

STRATEGIC THINKING AS A CORE COMPETENCY FOR BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Change is a dynamic force that is part of business and managerial life. To ensure business sustainability and survival in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, organizations need pro-active managers with strategic thinking competency to foresee and plan beyond the current business scenario. Strategic thinking competency is identified as a critical skill to predict the environment accurately and remain competitive in an increasingly unstable business environment. Nevertheless, many managers lack this skill. Thus, managers must continuously learn to become competent and to be able to cope in this environment. The main purpose of this qualitative study was to examine learning experiences which contributed to the development of strategic thinking competency amongst managers in Malaysia. Adopting grounded theory methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst 25 managers. Theoretical sampling and constant comparative method were utilized to identify major categories and themes. Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. Three general themes were identified: formal & informal learning, individual factors, and organizational factors. It was found that managers developed strategic thinking competency through a fusion of various learning experiences. These themes provided some insights into the significance of learning experiences in the development of strategic thinking competency based on the participants' perceptions. The study also proposed that strategic thinking is the foundation of strategic planning and strategic management. Organizations must play a more active role in developing strategic thinkers should they want to survive and succeed in the uncertain times ahead.

Keywords: Qualitative, grounded theory, strategic thinking, learning experiences

INTRODUCTION

The business world is facing greater challenges and demands [1-4]. Change is a dynamic force that is part of business and managerial life. Constant changes that are taking place, including globalisation of product, volatile financial markets, fierce competition, advances in technology, unstable economic and political environment, as well as the organisation's internal environment are some of the changes that present challenges and opportunities for current and future managers [3, 5-8]. The combination of these changes contributes to the high levels of business uncertainties. In this ever-changing and unpredictable business environment, organizations need proactive managers with strategic thinking competency to plan beyond the current business scenario.

The need for strategic thinking was highlighted more than 30 years ago. The need for strategic thinking has never been greater in this time of rapid changes. China, for instance, has clearly indicated the need for strategic thinkers in the country to adapt to the unpredictable changes [4, 9, 10]. Zimbabwe also affirmed that some of the problems faced in the country was due to the lack of strategic thinkers who were able to think and deliberate, whilst looking holistically to find appropriate measures to solve critical issues throughout the nation [11-13].

Given the lack of strategic thinkers, this study was an attempt to explore how managers developed the skill to think strategically. A qualitative study was utilised to gain a detailed understanding on the learning experiences which contributed to the development of strategic thinking capabilities. The qualitative research method was appropriate for uncovering individuals' perceptions on the subject matter [8, 14-16]. To develop a better comprehension on the subject matter, a grounded theory was applied to explore participants' experiences in their own words [17, 18]

Research Questions

What were the learning experiences that contributed to the development of strategic thinking?

Research Objectives

The general aim of this study was to examine significant learning experiences which contributed to the development of strategic thinking ability. The study explores what learning interventions enhanced the ability to think strategically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the changing world of business, individuals are compelled to demonstrate their ability to think strategically [4, 9, 10, 17, 19-24]. Nevertheless, many lack the skills and are unsure how to think strategically [17, 23, 25-28]. Recognising the importance of strategic thinking in today's environment, [10, 19, 24, 29-31] inferred that there was a need to create a capability for strategic thinking at all levels in organisations.

Research has helped to clarify the essence of strategic thinking, but few actually looked at how individuals develop competency in strategic thinking. [4, 6, 9, 28, 32-35] have long been proposing that further research should investigate what constitutes strategic thinking, and what conditions would facilitate the development of strategic thinking.

On a similar note, [2, 8, 16, 17, 23, 36] have all argued that there is a need for more empirical research in this area so that managers may respond more effectively in uncertain and unpredictable times. [25] accentuates "the ability to think strategically is an admired and sought-after leadership requirement, yet we know little about how it develops" (p. 403).

