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Generational Differences in Shaping Employees' Ethical Behavior for Sustainable Organization: A Meta-Analysis

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Abstract: The ethical behavior of employees is critical to organizational success, yet fostering such behavior presents persistent challenges in today's dynamic workplace. Predictable factors such as cultural diversity, technological advancements, and evolving societal expectations highlight the pressing need for robust strategies to promote ethical conduct. Due to that, this paper investigates generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior for sustainable organizations through a comprehensive meta-analysis. Using university electronic databases (Scopus) as a search lens to locate related articles, a meta-analytical technique is employed to analyze and synthesize available literature. The following themes of ethical behavior and generational differences were used to assess selected studies. Inclusion criteria focused on studies published within the past 10 years, ensuring relevance to recent organizational contexts. By systematically analyzing and synthesizing the literature, this paper provides actionable insights for researchers and practitioners aiming to address challenges of generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior. The findings highlight the distinct ethical values held by each generation and underscore the importance of fostering a cohesive ethical principle within organizations. A significant gap in the findings is the limited exploration of how generational ethical perspectives evolve, particularly in remote work settings, digital workplaces, and gig economies. Additionally, the practical effectiveness of ethical leadership and CSR initiatives in bridging generational ethical gaps remains underexplored. Future research should examine ethical behavior practices of non-traditional workspaces, assess effective leadership strategies and policy interventions, and adopt international approaches to enhance generalizability and inform culturally inclusive ethical policies.

Keywords: *Ethical behavior, generational differences, meta-analysis, sustainability*

1. Introduction

Organizations today face significant challenges in fostering ethical behavior among their employees. These challenges stem from various factors, including cultural and generational diversity. The modern corporate landscape faces the challenges of effectively managing a diverse workforce comprising individuals from various generational backgrounds. As organizations become more globalized, they must navigate the complexities of managing employees with diverse cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs. This diversity can lead to differing perceptions of ethical behavior, making it difficult to establish a cohesive organizational culture that promotes ethical conduct. Bridging these generational gaps and fostering a culture of ethical behavior is crucial for achieving long-term organizational sustainability.

Previous studies have emphasized the unique traits and priorities of various organizational cohorts, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Dwyer & Azevado, 2016; Guerin-Marion et al., 2018; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). These differences can significantly impact employees' perceptions, values, and approaches to ethical decision-making. Traditionalists, for instance, may place greater emphasis on loyalty and adherence to rules, while Millennials may prioritize work-life balance and social responsibility (Kapoor & Salomon, 2011). Consequently, organizations must recognize and address these generational nuances to cultivate and share the understanding of ethical conduct.

This article provides a thorough examination of prior literature concerning the influence of generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior within organizational settings. As a reviewed paper, it systematically synthesizes scholarly contributions to identify determinants that affect ethical decision-making and conduct in the workplace. The outline of this paper begins with the literature review defining characteristics of generational cohorts such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, and examines how these differences manifest in ethical perceptions, values, and workplace behavior. Methodologically, a meta-analytical approach is employed to analyze the quantitative findings from selected

journals and articles published between 2015 and 2025. Furthermore, key findings highlight the significant generational variances in ethical priorities, and the discussion section interprets these findings. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing key insights, acknowledging the limitations of the current review, and proposing directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The literature suggests that cultural and generational diversity within the workforce can pose significant challenges in shaping ethical behavior. Differences in values, attitudes, and work preferences among employees from various cultural and generational backgrounds can create tension and misunderstanding, making it difficult to establish a shared understanding of ethical conduct (Klopotan et al., 2020). Research has shown that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of different generations, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, can vary significantly. These generational differences can lead to conflict and a lack of cohesion, which can undermine the organization's efforts to promote ethical behavior. Additionally, the increasing diversity in the workplace has been found to intensify conflicts due to conflicting cultural differences and behaviors. Therefore, organizations must find ways to bridge these gaps and foster a shared understanding of ethical behavior that transcends cultural and generational boundaries.

