part of the survey is to investigate the possibility that contracting may operate as an alternative to unemployment or, to what have traditionally been seen as less secure forms of work, such as temporary, casual and part time employment.

Table 3 below reveals that over 45 per cent of respondents (219) were in traditional full-time, permanent employment prior to contracting. Contrary to many studies on non-standard work, unemployment appears to play a very minor role with only three reporting being unemployed prior to becoming contractors. While the previous studies are unlikely to include contractors, it was made clear in the interviews that the perceived threat or potential for unemployment can also be a powerful motivator in the move into contracting.

Table 3: Prior Employment Status

	Nos. of Responses	% of Responses
• Full-time temporary	30	6.3
• Full-time permanent	219	45.8
• Full-time casual	35	7.3
• Part time temporary	32	6.7
• Part time permanent	25	5.2
• Part time casual	74	15.5
• Self-employed	33	6.9
• Caring for dependants	10	2.1
• Unemployed	3	0.6
• Other	17	3.6
TOTALS	478	100

NB: Some individuals were in multiple employment arrangements prior to contracting

Also, despite being in traditional employment prior to contracting, many respondents were in various forms of non standard (that is, not full-time permanent) employment at the same time. The level of involvement in non-standard forms of employment is consistent with Australian Bureau of Statistics estimations of 48 per cent (ABS, 1995; Barnes et. al., 1999). However, the ABS data deals with employment alternatives as single, distinct categories rather than allowing individuals to fall into more than one of the multiple options allowable in this research. Confirmation that individuals hold multiple working arrangements while maintaining traditional full-time jobs comes from Bryson and White's (1996, 1997) studies of self-employment operating as a period of transition prior to individuals fully committing to the one arrangement. It may provide a 'try before you buy' option for individuals who are uncertain about really wanting to leave traditional work arrangements. Interview data from the development stage of this research also indicated that multiple job-holding provided a safety-net in terms of guaranteeing that financial commitments can be met or allowing an individual to pursue their real or 'other' interests with reduced risk.

Overall, the results from Table 3 offer support for the view that professionals are moving into contracting by choice - that they are being pulled by the opportunity offered by non standard employment rather than being pushed by constraints such as unemployment or from marginal positions of employment. The accuracy of this perception is examined in detail in the next item on the issue of choice and the timing in the initial move into contracting.

The Nature of the Move into Contracting

The results illustrated in Table 4 arose from the question; "Which of the following would best describe your move to contracting?" It makes the interaction of choice and timing of entry explicit in the individuals' move into professional contracting and clearly reveals the usefulness of the Push/Pull Matrix structure as a tool for examining non-standard work arrangements.

The populations represented by each of the four main quadrants of Push, Pull, Default 1 and Default 2 are all significant at the $p < .05$ level. Overall, while Contracting by Choice accounts for 124 or 30.7% of respondents and clearly dominates the results, there are also a significant group who are not contracting because they wish to. Further, the 'forced move' option of Default 2 is significant in its own right and this results was not expected to feature at all within the professional contractor workforce. The timing of entry in to contracting also appears to play a more important role than anticipated with no significant difference between those who had direct or delayed entry into contracting

Table 4: The Push/Pull Matrix

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor N = 22	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor N = 13	Totals
Contractor By Choice N = 20	PULL N = 66	DEFAULT 1 N = 38	By Choice N = 124
Contractor Not by Choice N = 18	DEFAULT 2 N = 11	PUSH N = 46	No Choice N = 75
Totals	Direct Entry N = 99	Delayed Entry N = 97	Total of 240 Respondents

While further papers will extend the Matrix structure to examine factors such as occupation, marital status, gender and age and clarify explanations of labour market and career, it is clear that four key options operate quite distinctly and will produce clear profiles of contractors within each.

This is evidenced below in Table 5 where the ability of the Matrix structure to explain professionals' movement into contracting is enhanced by an examination of the factors that underlie each of the main quadrants. This summarises the matrix in terms of the items that emerged as significant for each quadrant as well as the key factors of choice and timing.

