

Consulting Playbook

Mastering engagement with external consultants to achieve value for money and build APS capability

Version 1.0, May 2024



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Executive Summary

Australian Government Consulting (AGC) is a management consulting service for the APS, by the APS. Helping the APS to 'buy-better' from external consultants is a core part of our mission.

Our insights into consulting practice supplement the <u>APS Strategic Commissioning Framework</u> and <u>Australian Government procurement policy</u>. The focus of this Playbook is on maximising value for money once you have determined that it is appropriate to engage external support.

This Playbook is structured in three parts.

Part 1: Problem definition and project scoping

In addition to getting a good price, value for money depends on procuring support for the right problem (or opportunity). Part 1 of this Playbook sets out six steps to help you define the problem and scope the project.

- Understand the context: the context of a problem or opportunity will shape the range of potential responses.
- 2. **Define the problem (or opportunity):** a precise articulation of the problem will avoid needless analysis saving time and money.
- 3. **Scope the project:** a clear scope will help to ensure that consultants work efficiently and deliver what you need.
- Allocate internal resources: APS employees should be available to support project delivery and take the work forward.
- 5. **Plan for capability transfer:** specific capability goals should be set early, and remain front-of-mind throughout the project.
- Understand the market: understanding how external consultancies work (and what drives their costs) will help you achieve value for money.

Part 2: Working with external consultants

Part 2 of the Playbook outlines approaches to make the most of external consultancies.

- 7. **Start successfully:** giving consultants support and access so that they can hit the ground running will avoid unnecessary delays.
- 8. **Manage proactively:** strong project governance and risk management underpin progress and performance.
- 9. **Prepare for delivery:** planning for what comes next during the project will enable you to maintain momentum and take advantage of stakeholder buy-in.

Part 3: Ending the project

As you end the project, prepare to carry the work forward and provide feedback to help future APS buyers.

- 10. **Capture lessons learned:** a project retrospective will help the project team evaluate performance and identify opportunities for improvement.
- 11. **Provide feedback:** conveying feedback (to both the consultants and APS colleagues) will support the APS to buy better over time.

The Playbook complements other rules and guidance

The <u>APS Strategic Commissioning Framework</u> requires core work to be done by APS employees and restricts outsourcing of core work to defined circumstances. When external consultants are engaged, mechanisms must be in place to transfer knowledge and skills to the APS.

Officials from non-corporate Commonwealth entities and prescribed corporate Commonwealth entities listed in section 30 of the <u>Public Governance</u>. <u>Performance and Accountability Rule 2014</u> must comply with the <u>Commonwealth Procurement Framework</u> (the <u>Framework</u>) when engaging external consultants. The Framework states that officials must seek to achieve value for money and conduct procurements in accordance with their Accountable Authority Instructions and relevant operational guidelines. <u>Resource Management Guide 423 Procurement Publishing and Reporting Obligations</u> defines consultancy services and includes relevant information on determining whether a contract represents a consultancy.

You must consider if your engagement is within the scope of services of the <u>Australian Government Management Advisory Services Panel (MAS Panel)</u>. Use of the MAS Panel is Mandatory for non-corporate Commonwealth entities that are subject to the <u>Public Governance</u>, <u>Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (PGPA Act)</u> and optional for corporate Commonwealth entities and Commonwealth companies, including Government Business Enterprises, authorised by the Department of Finance to use the Panel.

Officials must actively manage their contracts to ensure supplier performance. The Australian Government <u>Contract Management Guide</u> is available to assist with this. The <u>APS Academy</u> and the <u>Centre of Procurement Excellence</u> also offer opportunities for officials to learn more about procurement and contracting.

A range of other resources offer guidance for public servants using external consultants. We have drawn on existing playbooks and guidance and adapted these for the APS context. Links to these resources are provided at <u>Appendix C: More information</u>.

This is a consultation draft of the Consulting Playbook. We would appreciate your feedback to inform later versions. You can contact us at agc.gov.au or email AustralianGovernmentConsulting@agc.gov.au

Problem definition and project scoping

The starting point for engaging consultants is to develop a clear understanding of the problem (or opportunity)

This section outlines six steps you should take prior to engaging external consultants. Depending on the scale and complexity of your project, you might complete multiple steps simultaneously or revisit steps as you gain more information.













