

What Skills are Required for Sustainable Leadership in Hospitality?

Susana Silva¹, Mónica Oliveira² and Cândida Silva³

¹CEOS.PP, CITUR, ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto, Vila do Conde, Portugal

²CITUR, ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto, Vila do Conde, Portugal

³CITUR, Algoritmi Center, ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto, Vila do Conde, Portugal

susanasilva@esht.ipp.pt

monicaoliveira@esht.ipp.pt

candidasilva@esht.ipp.pt

Abstract: The focus of Sustainability Leadership in tourism is on fostering individual development to facilitate adaptation to emerging technologies within complex and rapidly evolving environments, ultimately aiming to enhance performance and organizational effectiveness. Sustainable leaders prioritize collaboration, consensus-building, and support for team members to collectively achieve shared objectives, particularly those set by diverse stakeholders. This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview methodology to explore sustainability leadership within the hospitality sector. All interviews were conducted via online platforms and examined using thematic analysis. The sample included 10 hotel managers from various lodging establishments in Portugal, comprising four men (40%) and six women (60%). Participants' ages ranged from below 30 to 50 years, with one manager under 30, five between 31 and 40, and four between 41 and 50. In the context of organizational sustainability, participants emphasized the importance of a long-term perspective, safety considerations, and corporate social responsibility. Half of the respondents indicated the presence of sustainability-specific policies, largely derived from group policies or specific sustainability-focused project requirements. Most participants reported that sustainability is integrated into their organization's vision and mission, with several referencing the European Union Green Deal and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as key frameworks guiding their strategies. The majority of participants assessed their digital proficiency as advanced, even within complex operational contexts. Organizational digitalization levels were generally advanced, although some organizations were identified at an intermediate digitalization stage. Furthermore, social dimensions of sustainability and soft skills were regarded as essential for sustainable leadership in hospitality. The most highly valued leadership soft skills included solution-oriented thinking, resilience, critical thinking, communication, and team cohesion, whereas time management was identified as a lesser priority. These findings underscore the significance of sustainability for managers in the hospitality sector, though the degree of implementation varies across lodging types and different sustainability dimensions.

Keywords: Hospitality, Tourism, Skills, Sustainable leadership, Sustainability

1. Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry are a major contributor to global economic growth and has significant environmental and social impacts (Sakshi et al, 2019). Sustainability policies and practices are increasingly being adopted to address these impacts and ensure long-term viability. As the tourism and hospitality industry continues to grow, its impact on the environment and society becomes gradually significant. Sustainability leadership has emerged as a vital component in addressing these challenges, emphasizing the need for leaders who can effectively navigate the complexities of sustainable practices while fostering long-term organizational success. Sustainable leadership aims to interpret the concept of sustainable development from the perspective of leadership. It is a kind of leadership that aims to meet the needs of stakeholders and develop the core business of the enterprise, so as to create long-term value for all stakeholders. It emphasizes the balanced development of economy, society, and environment, and it is conducive to helping enterprises achieve profitable growth and sustainability and has become one of the hotspots of current leadership research (Liao, 2022).

The hospitality industry, central to tourism, is called to prioritize training and development in areas such as digital skills, green practices, and soft skills. This approach will not only enhance operational efficiency and guest satisfaction but also contribute to a more sustainable future. As the sector moves towards greater accountability and transparency in its operations, recognizing and nurturing these skills among its leaders will serve as the foundation for a resilient and thriving hospitality landscape, committed to sustainable development and ethical practices. Sustainability is a current concern for society as a whole and for all sectors of activity, in accordance with European Union concerns. According to UE (2022), the six thematic priority objectives to be achieved by 2030 are: (1) climate change mitigation to attain the 2030 greenhouse gas emission reduction target; (2) adaptation to climate change; (3) advancing towards a wellbeing economy that gives back to the planet more than it takes; (4) pursuing zero-pollution, including in relation to harmful chemicals; (5) protecting, preserving and restoring biodiversity, and (6) significantly reducing key environmental pressures related to the EU's material and consumption footprints including through EU 2030 reduction targets. The path to sustainable leadership in hospitality is covered with a diverse skill set, blending technical knowledge with crucial

interpersonal abilities. By equipping leaders with the tools they need, the industry can evolve to meet both present demands and future challenges, ensuring a positive contribution to society and the environment.

