

Aging Mentors in the Changing Organizational Odyssey: An Analysis

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: As a person advances in age his/her thinking also matures and as a result he/she makes a mature mentor. The present piece of empirical research is an endeavor into exploring the older mentors' perception about mentorship. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The sample comprised of 260 managers, in the age range of 30 to 50 years, working in public as well as private sector organizations. 'A Checklist of Mentorship Perceptions' was used with them. The responses for the questionnaire were obtained from managers who were also assigned the role of mentors in the organizational formal mentorship programs. The sampling was convenience based. The data were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and chi-squares. **Findings:** The older the mentors become, the greater is found their belief that sharing of success and failure-stories and providing the mentees with the ethical guidelines is essential for successful mentoring to take place. The older mentors perceive personal experience-sharing and counseling important for mentoring. They believe that 'mentee competence' is the issue which is handled by mentors. The perceived frequency of mentorship meetings, is observed to be 'once a month'. They believe that attitude, interpersonal skill and emotional maturity of mentees are the skills to be developed by them. The existing body of mentoring research provides a great deal of knowledge about the importance of mentoring, relevant structural factors surrounding mentoring relationships and characteristics of mentors and proteges (Fagenson, 1992; Ragins and Scandura, 1994; Scandura and Ragins, 1993). It has mostly dealt with the mentees' perspective. There is difference in frequency of interaction, organizational level of mentors and proteges and formality of the relationship (Finkelstein, Allen and Rhoton, 2003) which is studied in detail. The present study focuses on the 'mentor's perspective' and the issue of 'age of mentor' in mentoring relationships. **Applications/Improvements:** By managing an aging workforce organizations can utilize the vast experience, unfathomed potential and mature decision-making lying untapped with this workforce. This will add a Midas touch to the organization and its business.

Keywords: Aging Mentors, Aging Workforce, Changing Organizations, Mentoring, Mentorship, Older Mentors

1. Introduction

A diverse talent-human resource pool is the backbone of any organization. It has been proved time and again that the better an organization is able to get along with its employees, the quicker it grows in the fast-changing world. Despite the diverse initiatives in the workplace, defined by ethical, economic, legal, political and social dimensions, the field of human resource development has yet to develop more positive and productive work environments. While organizations earlier overlooked

a cost-saving and effective method for involvement of aging employees and development of leadership ability of younger employees - mentoring, now, with the passage of time, is being increasingly acknowledged for the benefits reaped with such relationships in which experienced individuals with appropriate knowledge facilitate the growth journey of junior colleagues. Organizations look forward to their aging but experienced employees to guide other employees of the organization and in turn help the organization improve performance of its employees.

Mentoring is as old as Greek mythology. It has

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emerged as an effective strategy for organizations to groom their next generation of leaders. It is through this process that the older and accomplished individual, in the course of teaching an apprentice, providing feedback to a less experienced, younger individual, also gets enriched himself. The psychological aspects which crop up with the 'aging' factor taking place with mentors are still to be investigated.

2. Literature Review

Organizations can depend on their aging workforce to nurture employees in a way to make their adjustment and thus performance better in the organization¹⁻³. The process of mentoring helps the mentor too as there are hidden benefits to the mentor⁴.

'Guru-Shishya Parampara' of the Vedic period is still a pious tradition remembered for its advantages and life-long impressions. The emotional bonding existing between the guru and shishya was actually the climate on which the success-story of the disciples was founded. Arjun, Shri Krishna, Sri Rama are remembered as mentees by their gurus, that is, Guru Dronacharya, Guru Sandipani and Guru Vishwamitra respectively. Socrates-Plato, Plato-Aristotle; the Mentor- mentee pairs are world-recognized for mentorship-thread underlying their relationship. The lives of these mentees speak volumes about the importance of 'mentorship' in one's life. The age-old tradition does not stop there and continues till date. The strong bond that exists probably does wonders in the world and will keep writing the histories of human race.