Current literature suggests that strategic planning and strategic thinking supplement each other. Strategic thinking and strategic planning are both necessary, in the process of developing effective strategies. Nonetheless, there seems to be a lack of understanding of what strategic thinking really means. This is apparent as

highlighted by [10, 19, 24] who noted many practitioners referring to the term as synonymous to strategic planning and strategic management. [29, 37] asserted that strategic thinking involved synthesising “innovative and creative thinking at all levels of the organisation”. Mintzberg stressed that strategic thinking was a “particular way of thinking with specific and clearly discernible characteristics.” He suggested integrating strategic thinking with strategic planning so that organizations could gain competitive advantage.

Strategic planning is closely related to the overall direction of the organisation, thus requiring thinking which is critical, forward and long-term. Strategic management is the blueprint for the organisation to map the way to managing the organisation. Managers need to understand how their organisation works as a subsystem within a larger system. It is not adequate for an organisation to develop a strategic plan, or a vision without a team of people to think, plan, act, rethink and re-plan to ensure the success of the strategic plan or vision. Strategic thinking involves disciplined thinking which is focused on the whole business as a system. Strategic thinking occurs before, during and after strategic planning and strategic management. It is the foundation for strategic planning and strategic management.

Developing and managing strategic talents and thinkers should be a main concern for organisations today. [33] postulated that individuals can learn to enhance their thinking abilities. For strategic thinking to occur, organizational structures, cultures, systems and processes should be conducive to promote strategic thinking among employees [7, 11-13, 19, 31, 38]. Appropriate training techniques, for example simulation and apprenticeship, can develop and enhance a capability in strategic thinking.

[19] proposed that management set up ‘strategic forums’ or dialogues to utilize the ingenuity and creativity of employees and focus on strategic areas deemed to be important for the organisation’s survival and longevity. [16] suggested that organisations set up ‘communities of practice’ deliberately as a means of sharing knowledge, skills and know-how among employees. Generally, communities of practice developed informally among employees from different areas and departments, and shared common interests and reasons. Communities of practice could be a platform for organisations to encourage employees to think strategically for the benefit of all.

Developing and managing strategic talents and thinkers should be a main concern for organisations today. [37] proposed that human resource development (HRD) could be a means to enhance strategic thinking ability in individuals. The purpose of HRD is to develop human capital on an ongoing and continuous manner by means of training and education. [1] suggested that HRD interventions could be incorporated in the strategic planning process, thus acting as a learning experience or curve for those involved. Appropriate training techniques, for example simulation and apprenticeship, can develop and enhance a capability in strategic thinking.

Human resource management policies and practices can be a tool to encourage and enhance strategic thinking. Recruitment and selection processes can be designed to include criteria and features that will enable organisations to recruit and select candidates who possess the ability or have the potential to think strategically in the workplace. Organisations should include strategic thinking ability as a criterion for succession planning. Employees who have the ambition to climb up the management ladder should exhibit their capabilities to think strategically to be considered for a promotion. However, proper recruitment, selection and training alone may not be able to improve strategic thinking skills. Organisations should put in place appropriate reward and incentive programs to help stimulate employees to think strategically. Rewards and incentives can serve as motivators to push employees to think.

The basic view to HRD is that most adults learn from experience. According to [19], experience provided a learning opportunity through observation and reflection

from those experiences. [10] believed the underlying assumption to individual learning was that past experience amalgamated and transformed into new experiences. Adults learn from various interactions of experiences, which include life, social and work experiences [37].

[17, 19] found that social and cultural environment, blended with awareness and efforts contributed to adult learning experiences. Learning shaped and reshaped behaviors constantly. [33] stressed that the knowledge gained from the learning experience could develop into expertise and capability provided there were appropriate organisational structure and human resource practices. Experience becomes meaningful when adults are able to explain that experience by reflecting on it. In other words, they learn turn the experience into learning through reflection. [13] considered interpersonal relationships as another key factor in adult learning. Adults learn from each other by sharing and exchanging ideas, opinions, and information. On a similar note, [16, 36] postulated that adults learn from one another during social engagements. adults develop certain expertise by learning from one another through communities of practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of a group of 25 managers on strategic thinking. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data [4]. [18] described qualitative research as an interpretation process that made sense out of certain phenomenon from the voice of the respondents based on their own experiences. A qualitative study provides the richness necessary to understand the phenomenon under study. It allows the researcher to uncover the meaning people assign to their experiences.

