



**Vertical Extensions to Microsoft®
Business Solutions—Axapta® Enable
Office Supply Distributors to Compete**
White Paper

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Abstract

This white paper is intended for wholesale distribution businesses that engage in the office supply market segment, as well as the technology providers who support them. The paper highlights the pressing, competitive issues in the field of office supply distribution. Microsoft® Business Solutions–Axapta® software offers a rich assortment of distribution management capabilities. A Microsoft Business Solutions Certified Partner, MBS Dev, Inc., adds to Microsoft Axapta powerful wholesale distribution functionality. With add-on features specifically developed for the needs of office supply distributors, MBS Dev delivers to these companies and the Microsoft Axapta resellers a complete solution that allows customers to operate more efficiently, control costs, and compete more forcefully with the national chains in this market.

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A More Level Playing Field for Office Supply Distributors

Companies providing distribution services in the office supply market experience a number of business challenges that can make it difficult for them to compete, serve customers effectively, and grow their businesses. Indeed, in recent years, many office supply distributors have gone out of business or changed their business model. The issues these companies face include:

- Increased competition — Recognizing the vast potential of this line of business, several national and international chains claim a significant share of the market. Their infrastructures, economies of scale, and delivery capabilities can pose a challenge for smaller competitors.
- More products, lower margins — Customers expect a vast range of products from an office supply distributor. They like their distributor to assist them with janitorial supplies, office furniture, office equipment, computer equipment, and more. Related, desirable services include equipment installation, furniture assembly, and configuration of PCs. Office supply distributors need an effective way to add these products and services to their offerings without losing out because of low margins.
- Globalization — Business, communications, and transactions move across the world, without interruption. Mid-size and smaller office supply distributors need to have the ability to serve their local, as well as their international customers, with equal excellence and be prepared to grow their businesses into international markets.

Microsoft is strongly committed to helping businesses succeed, and dedicates significant, increasing resources to creating technology solutions that allow its business customers to fulfill their goals. The company is also strongly engaged in developing and promoting software technology for specific, vertical markets and their business needs.

As introduced in this paper, Microsoft® Business Solutions–Axapta® software offers rich, flexible distribution and business management capabilities. A Microsoft Business Solutions Certified Partner, MBS Dev, Inc., extends Microsoft Axapta with solutions for distribution-based businesses and empowers office supply distributors with highly specific software functionality to meet their requirements for business technology. The solutions from MBS Dev are available to customer organizations, as well as resellers of Microsoft Axapta teaming with MBS Dev.

As office supply distributors implement the technologies discussed here, they can compete more effectively with the large companies in their field, and do so profitably while maintaining the quality of service their customers appreciate.

Critical Business Issues in the Office Supply Distribution Industry

Distributors of office supplies and related products and services play a key role in enabling businesses to run effective operations and let workers perform their required tasks. In recent years, competitive pressures and acquisitions have resulted in the near ubiquitous presence of several large, national chains. These enterprises can offer their customers attractive pricing, a wide variety of products, specialized services, and the ability to deliver almost anywhere.

Intensely Competitive Business Environment

Competitors to the national chains include medium-size and smaller businesses that are often highly successful in their regional markets, but experience significant competitive and operational challenges. Unable to continue profitable operation, many of these companies in recent years have left the market, and, as a consequence, have increased the pressure on the independent office supply distributors who remain. In an industry that generally drives slim profit margins, these distributors may still be able to offer their customers competitive pricing, but often they succeed on the basis of excellent customer service and long-standing business relationships.

Business management technology and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems used in the office supply distribution industry can make a large contribution toward an efficient, profitable business, help companies manage their resources, and allow them to pursue strategies for growth. The national chains have made large investments in IT departments and specialized software solutions created in-house on the basis of enterprise-level technology. These national chains have the resources to modify technology as business needs change and, as they grow into new markets, they can offer additional services or restructure their product offerings.

Potential of Technology Not Fully Used

The medium-size and smaller distributors tend to be not as well served by business management technology. For the most part, they have smaller IT departments and stronger dependencies on technology providers with greater expertise. Volatility in the software industry segment of companies catering to these distributors has resulted in the existence of a large number of proprietary software solutions that cannot easily be further developed or modified because the companies that marketed and installed them are no longer in business.