Generational differences in ethical attitudes can significantly influence the ethical behavior of employees. Younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z, tend to have a stronger focus on social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and ethical corporate practices compared to older generations like Baby Boomers. For example, Millennials are more likely to consider the ethical implications of their work and are more willing to sacrifice financial gain for the sake of upholding ethical principles. In contrast, some older employees may prioritize financial performance and short-term results over long-term ethical considerations (Nuseir & Ghandour, 2019), leading to potential conflicts and contradictions in the workplace. These generational disparities in ethical attitudes can create challenges in establishing a cohesive organizational culture that promotes ethical conduct across all employee groups.

Rapid technological advancement and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) have become a challenge for generational differences in the workforce. As Millennials are more technologically updated and integrating AI in every work performed, it may contradict the older style of performing work adopted by earlier generations (Verma & Garg, 2023). The integration of AI technology into professional workflows has sparked concerns among the older generation workforce regarding the quality of work produced, the reliability of sources utilized, and the capabilities of younger employees. While the older generation often relies on experience gained through years of practice and observation, the newer generation increasingly leverages AI tools to generate ideas and solutions. This shift in methodology may lead to differing perceptions of competence and credibility, as the reliance on AI technology challenges notions of expertise rooted in experiential knowledge.

To promote ethical behavior across different generational cohorts, organizations can implement a multifaceted approach (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011). First, organizations should establish clear and consistent ethical guidelines that resonate with all employees, regardless of their generational background (Ruiz-Palamino & Banon-Gomis, 2016). This can be achieved through comprehensive training programs, mentorship initiatives, and open dialogues that encourage cross-generational collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

Additionally, organizations should consider the diverse work environment preferences of each generation. For instance, younger generation workers may thrive in global-oriented and technologically advanced work environments, while Baby Boomers may respond better to focus on relationship-building and work-life balance. By catering to the unique needs and preferences of each generational cohort, organizations can foster a sense of belonging and engagement, which in turn can contribute to a stronger ethical culture.

Organizations should also foster open dialogue and cross-generational collaborations to bridge the ethical gaps between different age groups. Creating opportunities for younger and older employees to engage in discussion, share perspectives and collectively explore solutions to ethical dilemmas is are good approach to practice.

In the meantime, encouraging mentorship and knowledge-sharing opportunities to facilitate the transfer of

ethical norms and best practices across generations would help employees adapt to the right way of doing things. Pairing younger employees with seasoned professionals can help bridge the ethical divide and promote a shared understanding of the organization's values and ethical expectations.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a meta-analytical method to investigate the factors concerning generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior. Meta-analysis is a widely recognized research methodology, extensively used in various disciplines such as medicine, ecology, social sciences, and business. It is particularly effective for synthesizing data from prior studies, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of a research topic. Furthermore, meta-analysis is instrumental in guiding the design of new studies by summarizing existing knowledge and identifying gaps that future studies may explore.