This paper examined the learning experiences of a group of Malaysian managers who work in Kuala Lumpur. This qualitative study was designed using grounded theory to discover significant learning experiences perceived to have contributed to the development of strategic thinking competency. The adoption of grounded theory was appropriate to develop a better comprehension on the subject matter by exploring participants' experiences in their own words [2, 15] and identifying emerging themes related to the development of strategic thinking.

Theoretical Sampling

[39] described theoretical sampling as "the process of collecting data to make sense out of it all. The writer decided what data to collect, how to collect them, and from whom to collect the data, in order to develop an emerging theory". This idea guided the researcher when selecting samples for the study. The researcher adopted certain criteria to select a specific group and setting to be studied. [19] explained that the respondents acted as informants who actively collaborated with the researcher to provide an abundance of knowledge, or their own special knowledge about the subject under study, which is invaluable to the researcher. The sample was selected based on criteria of interest in order to provide richness to the description of strategic thinking and its development. They have been involved in the corporate planning and decision-making within their respective organisations and have been in a management position for more than 10 years [23].

[5] explained that normally purposive or judgemental sampling was employed by qualitative researchers. He added that purposive sampling normally was used to initiate data collection in exploratory or field research, followed by snowballing approach. [14] emphasised that purposive sampling was suitable in one of three conditions: (1) the researcher used it to select specific cases; (2) the researcher used purposive sampling to select members of a specified population; and (3) the researcher needed to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation. Hence, purposive and snowball sampling methods were adopted for this study.

Data Collection

This study employed a combination of sampling methods starting with the convenient and purposive sampling [5, 37] Initially, electronic mails were sent to five

senior managers who were in the writer's network and fit the criteria set. Two responded and agreed to participate in the initial phase of the study. Following their agreement to participate, an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study was sent one week before the scheduled interview. Next, the snowballing method was used in this qualitative study. The participants were requested to provide at least a name of a person who fit the characteristics or features, and the criteria set of a strategic thinker. This was stated in the letter inviting them to participate in the study.

The interviews took place at the respondents' workplaces or places suggested by the respondents. Efforts were made to suit their convenience for interviews. Participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Each interview was recorded after gaining the respondent's consent to tape the proceeding. Brief notes were also taken particularly on issues or matters that the participants raised as important. An individual interview lasted for about 60-90 minutes.

The questions were open-ended, neutral and non-leading in order to avoid imposing the researcher's values. In addition, it was made clear at the start of each interview that the questions given were intended only as prompts and any topic or issues related to the subject matter could be included in the interviews. The interview data were then transcribed for analysis of data.

Data Analysis

[12] emphasised that data analysis is "the most arduous and critical phase" of qualitative study. It is a "dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing". [41] stated that the goal of qualitative data analysis was to transform data into meaningful findings. The data analysis in this study was consistent with [14, 15, 18]'s strategies of general data analysis and data reduction. Raw data gathered from the interviews was scrutinised and reduced to identify meaningful patterns. To make sense of the data and emerging patterns, a framework was constructed and proposed.

Data collection, transcribing, coding, analysing and writing were undertaken concurrently throughout the study. Each interview was conducted and transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were quite intricate as participants responded in a mixture of Malay language and English. To ensure that the data gathered would be workable, translations were carried out word for word from Malay language to English. The writer had taken great care in doing so, to make sure the translation did not go out of context and retained the same meaning. No attempt was made to correct grammatical errors when translating and transcribing data. On that note, the writer had made every effort to use direct quotes from the subjects as they said them.

All 25 transcripts were e-mailed to the respective participants who had agreed to go through them to ensure accurate information was recorded. They were requested to read through the transcripts carefully, and to agree, disagree or alter any part which they felt were out of context of their responses. All of them called the researcher and confirmed that the transcripts reflected their actual responses.

Data analysis began immediately after the first data was collected [10, 24] This process continued after each data collection until the end. The sorting and coding of the transcripts involved a rigorous and time consuming process. Comparisons between cases and categories were constantly and repeatedly done to ensure the researcher did not overlook any relevant or important part of the interviews.