That, mentoring has been accorded a very high profile in recent years is indicated by the sheer volume of literature available on mentoring⁵. Of course, a peep into all the available literature would be outside the purview of this study, we propose taking up some support from the available literature on mentorship from mentor's perspective, the bulk of which is comparatively far lesser, as research mostly has dealt with mentees' perspective. The term, 'mentoring' is used to describe a variety of inter-relationships which exist^{6,7}. Despite the disagreement on what abilities the mentors should have⁸, the facts that "everyone who does well, has a mentor"⁹ and that almost every relationship which is supportive in nature is mentoring¹⁰, the importance of 'mentorship' cannot be denied.

Early research carried out in the area of mentoring characterized mentors as typically 8 to 15 years older than their proteges¹¹. Although the norm may still be of older mentors and younger protégés, changes ever-present in today's workplace, such as multiple career paths and a "protean approach to career development"¹², have increased the likelihood of role reversal (i.e., mentor younger than protege)¹³⁻¹⁶.

Mentoring, that can be defined "as a nonjudgmental, developmental relationship entered into voluntarily by both sides"¹⁷, decides an employee's job satisfaction and reduces role-stress and turnover intentions¹⁸⁻²⁴. Mentoring is practiced by organizations at both formal and informal levels. 'Formal mentoring' can be defined as a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies, while informal mentoring is self-explanatory. Researchers observe that mentoring has two dimensions: 'Career' and 'psychosocial'²⁵. 'Career mentoring' includes processes like coaching and protection; while 'Psychosocial mentoring' includes processes like role-modeling, counseling, accepting and friendship²⁶.

The meaning of the word 'mentor', originating from Homer's epic-poem, "The Odyssey," written nearly 2,800 years ago, has undergone a sea-change over the ages, now being described as "any individual, inside or outside the workplace, who has had a significant impact on an employee's career decisions and growth as a leader".

The characteristics of mentorships may vary depending upon the need of the mentee and the nature of the mentoring behaviors provided. For example, they differ in terms of duration of mentoring done, frequency of interactions which take place, organizational level of mentors and mentees and extent of formality involved in the relationship²⁷.

Research acknowledges that any successful leader in the field, with enough experience and knowledge may not necessarily be a "mentor material"²⁸. A good mentor must be approachable, patient, a good listener, available, supportive, respectful and respected.

The research done in the area of 'mentoring' provides a great deal of knowledge about the importance of mentoring, factors surrounding mentoring relationships and characteristics of mentors and mentees²⁹⁻³¹. Outcomes of the process of mentoring have not been studied in great

depths. The focus of mentoring-research has been on the 'mentee' only³²; with little attention given to the 'mentor'³³. Researchers have always had a great interest in the benefits of 'mentoring' but the focus primarily has been on the benefits for the mentee. Positive outcomes which have been found to be linked with 'mentoring' include a mentee's career-growth³⁴, success in the early-career³⁵, career satisfaction, work satisfaction and the number of promotions received³⁶. Mentor's role in 'developing skill sets' and rendering 'expert guidance' to the mentees is highlighted in literature³⁷. It is also highlighted that older mentors can bring 'decades of knowledge' and 'expertise' to mentoring³⁸. With regard to mentors' benefits, researchers have found: 'Career revitalization'³⁹, 'social recognition from peers and managers' and 'personal satisfaction'. Research also suggests that future behaviors and attitudes toward mentoring can be affected by previous experiences in mentoring relationships⁴⁰. Over the years the research has developed our understanding of the concept of 'mentoring', still one must remember that as an interpersonal relationship, mentoring is complex and multi-faceted. Kram cautioned researchers not to miss the mentor's perspective while conducting research on mentorship. In answer to Kram's concern, researchers are now studying issues from the perspective of the mentor also. Studies have focused on issues such as: Willingness to mentor others, reasons for mentoring others and mentee characteristics which mentors find desirable⁴¹⁻⁴⁷. However, several critical issues still remain unexplored. Research, though, does shed some light on outcomes of mentoring in terms of gains for mentors, researchers have explored that mentoring is its own reward because it helps the mentor mature as a person and a professional⁴⁸. In a study investigating federal employees in a formal mentoring program, the majority of mentors expressed that they derived personal satisfaction from helping junior-employees⁴⁹. A review of the literature indicates that much of the previous research has been based on asking mentors what they believed were the benefits of mentoring or data on the benefits of mentoring. Most mentors do not expect/charge any payments for mentoring. They feel a sense of parental pride, learn from the relationship and also improve as managers as a result of helping mentees⁵⁰.

