

Sector Skills Agreements: Issues for the South West

So, what did you read on holiday? Well I finally picked up a copy of "The World is Flat" by Thomas L. Friedman. With so many people talking about the book (alright, just make that sad economists), I was forced to discard my copy of Hello Magazine (what do you mean shallow - gossip is now good for you, or haven't you heard?) and dedicate myself instead to intellectual improvement, all for the sake of our forthcoming Learning Theme.

But for those of you who prefer the Da Vinci Code to globalisation, here's a quick précis. The book is based on the author's observation that the playing field for global competitiveness is being levelled through various forces. Ten such forces are outlined in the book, ranging from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (for context, I suppose), to Netscape's IPO in 1995, to the indexing of the Web (Google and Yahoo), to global logistics (UPS), etc.

One of the most intriguing parts of the book is in its first chapter, where the author describes his eye-opening experience in Bangalore, India. He refers to Infosys as "ground zero of the Indian outsourcing industry" and his description blows away any impression I might have had about sweatshop call centres with low-wage workers. Instead, he describes a high-tech world of highly-educated masses, cutting edge computing/communications, and brilliant leadership. There - now you can pretend to have read it!

So as the global economic environment flattens out, how do we, in the advanced industrial economies of the West, stay in the game? Well, skills won't be the whole story (capital investment is a pretty good idea), but they will be sure to play an important part. The UK's response to these challenges is to place a good deal of emphasis on the role of Sector Skills Councils, and in particular on the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), now being produced by them through the Skills for Business network.

In our main article we describe the function of SSAs, track their development and speculate on what this might mean for the skills partners in the region. On the back page we introduce Natalija Markovic and Barnaby Elphick, the job-share team who head up the work of the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) in the region, as well as providing up to date regional contacts for individual SSCs.

All this, of course, is by way of an introduction to our forthcoming Learning Theme, which looks at what SSAs will mean for the region. Learning Themes, for those of you who don't know, are an opportunity to bring together policy makers and practitioners in the region to discuss and debate key issues. Up to date research reviews, online debates and a workshop are just some of the activities that form part of a Learning Theme. Sharing ideas, developing recommendations, and of course a good dose of networking are just some of the outcomes.

So, if you want to take part just fill in the form attached to this Bulletin and away you go. And of course if you'd rather just observe from a distance you can check out progress on our website. We hope you'll be joining us for what promises to be a stimulating and timely discussion.

In the last SLIM Bulletin we published an article on Young People but in error stated that the article was authored by Simon Mauger. The article was in fact written by Chris Evans, Director, SLIM. Apologies to Simon for the error.

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Sector Skills Agreements

by Chris Evans, Director, SLIM

If the rhetoric is to be believed, the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), currently being produced by the network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), are about to change the skills landscape. As the leaflet setting out their development states, "Sector Skills Agreements are fundamentally altering the way skills are demanded, delivered and developed throughout the UK."¹ Well, there's nothing like raising expectations is there!

So what are these SSAs all about, what difference will they really make and what issues do they raise for partners in the region who need to plan and deliver these skills?

What are Sector Skills Agreements?

First heralded in the 2003 Skills White Paper², SSAs represent an opportunity to make skills training increasingly relevant to business and public services. They also provide an opportunity to close the skills gap, identified as a central priority for national competitiveness and prosperity. Put simply, the idea of SSAs is seen as a way of prompting and articulating demand from employers and obtaining greater responsiveness from providers of education and training.

The new sector skills agreements will have powerful leverage over the supply of training and skills at regional and local level. They will need to be based on excellent analysis of skills, productivity and labour market trends and gaps.

At the heart of SSAs is employer/provider collaboration. SSAs are about giving employers real influence over the supply of training provision; they also offer opportunities for providers to tailor their offer and raise the standards of work-related training.

SSAs also set out how to work with key funding partners to secure the necessary supply of training to close skills gaps. Whilst SSAs are facilitated by the network of employer-led SSCs, they are signed up to by everyone who supplies, funds and plans education and training.