After transcribing each interview, coding was carried out to highlight keywords of the interview. In doing so, the writer looked out for common words, phrases, themes and categories that emerged. [30] stated that "through imaginative variation, the researcher develops enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes" (p.486). In most cases the participants repeated certain words or phrases a few times in their interviews. These words or phrases were combined to unveil the participants' true experience. Concept mapping was also used in this process to give the writer a better and bigger picture of the emerging conceptual framework.

[10] highlighted that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis were

concurrent and interdependent processes. These led to the sorting of data into theoretical frameworks and reporting the findings in the context of existing and relevant literature and theories. The coding process in this study entailed three stages, *i.e.* open coding, axial coding and selective coding [39]. Coding was a process of sorting data and arranging them into appropriate categories. The coding was undertaken as each transcription was typed and reviewed several times. Once the coding for the first transcript was completed, the researcher went through the labels or categories again. When doing so, the researcher would group up relevant categories together under subcategories and provided them with another label or subcategory name.

Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. For instance, the researcher found that categories labelled as 'formal education' and 'training and development [T&D]' could be grouped together under a subcategory 'formal & informal learning'. The process was repeated after each subsequent interview until the data gathered saturated by comparing incidents from earlier sources. This process of axial coding continued until all the cases were reviewed. The emerging themes were generated after considering every distinct type of occurrences connected to one another.

Descriptions of Participants

25 experienced managers agreed to participate in the study. When recruiting participants, the following conditions were emphasised:

- At least ten years working experience at management level. [23] cited the works of Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993) and Skovholt, Ronnestad and Jennings (1997) which indicated that 10 years working experience in an organisation or organisations as the minimum period to develop expertise in their respective areas;
- Involvement in organisation-wide decision-making process or strategic planning at any time whilst in the management position; or
- Working experience as an entrepreneur or those in middle to top management positions including managers, senior managers, general managers, managing directors and also chief executive officers.

FINDINGS

Reporting the findings involved comparing and integrating the themes or categories in order to develop theoretical constructs and the theory as it emerged. To validate the categories and themes identified, three methods were used. Initially the coding was done manually by the researcher. The researcher's mentor did a separate manual coding for the first eight interview transcripts to strengthen the findings. After the manual coding was completed for all interviews transcripts, the data were analysed using NVivo. The researcher allowed the system to identify the possible categories and relationships from the data. The list of categories and themes identified manually by the researcher and NVivo were then compared and were found to be very similar.

The themes emerged from the questions asked and probed relating to how participants perceived they acquired their strategic thinking capabilities. Reporting the findings involved comparing and integrating the themes or categories in order to develop theoretical constructs and the theory as it emerged. The researcher coded each occurrence into as many categories as possible. As more categories emerged, some of the previous coding would relate to the existing categories while others would fit better into new categories.

Three emerging themes were identified: formal and informal learning, individual factors, and organisational factors.

Formal and informal learning

Formal and informal learning captured the fundamental entity of the participants' experiences of strategic thinking. For the participants, they believed that their formal

learning experiences enhanced their ability to think strategically. Some of the categories grouped under this theme included formal education, training and development and learning on the job or learning by doing.

As some participants articulated that they acquired the skill via formal education and training and development:

P1: I received many types of training and development programs, locally and internationally. The training varied from technical to soft skill programs. I think I acquired my management and thinking skills through the various training.

P5: At this time, what I learned from uni [university] is really, really helpful. I remembered the projects that we did at uni [university]. Now I understand why they were so difficult and challenging. It is to help develop my strategic thinking skill which is helpful in managing projects like what I am doing now.... Formal education is important as it prepares us for the future. It provides us with the basics in our area. All the projects and assignments I did in uni [university] actually challenged me to think and developed my strategic thinking skills.

P6: During my undergraduate studies, I explored & exposed my mind to new and creative ideas.....innovativeness, creativity—all these were exposed to during the graduate studies I also have to take up Art studies – an artist needs to be able to think – that really helped my thinking skills to develop.....I also learned psychology and strategic part as well – many aspects and different courses to develop various skills.....management skills, including strategic thinking.