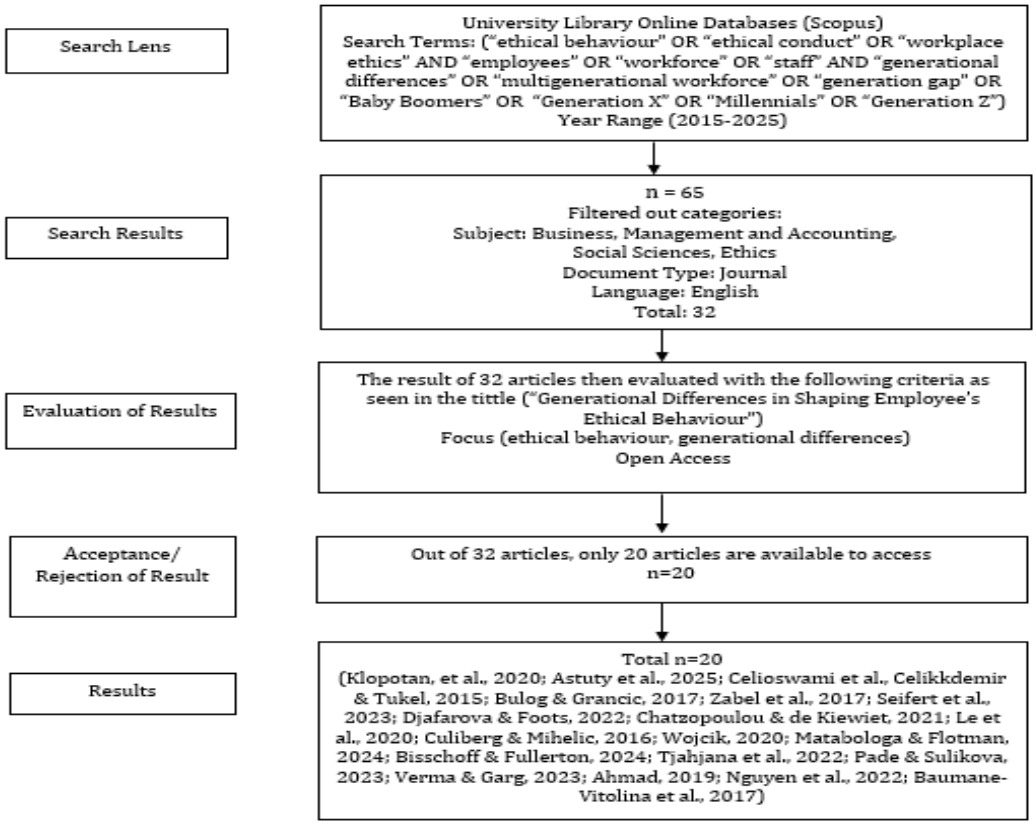
This paper concentrates on research articles published between 2015 and 2025, addressing the specific theme of challenges in shaping employees' ethical behavior with an emphasis on generational differences. The initial stage involved a systematic and computer-based search for relevant studies using online library database services. The search was conducted on the Scopus database, accessible through the university's online library portal. Keywords of "ethical behavior", "workplace ethics", "employees", "staff", and "generational differences" were used to identify pertinent publications. To ensure relevance, the search was limited to the articles' titles and publication years ranging from 2015 to 2025.

The initial search yielded 65 published articles. These articles were subsequently filtered based on specific criteria, including source type (journal), subject areas (business, management and accounting, ethics and social sciences), and language (English). Following this filtration process, 32 articles remained.

In the next stage, the 32 articles were evaluated to ensure alignment with the core themes of "challenges", "employees' ethical behavior", and "generational differences". Studies that focused on irrelevant contexts were excluded. After this thematic screening, the selected articles were downloaded to verify full-text accessibility. Of the 32 articles initially identified, only 20 provided full-text access.

The final set of 20 articles was meticulously reviewed to extract insights and synthesize findings relevant to the study's objectives. This comprehensive evaluation enabled the researcher to consolidate existing knowledge on the challenges of fostering ethical behavior in employees across generational divides, providing a robust foundation for further analysis and discussion.

Figure 1: Multi-Step Procedure of Meta-Analysis



4. Findings and Results

Table 1: Selected articles on Generational Differences in Shaping Employees' Ethical Behavior for Sustainable Organization

NO	AUTHOR/YEAR	TITLE	FINDINGS
1	Ahmad (2019)	Corporate Social Responsibility: A value-creation strategy to engage millennials.	The study emphasizes using corporate social responsibility (CSR) to engage millennials, who are skeptical of profit-driven motives. Key findings highlight the need for CSR policies to align with millennial values such as sustainability, inclusion, and equality. Effective strategies, including a seven-step CSR process and two-way communication, enhance engagement, attract millennial talent, and foster organizational sustainability and trust.
2	Astuty et al., (2025)	A closer look at the work behavior of Gen Z in micro, small and medium enterprises of developing countries.	The study explores Generation Z employees in MSMEs within developing countries, revealing that workplace happiness mediates the relationship between motivation and performance. It highlights the role of teamwork and