This paper explores the essential skills required for sustainable leadership in hospitality, highlighting the multifaceted nature of sustainability that encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Effective sustainable leaders must exhibit strong ethical commitments and a readiness to adapt to emerging technologies, while fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Key competencies include not only technical and hard skills related to sustainability initiatives but also soft skills that promote teamwork, resilience, and critical thinking. The qualitative study presented, incorporating interviews with hotel managers in Portugal, which demonstrate a shared recognition of the importance of incorporating sustainability into organizational strategies. These findings underscore the necessity for leaders to possess advanced digital proficiency, allowing them to implement innovative solutions that enhance sustainability practices. Moreover, social dimensions of sustainability and the ability to communicate effectively with team members and external partners are critical for fostering an inclusive organizational culture.

The paper is organized in three main sections, the two first sections present the literature review about sustainability leadership and sustainability leadership skills and competences. After is presented the methodology used to develop the study and the main results obtained. Finally, are discussed the results, the main conclusions of the study and indicated some future research directions.

2. Sustainability Leadership in Tourism and Hospitality

All the organizations should prioritize the development of sustainability leadership capabilities at all levels and sustainability leaders need to set an example by exhibiting a dedication to ethical behaviour and long-term value generation. To Sakshi et al. (2019) strong leadership and commitment from top management are essential for successful implementation of sustainability policies, and for this propose, leaders cannot work alone. Norren and Beehner (2021) emphasize the need for both global and local action to advance sustainability leadership, and this means a greater collaboration among governments, organizations, and communities to develop and implement effective sustainability strategies. It is crucial an integrated approach to promoting sustainable tourism, which combines education, emotional engagement, and fostering a sense of place (Cheng and Wu, 2015). This also involves tourist, and this approach ensures that they are not only informed about environmental issues but also emotionally invested in protecting the destinations they visit. According to Visser and Courtice (2011) sustainability leadership is distinct from traditional leadership models, as it emphasizes long-term thinking, systemic change, and the integration of environmental, social, and economic considerations. It calls on leaders to address global issues including social inequality, resource scarcity, and climate change while balancing the demands of various stakeholders. This is also defended by Norren and Beehner (2021) that provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and advancing sustainability leadership. They argue that sustainability leadership is critical for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The leaders must integrate the SDGs into organizational strategies and decision-making processes, ensuring alignment with global sustainability priorities. Visser and Courtice (2011) defend that sustainability leaders must possess a unique set of competencies, such as the ability to understand and address complex, interconnected challenges, building consensus and fostering collaboration among diverse groups. They must have emotional intelligence and visionary thinking. For Norren and Beehner (2021) leaders must (1) understand the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental systems, (2) prepare themselves for future challenges and opportunities, (3) apply ethical principles and values to sustainability decisions, (3) develop and implement effective sustainability strategies, (4) work with diverse stakeholders to achieve shared goals, (5) drive innovation and (6) reflect on personal values and their alignment with sustainability goals. To Visser and Courtice (2011) sustainability leadership is most effective when embedded in an organizational culture that values innovation, transparency, and accountability and leaders must champion culturally change to align organizational practices with sustainability principles. On the other hand, sustainable leadership is crucial if the business aspires to achieve their goals. Aydin and Emeksiz (2018) state that by adopting sustainable practices, the small tourism enterprises can enhance their competitiveness, profitability, and resilience while contributing to the long-term sustainability of urban tourism destinations. Hotels should invest in authentic sustainability initiatives and communicate these efforts transparently to build consumer trust and credibility, as emphasized by Chen et al. (2019). While many hotels are adopting environmentally friendly practices in response to consumer demand, some risk greenwashing by making misleading claims about their sustainability efforts. To avoid this, hotels must ensure that their actions align with their sustainability claims. Organizations should prioritize the development of sustainable leadership capabilities at all levels to implement effective sustainability strategies that integrate education and emotional engagement, enabling leaders, collaborators,

and tourists to actively contribute to protecting destinations and addressing global challenges such as social inequality and climate change, all in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Sustainability Leadership Skills and Competences in Tourism and Hospitality

The challenges of today's world, and the competitiveness of the global market are leading to the emergence of new skills and competences needed by workers for the labour market, including in tourism and hospitality, where soft, digital, and environmental skills are particularly important (Modi, 2024). Achieving environmental sustainability in tourism requires collaboration among governments, businesses, and consumers (Han, 2021). To Chokshi (2024) in the dynamic hospitality industry, effective leadership is pivotal for driving guest satisfaction, team engagement, and operational efficiency.

