

Promotion Unicorns

*Lessons from officers who have risen quickly in the Foreign
Service*

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Disclaimer: This report is not sanctioned nor an officially cleared HCTM report and is based solely on my own research and inquiry.

Introduction

Every year the month of April brings immeasurable stress and strikes fear in the heart of all Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) at USAID. It means that life stops as we know it for one month. There is no travel. No major meetings will be planned at this time. Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) know to tiptoe around their FSO bosses during this time and not to bother them because well, their bosses act *differently*. In April, as a collective, every USAID FSO around the globe is stressing over and preparing their promotion package. Everything an FSO has done all year needs to be captured in a 75 word Annual Accomplishment Record entry or a 250 word entry into their Promotion Input Form at this time. This is the moment every FSO has been working towards all year. This is their moment to shine...their moment to tell their walking on water story...THIS IS IT. And after all the late nights writing, the promotion packages get submitted and the Promotion gods decide their fate. The way the promotion process is set up it's a small minority that gets promoted each year which means that the vast majority will be completely disappointed and left to question their worth and value as an FSO. The promotion process is a fickle beast, shrouded in controversy and full of mystery. Yet, I heard about these 'promotion unicorns' - people who seemed to rise up in the system faster than the rest. These people would get promoted almost every time their window was open beating out the vast majority of FSOs. Even when statistics showed that it takes on average between 5-6 years to get from one grade to the next these unicorns would do it in half that time. How did they do it, I would ask myself? I decided to go find out and ask the unicorns themselves.

Methodology and Demographic Information

I carried out a study on promotion unicorns who I defined as FSOs who went from an FS 06 to FS 01 in 11 years or less¹. According to the 2021 FS promotion data report (issued 8/2022) it would take on average a total of 17.7 years² to get from an FS 06 to FS 01. I intentionally chose 11 years to limit my target group. I aimed to find enough FSOs to interview so I could identify trends and feasibly interview them all by myself. I interviewed 14 unicorns for this study. Participants included current Office Directors, Deputy Mission Directors, Mission Directors, and DAA level individuals within USAID. The FSOs I interviewed provided me the following demographic information about themselves:

Years it took to get to FS 1	10.5 years on average to go from FS 06 to FS 01 (fastest individual did it in 9 years) ³
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¹ I had started off defining my target group at 10 years or less and found quickly that there weren't many FSOs who did it in that short of a timeframe. Many people even questioned whether it was even possible, which it is. I enlarged my target group so I could interview enough people to identify trends.

² According to the report, average time spent in each grade was as follows: FS-04 3.5 years, FS-03 5.3 years, and FS-02 5.9 years. To get 17.7 years I added 1 year for FS-06, 1 year for FS-05, and 1 year for FS-01.

³ Of the 14 individuals interviewed, 4 of them started at FS 04 or FS 05 and got to an FS 1 in less time, they are not included in the calculation for coming up with an average.

Age	47 years old on average (youngest is 41 years old, oldest is 56 years old)
Gender	6 Female, 8 Male
Ethnicity	11 White/Caucasian, 2 African American, 1 Mixed
Backstop	2 Education, 2 Contracting, 5 Program, 2 Executive Officer (EXO), 3 Governance (DRG)

A significant number of unicorns I interviewed requested to keep their identities confidential and so I have refrained from providing names or other easily identifiable information regarding all unicorns in this report.

I also gathered inputs from current and previous backstop coordinators for O2 Program Analysis (the backstop I belong to) in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL) and eight individuals from the Office of Human Capital and Talent Management (HCTM) to get their insights into the promotion process from their unique role in directly supporting and overseeing the careers of so many FSOs. What I discovered surprised me and I predict it may surprise you as well. I will let the data and the unicorns speak for themselves.

7 Lessons from Promotion Unicorns

When it came to the promotion process the unicorns taught me seven important lessons and they are as follows:

1. Promotion should not be the goal

I started every interview with the same question, ‘What was your approach to getting promoted quickly?’ The majority of unicorns I interviewed told me they had no approach to getting promoted quickly. Promotion was never their goal. Promotion was never the most important thing in their minds driving their work. At best, promotion was an afterthought and several unicorns expressed genuine surprise at how quickly they did end up getting promoted. Unicorns are motivated by other reasons besides the promotion itself. We’ve all heard of FSOs who make bidding decisions and take on work tasks only after they’ve done the mental calculation of how promotion worthy the roles and tasks are. I specify I am referring to ‘other FSOs’ because of course (cough, cough, ahem) neither you nor I have *ever done that*. This way of thinking is contrary to how the unicorns operate. Unicorns take on roles, work tasks, and greater responsibilities for a myriad of reasons including: they love to learn, they want to develop their skills, they want to diversify their experiences, they want to answer the call whenever the Agency asks them to take on a specific role, they just want to do good work, they like solving problems and meeting the immediate needs that present themselves, etc. Two unicorns mentioned going to posts that their peers deemed ‘career suicide’, one went to a small mission after serving in one of the largest ones globally, and the other went back to USAID headquarters in the District of Columbia (DC) after spending time in the field. Both proved their naysayers wrong and thrived

at their new posts and got promotions out of them. All in all, unicorns don't make career decisions for promotions' sake. They take on roles they believe in and give it their all.

2. Remain lifelong learners

Unicorns emphasized the importance of always being in learning mode throughout their careers and are determined to keep learning until the end of it. They appear to be a group that is naturally curious, introspective, and look at each new post as another opportunity to gain new skills and experiences. They understand the importance of always learning and never getting to a place where they think they know it all. This group is keenly aware of how policies and the development landscape are constantly changing so it's in their own best interest to continue learning. Several unicorns mentioned how they were strategic when seeking their next assignments and their goal was to be a 'well rounded' FSO. Unicorns do a significant amount of self reflection and identified for themselves the skill areas they wanted to grow in and would make their bidding decisions accordingly. I saw unicorns aim for regional diversity and try to get posts in different regions of the world. Others wanted to work in countries that ranked very differently on the development index so they could see how programming differed accordingly. Unicorns sought to learn from all those who were more experienced around them, particularly FSNs. A DRG unicorn from this study advised all FSOs to put yourself in learning mode and aim to remain there for the rest of your professional life.

3. Seek mentors

Unicorns reported having had great mentors in supervisors and members of the front office that really helped them in their career and were often their advocates. These mentors took a real interest in the unicorns' careers and went out of their way to advise and support the unicorns. Unicorns learned how to write their performance evaluations, how to handle difficult situations, and how USAID works overall from these mentors. Unicorns actively sought out mentors and wanted to learn from all the people around them that they recognized had more experience than they did. A contracting unicorn mentioned how 20 years later he can still hear the advice ringing in his ears that more seasoned FSOs gave him at the beginning of his career. Another DRG unicorn admitted that if he could go back in time one thing he regretted not doing more of is reaching out to more FSOs to have coffee so he could learn from them at the beginning of his career.

4. Seek diverse professional experiences

Unicorns actively sought out diverse professional experiences that would allow them to acquire new knowledge and skills. Several unicorns either changed backstops or intentionally took on positions in technical sectors for which they had no prior experience. One unicorn worked out a rotation in the Embassy's political section at the mission level. Another unicorn did an assignment as an embedded staff within the host country government's structure, going to work everyday for the other government (not US). Unicorns think outside the box. They identify opportunities for their own personal growth and they ask for them. Unicorns actively seek

experiences beyond the daily work expected of their backstop. A contracting unicorn in this study shared how he would offer his management and negotiation skills to support various mission conversations and initiatives related to reorganization, etc. that were not related to contracting. An EXO unicorn I interviewed talked about how he ‘volunteers for everything’ and always raises his hand. His approach is to say yes to everything he can take on beyond his current workload. While most unicorns sought out new experiences, there were instances where the Agency came looking for them and they answered the call. One program unicorn shared her story of how she arrived at her new post over the weekend and immediately got a call from DC that she was urgently needed to lead an effort elsewhere and she immediately left on TDY without having met any of her colleagues in the new country. Unicorns actively seek out and are open to new unorthodox opportunities that come their way. When I asked the unicorns what advice they have for junior officers seeking to get promoted quickly several said to just say yes! Say yes to everything you can take on that is outside of your job. Say yes to being a control officer for a VIP visit. Say yes to join various task forces or other DC based efforts even if you are based in the field. These are all opportunities for junior officers to get to know the interagency and learn how others think and speak, to get more facetime with higher level officials, and to become more well rounded as an FSO.