For that reason, the business management software present in many office supply distributors is not always helpful when a company changes its business processes, adds new product lines and services, or wants to access new markets. If the software lacks the flexibility to support changing business conditions, the distributors may need to consider replacing it, engaging IT consultants to implement changes, or making do with workarounds based on their current technology. All three of these options are prohibitively costly: in direct expenses, inefficient business processes, or diminished ability to compete.

Basic Requirements for Business Management Technology

Clearly, business management technology can play an important part in helping medium-size and smaller office supply distributors succeed in a challenging market. What they would require is a technological solution that meets the following basic requirements:

- Ability to support industry-specific business requirements
- Flexibility to support new products and services, additional markets, and growing numbers of customers
- Efficient, cost-effective implementation and operation
- Ease of use, low training requirements, and ability to run more productive business processes
- Long-term viability and continuing product improvement plan
- Effective support that has the industry-specific expertise to help the business derive optimal benefits from the technology

However, the technology landscape available to office supply distributors does not offer many solutions that can fulfill these basic needs. Many industry-specific software products are based on older technology and lack the flexibility to adjust to changed business requirements without expensive programming. These products don't always integrate easily with the software tools workers use frequently, for example, word processing or spreadsheets. In fact, some industry-specific products may require different navigational and operating skills from these widely adopted software tools. These limitations can result in a relatively high cost of systems ownership and may still not deliver the capabilities office supply distributors demand.

Advantages of Microsoft Business Solutions–Axapta as a Distribution Solution

Microsoft is strongly committed to helping businesses attain their goals and invests significant research and development efforts in creating technology solutions that enhance the success of businesses in specific vertical and horizontal markets. Within the wide spread of Microsoft Business Solutions offerings, Microsoft Business Solutions–Axapta is a powerful business management solution for fast-growing companies in highly competitive environments. Microsoft Axapta offers extensive capabilities in distribution and supply chain management, as well as features of particular value for the wholesale distribution and service industries. It also provides for effective management of manufacturing operations and e-business.

Main Capabilities

Microsoft Axapta gives businesses the freedom to succeed and grow the way they want. The solution is designed to deliver high business value at a low total cost of ownership (TCO) and with a substantial return on investment (ROI). Microsoft Axapta delivers all of its business management functionality in a unified, streamlined architecture with a single business database, one programming language, one development environment, and one business logic for all clients. Any new information or additional capabilities immediately reflect in all areas of the solution. Businesses or their technology partners can rapidly and cost-effectively tailor Microsoft Axapta to their specific requirements by using the programming tools included with the solution. Such customizations are kept separate, leaving the application code unchanged and making upgrade processes straight-forward.

When businesses implement Microsoft Axapta, they can use just the functionality they want to use and turn on additional capabilities later. The tiered architecture of the solution makes it easy to incorporate additional locations, users, and lines of business without having an impact on the integrity of the business information and the solution's performance. As a flexible, extensible solution, Microsoft Axapta also helps to maximize the value of existing hardware and communications bandwidth, and helps control operational costs.

For companies that are active in international markets, have international trading partners and suppliers, or employees in international locations, Microsoft Axapta supports 32 different languages, as well as 32 currencies, and conforms to the legal and market requirements of 32 countries—right out of the box. Microsoft Axapta integrates with other Microsoft products and technologies, so workers can be productive in a familiar, easy-to-use software environment.

Distribution Enabled by Microsoft Axapta

For office supply distributors, distribution and supply chain management are the most critical lines of business. Microsoft Axapta offers a wide range of capabilities in these areas, for example:

- **Microsoft Axapta Commerce Gateway** — Helps to streamline business relationships and transactions with trading partners and suppliers, makes it easier for such companies to do business with an office supply distributor, and increases the business value of trading relationships.
- **Microsoft Axapta Enterprise Portal** — Offers business information and processes to customers, trading partners, suppliers, and employees who can retrieve data or take care of business in efficient, self-service manner.