To Han (2021) consumers with higher awareness of environmental issues are more likely to engage in sustainable tourism practices and are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviours if they believe their actions will have a positive impact. To respond to consumer demands and ensure a sustainable leadership, leaders need to acquire certain skills. The first concern are the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. To Modi (2024) sustainable Tourism focuses on minimizing ecological effect, promoting social equity, and ensuring economic viability. Consumers are increasingly prioritizing sustainability in their travel decisions, influencing the demand for eco-friendly products and services. Han (2021) states that environmental sustainability has become a critical concern in tourism and hospitality due to increasing consumer awareness, regulatory pressures, and the industry's significant environmental footprint.

Concerning the skills and competences needed, Modi (2024) defend that we can define them as a combination of knowledge (understanding), skills (abilities), and attitudes (values and behaviours). For Modi (2024) knowledge is fundamental for understanding the sustainability principles, environmental systems, and global frameworks; the skills are critical thinking, communication, collaboration and adaptability; and attitudes, comprehend ethical responsibility, environmental valuing, cultural sensitivity and proactiveness. Competencies in knowledge, skills, and attitudes are essential for advancing sustainable tourism (Modi, 2024). A well-trained workforce equipped with these competencies can drive innovation, ethical practices, and long-term sustainability in the tourism industry, particularly in hospitality.

3.1 Digital Proficiency and Organizational Digitalization in Tourism and Hospitality Industry

To Han (2021) digital technologies such as apps, social media, and online platforms are increasingly being used to promote sustainable tourism and educate consumers. Innovations such as carbon footprint calculators, eco-certifications, and virtual reality experiences are helping consumers make more informed and sustainable choices. Information technology is now completely integrated with the travel and hospitality sector, thus having the appropriate digital skills in those organizations is crucial. Jobs are being redefined and new ones created by digitalization and new technologies, which calls for new competencies and skills (Carlisle et al., 2023). Han (2021) also defends the need for continued research, innovation, and collaboration to achieve environmental sustainability in the industry. As digitalization reshapes job roles and creates new positions, organizations must invest in developing the necessary competencies and skills. Continued research, innovation, and collaboration are vital to achieving environmental sustainability in the industry (Han, 2021; Carlisle et al., 2023). The increasing integration of digital technologies in the travel and hospitality sector is pivotal for advancing sustainable tourism and educating consumers. As job roles evolve due to digitalization, ongoing research, innovation, and collaboration are essential to fostering environmental sustainability in the industry and organizations must prioritize investment in competencies that align with these technological advancements to effectively meet sustainability goals.

3.2 Social Dimensions of Sustainability and Soft Skills in Tourism and Hospitality Industry

Soft skills play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development within contemporary society (Alikova et al., 2022). Soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and adaptability are essential for effective collaboration and problem-solving. For Alikova et al. (2022) soft skills must be integrated in education and professional training to prepare the individuals to navigate challenges and promote sustainable practices, highlighting the importance of cultivating these skills to support not only personal growth but also collective societal progress towards sustainability goals. For Chen et al. (2019) trust is a critical factor in consumer decision-making, especially in service industries like hospitality and greenwashing indirectly affects behavioural intentions through trust. For Chen et al. (2019) consumers are sensitive to perceived dishonesty in environmental claims, so hotels must avoid greenwashing to maintain consumer trust and loyalty. Authentic and transparent communication about environmental practices is essential. According to López and Mowinckel

(2020) social skills encompass personal, interpersonal, and intercultural communication abilities, enabling individuals to engage effectively and constructively in both social and professional settings. Cultural awareness plays a crucial role in understanding and appreciating the cultural and linguistic diversity. Together, social skills and cultural awareness equip individuals to thrive in multicultural environments and contribute positively to society. The development of soft skills is essential for encouraging sustainable practices and facilitating effective collaboration in modern society. By integrating skills such as communication, teamwork, and cultural awareness into education and professional training, individuals are better prepared to overcome obstacles and promote sustainability. Overall, a focus on soft skills and cultural competence empowers individuals to contribute positively to their communities and advance sustainability goals (López and Mowinckel, 2020).