5. Hone writing skills

Unicorns recognize the importance of writing skills when it comes to their promotion materials. They express gratitude to the mentors they had along the way that taught them how to write their promotion materials. Almost half the unicorns I interviewed expressed a certain level of confidence, I prefer to say mastery (unicorns can be so humble) when writing their promotion materials. Here are some soundbites of the advice they have when it comes to writing: *Focus on showcasing the skills you used to achieve your result. Don't just say what you did, go into the step by step of explaining 'how' you did it. Always be able to show how your accomplishment contributed to the Agency's mission. Don't use flowery language or jargon. Be open and honest and write plainly. Find examples of accomplishments that can differentiate you from your peers. Don't write about the things that you know everyone in your backstop is doing too. Stretch beyond your backstop, beyond your unit and/or mission, take on assignments that can impact the Agency as a whole such as being part of a DC task force. etc.*

6. Link everyday work to greater U.S. government policy

Unicorns seek to connect the work they do each day with greater U.S. government (USG) strategic frameworks in their conversations with subordinates and peers, when writing their promotion materials, and when interacting with the interagency, DC based colleagues, and Congress. Unicorns believe it is important to link what they do back to the USG's highest goals and objectives and they keep this at the forefront in their work and in work conversations. Unicorns know the ‘why’ they are doing what they do, they understand how their work supports USAID's development objectives in the country. Several unicorns expressed how when they look at their peers they have noticed that many FSOs tend to get caught up in the weeds and are very focused on their technical work or the immediate tasks at hand. Several unicorns acknowledged

that one factor that likely contributed to their fast promotion was their ability to articulate how the work they were doing at the mission level contributed to higher USG goals. Several conjectured that their ability to do this is what led to their fast rise into senior leadership positions.

7. Serve in hardship posts

Several unicorns along with representatives from PPL and HCTM have noted that serving in hardship posts can have a positive influence on promotions. At hardship posts, an FSO has more opportunities to take on greater responsibilities because there is likely lots of work to do and not enough bodies to do them. An FSO can shine if they can step up to the challenge. Due to staffing shortages in these posts FSOs will often find themselves in an Acting capacity in more senior roles. However, hardship posts may not be an option for certain FSOs due to a variety of factors, one of which may be family obligations. For these particular individuals who can't go to a hardship post, one education unicorn I interviewed has some advice for you. This unicorn wants FSOs to know that you don't HAVE to go to a hardship post to get promoted. She believes that you can find opportunities to make a difference and transform things in strategic ways anywhere you go. Smaller missions with limited resources can force you to be more creative which in turn can help your promotion package stand out as well.

And there you have it! Advice from the unicorns themselves about what worked for them.

One More Ingredient to their Special Sauce

Now, I am going to go out on a limb and propose an eighth factor that I believe contributed to the unicorn's success. This factor was only mentioned explicitly by two unicorns interviewed, a previous backstop coordinator from PPL, and a staff from HCTM, yet it was a quality I observed throughout my interviews with unicorns that surprised me. The eighth factor is.....(drum roll).....HUMILITY!!!

8. Humility

While only two unicorns mentioned the importance of humility verbatim, many unicorns exhibited humility in their interviews when talking about how they interact with the people around them and how they handled critical feedback. Unicorns are leaders that are willing to admit what they don't know and seek out the counsel of their subordinates. Unicorns like to be challenged. They want their subordinates to disagree with them to show them another perspective. A contracting unicorn shares that when he was in an Office Director role he would always acknowledge openly when he first arrived at a new post that his FSNs have more years of experience than he did so he would never know as much as them. He said this to his team of FSNs! Often at a mission there are FSNs who have been there for decades so they are a rich source of knowledge and experience and actually have more 'years' working for the USG than their American supervisors. Unicorns inherently know this and strive to work as close as possible with the FSNs. Several unicorns credited the FSNs for their fast promotions. I heard

from several unicorns and representatives from PPL and HCTM about their surprise with some of the new junior officers coming into the agency in recent years who act like they 'know it all' and alienate FSNs. This subset of new officers want to be in charge and seem interested in building relationships mainly with the highest ranking officials at post. These officers appear to want to run everything and make all the decisions. A DRG unicorn advises that stepping back and learning the bureaucracy by listening closely and absorbing everything around you, instead of needing to control it and take charge of it all will serve you more in the long term. This unicorn goes further by saying that, 'you should not feel like you need to be the first person to speak in the room. Senior leaders pay attention to not who says the most but who says the most meaningful thing.' The message that both unicorns and senior leaders had for new FSOs is to take the time to learn from all the individuals around you, especially the FSNs when starting out at this agency.