In its "Specification for the Scope and Delivery of SSAs", the SSDA describes the key outcomes of the SSAs as:

- giving employers the chance to shape provision to gain world-class, relevant training that meets their needs
- encouraging employers to work collaboratively within their sector
- offering individuals learning opportunities that are supported and shaped by employers and trade unions and that lead to real job opportunities
- providing employees with genuine career development linked to the future of their industry.

In practice, the SSDA says that each agreement will put in place a framework that will ask employers to sign up to skill priorities with the main funding and provider agencies. This framework will get all parties to agree on the actions they will take together to meet the priorities.

This might involve, for example, providing strategic leadership, establishing a timetable of accountable actions and responsibilities or setting sector-specific targets, right down to specifying which qualifications will be given priority by training providers.

2005 Skills White Paper

The 2005 Skills White Paper further reinforced the importance of SSAs, with a new emphasis being placed on the fact that SSAs will ensure that public funds respond directly to business needs.

SSAs are intended to generate both short and medium-term change, and are therefore intended to have a significant impact on providers' immediate planning processes. For instance, providers' three-year plans will need to say how the organisation will align its work with the priorities agreed in SSAs for specific sectors and in the context of local and regional demographic and economic priorities.

Funding will follow those qualifications and programmes that are identified as priorities in SSAs, thereby allowing providers to develop new programmes to fill emerging skills gaps.

Strategically, providers will also need to look to training and recruitment practices within their own organisations to ensure the credibility and currency of their provision. It follows that employer engagement will need to be a strategic priority for all providers, who will increasingly need to see businesses as their primary customers.

The SSAs will also have an impact on the further development of the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). RSPs will be responsible for agreeing, beyond that of core partners, any 'additional' regional response to SSAs and will also use SSAs to help align regional planning and funding³.

How will SSAs be developed?

SSDA guidance to SSCs on the production of SSAs⁴ shows that it is an easy five-stage process:

Stage 1: A sophisticated assessment of each sector's needs to cover the long-term, medium-term and short-term, mapping the drivers of change in the sector five to ten years down the track, and determining skill needs.

Stage 2: A review of the range, nature and employer-relevance of current training provision across all levels.

Stage 3: An analysis of the main gaps and weaknesses in workforce development, leading to agreed priorities to be addressed.

Stage 4: A review of the scope for collaborative action – engaging employers to invest in skills development to support improved business performance – and an assessment of what employers are likely to sign up to.

Stage 5: A final agreement of how the SSC and employers will work with key funding partners to secure the necessary supply of training.

Within the Agreements are set benchmarks and milestones that are negotiated with the key delivery partners to monitor progress and employer buy-in. SSAs are subject to constant updates and development to ensure they are responding to the changing needs of business.

There, said it was easy, didn't I?!

SSAs: developments to date

Four 'Pathfinder' SSCs – Skillset (audiovisual), SEMTA (science, engineering and manufacturing technologies), e-Skills UK (IT-related), and ConstructionSkills – have now developed SSAs with employers in their sector, which were launched in parallel with the 2005 Skills White Paper.

The next six SSCs have embarked on developing their Agreements: SkillsActive (sport and recreation), Lantra (land-based industries), Skills for Logistics (freight logistics), Cogent (chemical, nuclear, oil and gas, petroleum), Skills for Health, and Skillfast UK (apparel, footwear and textiles). They are scheduled for completion by March 2006. That leaves a remaining 15 SSCs yet to produce SSAs.

Up to date details on the progress of the SSAs can be found in the SSDA newsletter, INVOLVE, more information on which is at the end of this article.

Why do we need Sector Skills Agreements?

To understand why SSAs are seen as necessary, it is important to view their development within the overall policy framework for skills.

Government believes that if enough information is provided to employers, they will make the 'right' decisions about their skills

needs, providers will offer the 'right' sort of provision, and individuals will make the 'right' decisions about their engagement in learning. To this end it sees its own role as securing information on the labour market and learning market.

It is also important to remember that Government policy on skills is broadly directed by an economic imperative. Government believes that more and higher levels of skills will lead to national economic growth, increased productivity for companies, and higher earnings for the individual. Against this is a set of assumptions about the current system for supporting skills development:

- the demand for skills is not matched by the supply of skills in terms of both quantity and the appropriate skill mix
- the main reason for this is that the supply side is unable (for a variety of reasons, but usually articulated in terms of market failure) to meet the needs identified by the demand side of the skills equation
- ongoing reform of the supply side is needed in order to rectify this situation.