3.3 Environmental Capacity and Green skills in Tourism and Hospitality

In the tourism and hospitality sector, green skills encompass sustainable practices such as enhancing energy efficiency, minimizing waste, conserving water, and implementing eco-friendly products. These initiatives aim to reduce the environmental impact of tourism activities. For instance, hotels and restaurants are embracing green practices by utilizing renewable energy sources, managing waste effectively, and optimizing resource usage to enhance sustainability. To Osolase et al. (2023) hotels have a significant environmental footprint, making sustainability a critical focus area and green human resources practices can help hotels reduce their environmental impact while enhancing employee engagement and organizational performance. Green skills are crucial for a sustainable leadership. According to Global Green Skills Report (2022) business leaders, should foster green talent and align with global sustainability goals, like prioritize workforce development by investing in targeted training programs, learning courses, and local initiatives to equip employees with green skills. Leaders should recruit individuals who possess green skills to strengthen the organization's sustainability capabilities and recognize that green hiring and upskilling are essential to the employer brand. Leaders can play a pivotal role in advancing the green skills movement, ensuring that organizations remain competitive and contribute to a sustainable future. For Vorna et al. (2015) integrating green skills into educational and training programs to ensure that the workforce is prepared to meet the demands of environmentally sustainable practices. Adopting green initiatives can enhance organizational performance while promoting environmental responsibility that can contribute to improving productivity and innovation while reducing environmental impacts, thereby supporting long-term sustainability goals. By implementing practices that enhance energy efficiency, minimize waste, and conserve resources, hotels and restaurants can significantly reduce their environmental impact. Business leaders should prioritize workforce development by investing in targeted training and recruitment of individuals with green skills to enhance sustainability capabilities. Ultimately, adopting green initiatives not only supports long-term sustainability goals but also enhances organizational performance and innovation (Vorna et al., 2015).

4. Methodology

This qualitative and exploratory study aims to explore sustainability leadership within the hospitality sector. A semi-structured interview was used to achieve this objective. The script was organised in four sections: sociodemographic characterisation, sustainability leadership, digitalisation and digital skills, social aspects in sustainability and soft skills. The skills used in the semi-structure interview were identified after the literature review on the theme.

Our sample had 10 hotel managers from various lodging establishments in Portugal, comprising four men and six women. Participants ages ranged from below 30 to 50 years, with one manager under 30, five between 31 and 40, and four between 41 and 50. Regarding the knowledge and skills in sustainability, one of the respondents consider himself as a beginner, six consider as having basic skills, and three as being a master / expert in the subject.

Considering the human resources of the companies studied, two have less than nine employees, three have between 10 to 49 employees, three have between 50 to 249 employees, and two of them have more than 250 workers.

Some of the respondents are leaders: three of them lead to less than nine persons, one leads 13 workers, one leads 18 workers, one leads 25 persons, and the one that presents a bigger number leads about 80 persons.

Regarding the type of lodging two were five-star hotels, two four-star hotels, two three-star hotels, two apartments, and two Hostels.

Regarding the educational status and years of experience in this position, the majority has training in the area of hospitality or related areas: technical course in restaurant and bar, hotel management, Master in Marketing, Graduation and master in Psychology; Graduation in Tourism, Graduation in food engineering, Graduation and master in environmental, graduation in safety at work, Technical graduation in hospitality, Graduation in chemistry and graduation in hygiene and safety and Graduation in hospitality management.

The majority of the participants have more than 15 years of experience in the sector.

The interviews were audiotaped and verbatim transcribed for the analysis. For data analysis, thematic analysis procedures were used (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Results

Questions related to sustainability leadership in hospitality

The decision-making inside the organisations is a very important issue in sustainability. All our participants had responsibilities in this field although most of them had other people with the power to make management decisions inside the organisation, specifically the hotel manager or the group manager. Most of the time the decisions are made in a democratic environment with the participation of different members of the organisation, experts, and the founder.