Despite mentoring being a very effective way to utilize the experience and knowledge of aging employees, a major shortcoming of the process of mentoring is, 'lack of formal training given for mentoring'. Mentoring arrangements at times do not suit some mentors. The fact that

mentors are seldom concretely rewarded for their efforts is considered to be ethically unjust as it relies largely on virtues of mentors. Research also contends that in order to be effective as mentors, mentors need to find answers to several questions⁵¹. Mentor faces problems regarding right behavior and skill for mentoring. They also juggle with questions like how, when and where to share their experience and knowledge with the mentee. They are often confused about how to build a strong bond with the mentee. Mentors also do not know how to build an image of an able and ethical role-model. Overnight, they are turned into a role-model, closely watched by the mentee, with the expectation of appearing to be always right and ethical in approach. The risk of becoming too emotionally attached to a protege is another fear that mentors have and these problems must be solved within a distinctly social context. It was also suggested that the life satisfaction of older workers enhances while serving as a training resource⁵².

In the past few decades, organizations have witnessed changing attitudes about workplace satisfaction and demographic shifts in the workforce caused by aging personnel. These changes demand changed strategies to enhance career growth and improve the organizational milieu. To meet the modern demands, mentoring needs to revitalize itself.

With growing competition for competent personnel, retention of older workers is an increasingly challenging goal for many organizations. The older workers are not only extremely diverse, also, as they age they develop different skills, needs, values and varying health conditions, as well as a variability in response to the aging process^{53,54}. Despite these constraints, aging workers use their experience and seniority to be productive and to grow in their careers⁵⁵. An older employee turns out to be an effective mentor to a less experienced employee in an organization⁵⁶. There is sufficient evidence that older employees may be more committed and less likely to avail of voluntary absences from work than younger employees⁵⁷. It is highlighted in literature that formal mentoring can promote professional development⁵⁸. However, in spite of articles elaborating the benefits of mentoring done by older mentors, there are still questions raised and distrust shown for older mentors^{59,60}. It is also suggested in literature that a mentor should be approximately half a generation older to a mentee (i.e. 8 to 15 years), because in case the age-difference between the two is much the relationship will become a parent-child relationship and

if the difference is less the relationship will become like that between friends⁶¹. It is also discussed that in case of similar age of mentor-mentee or when the mentee is older in age the process of mentoring becomes challenging.

Self-efficacy of the mentor also plays an important role in deciding the effectiveness of his mentoring. A positive correlation was observed among self-efficacy, hope and social networks⁶². The role of body-language is also important in a mentoring-communication. The importance of 'communication' in teaching-learning is emphasized in literature and it is also discussed that 'body language' and 'graphics language' often communicate more than verbalism⁶³. In addition to it with advancing age the mentor may become more rigid about being educated about mentoring. It is also discussed that elderly education is resistive and effective factors against ripe years, aging, disability and mental dissipate⁶⁴.

Thus, the complexity sets forth when the mentor who has an important and worthwhile role to play in the organization, ages. The world recognizes it as a challenge to manage him while the person is extremely rich in terms of experience and skill. The question therefore is whether to leave the mentor as an aging burden to the organization or out of this aging burden find an opportunity in the form of a helping hand to show the organization the right path to move on. The present study stimulates a discussion on the concept of mentorship with the perspective of aging workforce personnel, specifically focusing on the perceived effective mentorship methods, issues handled by mentors, frequency of mentorship programs and skills of mentees to be developed. The researchers have also endeavored to explore if mentors do share their success and failure stories and if they provide their mentees with some ethical guidelines.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To study the relationship that exists between age of mentors; and their belief in sharing of their own success and failure stories with the mentees, providing the ethical guidelines to mentees, and the perception of the older mentors that seniors are responsible for the development of mentees.
- To study the relationship that exists between age; and personal experience sharing, use of case examples, counseling and coaching as meth-

ods of mentoring, 'expectations of mentees' and 'mentee competence' as issues handled by mentors while mentoring.

