



DRUG ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE:

A hidden management crisis



Over the years, substance abuse has become a health, social and welfare problem. Despite the National Drug Strategy, hazardous use of licit and illicit drugs still occurs in the workforce.

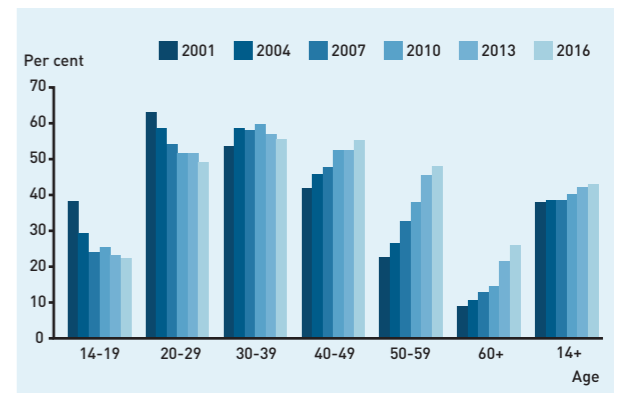
Various studies from reputable national agencies and their subsidiaries have indicated that individual and environmental factors, as well as workplace culture, have contributed to workplace substance use and abuse. Use of licit and illicit drugs has been found to negatively impact work productivity, workplace safety, and company profit and finances.

However, with proper workplace management, appropriate policies and prevention strategies, the complex issue of substance use and abuse can be properly addressed and mitigated.

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS), the authority on statistics regarding substance abuse in Australia, states that drug use is a complex issue that brings forth a wide array of problems.

In a study collected from 24,000 individuals across the country, it was found that 1 out of 6 Australians (15.6%) had taken at least one illicit substance in 2016 alone, and 4 out of 10 individuals had used an illicit drug in their lifetime¹. See figure 1. Although the number of people who took illicit substances in the age groups 14-39 is lower compared to recent years, the number remains high² and is indicative of substance abuse being commonplace in the country.

Drug use is recognised throughout the country as a major health issue that needs to be addressed. For a complex problem such as substance use and abuse⁴, careful understanding of the issue and its impacts is needed. That is why it is important to understand what the term 'substance abuse' truly entails.



(a) Used at least 1 of 17 illicit drugs in 2016—the number of drug used varied between 2001 and 2016
Figure 1. Illicit Drugs Use by Age, 2001-2016 (%)

Substance Abuse Breakdown: Definition

Substance use, according to the Australian Psychological Society, is not a new phenomenon in Australia.⁵ Drug use has been a fundamentally social act⁶ for purposes ranging from medicinal all the way to ritualistic⁷. But in more recent years, terms such as 'drug use' and 'substance use' have been used interchangeably with 'drug abuse' and 'substance abuse' that are closely associated with a plethora of negative psychological, social and economic impacts.

the NDSHS provides one of the broadest definitions of 'drug use' as it has not only included alcohol and pharmaceutical drugs, but also tobacco smoking. See Figure 2 & 3. Furthermore, NDSHS differentiates between illicit drug and poly-drug use; wherein illicit drug use is understood as the use of at least one illicit substance at a time while poly-drug use is to be understood as the use, misuse or abuse of more than one licit or illicit drug¹⁰.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines substance abuse as a hazardous use of psychoactive substances including alcohol and illicit drugs that may lead to dependence syndrome⁸. However, over-the-counter drugs may also be misused and abused⁹. Additionally,

Although through knowing the definition the scope of the substance abuse issue can be glimpsed, it does not provide a means to address it. In this case, understanding why substance use and abuse exists may help in devising an appropriate response.