Regarding the sustainability of the organisation, our participants consider the most important factor the increased focus on long-time perspective, safety issues, and corporate social responsibility aspects.

Half of our participants referred to the **existence of specific policies** in hospitality related to sustainability. These policies are mainly related to specific group policies and specific demands for applying to projects in the field of sustainability. Moreover, they have also **specific policies for digitalisation** because these policies are valued when the organisations want to apply to financing projects.

Most of our participants referred to the **inclusion of sustainability in the vision and mission** of the hotels specifically related to social responsibility and the importance given to the persons and the organisation growth, to organisational culture promoting an environment of diversity and inclusion, and to environmental issues promoting the carbon-reducing, the energy and temperature control.

In the same way, the EU Green Deal and UN Sustainability Development Goals are known to almost all our participants. They have well **implemented several strategies** related to **reducing consumption, recycling**, and reusing but also **social, economic, and environmental strategies**. The most referred strategies were reducing food waste, reducing water consumption, reducing plastic and paper utilisation, towel change, light and temperature control, LED installation, non-individual amenities, having local suppliers, implementing activities to reduce poverty, reducing social inequality, promoting activities to integrate people with different needs, and helping local associations.

All the participants consider themselves **free to implement sustainability solutions in their hotels** and they consider that in the near future, there will be important improvements in their organisations in order to be more sustainable.

The **drivers for sustainability decisions** most valued by our participants were “reducing costs”, “Health and safety of employees, customers, and suppliers”, and “I believe that it is the “right thing to do” for the world”. On the opposite, the **less valued dimensions** were “Other hospitality providers are also doing it”, and “attracting investment from investors”.

Therefore, our participants consider **sustainability a top priority in hospitality**.

Although there are some **important hinderers to implement sustainable leadership** namely the quality and prices of sustainable products are not competitive, the difficulty in finding the right solution and the lack of knowledge in this field, difficulties in the selection of suppliers, creating the routines, changing the mentalities inside the organisation, and creating a culture of sustainability.

Digitalisation in hospitality

Most of our respondents considered that they **have advanced digital skills even in complex** contexts. Nevertheless, the level of digitalisation of the hotels is in majority at an advanced level but there are some at an **intermediate level of digitalisation, just for well-defined and non-routine problems**.

Concerning the outsourcing of digital services, the ones identified are for services related to operational services for specific areas, like reservations, channel management, website, restaurant management, social media management, customer satisfaction evaluation, and finance and accountability management.

Social aspects in Sustainability and Soft skills in hospitality

According to our participants, the most valued **soft skills for hospitality leadership** were **solution-orientated, resilience, critical thinking, communication, and team spirit**.

Regarding the **implementation of social responsibility practices**, the most implemented were respectful law and ethics, public involvement, brand image, respect for human and labour rights, and family protection.

Our participants consider the importance of **promoting local communities in the hospitality industry**. With this aim, they implement activities such as having local suppliers, donations, and partnerships with local associations, creating discounts for locals, having stores with local products in their organisations, allowing academic internships and student visitations, giving the opportunity for local artists to present their job in the common spaces of the organisation, creation of initiatives that promote support to the surrounding community with constant actions adapted to the needs of the place (e.g. distribution of clothes, food, books), among several activities adapted to the specific needs of the local community.

Regarding the suppliers in hospitality industry, several participants referred that **they prefer local suppliers but, in some cases, it depends on the quality of the product and the price**. For the hotel groups, it is also frequent to have group suppliers that are mandatory to use. Only one participant referred to the **existence of a distance policy for purchasing** and this policy refers to buying only in the North of Portugal (the region where the lodging is located).