- To study the relationship that exists between age and frequency of mentorship meetings.
- To study the relationship that exists between age and skills (attitude, technical skill, interpersonal skill, emotional maturity and stress management) of mentees to be developed through mentoring.
- To study how does 40-50 age group believe with regard to sharing success stories and sharing failure stories with mentees and providing the mentees with ethical guidelines.

4. Hypotheses

4.1 Hypothesis 1

A positive relationship exists between age of mentors; and their belief in sharing of their own success and failure stories with the mentees, providing the ethical guidelines to mentees and the perception of the older mentors that seniors are responsible for the development of mentees.

4.2 Hypothesis 2

A positive relationship exists between age; and personal experience sharing, use of case examples, counseling and coaching as methods of mentoring, 'expectations of mentees' and 'mentee competence' as issues handled by mentors while mentoring.

4.3 Hypothesis 3

A positive relationship exists between age and frequency of mentorship meetings.

4.4 Hypothesis 4

A positive relationship exists between age and skills (attitude, technical skill, interpersonal skill, emotional maturity and stress management) of mentees to be developed through mentoring.

4.5 Hypothesis 5:

The 40-50 age group believes more in sharing success and failure stories with mentees and providing the mentees with ethical guidelines than the 30-40 age group.

5. Methodology

5.1 Sample

The sample comprised of 260 managers. Both male and female managers were taken for the study. They were in the age range of 30 to 50 years. They were working in well-established, ISO-certified, production organizations of UP, India. These organizations were public as well as private sector organizations.

5.2 Tool Used

'A Checklist of Mentorship Perceptions' was used. In addition to it there were 4 yes-no type items. All of these items were written on the basis of the literature review done.

5.3 Administration

The responses for the questionnaire were obtained from managers who were also assigned the role of mentors in the organizational formal mentorship programmes. The sampling was convenience based.

6. Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics, chi-squares and cross-tabulations.

About 18% of mentors, who were respondents, perceived that developing the personal vision and uncovering the value priorities of mentees is the objective of mentorship programs. An equal percentage of respondents (18%) perceived that enhancing the leadership and management skills of the mentees is the objective of the mentorship programs. Thinking strategically and inspiring for having a shared mission, vision and values was also perceived as an objective of mentorship programs by 17% of the respondents. It can be concluded that direct individual benefits to mentees were more of an objective of the mentorship programs than direct organizational benefits, though the individual benefits would also result in indirect organizational benefits.

48% of the respondents perceived that a senior colleague should guide his subordinate in how to perform well in the organization. Only 14% of the respondents said that mentors are meant to provide insights to the proteges into adjustment with the organization culture. Individual performance, on which most of the rewards in an organization are dependent upon, emerged as a more important area of guidance for a mentee.

In guiding a subordinate, personal experience-sharing by the superior (36%) and counseling (34%) emerged as the effective methods of mentoring. Citing case-examples from the same company was also perceived (25%) as an effective method of mentorship.

A desire to help (32%), his up-to-date knowledge (24%), his interest in people (20%) and his good reputation for developing others (20%) emerged as the characteristics important for guiding younger colleagues or subordinates.

The opportunity to positively influence the next generation (33%), an opportunity for self-development (23%) and the opportunity to improve communication (21%) were the perceived gains for mentors in a mentor-mentee relationship. The need for self-development and self-fulfillment were seen to be existing in the mentors.

Cultivating the feeling that 'go on you can do it' (25%), helping mentees with problems that have temporarily stopped mentees in their tracks (21%) and smiling, encouraging, being optimistic about development programs or processes being undergone by mentees were the perceived roles of a mentor in a mentor-mentee relationship. The mentors probably believed that they are facilitators of positive behaviors as far as their mentorship role is concerned.

To be able to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses (44%), self-analysis regarding how to approach his/her decisions or problems (25%) and help him/her develop (23%) were the perceived areas in which a mentor believed he/she could be of help for a mentee.

The perceived issues, which are handled by a mentor, emerged as expectations of mentees (32%), mentee competence (27%), relationship boundaries (18%) and confidentiality (18%).

The mentorship programs were perceived, by the mentors, to be held once a month (50%) and once a fortnight (35%). Once a week was too short a period for such programs to be repeated and 'when a problem arises such a program should be taken up' was an ineffective existence of such systems of mentoring.