The context of a problem or opportunity will shape the range of potential responses

Answering the following questions will help you make decisions about the scope and scale of the project, saving you time later on. You should aim to complete this step rapidly. For many projects, one or two hours will be sufficient.



Impact

What is the impact of the problem or opportunity?

What is the effect on specific cohorts, communities or sectors?

What will happen if no action is taken?



Background

Who are the key actors and stakeholders?

Who has tried to solve the problem (or a similar problem in another context)?

What has been tried in the past, and what happened?



Authorising environment

Who is the ultimate decision maker (e.g. a Minister)?

Who else needs to be convinced by your advice (e.g. senior officials, or other governments)?

Who else can influence the decision, and what are their interests?

Are there any constraints on the decision (e.g. funding constraints or Government commitments)?

Who is responsible for responding to the findings or outcomes of the project?



Capabilities, capacity and constraints

What resources are currently invested in addressing this issue?

What specific capabilities are required to understand and solve the problem?

Who has relevant information and expertise?



Timeframes and deliverables

Why is the problem important to solve now?

When does the solution need to be identified?

How soon does change need to occur?

What are the likely deliverables (if known)?



Risks

What level of accuracy/confidence is needed?

What are the consequences of defective advice?

Step 2: Define the problem (or opportunity)

A clear problem statement is essential to achieving value for money from consultants

A precise articulation of the problem (or opportunity) will avoid needless analysis – even a great answer to the wrong problem will not represent value for money. A clear problem statement will also ensure that people involved in the project are on the same page.

You should aim to develop a problem statement that is:

- Specific enough to be meaningful, and measurable wherever possible.
- Outcomes focused, rather than focussed on outputs or activities.
- Relevant to the goals and constraints of the decision-maker including, for example, the responsibilities of the relevant portfolio and the scale of reform ambition.
- Time-bound.1

Avoid including solutions in your problem statement. External consultants, who often engage across a range of sectors, may be able to propose alternative solutions that better meet your objectives.

Once you have a draft problem statement, it is a good idea to refine it with your team. A workshop can be an effective method of achieving this.

Example:

Strong problem statement:

How could the Government change energy demand (shift or shrink) to deliver Australia's energy transformation by 2030, using existing and planned infrastructure?

Component of the broader policy problem that may require external expertise: Modelling expected energy demand under a range of scenarios considering commercial, geographic and technical risk and opportunity factors.

Weaker problem statements:	Reason:
What can Government do to support Australia's energy transformation by 2030?	Not specific
How much could the Government incentivise changes in energy demand?	Not outcomes focused
What can the Government do to increase public transport utilisation by 2030?	Not relevant to the goals and constraints of the decision-maker
How much could the Government incentivise changes in energy demand (shift or shrink) to deliver Australia's energy transformation using existing and planned infrastructure?	Not time-bound

¹ C Conn and R McLean, 'Bulletproof Problem Solving' The One Skill That Changes Everything', Wiley, 2018 (Accessed: 20 May 2024)

Step 3: Scope the project

Defining the project scope will help ensure that consultants work efficiently and deliver what you need

Clearly stating the project scope and outputs will enable the project team to work efficiently towards a clear end point. It will also help you to manage the performance of external consultants.



Clarify boundaries

Be up front about boundaries and constraints. This will avoid spending time on options that are not viable, and may prompt consultants to provide new insights that challenge your assumptions about what is feasible.



Specify deliverables

Set clear deliverables throughout the project. This will give you visibility of progress and opportunities to course correct. Interim deliverables may include, for example, a project plan, insights from consultations, analysis, or early drafts of the final deliverable.

If the project deliverables are highly uncertain, it may be beneficial to break the project into smaller parts and only go to market for the initial stage. (Note that changes to specifications once you have entered into a contract are likely to incur additional costs.)

You should also specify requirements associated with capability transfer. For example, this could include coaching or training services, or the development of user guidance for a technical model.



Estimate resources and timeframe

Develop a timeline for completing the project, and estimate the required resourcing. Your estimates should account for internal capacity and capability, as well as other context uncovered in Step 1.

Step 4: Allocate internal resources

Your organisation will need to identify internal capacity to support the project and carry the work forward

Plan ahead for the diversity of people, skills and experience needed to deliver the project and take forward the work:

- What internal APS staff are available and suitable to commit to the project?
- What capabilities and skills do the APS staff have?
- What skills are needed to transition to implementation after the project ends?