Generally, our participants think that **it is important to have greater proximity with the suppliers**, it will be easier to have faster and fresher deliveries, and in some cases, better prices.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This exploratory study aimed to analyse sustainability leadership within the hospitality sector, focusing on the level of sustainability practices and leadership of the sector, including the level of digitalization and of social commitment of the organizations, as well as the role of soft skills to develop a sustainability culture. The results pointed out that organizations are moderately committed with sustainability. They all are leaders for implementing sustainability practices and initiatives in hotels, nevertheless, the decisions usually are made by hotel managers or by the hotel owners, which can be quite conditioning of decision-making. Nevertheless, it is unanimous that sustainability should be a top priority in hospitality and the existence of sustainability policies, specifically for digitalization, as well as the inclusion of sustainability in the mission and vision of hospitality businesses, since it will enhance their competitiveness and profitability. This recognition of the importance of sustainability to the hospitality industry is fully in line with several authors in the literature (Aydin and Emeksiz, 2018; Sakshi et al., 2019; Han, 2021). However, the literature didn't mention the difficulties of implementation neither the lack of capacity for sustainability leaders to decision-making in this field. Moreover, it is presented the main factors that can facilitate the adoption of sustainability leadership in the hospitality industry, which are in accordance with literature, namely, the costs and difficulty in sometimes to finding a sustainable solution (Osolase et al., 2023), the lack of knowledge is the most highlighted issue in this study and in literature (Vorna et al., 2015; Alikova et al., 2022; Modi, 2024), and also creating a culture of sustainability, by creating routines and changing the mentalities inside the organisation (Visser and Courtice, 2011; López and Mowinckel, 2020).

About businesses digitalization in the hospitality industry, it is interesting to notice that this is an aspect where all the companies of this study considered themselves well prepared and with advanced levels of digitalization, recognising the role of digitising processes and procedures for more sustainable and competitive management, as mentioned in the literature (Han, 2021; Carlisle et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it worth to notice that this mainly happens because of the funds available to companies for digitalization projects, which highlights the importance of co-operation between companies and governments to implement sustainability (Norren and Beehner, 2021).

Considering the soft skills for leadership in hospitality, from this study were valued to be solution-orientated and resilient, to have critical thinking and facilities in communication and team spirit. The soft skills are being studied has fundamental to complement the technical skills and need to be inserted in hospitality and tourism curriculums (López and Mowinckel, 2020; Alikova et al., 2022).

Finally, this study showed that hospitality businesses have a special concern with implementing social responsibility practices as developing projects that consider the ethics and respect for human and labour rights and family protection. Moreover, to involve public and local communities in sustainable activities, which will improve the brand image. In this respect, also the suppliers are first consider the locals one's, but always considering the best price guarantee and sometimes the group policy don't allow to do it because of buying policies in bigger scale, another issue that first consider the price. Literature always recommends the involvement with locals, including buying goods to local suppliers. This difficulty shown in this study can be related with the fact that although there are sustainability leaders and experts in hospitality companies, they are not the ones that make the final decision even when it comes to sustainable issues.

It is worth noting that green sustainability practices in hospitality industry, i.e. those related with reducing energy and water consumption, as well as recycling, are the practices most emphasised in this study, also in line with the literature (Osolase et al., 2023). This is also due to the co-operation and lines of funding available for this type of action.

This study has some practical implications, the hotel managers should integrate sustainability into their culture and practices. Additionally, it is crucial to invest in their digitalization through training courses and acquisition of hardware and software that will prepare hotels to face the current and future challenges. Moreover, higher education institutions in the field of hospitality should integrate issues related to sustainable leadership, digitalization and soft skills in the curriculum of future professionals.

This study was just exploratory in the field of sustainable leadership in hospitality therefore it has some limitations. Although it was considered the most relevant types of lodging in Portugal (five-star hotels, four-star hotels, three-star hotels, apartments, and Hostels), the sample was only of ten companies. Therefore, the next steps of the project will be to enlarge the sample by doing a survey to cover the main lodging companies in Portugal, of five types, to understand what the country is doing about sustainability leadership and what are the differences between the type of lodging. Moreover, it will be also considered the other collaborators of the lodging besides the sustainability leader, to understand the real feeling of the employees about the sustainability culture of the company and the challenges they face implementing it.

Another future research, continuing this project, will be to hear the customers and local communities. The customers will be to understanding how they perceive brand sustainability practices and leadership, and how this affects their choices when deciding the accommodation. Local communities are also important to study to know how they are involved in sustainable practices by the hospitality sector and how this can improve their lives.

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