Given this analysis the development of SSAs is an obvious solution. It provides a mechanism to match demand with supply and in the process change the behaviours of employers and providers alike. Most importantly, it informs the purchasing behaviour of LSCs which, as the 2003 Skills White Paper states, could mark a shift from central government planning to local determination.

Sounds sensible. But where are the pitfalls?

Where do the problems lie?

The development of SSAs undoubtedly provides an opportunity to reform the system for planning and purchasing skills. But that doesn't mean it will be all plain sailing. The first four SSAs were launched alongside the 2005 Skills White Paper, and in the Learning Theme Briefings that follow in the coming weeks we will take a critical look at their contents. But for now let's speculate on the issues that partners will need to address in determining both the credibility and workability of these agreements.

Data

As the Report, *Emerging Policy for Vocational Learning in England*⁵ points out, at the local level decision makers typically lack the data and resources to take into account any but the most general demographic and economic trends. This is particularly worrying in a system that will increasingly depend on local analysis of labour market conditions in order to better match supply and demand. It remains to be seen how well the SSAs assess specific skill needs, as required by the Skills Strategy.

The overall quality of data that will be generated by SSCs and occupational bodies is as yet unknown, and what is known about the human resource planning and skills forecasting of individual employers does not provide grounds for optimism.

Concerns exist equally at the level of employers. The usefulness of SSAs relies heavily on employers being able to predict their future needs. Yet many employers, either through lack of skills or resources, do not currently engage in systematic planning or forecasting and find it hard to articulate what they need or want from the skills system in a form that can be put into operation⁶. Furthermore, uncertainties over technology, exchange rates and future corporate strategies may simply be too great to allow traditional corporate manpower planning approaches to work effectively.

Some sectors are recognising the need to develop more effective mechanisms for forecasting their skills needs. One such example is the construction industry, which is setting up a South West Construction Observatory (working title), see below:

The Productivity, Capacity and Skills Observatory

This will create a mechanism for engaging key stakeholders around a comprehensive forecasting model for the construction industry, and its customers, analysing capacity, productivity and skills.

The model will capture, co-ordinate and interrogate information from around the sector, producing comprehensive reports on current skill levels and advice on what the industry needs to do to prepare for the future.

It will draw on knowledge and experience from government, training providers, construction companies, regional organisations and customers, so that we all can plan future skills needs – and target the investment being made – with confidence.

The Observatory will create a series of regional groups which will include representatives from Government, education and the construction industry to help identify, feed into and model current and prospective skills needs in the area.

ConstructionSkills will collect and present reports and forecasts at the regional level. These will be reviewed, modified and agreed by the regional groups and used for strategic planning, detecting pinch-points and determining future employment and training requirements.

A combination of national industry analysis and the bringing together of the regional models will produce a UK wide model that a national group and stakeholders will analyse and use to plan for the future. The result will be a single set of authoritative figures, recognising specialist, sectoral and regional differences, to forecast skills needs and likely training requirements for the UK construction industry.

Are we clear about what skills we need?

Current government policy emphasises higher-level skills, but there is a lack of clarity about the nature and level of the skills needed by the majority of the workforce in order for the UK to remain economically competitive, and the extent to which jobs currently, or in the future, will predominately require skills at Levels 2 or 3⁷.

This is further complicated by the promotion of different skills targets simultaneously and sometimes in conflict with one another. For example, the 50% HE participation target for 18–30 year olds has implications for Level 3 achievement, as expressed in targets for participation in the Apprenticeship scheme. To reach the 50% target, HE institutions (and those FE institutions offering higher-level qualifications) need to attract a greater percentage of Level 3 achievers. The data, however, indicates that the number of 21–30 year olds achieving a Level 3 is likely to be small, and only a few reach higher education through the Apprenticeship route. This suggests that nearly every young person with Level 3 will need to opt for higher education if the target is to be met. At the same time, the new Skills Strategy proposes to expand Apprenticeships. How will both targets be met, and how will SSAs deal with this dilemma?