P7: I studied abroad. I think the education system there had taught me more than just what's in the book. The experience taught me to be more independent, to think of ways to survive [especially when I first arrived on the foreign land]. School taught me to be creative, to think creatively, to be more organised, to analyse or evaluate situations.

P7: I think universities have the opportunity to help develop strategic thinkers from earlier on.

Some participants stated that they learn on the job or learn by doing:

P1: I learned to think [strategic] on the job mostly. Learn by doing and reflecting on that learning then modifying if I have to or improvise.

P2: Line managers will normally hold meetings, informal as well as formal, to come up with their respective action plans. Everyone is prepared beforehand with data and information, reports and proposals. We listen to all ideas. We discuss, brainstorm. Which option is better? Or can we collectively think of something better?

P6: group cohesiveness, human relations, group dynamics etc.... too ineffective when too many in a group. Even datelines won't settle the issues. When the people started to group up, it became difficult to handle the situation when you need to work with them.... I learned to handle the problem..... I understand that it is important to have people in charge of various units or departments to better manage the company when it is growing.

P7: I learned on the job what each post was about. By the end of my programme, I can understand and see how the whole organization functions and links to each other. The experience made me knowledgeable in my work. That's important. You have to know how the whole organization works to get the big picture. Then you can see where you are and your role in the company. That way, you will learn more.

P8: We learned everything on the job, from day one! We learned through mistakes, went through trial and error. But those times and mistakes really helped us to think of ways to correct those mistakes and how to avoid them in future. Those times really helped develop our thinking skills....to analyze the situation and weigh the pros and cons....to come up with alternatives.....but all of these must have goals or objectives or what we want to achieve.

Individual Factors

Individual factors covered work and life experiences that are regarded by participants to be essential in promoting strategic thinking ability. Participants quoted

factors such as open-mindedness, never giving up, and self-development strategies like reading, as well as networking. Individual factors can be divided into intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors.

The participants explained:

P1: I think when I think in respect to certain issues, I do a lot of digging for info, asking around, a lot of reading... then I do some analysis or evaluation on the situation. What is involved? Why? Who is involved? How do you normally solve it? Is there a better way? What if this way does not work, is there another way? You know..... things like that. It's like doing a SWOT analysis.... I mean I look at my strengths and weaknesses, and also opportunities that arise as well as threats involved”.

P2: What happened in our personal lives also we learn from it. I like to jog in the morning. I meet friends on the track. We talk. I play golf and meet people and talk. Talk about what? Whatever that come up. You learn about things that you never know about sometimes. Mostly about politics, economy and business. I read.... newspapers, magazines, books. You must have the knowledge in what you do to be able to think [strategically]. Because you need to know more. A bigger picture of what's happening.

P5: I do a lot of reading, especially when I am handling projects. I need a lot of information to help me understand the situations better.

P1: I learned about the business and industry on my own. I read a lot; I socialize a lot with those in the industry. I developed an understanding of the market behaviour and the impacts on the business. I realized that there were so many factors, including external ones that influenced the business and industry.

Organisational Factors

Organisational factors such as rewards and/or incentives be they monetary or not, work system, organisational culture, and HRM policies and practices comprising recruitment, selection, training and succession planning participants perceived as critical in strategic thinking.

A few participants highlighted:

P7: ... encouraging employees to think strategically, in line with the company's direction, the management has put in place a reward system – both monetary and non-monetary. For example, good contributors will be acknowledged in their bulletin and notice boards. Some exceptional ones with continuous good contributions and performance, and potential, will be considered for future promotion or possible succession planning. How? Based on their qualities, performance we identify them and develop them for future – to realise their potentials”.

P12: We encourage our people to think constantly. We have several programs/rewards for those who come up with workable ideas. For instance, we provide monetary and non-monetary rewards to motivate the employees to think continuously for the company.

P17: One criterion in my succession planning is the ability to think strategically. Promotion from within is easier as I know who has the characteristics or “aura” of a strategic thinker.