Table 5: Items underlying the Push/Pull Matrix

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always wanted** • To be own Boss** • More Money** • Professional Norm** 	DEFAULT 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance** • Flexible lifestyle** • Voluntary Redundancy** 	BY CHOICE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always wanted** • To be own Boss** • More Money** • Professional Norm** • Other Reasons*
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one reason explains the move – But combinations do. • Invol. Redundancy & Business with others** 	PUSH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involuntary Redundancy** • Lack of Career Prospects** • Best Option** 	NO CHOICE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involuntary Redundancy** • Lack of Career Prospects** • Best Option*
	DIRECT ENTRY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always wanted** • To be own Boss** • More Money** • Professional Norm** • Business with Others** 	DELAYED ENTRY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involuntary Redundancy** • Lack of Career Prospects** • Voluntary Redundancy** • Best Option** • Balance** 	

**Item significant at the .001 level * Item significant at the .005 level

The results presented in Tables 4 and 5 justify the distinction made in this research between voluntary and involuntary redundancy as voluntary moves were significantly linked to the options of Default 1 and, to a lesser extent Default 2 while Involuntary was linked to Default 2 and Push options. It seems that individuals who described their move into contracting via a path of voluntary redundancy may have viewed it as presenting a career opportunity rather than the lack of it.

Generally, direct and voluntary move into contracting are more likely to be motivated by money whereas delayed but voluntary moves are made to in order to achieve a work/family balance and because these individuals see contracting as the best option for lifestyle reasons. Females also tend to enter from the route of voluntary redundancy. The two Default options also emerge differently when examined in terms of individual reasons for entering. 'Employer Request' is concentrated in 'Default 1', a result difficult to

explain from these results but, from the earlier discussion, one likely to be related to married females with children (Balancing Work and Children).

The Default 1 option appears to be interpreted by respondents as an option of choice rather than coercion in that 'Employer Request' has positive connotations, providing an opportunity not offered by traditional forms of employment, rather than the constraint first advanced.

SUMMARY

The results from a survey of 240 professionals registered as contractors revealed that, despite the widely cited 'elite' position of the professional, contracting actually covered a continuum of arrangements.

These indications ranged from contracting as:

1. a trap associated with job insecurity, low earnings and periods of unemployment entering as a defensive move against unemployment, through to
2. a transitional form of employment on the road to more permanent employment arrangements for some, to
3. being a career option for the most able and ambitious for others.

A key factor of the pull into contracting is the incentive of more money. Furthermore, the results indicate that the movement of professionals into self-employment options such as management consultancies may be the result of a default career choice, resulting from organisational retrenchment rather than individual choice. The majority of the professionals surveyed explained their motive for entering contracting in terms of various 'negative' experiences associated with their previous employee role. Most respondents did not express a strong prior commitment to notions of personal advancement through self-employment and instead, gave reasons related to illness, childcare, redundancy and unemployment as well as dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their previous employment situation.

Overall, the results indicate that for men, job loss through redundancy was the single major factor associated with the move from previous employment. Consequently, there is a proportion of the professional contract workforce who have an increased vulnerability because of redundancy and, indications from other, general studies on non-standard employment, indicate such moves are associated with decreased earnings and potentially downward mobility for childbearing women and older men. Very clear occupation/industry differences emerged, particularly in relation to the IT and engineering professions where there were clear norms of contracting.

The results clearly reflect the impact of economic recession and the restructuring of employment which has produced not only the prospects of unemployment for the professional worker, but also increased work fragmentation and insecurity. The results support Morris's (1995) conjecture that such moves represent changes in the employment trajectory of workers in a manner that may well affect different age cohorts in different ways is borne out in these results. There are clear differences between secure and insecure forms of professional contracting that are not easily captured by the traditional indicators of occupation or even by notions of polarisation of an underclass and an elite. Further, the results lend support to the indications from the pilot interviews which underlie this current study where complex work histories were revealed.

In summary, labour market explanations of skill shortages and high demand do not explain how individuals made or had the ability to accomplish, the move from employee to professional contractor status, or why some individuals choose to remain in contracting while others leave. Furthermore, plans and motivations for remaining or exiting may not be the same as those for entering. This returns to the concept of the 'push' versus 'pull' dichotomy and raises questions about the extent to which the decision to become a professional contractor is the result of rational, calculative decision. There is also the question of the role contracting plays for the professional who enters it – is it a 'trap' or a 'bridge'? Professional contracting is a 'trap', if it is connected with unemployment, is involuntary and provides few opportunities for more permanent employment. It is a 'bridge' if the notion of contracting as a planned career move becomes important. These issues will be dealt with in subsequent papers.

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