			respect in enhancing employee satisfaction, productivity and MSME sustainability.
3	Baumane-Vitolina et al. (2017)	Ethical behavior and honesty in the post-Soviet business environment.	This study examines generational differences in honesty as a personal value and behavior, revealing that older generations exhibit greater honesty than younger ones. Post-war and early Generation X rate honesty and responsibility higher individually. Key challenges include fostering ethical behavior through training and integrating value-based assessments into hiring practices. Promoting honesty at the organizational level may further encourage ethical workplace behavior.
4	Bulog & Grančić (2017)	The benefits of business ethics-ethical behavior of decision-makers: The empirical findings from Croatia.	This study examines the advantages of business ethics and evaluates managerial ethical behavior. Findings reveal that the company lacks a developed ethical framework, with managers often disregarding ethics in decision-making, indicating a limited understanding of its significance in business. To address this, the company should prioritize promoting ethical conduct, establishing ethical values, and implementing comprehensive ethical policies and strategies.
5	Bisschoff & Fullerton (2024)	The AB Gap: An assessment of the difference between ethical attitudes and ethical behavior among the next generation of business leaders in South Africa.	The study investigates inconsistencies between the ethical attitudes and actions of South Africa's prospective business leaders. The findings indicate that this emerging group demonstrates a relatively strong ethical inclination.
6	Çelikdemir & Tukel (2015)	Incorporating ethics into strategic management about Generation Y's view of ethics.	This study intends to explore the influence of Generation Y's ethical ideology on their business practices, examining how generational shifts have shaped ethical behavior. The findings reveal that Gen Y prioritizes ethical behavior and incorporates ethical principles into their business actions, valuing ethics above success, reputation or profit.
7	Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, (2021)	Millennials' evaluation of corporate social responsibility: The wants and needs of the largest and most ethical generation.	This research investigate how millennials's perception of CSR and the underlying factors that influence ethical behavior. The findings reveal that millennials assess corporate actions with an idealistic perspective and are often skeptical of corporate ethics, prioritizing evidence of authentic and altruistic motives. This research provides valuable insights for

			managers to better understand the mindset of this impactful generation.
8	Culiberg & Mihelič (2016)	Three ethical frames of reference: Insights into Millennials' ethical judgement and intentions in the workplace.	The research examines Millennials' ethical decision-making behavior. The findings affirm a consistent link between ethical judgements and intentions, while the impact of ethical frames of reference varies depending on the context. The varying predictive power of these frames highlights important implications for managers seeking to foster ethical behavior among Millennial employees.
9	Djafarova & Foots (2022)	Exploring ethical consumption of Generation Z: Theory of Planned Behavior	This paper examines the determinants that lead Generation Z to enact their ethical purchase intentions in practice. The analysis reveals that Generation Z holds a deep awareness of, and dedication to, ethical and ecological concerns.
10	Jonck et al. (2016)	Work ethics of different generational cohorts in South Africa.	The objective of this research is to compare work-ethics profiles across three cohorts- Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. The analysis uncovers both shared traits and significant generational divergences, especially regarding work diligence and delay of gratification.
11	Klopotan et al., (2020)	Do business ethics and ethical decision making still matter: Perspective of different Generational Cohorts.	This study compares attitudes toward business ethics and ethical decision-making across Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Overall differences were slight, with Generation Z notably de-emphasizing formal rules, performance metrics, and job pressures relative to older cohorts. Across all generations, supervisor behavior emerged as the strongest determinant of ethical choices. The findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership and a supportive ethical climate, and reveal a generational tilt toward personal moral beliefs over organizational directives. To foster consistent ethical conduct, the targeted ethics training and leadership development programs are recommended.