- **Microsoft Axapta Logistics** — Integrates and streamlines the smooth cooperation among such key functions of a wholesale business as purchasing, inventory management, financials, customer-demand management, and others.
- **Microsoft Axapta Product Builder** — Enables customers and employees to configure customized products online with great ease.
- **Microsoft Axapta Enterprise Portal Roles** — Makes it easy for employees in any company location to work efficiently with the solution, with minimal training, and smoothes business functions for customers, suppliers, and partners.
- **Microsoft Axapta Trade** — Automates sales and purchasing, simplifies intercompany transactions within a single system, helps to manage trade agreements with customers and vendors, and assists in controlling costs with accurate inventory valuation and full visibility into cost prices.
- **Microsoft Axapta Warehouse Management** — Helps to optimize warehouse layout and business processes in warehouses for optimal cost control and productivity.

In addition, Microsoft Axapta provides extensive capabilities for financial management, human resources management, customer relationship management, and more.

Critical Role of Microsoft Business Solutions Partners

Participation of Microsoft Certified Business Solutions Partners helps office supply distribution businesses and other organizations reap tangible benefits from Microsoft Axapta. Typically, the partners help a company assess its business needs, prepare and plan the implementation, and provide any training and support. For almost any business, there will be a partner who understands its particular opportunities and challenges in depth. Many of the partners are also independent software vendors (ISVs) and can extend Microsoft Axapta with specific solutions for certain business needs.

Assistance from a Microsoft Business Solutions partner gives assurance that a business can derive tangible benefits from the solution and generate a strong ROI in a reasonable time frame. Microsoft continues to increase its ability to deliver valuable technology to meet the needs of user organizations in specific, vertical market segments. A recently announced Microsoft initiative, the Microsoft Industry Builder, will make it easier for ISVs to develop compelling solutions for Microsoft Axapta and other Microsoft Business Solutions offerings in vertical markets. Microsoft Industry Builder will benefit customers directly by imposing stringent testing and quality standards, and by providing a single, accountable point of contact for support for Microsoft Axapta, as well as the ISV solutions.

Supporting Vertical Markets: MBS Dev, Microsoft Certified Business Solutions Partner and Distribution Specialist

MBS Dev, Inc., headquartered in Colorado, is a Microsoft Certified Business Solutions Partner. The company started when its founders realized that many Microsoft Axapta customers and partners did not have easy access to capable development resources to help customize the solution for the business needs of vertical markets. The company is dedicated to Microsoft Axapta, and supports both user businesses as well as other resellers of Microsoft Axapta and their market-specific requirements. MBS Dev owns significant expertise in a wide spectrum of vertical markets, and partners with other solution providers to develop and deliver compelling vertical solutions, with a particularly strong focus in the area of wholesale distribution. MBS Dev team members have clocked more than 300 years of combined, wholesale distribution experience, often working with industry leaders.

Recently, MBS Dev became one of the first Microsoft Axapta ISV partners to be certified by Microsoft for its vertical wholesale distribution add-ins to Microsoft Axapta. Certification by Microsoft verifies that solutions offered by MBS Dev meet Microsoft's standards for development and deployment. It also means that MBS Dev can increase the competitive advantage of Microsoft Axapta resellers and give them a way to create a strong differentiation for their offerings.

For office supply distribution businesses, MBS Dev has developed richly featured extensions to Microsoft Axapta, dedicating extensive resources to enabling Microsoft Axapta to meet the requirements of wholesale distributors. Implementing these enhancements within a wholesale distribution infrastructure requires Microsoft Axapta, certain key components of the MBS Dev Wholesale Distribution Suite, and the extensions that are suitable for a given business environment.

An Office Supply Distributor Infrastructure with Microsoft Axapta and MBS Dev Solutions

MBS Dev uses a layered approach in its technology design, so office supply distributors can acquire, implement, and use exactly the functionality that benefits their business. To Microsoft Axapta, MBS Dev adds several important wholesale distribution capabilities and then further refines the solution with its Office Supply Vertical Extensions for highly specific business needs.

As research by MBS Dev shows, distributors share many operational requirements. Roughly more than 80 percent of the functionality in a strong distribution solution can be identical for all of these customers. However, it is the vertical-specific, highly targeted capability of a solution—the remaining 10 to 20 percent of the solution’s functionalities—that allows distributors to fully realize the benefits of their investment in technology.