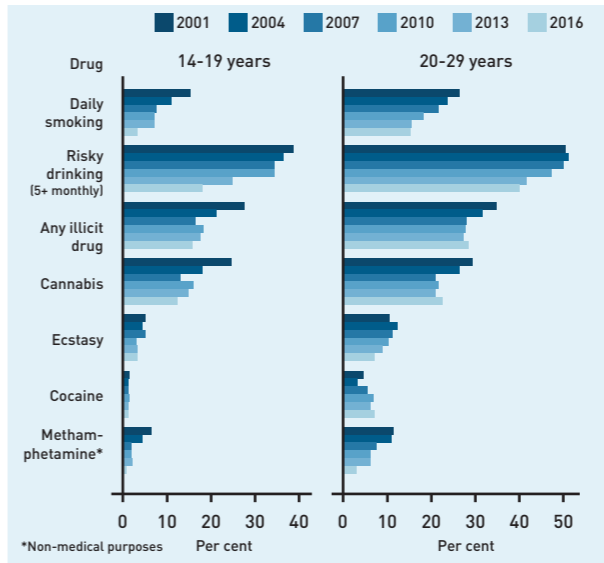


Figure 2. Drug Use Behaviours for People Aged 14-29, 2001-2016 (%)¹¹

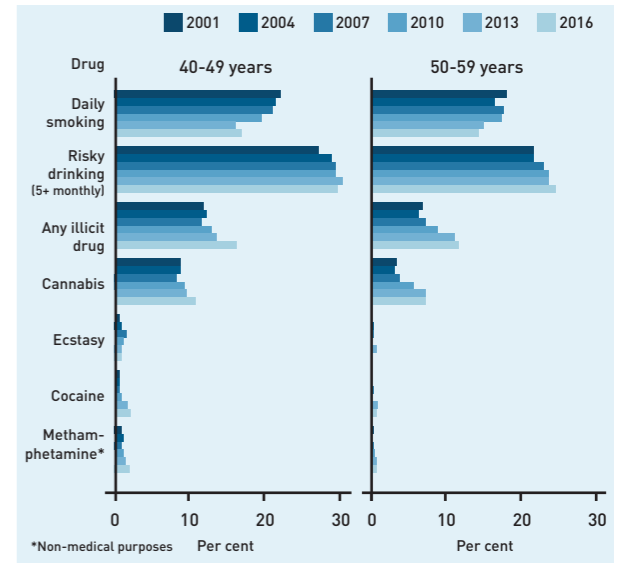


Figure 3. Drug Use Behaviours for People Aged 40-59, 2001-2016 (%)¹²



Substance Abuse Breakdown: Factors that Influence Substance Use and Abuse

It is interesting to note that, although there is an abundance of studies and articles discussing the definition and impacts of substance use (as well as profiling users within Australia), there seems to be a scarcity in studies that explore why it exists and persists.

Lang explained that psychoactive substances were traditionally used as medicine or as accompaniment to rituals and ceremonies¹³. On the other hand, Keenan posited that substance use exists to attain, consume and create experiences¹⁴. The Australian Psychological Society, through their position statement on substance abuse, attributed the prevalence of substance use to media consumption, cultural practices, religious traditions, workplaces, families and friends.¹⁵ Although Spooner and Hetherington, through the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, focused on teen cases of substance abuse, they provided a comprehensive perspective as they explored the social determinants related to drug use:

Social Factors

Spooner and Hetherington

- Low social category
- Lowered social capital
- Lack of social cohesion
- Absence of pro-social activities
- Lack of social efficacy and sense of belongingness

Individual Factors

Spooner and Hetherington

- Exposure to drug use during a child's developmental years
- Cognitive limits
- Low socio-economic status
- Cultural practices and beliefs

Furthermore, the authors discussed that growing up in a single-parent household and an environment where drugs are accessible, exacerbated the problem.¹⁶ On the other hand, as NDSHS provided a broad definition of drug use, they also discussed various reasons why people are enticed to use licit and illicit substances.

In its 2016 study, NDSHS found that curiosity and influence from friends and family were main reasons that people consumed illicit substances (i.e. friends and family either offered them or were using them). Drug experience enhancement, performance enhancement, and cosmetic purposes were reported to be the primary reasons for pharmaceutical misuse and abuse. Although the NDSHS study did not touch on the reasons for smoking and alcohol drinking, the same study reported that tobacco smokers were unable to quit because they either enjoy smoking or the act relaxes them.¹⁷

However, there was virtually no testimony as to why people continue to use and misuse illicit substances. Therefore, ongoing discussion of the effects of substance abuse on the individual is inevitable.