12	Le et al. (2020)	Ethical consumption in Vietnam: An analysis of generational cohorts and gender.	This study examines the discrepancy between ethical attitude intentions and actual consumer behavior. The result reveal no gender-based differences in ethical purchasing among Generation Z, Generation Y and Generation X, or nor any significant distinctions between Generation X and Generation Y. Moreover, no cohorts differences emerged in overall ethically driven consumer behavior.
13	Matabologa & Flotman (2024)	Organizational ethics context factors in a public energy utility company: A Millennial view	This paper explores Millennials' lived experiences with organizational ethics, with a focus on how ethical leadership shapes those experiences. The results reveal a paradoxical and ambivalent division in Millennials' perceptions of the organization's ethical climate.
14	Nguyen et al. (2022)	Generation Z Job Seekers' expectations and their job pursuit intention: Evidence from transition and emerging economy.	This paper examines the expectations and job pursuit intention of Generation Z job seekers in a transitional emerging economy. The findings indicate that Vietnamese Generation Z places greater value on intangible organizational attributes than on physical job features, viewing these intangibles as instrumental to their career goals and as expressions of a firm's corporate social responsibility.
15	Pade & Sulíková (2023)	Significance of and ethical culture for young employees.	The investigation demonstrates the value of cultivating ethical norms within an organization, particularly for younger employees. The findings suggest that companies must focus on being responsible global market participants, while younger employees should prioritize ethical values in their work.
16	Seifert et al. (2023)	Generational work ethic differences: From baby boomers to Gen Z	This study compares work ethic differences between Baby Boomers and Generation Z, revealing significant generational variations in their levels of work ethic.
17	Tjahjana et al., (2022)	How Generation Y and Z perceive business ethics	The purpose of this research is to examine Generation Y and Z's perspective on business ethics. Result reveal that, although both groups lack sufficient ethics training, they remain inclined to act ethically- and that one in four individuals is willing to sacrifice ethical principles for what they views as the greater good.

18	Verma & Garg (2023)	Exploring intergenerational differences in technology-oriented ethical behavior	The investigation seeks to understand how technology-related ethics manifest across a varied workforce and to identify generational differences among Gen X, Y, and Z. Results show significant variation across all metrics of technology-oriented ethical behavior from pre-millennials through post-millennials.
19	Wójcik (2020)	Generational values and generational confrontations: Ethical challenges in the light of contemporary economic and social trends.	This paper aims to discuss the sources of moral behavior and analyze the generational backgrounds that have shaped their attitudes, which may also influence their ability to address moral dilemmas. The study found that Millennials are the first to work in a tech-driven, globally connected multicultural environment, and each generation is increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse than the last.
20	Zabel et al. (2017)	Generational differences in work ethics: Fact or fiction.	This paper examines generational differences in work ethics. Results indicate that variations in Protestant Work Ethics are minimal, suggesting that tailoring talent-management strategies specifically for Millennials may be redundant.

Discussion

The exploration of factors concerning generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior reveals significant trends and nuanced contradictions. The studies collectively underline the relationship between generational values, organizational culture and ethical behavior. Many studies converge on the premise that younger generations, particularly Millennials (Generation Y) and Generation Z, prioritize ethical practices aligned with sustainability, inclusivity, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). For instance, Ahmad (2019) and Chatzopoulou and Kiewet (2021) emphasize Millennials' skepticism toward profit-driven motives, advocating CSR as a strategic engagement tool. Similarly, Djafarova & Foots (2022) highlight Generation Z's strong commitment to environmental and ethical concerns.

Additionally, studies like Klopotan et al. (2020) and Le et al. (2020) reveal minimal generational differences in ethical attitudes, suggesting that intrinsic values, such as honesty and responsibility, are critical across cohorts. Klopotan's findings underscore supervisors' influence as a consistent determinant of ethical decision-making. Teamwork and respect also emerge as universal motivators across generations, as evidenced by Astuty et al. (2025), who link these attributes to workplace happiness and MSME sustainability. This aligns with Jonck et al. (2016), which identifies commonalities in work ethic among generational cohorts despite differences in attitudes toward gratification.

Contradictory findings regarding the ethical behavior-action gap have been found. Bisschoff & Fullerton (2024) identify a disconnect between ethical attitudes and behavior among South African youth, whereas Çelikdemir & Tukel (2015) assert that Generation Y integrates ethical principles into business actions, prioritizing them above profit or reputation. Similarly, studies like Matabologa & Flotman (2024) describe Millennials' ambivalence about organizational ethics, indicating conflicting perceptions of ethical leadership. In contrast, Culiberg & Mihelič (2016) emphasize Millennials' consistent ethical judgment, even though it is context-dependent.