The partnership approach

At the regional level, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) plans will provide the umbrella for skills development in the region. Local Learning and Skills Councils will have interest in local planning, as will providers, and this does not start to include the wider range of bodies with a direct or indirect interest in skills.

The agencies often define issues differently and work to different priorities, thereby creating operational problems. While there is, for example, inherent interest in sectors and/or industrial clusters as a focus for activity, different players may form the boundaries differently – the DTI has clusters that do not match the sector boundaries of the SSCs, nor the clusters being identified by the RDAs, nor the sectors being used by the Small Business Service (SBS).

Then there are the funding issues ...

How responsive is the supply side?

A significant assumption underpinning SSAs is that local training supply can in fact respond to the demands of employers. A recent report by the SSDA⁸ presents the findings of a study which explored sector skills upgrading needs among employers and the capacity of

local vocational and educational training in England to meet those needs. The report focused on four sectors (maintenance and repair of motor vehicles; telecommunications services; mechanical engineering, vehicles and other engineering; textiles, clothing and footwear manufacture) in eight regions.

The research found that skill upgrading needs could be met through short course provision by local colleges or training providers, but that only a minority of employers in each sector actually expected to call on their services.

There were also a number of barriers preventing local training providers from running short training courses for local employers, chiefly concerning whether employers (especially SMEs) could put forward a sufficient number of trainees to justify the efforts in developing courses and whether they would be able to pay the full costs of such training.

Local college departments' stated first priority was to deliver courses, usually 12 months or more in duration, leading to accredited qualifications that would attract LSC funding. Although some examples of adult participation in these courses were in evidence, most of the provision was for 16-20 year-olds at the beginning of their careers. Most teaching staff were fully engaged in delivering these LSC-funded courses and were therefore not available for short course preparation or delivery. In addition, several department managers reported that efforts to provide updating training would be hampered by out-of-date equipment and gaps in the FE teachers' own skills and knowledge.

The study's findings have important implications for the development of SSAs. The report also presents a strong case for further research to be conducted in other sectors and regions in order to establish the nature of upgrading skills required and to ensure that SSAs are robust.

Regional Skills Balance Sheet

Finally, in the short term there is the issue of the availability of SSAs. It will clearly be some time before all the SSAs are in place for the region and in the meantime partners still need to plan provision to meet anticipated need. With this in mind the South West Enterprise and Skills Alliance (SWESA) has commissioned, through SLIM, the development of a Regional Skills Balance Sheet. The Balance Sheet, currently in production and to be available in draft during October 2005 will provide:

- A baseline measure for each SSC defined sector, Regional Economic Strategy (RES) Priority Sector and LSC Priority Sector within the South West of the current picture of employment and skills held.
- A baseline measure of the anticipated future skills requirements by SSC defined sector, RES Priority Sector and LSC Priority Sector within the South West.
- A baseline measure of the anticipated shortfall/surplus of skills based on current levels of activity.

For further information on the Regional Skills Balance Sheet, contact Dr Peter Whalley, Research and Development Manager at SLIM: P.A.Whalley@exeter.ac.uk.

- ¹ P 3 Sector Skills Agreement Leaflet, Skills for Business Network
- ² Skills Strategy White Paper - *21st Century Skills - Realising Our Potential* 9 July, DfES
- ³ Regional Skills Partnerships – Roles and Responsibilities, SWESA Board Report 20 July 2005
- ⁴ Sector Skills Agreements Stage 1 Skills Needs Assessments Guidance, SSDA, January 2005
- ⁵ Emerging Policy for Vocational Learning in England: Will it lead to a better system, LSRC, 2004

- ⁶ Huddleston P and Keep E, What do employers want from education? – a question more easily asked than answered. In J Cramphorn (ed.) *The role of partnerships in economic regeneration and development – international perspectives*. 1999 Coventry: Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick, 38–49.
- ⁷ Emerging Policy for Vocational Learning in England: Will it lead to a better system, LSRC, 2004
- ⁸ Raising sector skill levels: how responsive is local training supply? SSDA Research Report 9, April 2005