Substance Abuse Breakdown: Impacts on Humans

Alcohol, illicit substances and pharmaceutical drugs are chemicals that can enter the body in a multitude of "ways" from ingestion and inhalation, to injection. Depending on the kind of substance and physical constitution of the individual, drug abuse affects different people differently.¹⁸ However, the effects of most abused substances can be categorised into: natural chemical messenger imitation and brain reward centre overstimulation.¹⁹

Substances such as marijuana and heroin mimic the nervous system's neurotransmitters and activate nerve cells. The neurons can send abnormal messages to and from the brain which can cause problems both for the brain and the body. On the other hand, illegal drugs such as cocaine and methamphetamine cause nerve cells to release excessive amounts of dopamine, flooding the reward circuits of the brain and causing the feeling of pleasure or the drug-induced euphoric 'high'.²⁰ Although not all substances are harmful to a human being, psychoactive drugs such as marijuana and methamphetamine can cause harm.²¹

There is a wide variety of possible observable effects that substance use and abuse can have on a person. According to the Gateway Foundation, a substance abuser is more likely to have cardiovascular conditions,

a damaged liver and a weaker immune system. In addition, a drug user is more susceptible to infections and seizures. At times, substances may also cause nausea, vomiting, anorexia, abdominal pain and global body changes (e.g. men developing breasts). Furthermore, women who abuse illicit substances have a higher risk of having babies with birth defects.²²

In addition to the physiological effects of illicit substance abuse, there are also behavioural changes that are harmful to a person's health and interpersonal relationships. The Gateway Foundation listed: paranoia, aggressiveness, hallucinations, addiction, impaired judgement, impulsiveness and loss of self-control as the behavioural problems contracted from substance abuse.²³

These behavioural and psychological problems have allowed the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to recognise substance abuse as a health and welfare issue.²⁴

Despite these hazardous and vastly negative impacts, there are still people who abuse licit and illicit substances. In addition, this complex health and welfare issue has found its way into the Australian workplace.

The Hidden Management Crisis: Substance Abuse and the Working Environment

Vandenbroek explained that the Australian workforce is comprised of people aged 15 and above who can be separated into the active and inactive labour force.²⁵ Considering that the NDSHS used a population sample of individuals aged 14 and above, this already showcased that substance abuse has indeed found its way into the workforce. It is interesting to note that substance use in the workplace has a chronic definition.

The National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) defines workplace substance use as alcohol consumption and/or licit or illicit drug use up to two hours before work. This also includes substance use and abuse within the work shift, and/or during breaks. Instances outside of these parameters are not considered to be workplace substance abuse.²⁶ Within these limitations, there are still reported cases of workplace substance use and abuse.

The Australian Drug Foundation reported that half of Australia's workers drink at harmful levels. It is worth noting that the 17% who use harmful drugs account for 5% of workplace deaths and 4-11% of non-fatal injuries. These possibly preventable incidents cost Australian companies millions of dollars annually.²⁷

In addition to this, Wheeldon through Integrity Sampling found that 300,000 workers in Australia in full-time



employment, misuse drugs and alcohol at harmful levels, and that 57% of part-time and contractual staff are also detected to have the same problem. 40% of the workforce population in the 35-55-year-old demographic tested positive for methamphetamine and 1 in 15 professional drivers in the State of Victoria tested positive for illicit drugs in 2016.²⁸

These results underscored the fact that substance use and abuse in the workplace negatively affect productivity, workplace safety, and company finances.²⁹

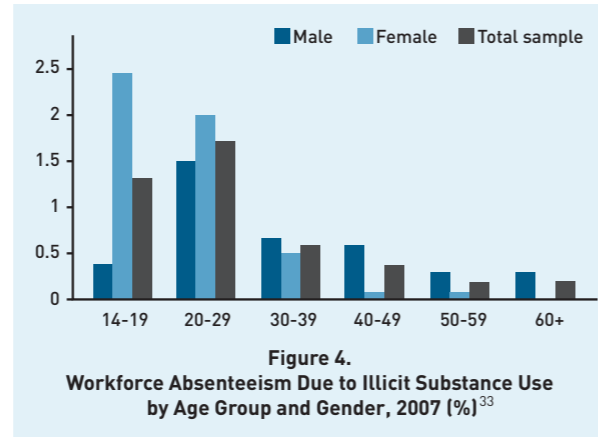
Impact on Productivity

A study by the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, the Accident Compensation Corporation and the New Zealand Drug Foundation, found that employees with substance abuse-related problems exhibit:³⁰

- Lateness
- Absenteeism
- Poor decision-making
- Lack of concentration
- Reduced reaction time
- Increased error rates
- Impaired performance and efficiency

Absenteeism as a negative impact of substance abuse on worker productivity is echoed in studies from the Australian Safety and Compensation Council, NCPIC and Kinnect to name a few. See figure 4.