The perceived skills of a mentee to be developed through mentorship programs were also identified by mentors. The most important skill of a younger colleague which needs to be developed most was 'attitude' (40%). It can be concluded that attitude is the skill which makes all the difference in a person's life.

Improved self-confidence (29%), a non-threatening learning opportunity (22%) and developing business expertise and technical knowledge (15%) were identified

as the perceived benefits of mentorship programs for the mentees.

6.1 Hypothesis 1

A significant positive correlation was observed between age of mentors and their belief in sharing of their own success stories (value = 1.02 $<P = .04$) with the mentees.

A significant positive correlation was observed between age of mentors and their belief in sharing of their failure stories (.02 $<P = .03$) with the mentees.

A significant positive correlation was seen between age and providing the ethical guidelines to mentees (3.46 $<P = .04$).

A correlation was not observed between age and the perception of the older mentors that seniors are responsible for development of mentees. (Refer to Table 1)

6.2 Hypothesis 2

A significant positive correlation is observed between age and personal experience sharing by mentors as a method of mentoring.

No significant relationship was observed between age of mentors and use of case examples for mentoring.

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and counselling as a method of mentoring (5.38 $<P = .02$).

No significant relationship was observed between age of mentors and counselling as a method for mentoring.

No significant correlation was observed between age and 'expectations of mentees' as an issue handled by mentors while mentoring.

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and 'mentee competence' as an issue handled by mentors while mentoring (6.69 $<P = .01$). (Refer to Table 1)

6.3 Hypothesis 3

No correlation was observed between age and frequency of mentorship meetings as 'once a week'.

No significant correlation was observed between age and frequency of mentorship meetings as 'once a fortnight'.

Table 1. Showing Pearson Chi-Square values for age and other variables

Hypothesis	Pearson Chi-Square values for age and	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance	Mean	Std. Deviation
H01	Sharing success stories	1.02	1	.04	.88	.326
H01	Sharing failure stories	.02	1	.03	.69	.471
H01	Ethical guidelines	3.47	1	.04	.50	.510
H01	Seniors responsible for development	1.42	1	.63	.85	.368
H02	Personal Experience sharing	.26	1	.03	.58	.504
H02	Case Examples	.19	1	.74	.42	.504
H02	Counselling	5.38	1	.02	.58	.504
H02	Coaching	.65	1	.62	.08	.272
H02	Expectations of mentees	3.47	1	.14	.50	.510
H02	Mentee competence	6.69	1	.01	.46	.508
H03	Once a week	3.63	1	.65	.12	.326
H03	Once a fortnight	1.11	1	.29	.35	.485
H03	Once a month	.05	1	.02	.54	.508
H04	Attitude	.03	1	.05	.81	.402
H04	Technical	.03	1	.85	.19	.402
H04	Interpersonal	4.75	1	.02	.19	.402
H04	Emotional Maturity	7.18	1	.01	.15	.368
H04	Stress Management	1.42	1	.23	.15	.368

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and frequency of mentorship meetings as 'once a month' ($.05 < P = .02$). (Refer to Table 1)

6.4 Hypothesis 4

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and 'attitude' as a skill of mentees to be developed through mentoring ($.03 < P = .05$).

No significant correlation was observed between age and 'technical skill' as a skill of mentees to be developed through mentoring.

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and 'interpersonal skill' as a skill of mentees to be developed through mentoring ($4.76 < P = .02$).

A significant positive correlation was observed between age and 'emotional maturity' as a skill of mentees to be developed through mentoring ($7.18 < P = .01$).

No significant correlation was observed between age and 'stress management' as a skill of mentees to be developed through mentoring. (Refer to Table 1)

6.5 Hypothesis 5

Most of the mentors (230 out of 260) showed a preference for sharing success stories with the mentees. The age-group of 40-50 years especially felt that sharing success stories by the mentor is essential for the development of younger/junior colleagues. Therefore Hypothesis 5 is supported. (Refer to Table 2)

Table 2. The cross-tabulation of 'sharing of success stories' and 'age'

		Age		Total 30-40 years
		30-40 years	40-50 years	
Share success stories	no	0	30	30
	yes	60	170	230
Total		60	200	260

A significant number of mentors (180 out of 260) said that sharing of failure stories by the mentors with the mentees is essential for good mentoring. The age group 40 to 50 years was again more in favor of sharing failure stories than the 30-40 age-group. Therefore it can be said that Hypothesis 5 is supported. (Refer to Table 3).