Project roles and responsibilities:

Position	Role	Responsibility	
Project sponsor	Senior leader providing strategic direction and high-level support.	Secures resources, champions project value, and makes key decisions.	
Project lead	Oversees project operations and ensures project success.	Manages scope, timelines, budgets, deliverables and communication with stakeholders.	
Contract manager	Manages contractual aspects of the engagement with consultants (may not be a dedicated, full-time resource on the project, or may be combined with another role).	Oversees contracts, manages consultant relationships, and ensures adherence to requirements.	
Project team	Internal staff contributing their knowledge and expertise to the project.	Collaborates with consultants, shares agency knowledge, contributes expertise to tasks, and applies learnings to develop capability.	
Project stakeholders	People with knowledge of the problem, people who are affected by the problem, and/or people responsible for implementing the solution.	Provide knowledge and experience to the project.	

Step 5: Plan for capability transfer

Capability building should be considered early, and remain front-of-mind throughout the project

It is a requirement of the <u>APS Strategic Commissioning Framework</u> that any use of external expertise enhances the capability of the APS.

Set capability goals and embed strategies to build capability

You should establish clear obligations for consultants to transfer specific skills and knowledge to APS employees.

Strategy	Description	Benefit
Blended Teams	Embed client resources into the consultant team, or vice versa.	Facilitates bilateral transfer of knowledge and understanding throughout the project, and supports skills transfer to APS staff.
Shadowing	Assign APS staff to shadow consultants throughout the project.	Allows for in-depth on-the-job learning and knowledge transfer.
Knowledge transfer sessions	Schedule dedicated knowledge transfer sessions led by consultants.	Equips APS staff with the skills and expertise to contribute to deliverables and to carry the work forward after the project ends.
Soft landings	Allow time for a smooth handover from the consultant to the client.	Ensures all questions and issues are addressed before the project is closed.

Capture the insights and tools generated through the project

Ensure you have full access to and understanding of all tools, analysis and methodology from the consultant's work. These should be provided in a form that you can readily use. Intellectual Property considerations should be identified as part of procurement planning processes to ensure relevant contractual obligations are included which identify what party owns specific information or data generated as part of delivering a contract. For more information refer to the <u>Australian Government intellectual property manual</u> (Chapter 7).

Step 6: Understand the market

Understanding how consultants work will help you achieve value for money



Understand the cost drivers of consulting proposals and be prepared to negotiate

- The biggest influence on the cost of consulting projects is usually the seniority
 of the team and the amount of time that each person dedicates to the project.
 The methodology (or activities) that the consultancy proposes will also influence
 the cost of the project.
- You can ask the consultancy to provide a breakdown of costs (including the
 estimated time that each person will spend on the project), and negotiate to
 maximise value for money. In some instances, you may be able to reduce the
 cost of the project by undertaking some activities in-house.
- Consider linking contract deliverables to milestone payments. Contracts based on estimated time may lead to cost increases due to project delays.



Ensure you have the right team (not just the right consultancy)

- Consultancies often refer to experience delivering similar projects. You should
 check that the specific team assigned to your project has the requisite capabilities.
 It is then important to agree what will happen if the consultancy needs to change
 team members.
- You should also confirm that any subject matter experts cited in the proposal
 will be meaningfully involved in the project. Senior people (usually 'partners'
 or 'principals') are typically involved in multiple projects at once, and are also
 required to cultivate new clients and win business. Consultancies can increase
 the project profit-margin by reducing the demands on senior people in favour of
 consultants with less experience.



Obtain feedback

- When procuring consultancy services, agencies must consider relevant experience and performance history (<u>Procurement Policy Note - Ethical conduct of tenderers and suppliers</u>).
- Transparency, cooperation and information sharing across agencies is critical for delivering the best outcomes for Australians. Reach out to other agencies and ask for their feedback on consultancy services. You should also ask about their experience dealing with a similar problem, and any recommendations for how you can approach the problem to achieve value for money.

Working with consultants

Build and manage an effective, integrated project team

This section includes approaches to working with consultants that support delivery of the project, from set up to sign off.