Abstracts/Reports on SSAs and SSCs

Sector Skills Agreements

Sector Skills Development Agency - July 2005

Leaflet explaining the Sector Skills Agreements, focusing particularly on how the process the pathfinders (e-skills UK, SEMTA (the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance), ConstructionSkills and Skillset (the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries)) have gone through will inform the rest of the SSDAs. Online at: [www.ssda.org.uk/ssda/PDF/SSA leaflet.pdf](http://www.ssda.org.uk/ssda/PDF/SSA%20leaflet.pdf)

Sector Skills Agreement - Film, TV and Interactive Media Skillset - July 2005

Sector Skills Agreement for the Audio Visual Industries. Online at: www.skillset.org/strategy/article_4015_1.asp

Guide 2 Sector Skills Agreements: Policy and Strategy Skills and Education Network (SENET) - June 2005

This guide explains the policy and strategy related to the Sectors Skills Agreements (SSAs) as they develop. It defines SSAs and sets out the key facts, the key national policies, the government targets and provides information on literature relating to the agreements.

Online at: senet.lsc.gov.uk/guide2/skillsagreement/G2SectorSkillsAgreements.pdf

IT Insights: Regional Skills in the South West e-Skills UK - April 2005

One of a set of 9 reports for the English regions, bringing together the employer skills needs, employment forecasts and the supply side provision.

This report intends to identify the demand for IT skills in the South West region and to establish how well the providers of training and education are fulfilling this demand. Its approach is to draw upon government statistics, prior e-skills UK studies and new primary research to map and understand provision and uptake of resources.

Online at: www.e-skills.com/cgi-bin/orad.pl/250/ITinsights_SouthWest.pdf

Raising sector skill levels - how responsive is local training supply? Sector Skills Development Agency - April 2005

This study seeks to shed new light on the extent and nature of any mismatches between employers' training requirements and local vocational and educational training (VET) provision. The survey covered employers in four sectors and eight regions which were chosen for diversity and included the maintenance and repair of motor vehicles in Devon and Cornwall.

Online at: www.ssda.org.uk/ssda/pdf/Skills9.pdf

South West Skills Strategy for the Audio Visual Industries Skillset - March 2005

This strategy provides an initial overview of the size and shape of the audio visual industries in the region and identifies what is understood to be the main skills issues that they face at the moment.

The strategy focuses on the big and long term issues of ensuring that the workforce has the skills needed to respond to changing technologies and working practices throughout their careers. It reflects the need for employers and individuals to have a full understanding of the changes facing the industry that will impact on the skills they need and therefore the learning and training supply that will be essential if these skills are to be developed. The strategy also reflects the need for clear communication of the industries' skill needs to those involved in providing information, advice and guidance to those working in the industry or who are considering entering it.

Online at: www.skillset.org/strategy/uk/article_3139_1.asp

Sector Skills Agreements - Stage 1 Skills Needs Assessments Guidance

Sector Skills Development Agency - January 2005

This paper provides guidance to help enable the first component, stage 1 of the SSA – the Skills Needs Assessment (SNA) – to be fit for purpose by providing the necessary foundation for the SSA and an overall framework for it.

Online at: [www.ssda.org.uk/ssda/docs/SSA Stage 1 Guidance.doc](http://www.ssda.org.uk/ssda/docs/SSA%20Stage%201%20Guidance.doc)

Further resources can be found on the web pages specific to this Learning Theme at: www.swslim.org.uk/themes/themes_past.asp?theme_ID=20

The Skills for Business Network in the South West

Replacing the usual interview column, we take a peek at who's who in the Skills for Business network in the region.

Natalija Markovic and Barnaby Elphick are recently in post as the regional Partnership Managers (job-share) overseeing and facilitating the work of the Skills for Business Network and the individual Sector Skills Councils in the South West. Both come with extensive experience of working in the business and learning and skills sectors, their current role involves supporting SSCs with the development of their Sector Skills Agreements and participating in strategies aimed at improving cross-sector themes such as management and leadership, skills for life / basic skills, employability and brokerage.

Natalija and Barnaby are working closely with regional partners such as the South West Enterprise and Skills Alliance (SWESA), the South West Regional Development Agency (SW RDA), the Learning and Skills Councils (LSC) and Jobcentre Plus, to inform and underpin partners regional workforce development strategies and initiatives.