The mentors were divided on the issue of 'ethical guidelines' for mentoring. Half of the respondents were in favor of ethical guidelines whereas half of the respon-

dents were against the ethical norms for mentorship. Those who said that there should not be ethical guidelines were mostly (120 out of 130) from the 40-50 age-bracket. While those who said that there should be ethical guidelines were again representing 30-40 years as well as 40-50 years of age-bracket. As the 40-50 years age-bracket was more in favor of ethical guidelines, it may be concluded that the younger mentors believe in ethics more as it is an ideal state and as a mentor advances in age he/she gets more close to reality rather than ethics. Therefore it can be said that Hypothesis 5 is supported. (Refer to Table 4).

Table 3. The cross-tabulation of sharing failure stories and age

		Age		Total 30-40 years
		30-40 years	40-50 years	
Share failure stories	no	20	60	80
	yes	40	140	180
Total		60	200	260

Table 4. The cross-tabulation of ethical guidelines and age

		Age		Total 30-40 years
		30-40 years	40-50 years	
ethical guidelines	no	10	120	130
	yes	50	80	130
Total		60	200	260

7. Conclusion

The older the mentors become, the greater is found their belief that sharing of success and failure stories and providing the mentees with the ethical guidelines is essential for successful mentoring to take place. Then reasons can be traced back to their experience-rich past. The old mentors probably have a strong desire to narrate examples and stories from their past so that the mentees can benefit out of them. These older mentors also seem to possess a strong belief in ethical standards and wish to provide the younger mentees with ethical guidelines. In this study, a correlation was not observed between age and the perception of the older mentors that seniors are responsible for development of mentees. Still the research in the area highlights that the older mentors make better mentors.

The older mentors get, the more they perceive personal experience-sharing and counseling important for

mentoring. The older mentors seem to have realized as they have aged that without personal experience-sharing and proper counseling it is tough to mentor the younger mentees. Mentoring with case examples and mentoring with coaching do not emerge as significantly related to age though.

The older mentors believe that 'mentee competence' is the issue which is handled by mentors. The reason can be traced back to their experience in terms of job and age. As they have grown in the organization and also in age they probably know that the more competent a person is the more successful he would be in the organizational as well as his/her personal life. Therefore they focus on developing the mentee competence.

The perceived frequency of mentorship meetings, as observed in the sample of older mentors, is observed to be 'once a month'. Most of the mentors in our sample opined that meetings between mentors and mentees should be held once a month. No relationship was observed between age and frequency of mentorship meetings as 'once a week or once a fortnight or only when a problem arises'. The maturity which comes through age is probably the reason why mentors think that one meeting between the mentor and the mentee in a month is sufficient for successful mentoring.

The older mentors believe that attitude, interpersonal skill and emotional maturity of mentees are the skills to be developed by mentors in their mentees. The findings again indicate that the maturity that comes with age and thereby through experience is a big factor in deciding the perceptions regarding the implications of the variety of phenomena that exist. The older mentors feel that the attitude of mentees, their interpersonal skills and emotional maturity are important skills that guarantee their success in their professional and personal lives.

It is also established on the basis of the study that 40-50 years' of age bracket believes more in sharing their success stories, failure stories as well as providing of ethical guidelines to the mentees as compared to the 30-40 years' of age bracket of mentors. The reasons may again be traced in the maturity achieved through age and experience as one grows in the organization.

Though managing an aging workforce has its own challenges but it has some unique opportunities too. The real opportunity is the utilization of the vast experience, unfathomed potential and mature decision-making lying untapped with the aging workforce in the organization. If the organization is successful in utilizing this valuable

resource for growth and excellence, it will add a Midas touch to the organization and its business.

The Mentors still exist in organizational Odysseys. Need of the hour is to make a sincere search for them.

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