In the same study by the Australian Safety and Compensation Council, it was indicated that approximately 270,000 workers take at least one day from work monthly due to alcohol-related problems.³¹ In addition to this, NCPIC reported that 1% of the workforce population admitted to missing work, university or TAFE because of substance use.³²



Furthermore, NCPIC explained that workplace substance use can also lead to: poor coordination, a decreased attention span, comprehension difficulty, decreased depth perception, motivation decline, unnatural energy increase, unnatural activity increase and paranoia.³⁴ In another NCPIC study, substance abuse can reportedly cause an increase in turnover and a decrease in output.³⁵

Impact on Workplace Safety

In its 2007 study, the Australian Safety and Compensation Council reported that 2.5% of the workforce attends work despite being under the influence of illicit drugs. At the same time, they found that 7.5% of hospital morbidity is related to substance use in the workplace, specifically alcohol consumption.³⁶ Hence, it is clear that substance abuse does negatively affect workplace safety.

According to the Australian Drug Foundation, substance use and abuse play a significant role in work-related injuries and fatalities. This is connected to some productivity impacts, particularly the decrease in attention span, poor coordination, difficulty in comprehension and slower reaction time.³⁷

Impact on Company Finances

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation explained that Australian businesses lose an estimated \$6 billion annually due to substance use-related productivity issues.³⁸ The Australian Safety and Compensation Council, on the other hand, estimated an annual loss of \$437 million for employers. These numbers are the impact of lost productivity alone.

Work-related injuries due to substance use and abuse cost businesses more. According to the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), most work-related accident compensation claims come from workers who are absent for 12 weeks on average. These claims have a direct and indirect cost estimated at \$60 billion per year.³⁹

The Hidden Management Crisis: Factors Influencing Workplace Substance Use

Although the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre's study was focused on teens, the individual and environmental factors that influence them may also influence the working adult. In addition to this, as the Australian Commonwealth recognises individuals aged 15 all the way to 19 as part of the labour force⁴⁰, the results from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre still hold water. Hence, cultural beliefs and practices, exposure to drugs through their living environment and social interactions, stress, and low socio-economic status do affect substance use behaviour.⁴¹

The Australian Safety and Compensation Council offered an alternative explanation for workplace drug use. The Council's study found that aside from the feelings of exhilaration and increased confidence, substance use in the workplace is also influenced by workplace culture⁴². The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) agreed on this observation and expounded on it.

In their study of work-related alcohol and drug abuse, the NCETA reported that the workplace culture approach in explaining the factors influencing substance

use can be divided into workplace factors, individual factors and organisational factors. As the individual factors coincide with the results from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre's study, workplace factors include: working conditions, supervision levels, availability of licit and illicit substances, and workplace policies. On the other hand, organisational factors include: procedures and practices, the health and safety climate, and the industrial relations climate.⁴³

In a similar vein, Kinnect contributed factors that are similar to NCETA's workplace factors. According to Kinnect, aside from workplace, individual and organisational factors, workplace conditions must also be considered. Kinnect observed that hazardous work, long shifts, poor industrial relations, low wages, boredom and job insecurity are also influences to substance use and abuse in the workplace.⁴⁴ To some degree, Kinnect's observation is supported by the NCPIC, as their 2009 study on substance use in the Australian workforce has separate sections dedicated to cannabis and other drug use in different industries across the country.⁴⁵ See figures 5 & 6.