"At the moment, we're making sure that the Skills for Business network plays an integral role alongside key regional partners in the Regional Research Forum and the Regional Observatory during the development of the Skills Balance Sheet (formerly known as the Regional Skills Matrix)," Barnaby explained. "When completed, it is envisaged that it will become the most comprehensive source of information for economic, employment and skills data & trends to inform the work of all regional partners."

If you have any questions about the Network's plans for our region or a copy of the South West Skills for Business Network's business plan, please email Natalija and Barnaby at southwest@ssda.org.uk

E-Contact List for South West Sector Skills Councils and details of their sector

- **Asset Skills** (Property, housing, cleaning and facilities management) - Liz Black (lblack@assetskills.org)
- **Automotive Skills** (Retail motor industry) - Tony Moore (tmoore@automotiveskills.org.uk)
- **Creative and Cultural Industries SSC** - Caroline Parkinson (caroline.parkinson@ccskills.org.uk)
- **Cogent** (Chemical, nuclear, oil, gas, petroleum & polymer industries) - John Holton (john.holton@kogent-ssc.com)
- **Construction Skills** (Construction industries) - Roger Stone (roger.stone@citb.co.uk)
- **Energy & Utility Skills** (Electricity, gas, waste management & water industries) - Mike Carney (mike.carney@euskills.co.uk)
- **e-skills UK** (IT, telecommunications and contact centres) - Patrick Beasley (patrick.beasley@e-skills.com)
- **Financial Services SSC** (Financial industries) - Chris Hall (chris.hall@fssc.org.uk)
- **Go Skills** (Passenger transport) - Janet Francis (janet.francis@goskills.org)



- **Improve** (Food & drink manufacturing) - Dawn Neale (dawn.neale@improvetd.co.uk)
- **Lantra** (Environmental & land-based industries) - Lyndsay Bird (lyndsay.bird@lantra.co.uk)
- **Lifelong Learning UK** (Community based learning, FE, HE and library & information industries) - Alison Twiney (alisontwiney@lifelonglearninguk.org)
- **People 1st** (Tourism & hospitality) - Lyndsay Campbell (lyndsay.campbell@people1st.co.uk). Also, **Tourism Skills Network South West** - Wendy Samuel (wendy.samuel@tourismskillsnetwork.org.uk)
- **SEMTA** (Science, engineering, aerospace and manufacturing technologies) - Bill Sutton (bsutton@semta.org.uk)
- **SkillsActive** (Active, leisure, outdoor and playwork) - Kim Egerton (kim.egerton@skillsactive.com)
- **Skillfast UK** (Apparel, textiles, footwear and related industries) - Clive Champion (clivechampion@tiscali.co.uk)
- **Skills for Care** (Social care sector) - John Nash (john.nash@skillsforcare.org.uk)
- **Skills for Health** (NHS, independent & voluntary health organisations) - Bob Adams (bob.adams@skillsforhealth.org.uk)
- **Skills for Logistics** (Freight logistics & warehousing industries) - Jane Colthup (jane.colthup@skillsforlogistics.org)
- **Skills for Justice** (Justice sector) - Tina Parker (tina.parker@skillsforjustice.com)
- **Skillset** (Audio visual industries) - Anthony Skates (anthony@skillset.org)
- **Skillsmart Retail** (Retail sector) - Jane Rexworthy (Jane.rexworthy@skillsmartretail.com)
- **SummitSkills Ltd** (Electro-technical, heating, ventilating, air conditioning, re Fridgeration and plumbing) - Kathryn Hopkins-Morgan (Kathryn.Morgan@Summitskills.org.uk)

Chair - South West Skills for Business Network - Peter Martin, Chief Executive, Lantra (peter.martin@lantra.co.uk)

Vice Chair - South West Skills for Business Network - John Rogers, Chief Executive, Skills for Health (john.rogers@skillsforhealth.org.uk)

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Workshop details

Dillington House, Ilminster,
Wednesday 19 October 2005
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(lunch included)

Please Note

There is a charge of £50 per person for those attending the workshop. The research brief, report and on-line discussions are all free of charge.

We will invoice in advance for those registering to attend the Workshop.

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