Infrastructure Foundation for Wholesale Distribution Management

The **MBS Dev Wholesale Distribution Suite** includes key modules for office supply and most other wholesale distribution companies. These modules are:

- High Volume Distribution
- Warehouse Pick Optimizer
- Forecasting
- E-Business

Unique to the Wholesale Distribution Suite, as well as the Office Supply Vertical Extensions, is the application of the workstation concept to all functional areas of the solution. A workstation corresponds to a functional role in a company’s operations or departments. All employees—executives as well as customer service staff or warehouse workers—have available to them all the information they need in order to perform their tasks, in a single screen. More than a simple template, the workstation design accommodates an optimal workflow, tailoring the user experience to the specific job function. Workstation design helps workers be productive and focused on their tasks by making all relevant functions available from a single entry point and minimizing the distraction of navigating a variety of screen or windows. The workstation capability enables companies to perform with great efficiency and respond to customer needs in a speedy manner.

Not all capabilities of the Wholesale Distribution Suite will be of value for all wholesale distributors. The modular design of the technology allows them to choose the functionality they want to use. They will not need to pay for software capabilities they have no need for.

Capabilities available within the Wholesale Distribution Suite include:

- **Executive Workstation** for assessing company performance with key performance indicators (KPIs)
- **Customer Service Workstation** for effective and speedy customer support
- **Order Management** for efficient, dependable handling of customer orders
- **Buyer’s Workstation** for cost-effective, advantageous purchasing
- **Catalog Workstation** for reviewing and maintaining the company’s product catalog
- **Warehouse** for reliable, productive management of warehouse facilities

- **Receiving Workstation** for fast, correct receiving with optimal stages
- **Pick Scheduling** for designing the most efficient picking routes and orders
- **Picking Workstation** for streamlined, dependable picking operations
- **Shipping Workstation** for cost-effective, timely customer shipments
- **Transportation Workstation** for managing internal trucks and manifests
- **Returns Workstation** for rapid, low-overhead processing of returns
- **Billing/Invoicing** for prompt invoicing free from errors
- **Accounts Payable** for tracking and management of incoming payments
- **Cash Application** for cash management
- **Forecasting** with economic order quantities (EOQs) and automated reordering of products
- **Alerts** for accurate notification of triggered events
- **E-Business** for electronic transmission of operational documents powered with XML transactions
- **Contract and Matrix Pricing** for highly flexible margin management and pricing control

Addressing Specific Concerns of Office Supply Distributors with Vertical Extensions

Microsoft Axapta and the MBS Dev Wholesale Distribution Suite support wholesale distributors in the areas in which many share similar business requirements that technology can satisfy. The combination of the two technologies can equip wholesalers with powerful business management tools. The MBS Dev Vertical Extensions add highly specific functionalities for wholesale distributors who want to maximize their ability to compete and grow profitably in a range of vertical market segments.

Many of the capabilities in the MBS Dev Vertical Extensions incorporate the Internet into streamlined, wholesale business processes by using Web services to support purchase order transmissions, manage shipping services, or help manage customer relations. Office supply distributors can effectively set up national accounts and serve customers, wherever their location.

Office Products Vertical Extension

The MBS Dev Office Products Vertical Extension (OPVE) optimizes distribution management for businesses dealing with many of the most often-used office products and stationery items. Features include:

- **Contracts and Matrix Pricing** — Manage customer agreements efficiently with three different contract types (fixed, variable, and fixed-variable) and matrix pricing that controls margins based on groups of products. During quarterly updates, the solution also automatically updates all pricing files. You can set pricing at net, margin, list-down, and cost-up.
- **Cross References** — Reference products globally, by route code, or by customer, to manage profitability at the level of individual customers. Automated cross references during quarterly product updates refresh the information on discontinued products.

- **Wholesaler Interface** — Engage with your wholesalers in an automated interface that includes the newest transaction sets offered by the wholesalers and uses the current Internet technology. Define your own routing and customer-specific formats, and ship to large, corporate customers in any location.
- **Stock Checks** — Check stock at all wholesalers' distribution centers during the order-entry process. Route orders to the preferred distribution center to provide excellent customer service and maintain a 100 percent fill rate.
- **Freight Tracking** — Track freight internally and from the point of leaving the wholesalers, by using the newest Web services offered by freight companies. Interfaces to major shipping stations let you access Worldship, Digital Shipper, Pitney Bowes, and others.