Proportion of the Australian Workforce Reporting Recent Substance Use by Industry

	Any Illicit [%] [†]	Cannabis [%] [†]	Ecstasy [%] [†]	Methamphetamine [%] [†]	Cocaine [%] [†]	Other [%]	Alcohol [%] [†]	WUI* [%] [†]
Media and Telecommunications (n-298)	24.5	17.5	9.6	5.0	5.5	5.3	91.6	3.9
Hospitality (n-530)	23.2	17.6	10.2	6.1	4.7	8	89.4	7.2
Construction (n-814)	22.9	18.1	5.8	5.5	3.2	5.4	90.9	5.6
Manufacturing (n-886)	15.5	12.5	2.9	2.8	1.3	2.9	92	1.3
Finance (n-410)	15.1	9.8	6.9	4.0	5.1	5.0	94.7	0
Administration (n-1279)	14.6	8.9	4	3.2	1.4	6	92.9	2.1
Retail (n-1044)	14.3	10.8	3.9	1.6	2.5	3.7	87.8	2.8
Transport (n-539)	14.1	10.6	3.5	2.4	1.4	4.2	91.1	2.8
Wholesale (n-212)	13.1	8.1	2.9	2.4	0.7	2.7	88.6	0.5
Mining (n-205)	10.6	8.2	4.9	4.4	1.7	2.7	93.5	2.7
Agriculture (n-352)	10.3	6.5	2.7	1.2	0.6	4.2	86.5	0.4
Healthcare (n-1640)	1	6.7	2.4	1.0	1.3	2.9	88.5	0.9
Education (n-1119)	7.3	5.6	1.2	0.6	0.2	2.1	88.5	0.6

* per cent of the sample that went to work under the influence of any drug (WUI)
[†] as some participants were not asked this question, the total 'n' may vary in this column

Figure 5. Substance Use by Occupation, Proportion⁴⁶



Proportion of the Australian Workforce Reporting Recent Substance Use by Occupation

	Any Illicit (%)†	Cannabis (%)†	Ecstasy (%)†	Methamphetamine (%)†	Cocaine (%)†	Other (%)	Alcohol (%)†	WUI (%)†
Tradespeople (n=1164)	19.1	15.8	5.8	5.1	2.4	4.4	92	4.3
Unskilled (n=1730)	18.7	13.1	4.2	2.7	1.8	5.2	84.9	3.1
Skilled (n=3001)	13.8	9.8	4.5	2.9	2.1	4	90.5	1.9
Professionals (n=4093)	13.2	9.7	3.8	1.9	2.3	3.6	91.2	1.6
Managers (n=959)	12.9	7.8	4.5	2.1	3	4.9	93.5	1.4

† as some participants were not asked this question, the total 'n' may vary in this column

Figure 6. Substance Use by Occupation, Proportion⁴⁷

Employer's Responsibility

It is the responsibility of both the employer and the employee to ensure a safe working environment for others in their workplace. Employee performance, truancy and injury prevention whether related or not to substance abuse, fall under the scope of normal business management.

Hence, preventing substance use and abuse related performance problems and injuries, should be part of risk mitigation action conducted by management. Treatment assistance, prevention programs and counselling provided by specialised third party providers, should be implemented as part of a primary goal to improve employee health, general well-being and productivity. Guides such as that developed by Work Cover provide information to corporate policymakers on how to draft internal memorandums regarding this issue.

Field managers and supervisors should also be trained to spot potential flags among team members that could potentially show their personnel are using illicit drugs or abusing other substances.

Examples of such flags are a combination of:

- Poor coordination
- Increased talkativeness
- Declining motivation
- Paranoia
- Changes in appetite
- Euphoria
- Decreased attention span
- Sudden and unnatural increase in energy

Special attention should be given to departments that deal with food, heavy equipment, driving, explosives and medicine. Effective risk mitigation should include higher basic safety standards for employers in high-risk

departments and should impose zero tolerance to create a drug-free environment.

Employee contracts should already contain stipulations regarding drug use and substance abuse in and out of the work area. If no such stipulations are set, any issues should still be covered under criminal acts because drug use and substance abuse are considered criminal acts under state and federal laws.

Provisions regarding prevention and monitoring should also be implemented without violating employee rights. Employers should consult a lawyer on how best to implement random drug testing in their organisation within the confines of the law. This will vary depending on business operation, the human resource management and type of business.