P22: The HRM practices involve recruiting and selecting fresh graduates from any background. The candidates go through a structured and formalized process of assessment in order to choose the most suitable candidate.

This factor also includes current position or role held by participants within their respective organisations. These positions which include becoming a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), General Manager (GM), Senior Manager (SM) and Manager (M), exposed the participants to various scenarios which require them to apply their strategic thinking abilities.

Some participants shared:

P3: The Chairman [my brother], CEO [me] and President of the company make the strategic planning and decisions. We are guided and advised by an external

consultant. This small group is involved in all the company's decision making process. We are also involved when formulating the company's vision and mission statements" As one respondent put it " I think this thinking [strategic] does not happen in a day or two. It takes time. We learn from experiences....work....life. The mistakes that we do. The trials and errors. The success. The everyday things. Some people try to avoid mistakes. But you learn more through it."

P7: As a CEO, thinking [strategic] is what I do every day. It's like breathing. You think all the time, for the good of the company. What can I do to make it better? To achieve goals? Targets? Thinking and planning goes hand in hand. I think and plan how to do things. You cannot just think and not do anything. You cannot plan without thinking, right? So I think that both complement each other. You cannot do one without the other. You get better and better over time.

Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. The three emerging themes from data analysis were grouped as depicted in Diagram 1. Each theme was interrelated, and an integration of all or several contributing factors were identified to have some influence on the development of strategic thinking ability.

TABLE1 EMERGING THEMES

Themes	Categories
1. Formal & informal learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal education ▪ Training and development ▪ Learning on the job or learning by doing ▪ Subject-matter expertise ▪ Failures/successes ▪ Communities of practice ▪ Professional seminars ▪ Business circle ▪ Job experiences ▪ Professional/Business/ Social affiliation
2. Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-directed learning ▪ Self-development strategies ▪ Open-mindedness, never give up ▪ Personal experiences ▪ Life experiences ▪ Peers, other people ▪ Social gathering
3. Organizational factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ HR practices – rewards, recruitment, selection, succession planning ▪ Organizational culture ▪ Organizational policies ▪ Management support ▪ Being a CEO, GM, SM, M ▪ Task force/special projects ▪ Understand the business & industry ▪ Vision, mission, goals, strategic issues ▪ Involvement with strategic planning and/or strategic decision making/problem solving ▪ Alternative business strategies

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings in this study were similar to past studies conducted. [5] in her study on how nurse executives became leaders found similar themes: learning from experience, learning from relationships and self-directed learning. Learning from

experience included previous experience, tenure, tacit knowledge, successes and failures, on-the-job assignments, reflection as a learning strategy, and emancipatory learnings derived from on-the-job assignments. Learning from relationships included bosses, administrative peers, other staff, family systems, and friends. Self-directed learning included formal and continuing education programs, professional organisations and networking, reading, field work, routine work, and committees. Learning shaped and reshaped behaviors constantly.

[33, 34] also found that the knowledge gained from the learning experience could develop into expertise and capability provided there were appropriate organisational structure and human resource practices. Experience becomes meaningful when adults are able to explain that experience by reflecting on it. In other words, they learn turn the experience into learning through reflection.

[13] considered interpersonal relationships as another key factor in adult learning. Adults learn from each other by sharing and exchanging ideas, opinions, and information. On a similar note, [16] postulated that adults learn from one another during social engagements. [8] found that adults develop certain expertise by learning from one another through communities of practice.

The findings and conclusions of this study trigger additional research opportunities, as follows:

- A comparative study of the experiences of strategic thinkers in various industries should be conducted.
- More studies to identify the best means of instruction on strategic thinking and how to enhance the transfer of its learning.
- A further exploration of the personal factors that influence the development of strategic thinking should be considered.
- A further exploration of the environmental and organisational factors that support the development of strategic thinking would also be beneficial.

It is possible to design training programs that enhance managers' capability in strategic thinking, however, this study needs to be further tested in a number of different types of organisations and industries to determine the mechanics and processes involved. Given the fact that the researcher was only able to interview a small group of individuals, it would be interesting to utilise future research to explore further the relevance of this research to other industries within and across Malaysia as well as other countries.

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