Generational differences in work ethics also spark debate. Seifert et al. (2023) and Tjahjana et al. (2022) report

significant variations, whereas Zabel et al. (2017) argue these differences are overstated, cautioning against overhauling talent management strategies for younger generations.

The connection between ethical values, organizational culture and generational differences suggests that ethical leadership and tailored strategies are paramount. While Millennials and Generation Z are vocal advocates for ethics and sustainability, their perceptions often conflict when confronted with practical realities, such as decision-making under pressure or organizational constraints.

Even though this study highlights several key findings, but also reveals notable gaps in the literature. First, while the study identifies distinct ethical priorities across generations, there is a limited exploration of how these generational perspectives evolve. Ethical behavior is dynamic and influenced by changing societal norms, technological advancements, and shifting workplace structures. Longitudinal studies are needed to track these changes and their impact on organizational ethics over different career stages.

Second, the research largely focuses on corporate and structured work environments, neglecting the ethical behavior of employees in remote work settings, digital workplaces, and gig economies. With the rise of virtual teams and AI-driven decision-making, future research should examine how generational ethics manifest in non-traditional workspaces.

Third, while ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are discussed as means to bridge generational ethical gaps, their practical effectiveness remains underexplored. Further empirical research is needed to assess which leadership strategies, training programs, and policy interventions are most effective in aligning ethical values across generations.

Lastly, there is a lack of cross-cultural comparison in the study. Ethical perceptions and behavior are shaped by regional and cultural contexts, and understanding how generational ethics differ globally can provide broader, more applicable insights. Future studies should adopt comparative international approaches to enhance the generalizability of findings and inform culturally inclusive ethical policies.

Hence, organizations must therefore prioritize ethical leadership, transparent communication and education to bridge perception gaps and foster a consistent ethical climate. Efforts should emphasize inclusivity, aligning corporate objectives with generational aspirations, and fostering intergenerational dialogue to create a cohesive ethical framework. Fostering ethical behavior requires a multifaceted approach, integrating CSR, leadership, training, and culture. These strategies enhance employee satisfaction and support organizational sustainability in a diverse, interconnected world.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this meta-analytical study highlights the multifaceted challenges posed by generational differences in shaping employees' ethical behavior in ensuring a sustainable organization. By synthesizing data from 20 research articles published between 2015 to 2025, this paper provides valuable insights into the connection between generational diversity and workplace ethics. The findings underscore that generational differences influence ethical perspectives, behaviors, and expectations in the workplace. Key challenges include navigating conflicting values across generations, adapting leadership strategies to foster inclusivity, and leveraging technological advancements without compromising ethical standards. Additionally, this study reveals that the evolving nature of the workforce tailored approaches to ethical training and development that resonate with diverse generational cohorts. Addressing these challenges is important for organizations striving for sustainability, as ethical behavior plays a crucial role in building trust, enhancing collaboration, and ensuring long-term success. Leaders must adopt adaptive and inclusive strategies that bridge generational gaps while promoting a culture of integrity and accountability. Furthermore, the integration of technological tools must be balanced with ethical considerations to mitigate potential risks and uphold organizational values. Overall, this paper contributes to the understanding of how generational diversity impacts ethical behavior in the workplace and offers a foundation for future research to explore innovative solutions. By embracing diversity and fostering ethical leadership, organizations can navigate generational challenges and create a sustainable, value-driven environment.

Future Direction and Limitations: A key limitation of this review is the scope of the literature selection. The articles reviewed were exclusively sourced from the social sciences field (business, management, and accounting) subject areas, and only journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 were considered. This narrow focus may exclude relevant insights from interdisciplinary fields, which could offer valuable perspectives on ethical behavior and generational diversity in organizational settings.

Future research could expand the scope beyond the Business, Management, and accounting disciplines to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives from fields such as physiology, sociology, and cultural studies. Such an approach would enable a more holistic understanding of the complex relationship between generational diversity and ethical behavior in organizational settings. Additionally, future studies could adopt comparative cross-cultural analyses to examine how generational cohorts perceive ethical behavior across different cultural contexts, thereby discovering global patterns and localized distinctions.

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