Effective programs should involve not only testing but also prevention and a clear due process on how to handle infractions. The rules should be thoroughly explained within the text and to all employees. Refresher courses should also be held periodically.

Quality employee assistance programs should also be in place, to prevent a witch hunt scenario. Work-related stress is understandable and providing counselling to deal with stress should be considered. Substance abuse incidents should be covered under the same policy.

Supervising staff should be familiar with the procedures and comfortable dealing with related issues. Most cases will not require treatment or police involvement. However, the same policies should also include escalation guidelines for programs to be effective.

Disciplinary actions should be left to the discretion of the company itself; company culture should play a huge role in drafting a clear-cut provision for offenders.

Alcohol and drug testing are NOT compulsory for all industries. Organisations should consult with lawyers regarding how to properly implement testing and disciplinary actions that are not contrary to employee rights under the Fair Work Commission.

In many cases, random or regular alcohol and drug testing in the workplace may be advisable in order to maintain a drug- and alcohol-free workplace. Testing providers should be consulted on which tests to implement. An organisation's "Fit for Work" policy should be updated to include the provisions of a drug-free workplace program, and employees should be informed beforehand and provided with the opportunity to raise questions and concerns before testing is implemented.

Standards in Australia for all tests to determine drug and alcohol use and abuse in the workplace:

- Urine Test – AS/NZS 4308: 2008
- Saliva Test – AS 4760: 2006
- Alcohol Test – AS 3547:1997



Zero Tolerance Policy is a Must

Even if a business is not in a safety-sensitive industry, a drug-free working environment is a must. The Fair Work Commission normally supports employers with such a policy. It is only how a policy is written, its procedures and disciplinary actions within the policy that leave technicalities on why some rulings get reversed.

Corporate zero tolerance policies must be in line with the country's state and federal laws regarding drug use. Only procedural errors during implementation provide the caveat for employers as to why there are cases where compensation is awarded to employees or ex-employees disciplined under such provisions.

There is absolutely nothing to fear by aiming to provide a safer working environment by implementing policies that could result in less conflict, fewer injuries, and even prevent work-related deaths. Proper drafting of policies, personnel orientation and a fair disciplinary structure will normally prevent litigations regarding

Employers should ensure that all procedures and guidelines are set in accordance with Fair Work policies. For example, employees should not be dismissed simply because they returned a positive result for drugs or alcohol. Instead, an alcohol and drug testing policy should include guidelines on steps to be taken if a positive preliminary result is obtained, steps to take confirmatory laboratory results, and steps to either rehabilitate or approach an employee based on laboratory results. The Fair Work Commission has awarded substantial compensation to employees who were unfairly dismissed over results of these tests. Vague terms such as "laboratory testing" can be used against an employer if an employee claims "invasive procedures."

Safety-sensitive industries are not exempt from the need to "compassionately" police and enforce zero drug and alcohol policies in the workplace. However, the Fair Work Commission does take breaches of zero drug and alcohol tolerance policies seriously. It is therefore very important that such policies be drafted with as much detail as possible without contradicting labour codes.

zero tolerance policies or at the very least, win a case should it go to court.

Experts should always be consulted on the aspects of drug-free policies, including lawyers, third-party testing providers and medical professionals.

Drug abuse is a chronic disease, requiring constant monitoring and treatment. It is highly communicable and affects not only the health of individuals involved but also the safety of those around them. For workplaces, it is an expensive problem to ignore, and one that is even more dangerous to tolerate.

There is no cure to this problem, only prevention. Competent management combined with education is the best solution to this issue. There is no counter argument as to why zero tolerance on substance abuse should be implemented in every organisation.

End Notes

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- Ibid.: p.68
- Ibid.
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Andatech was founded in 2003 as a distributor of ISO-certified breathalysers for Australians, and over the past decade has established a reputation as a leader in reliable occupational health & safety and wellness technologies throughout the Asia Pacific.

Its range of quality products and services reflects its vision of a safe and healthy environment, at home and at work.

Andatech offers a suite of drug and testing support services including breathalyser training;

independent drug and alcohol testing services; sales and leasing plans for portable industrial and wall-mounted breathalysers; alcohol interlocks for vehicles; breathalyser calibration services; and drug testing kits.

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