Start successfully

Give consultants support and reasonable access so that they can hit the ground running.

Document roles and responsibilities so that everyone involved in the project can proceed with certainty.

Manage proactively

Invest in good project governance and risk management to support progress and performance.

Prepare for delivery

Prepare to take work forward when the project ends.

Reconcile and accept the deliverables before ending the project.

Step 7: Start successfully

Giving consultants the right support and access enables them to hit the ground running

Plan ahead and prepare the resources that the consultants will need to successfully deliver the project. Access will need to comply with the <u>Protective Security Policy Framework (PSPF)</u>, <u>Information Security Manual (ISM)</u>, the <u>Privacy Act 1988</u> and any agency specific information security requirements (including in relation to cyber security). You may require input from various areas across your agency.

Talking to colleagues and consultants early about access requirements will help to ensure that work can commence in a timely manner. Advising consultants in advance about resources they won't have access to can also minimise the risk of project delays.

Consider which of the below is **appropriate and necessary** for the consultants to complete the project:

ICT	Facilities	Information	People
			· .
☐ Accounts	☐ Meeting rooms	□ Data	☐ Subject matter
□ Laptops	☐ Work stations	□ Documents	experts
☐ System access☐ File sharing	☐ Security passes (escorted or	☐ Access☐ Storage	☐ Stakeholders☐ Decision makers
_ 5	unescorted)	_ 5	☐ Client team members

Step 8: Manage proactively

Good project governance will help manage progress and performance

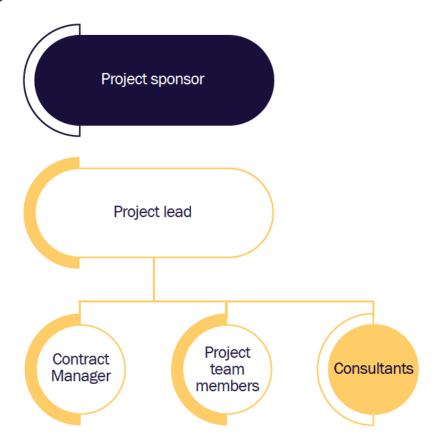
Good project governance requires clear lines of responsibility and accountability. This includes how key stakeholders are engaged, oversight arrangements, systems, processes, decision making, and reporting.

Reporting requirements should be built into specifications and contract terms, and be aligned to agreed service level agreements, milestones and key performance indicators.

The nature and cadence of meetings will depend on the project and interest of relevant decision-makers. **Establishing a meeting rhythm early helps to maintain momentum and to engage relevant stakeholders at the right time.** Regular meetings, designed with clear objectives and accompanied by written status reports, are an opportunity to check on progress and raise any concerns.

Documenting roles and responsibilities at the beginning will enable all parties to undertake tasks with certainty. This helps clarify the work each member should be doing, communication channels, and dispute resolution pathways.

Example project team structure:



Step 8: Manage proactively

Active risk management is essential for project delivery

You should always ask for a risk assessment and the consultant's proposed methods for dealing with risks. In large or complex projects, a detailed risk management plan will ensure both sides have an agreed understanding of project risks, who owns them, and who implements appropriate controls and mitigation strategies. For more information refer to the Commonwealth Risk Management Policy (Department of Finance).

The below table includes risk examples specific to consulting projects, which should be considered in addition to Commonwealth procurement policy and agency frameworks.