Other functionality of the OPVE facilitates catalog building, item updates, excluded items, customer budgets, credit card interfaces, usage reporting, summary billing, and a complete e-commerce solution that helps office supply wholesalers outperform the competition and improve on the buying group's offerings.

Office Equipment Vertical Extension

The MBS Dev Office Equipment Vertical Extension (OEVE) supports distributors who offer such office equipment as copiers, printers, and fax machines. Key capabilities include the following:

- **Leasing and Rental Management** — Manage equipment leases and rental contracts to ensure high customer satisfaction and low administrative overhead.
- **Installation Scheduling** — Efficiently schedule the workers who set up and test equipment at customer locations, and control your costs of doing business.
- **Project Billing** — Invoice flexibly, across fiscal years or other financial reporting periods, to ensure prudent financial management and correct, timely billing. Track margins throughout an entire project, not just by individual sales orders. Forecast the profitability of projects in your budgets and track it to actual results.
- **Usage Tracking** — Verify actual customer usage of the equipment you place to maintain customer value, anticipate maintenance or replacement needs, and implement optimal cost-efficiency in your equipment distribution.

The OEVE also allows office supply distributors to track manufacturers' warranties, to record and reference equipment serial numbers, to easily exchange information and documents with manufacturers electronically, and to process service requests efficiently.

Office Furniture Vertical Extension

The MBS Dev Office Furniture Vertical Extension (OFVE) enables distributors to engage competitively in selling or leasing office furniture to their clients. Somewhat similar to the Office Equipment Vertical Extension, the OFVE includes among its main capabilities:

- **Installation Scheduling** — Schedule worker teams to install and assemble furniture with best efficiency, so you can keep customer satisfaction high and expenses under control.
- **Labor Hours Tracking** — Track labor costs of delivering and assembling office furniture to ensure proper billing and best resource usage. With tracking of labor hours, you have insight into the profitability of an entire project, and can serve your customers accurately and in a timely manner.
- **Project Billing** — Invoice across financial reporting periods and provide customers with simplified, reliable billing that helps bring in receivables in a timely manner. Track

margins throughout the whole project, not just by individual sales orders. Forecast project profitability in your budget and track it to actual performance.

- **Fixed and Time-and-Materials Billing** — Use fixed or time-and-materials billing procedures to make sure of dependable, prompt invoicing, and receipts. Your employees can track their tasks and time to ensure proper billing for labor and recording of profitability for management review.
- **Product Documents** – Make available manufacturer’s specifications, pictures, or any other related document directly to customers. Customer service representatives can e-mail from the order entry or customer service screens to help customers make an informed decision.

In addition, the OFVE gives distributors a way to track serial numbers, warranty agreements, and leasing contracts, and streamlines the electronic exchange of documents and business information with manufacturers.

Janitorial and Sanitation Vertical Extension

The MBS Dev Janitorial and Sanitation Vertical Extension (JSVE) allows office supply distributors to engage in a complementary line of business that is of great interest to customers and offered also by the large competitors. Important features of the JSVE include:

- **DOT Hazardous Requirements** — Monitor and control the distribution of potentially hazardous cleaning or other products with actual Material Data Sheets (MDSs), and help ensure appropriate usage of the products on customer sites. Print such data sheets or other documents with orders to ensure that customers and shippers are in compliance with Department of Transportation (DOT) regulation.
- **EDI Interface Rebates** — Manage rebates from your suppliers efficiently by exchanging business documents and information through electronic data interchange (EDI).
- **Customer and Vendor Rebates** — Track and manage rebates dependably to ensure best economy for your business and your customers.
- **Wholesaler Drop Ships** — Have goods sent directly from your suppliers to customers, and avoid the cost and effort involved in receiving, storing, and shipping them at your place of business.

Other capabilities of the JSVE let office supply distributors track serial numbers, implement contract pricing, and streamline communications and transactions with wholesalers.

Wholesale Paper Vertical Extension

For office supply distributors dealing with paper products, the MBS Dev Wholesale Paper Vertical Extension (WPVE) helps in doing business competitively and efficiently. Its key features include:

- **Multiple Units of Measure (UOM)** — Report on paper goods in your or the customer’s preferred choice of measuring unit.
- **Consignment Management** — Track paper stock you don’t own to ensure full accountability, appropriate financial management, and maintain optimal inventory levels.
- **Lot Control** — Manage your paper inventory with best control and economy, so you can consistently deliver a high-quality product to customers at a competitive cost.
- **Cut Sheet Pricing** – Price large rolls of paper by the sheet for better inventory control.

The WPVE also offers extensive capabilities for managing charge-backs and rebates, pricing per contracts, and pricing per hundred weights.

Computer Supply Vertical Extension

Competition with the large, national chains pushes distributors to enter into the computer supply market. The MBS Dev Computer Supply Vertical Extension (CSVE) assists distributors in adding computer supplies to their offerings and improving the company's bottom line. Main capabilities include:

- **Product Configurator** — Allow customers or sales staff to configure personal computers to provide customers with the capabilities they prefer.
- **Refurbishment** — Monitor and manage the refurbishment of computer equipment and track the information on the changed value of the equipment.
- **Warranty Tracking** — Track and manage warranty agreements to ensure best economy and customer satisfaction.
- **Leasing Management** — Manage leasing arrangements efficiently to maintain high customer value as well as profitability.
- **E-Business with Large Manufacturers** — Do business with large manufacturers through an automated interface that includes capabilities for drop-shipping from their warehouses, costing, pricing, and electronic invoicing.
- **Kit Products** — Manage all your kit products efficiently during the outbound processing cycle.
- **Up-Sell, Cross-Sell and Complements** — Give your customer service staff complete visibility of products and options to help customers make the right selection every time.

Other features of the CSVE include tracking of rebates and serial numbers, flexible freight charges, and efficient communications with manufacturers.

Books and Periodicals Vertical Extension

The MBS Dev Books and Periodicals Vertical Extension (BPVE) allows office supply distributors to add publications to their product line-up and serve those customers who are interested in business magazines, how-to-guides, manuals, and other literature. Key features include:

- **ISBN Tracking** — Track International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs), and thereby follow the industry standard for referring to publications; and communicate effectively with suppliers and customers. Track all book attributes in your electronic interactions with customers, vendors, and business portals.
- **Buyback Processing** — In dealing with used books with fluctuating values, ensure that you don't pay more in buying them back than you should and that you charge appropriately when you resell them.
- **Publisher Allowances** — Get the best value from allowances offered by publishers, through dependable tracking and reporting.
- **Freight Shipping Rules** — Ship products in a streamlined way by using many configurable shipping rules that can apply to customers, products, and order types.
- **E-Business** — Process electronic documents from manufacturers and wholesalers efficiently.
- **School Book Processing** — Distribute books to school districts, including grade and high schools, and colleges. MBS Dev furnishes the capabilities distributors need in

order to serve this market effectively, including pricing to reflect different conditions of the books and control of school catalogs for inbound to outbound processing with accurate reporting of financial values.

Additional capabilities of the BPVE help to streamline distribution communications and transactions, track serial numbers, manage rebates, and implement price-point pricing.

Getting Started

Competition in the market segment of office supplies distribution continues heatedly. Businesses active in this market would be well advised to review their business processes, perform an honest assessment of their competitive position, and equip themselves with the best technology and tools available to them. If you are a business decision maker in such a company, or a reseller working with a customer in this industry, consider what Microsoft Business Solutions Axapta and MBS Dev offer.

The Web sites listed and contact information listed below will be updated from time to time, especially as Microsoft and MBS Dev deepen their vertical engagement, and should give you a good starting point in your search for an effective distribution solution.

For More Information

- To find out more about Microsoft Axapta:
 - [Microsoft Axapta home](#)
 - [Microsoft Axapta product overview](#)
 - [Microsoft Axapta supply chain and distribution management](#)
 - [Microsoft Axapta customer success stories](#)
 - [Microsoft Axapta solution demos](#)
 - [Microsoft Axapta fact sheets](#)
- To learn about Microsoft Business Solutions:
 - [Microsoft Industry Builder initiative](#)
 - [Microsoft press release about the Industry Builder initiative](#)
 - [Microsoft Business Solutions home](#)
 - [Contact Microsoft Business Solutions](#)
- To see more of MBS Dev, Inc.:
 - [MBS Dev home page](#)
 - [Contacting MBS Dev](#)
 - [MBS Dev wholesale distribution solutions](#)

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