Key risks	Controls and mitigation strategies
APS agency does not benefit from capability development and/or transfer of knowledge.	 Ensure relevant staff are available to work with the consultant. Include specific capability uplift deliverables in the project plan, and ask for these to be included in project status reports.
Poor problem definition leads to deliverables that do not meet expectations or cannot be implemented.	 Invest in developing a clear problem statement at the outset. Align project deliverables with the problem statement. Include interim deliverables throughout the project so that there is time to course correct.
Consultant is not given appropriate and necessary access in a timely manner, leading to delays.	 Identify and plan for appropriate and necessary access early. Agree a process for escalating access issues to the project sponsor for resolution. Commit resources and support to the project and document this in governance arrangements. Identify key internal stakeholders early for consultation.
Conflicts of interest are not declared or inappropriately managed, undermining the integrity of the project and contract management process.	 Ensure staff are aware of their obligations under the APS Code of Conduct, Commonwealth procurement policy, and other agency obligations. Ensure all individuals materially involved with the management of a contract make a conflict of interest declaration and update it on a regular basis and when circumstances change. (Refer to the resources listed at the bottom of this page). Ensure consultants are aware of agency expectations for integrity and ethical conduct, and include clauses in the contract that require consultants to identify, disclose and appropriately manage any conflicts of interest. Ensure consultants are made fully aware they will be subject to the Public Interest Disclosure Scheme and aware of their obligations in respect of disclosable conduct. Include 'Notification of Significant Events' clauses in the contract and ensure consultants are aware of their obligations.
Procurement processes, poor contract management and contract variations lead to contracts not representing value for money or delivering outcomes for Australians.	 Ensure relevant staff have appropriate procurement and contract management training. Establish meaningful and enforceable milestones and deliverables for supplier performance. Monitor and enforce supplier performance against contract commitments, including guidance on escalation points. Seek appropriate legal advice when developing contract requirements beyond the <u>Commonwealth Contracting Suite</u> and <u>ClauseBank</u> to ensure that the new requirements give effect to contract enforcement. Ensure contract variations and extensions achieve value for money and are approved at a level commensurate with the risk, scope and nature of the contract being extended.

For more information on integrity and conflicts of interest: Integrity resources (Australian Public Service Commission), Ethics and Probity in Procurement (Department of Finance), Contract Management Guide (Department of Finance) and Louder Than Words: An APS Integrity Action Plan. (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet).

Step 9: Prepare for delivery

Planning during the project for what comes next will sustain momentum and stakeholder buy-in

Final project deliverables are usually just the end of the beginning. Your agency will need to respond to the outcomes of the project, and take the work forward. This could involve deciding whether to accept the consultant's advice, allocating resources to implement the recommendations, and/or undertaking organisational change.

Planning to convert the consultant's advice into impact

You should consider the following questions early in the project:

- What key decisions are required to respond to the recommendations in the project?
- Who will be responsible for taking the work forward? (How can you involve them in the project so that they are sufficiently across the material?)
- Who needs to see project deliverables? (How can you ensure the deliverables are fit for these audiences?)

Responding to the consultant's 'sell on'

After spending time in your organisation, the consultant may provide views about further work.

The consultant's pitch might give you valuable insights. When you listen to the pitch, ask probing questions to understand what problem this pitch is trying to solve. However, additional work needs to be considered as a new project with a new scope and, where possible, should be completed by APS staff. Refer to the APS Strategic Commissioning Framework for more information.

An existing contract must not be varied to include additional work, particularly in circumstances where the original scope and value is significantly altered, and potential suppliers may have responded differently to the initial procurement process.

Your agency must manage any conflicts of interest and/or probity issues where a consultant provides advice on additional work, and consider the consequences of a supplier working above and below the line on a given project.

If an additional project is necessary and not able to be completed in-house, a new procurement process should be started. An appropriate consultancy service should be engaged through a competitive selection process – the market may have additional insights or innovative approaches to your problem.

Step 9: Prepare for delivery

It is critical to reconcile project deliverables before ending the project

Delivery and acceptance

Closing the project generally occurs on acceptance of the final deliverables. Acceptance involves your final sign-off to confirm that the consultant has met their obligations under the contract. This includes reviewing whether deliverables were fully compliant with contract specifications.

Managing underperformance and non-performance

You have an obligation to ensure the project achieves value for money. Being clear on scope, requirements and managing the relationship with the consultant will help you get the deliverables you need and value for money.

If the deliverables do not meet the standard required in the contract, you should notify the consultant immediately, explain why the deliverables don't meet the standard, and agree on remediation. Ensure you understand and follow any contractual obligations and processes.

If you fail to address the non-performance with the supplier, it could inadvertently cause a waiver of that conduct/breach. You may need to seek legal advice to understand your rights.

For more information on reconciling deliverables: <u>Contract Management Guide</u> (Department of Finance).

Ending the project

End your project by capturing lessons learned and providing feedback

This section includes approaches to capturing lessons learned and providing feedback to APS colleagues and consultants





Reflect on whether you achieved your project objectives and what you learned. Both successful and unsuccessful projects provide an opportunity to gain useful knowledge and improve capability.



Provide feedback

Formally document final evaluations or reviews of consultants' performance.

Identify which lessons can be shared with APS colleagues. Constructive and honest feedback to consultants also contributes to improved outcomes for future APS buyers.



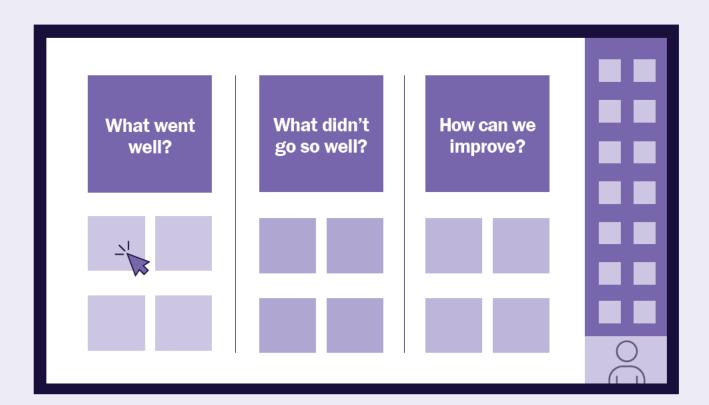
Learn and improve through end-of-project 'retrospectives'

The purpose of a project retrospective is for the team to evaluate performance and identify opportunities for improvement.

Retrospectives can be simple and informal. To run a retrospective with your team, you can divide a whiteboard (in-person or virtual) into the three sections shown below. Allocate time for the team to reflect on each question and to write their answers on the board. Then lead discussion on the key themes from the observations, and agree how these could be turned into actions.

For more information on project retrospectives: Agile Policy Playbook

Project retrospective template:



Step 11: Provide feedback

Provide feedback to APS colleagues and consultants to support the APS to buy better over time

Convey feedback to APS colleagues

Sharing your experience and lessons learned will support the APS to buy better and reduce reliance on external consultants.

Questions to ask when considering feedback:

- What knowledge would you share with another agency facing a similar problem or opportunity?
- · What strategies were successful in building APS capability?
- · How do you recommend managing consultants based on your experience with this project?
- How would you rate the consultant's performance?
- · Would you recommend the consultancy to APS colleagues?

Help consultants provide better services to future APS clients

Providing constructive feedback to the consultant will help them understand and meet the expectations of future APS clients.

Questions to ask when considering feedback:

- Did the project align with initial expectations?
- Did the project scope drive the right behaviours and outcomes?
- Was there adequate APS capability building?
- Were risks identified and managed appropriately?
- Did the work of the consultancy get implemented?
 (Did it require substantial revision by APS staff?)

Appendix A: Playbook checklist

Pro	oblem definition and project scoping
	Determined that outsourcing is appropriate given the APS Strategic Commissioning Framework
	Understood the context of the problem or opportunity.
	Developed a clear problem or opportunity statement.
	Defined project scope, including boundaries, deliverables, resources and timeframe.
	Identified internal capacity to support the project and carry the work forward.
	Identified capability goals to be included in the contract.
Wo	orking with consultants
	Provided appropriate and necessary access (e.g., ICT, facilities, information and people).
	Allocated APS staff to the project.
	Reinforced capability goals.
	Established project governance and risk management.
	Planned for what comes next (implementation).
	Reconciled project deliverables.
En	ding the project
	Captured lessons learned.
	Captured capability transfer.
	Provided feedback to APS colleagues.
П	Provided feedback to the consultant

Appendix B: Worksheet – understanding context and defining the problem²

Problem statement:		
Impact What is the impact? What is the effect on specific cohorts/communities/ sectors? What will happen if no action is taken?	Background Who are the key actors and stakeholders? Where has this (or similar problem) been solved/ addressed? What has been tried in the past, why and with what impact?	
Authorising environment Who is the ultimate decision maker? Who else do you need to convince? Who could help influence the decision? What are the interests of the above actors?	Capabilities, capacity and constraints What is currently invested in addressing this issue? What expertise is required to solve the problem? Are there any constraints (or opportunities) (e.g. funding constraints or Government commitments)?	
Timeframes and deliverables Why is the problem important to solve now? When does the solution need to be identified? How soon does change need to occur? What are the likely deliverables (if known)?	Risks What level of accuracy/confidence is needed? What are the consequences of defective advice?	

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