More evidence of humility came through for me when several unicorns very transparently shared their own stories of getting critical feedback and what they did about it. One program unicorn shared how he was held back from being promoted one year because a supervisor put critical feedback in his promotion materials and he spent the next rating period working on improving certain skills to change that narrative about him. Another program unicorn shared how he got low scores in his multi-source ratings from subordinates and used that to deeply reflect on the differences between his and his team's preferences, particularly in regards to management style. He then adjusted to his team's preferences and received much higher ratings the following year. More importantly, he thinks the experience has helped him develop new management skills and better understand some of the nuances with FSN empowerment. Another DRG unicorn shared how he has gotten critical feedback from his supervisors before, 'real zingers', but he was so appreciative that those supervisors were willing to give him that feedback so he could change. Another contracting unicorn admitted that she's a 'born contrarian' and believes there is value for USAID to be a rebel in the development space, but she admits that earlier in her career when she was greener she failed to communicate the reasons behind why she wanted certain changes and so people could find her abrasive. She has worked on looking at those situations to see what she did wrong and has continuously worked to refine her approach. In all these stories I see a prevailing theme of humility. These unicorns were open and willing to accept critical feedback and then invested time and energy into changing themselves to be what their peers and the Agency needed from them as a leader.

Insights from PPL and HCTM

I interviewed and consulted with ten individuals from HCTM and PPL who have dedicated their entire career or at least a tour (4 years) in the case of the FSO backstop coordinators to supporting countless FSOs rise up through the system. I wanted to get insights from their unique perspective of having a birds eye view of so many careers at that 10,000 foot level and get an idea of what they see. I asked them what are the characteristics of FSOs who have been promoted quickly? In addition to some factors that have already been listed previously they also added the following:

1. Had previous USAID experience. Many junior officers coming into the agency already worked for USAID as a personal service contractor or through some other mechanism. These people who have an understanding of USAID and have an advantage.
2. Luck. FSOs hired before or after a long hiring freeze could rise up the ranks more quickly because there was a lack of middle and senior managers.
3. Manage relationships well, 360 degrees. They get along well with people and are good team players.

Disadvantages of Fast Promotions

It was almost unanimous across unicorns interviewed and even in responses from representatives from PPL and HCTM that the greatest disadvantage of rising quickly to an FS 01 is the fear of being forced to leave the Agency should an FSO open their window and join Senior Foreign Service (SFS) too early and then not get promoted by their Time in Class (TIC) date. For many unicorns who got to an FS 01 early in their careers and at a young age the prospect of TIC-ing (pronounced TICK-ING) out of the system can be quite scary. Many unicorns chose to delay opening their windows because they didn't want to risk being out of a job sooner than they were ready.

[Here](#) is a slide deck from HCTM's 2023 webinars on opening your window for promotion into the SFS. Once you open your window, when you are selected for promotion into the SFS at the Counselor rank, your TIC limitation date is recalculated and becomes seven years from the date your promotion is effective. Since SFS promotions are approved by the President with advice and consent of the Senate, the effective date will be roughly 9-12 months after the boards convene. Hence, when you open your window, if you are immediately selected for promotion, you will have about eight years until the SFS TIC expires if you are not promoted again. There are two additional SFS ranks, Minister-Counselor and Career Minister. If you are promoted into these higher levels, an additional five and four years will be added to your TIC, respectively. The SFS TICs are cumulative. If you reach the Career Minister level, then your total time in the SFS would be 16 years. All in all TIC-ing out is a possibility if you don't get promoted in the time frames listed above and something every FSO needs to think about before opening their window.

Another disadvantage can be captured by the saying, 'it's lonely at the top'. One unicorn shares how as the third highest ranking US official at post after the Ambassador she is higher ranking than the Deputy Chief of Mission who is ten years her senior. As a Deputy Mission Director, it is challenging for her to develop social connections outside of the workplace because her similarly aged peers who are mostly Office Directors view her as part of the front office and similarly ranked peers view her as too young. A representative from HCTM commented on how it can be difficult for younger FSOs in high leadership positions to gain the respect they need from host country government officials due to the country's cultural norms.

Both the current and previous PPL backstop coordinators for Program Officers Tamika Cameron and Zema Semunegus, respectively, highlighted another disadvantage of FSOs rising too quickly: they can be pushed into managerial roles for which they are not prepared. Tamika views

management as a skill FSOs learn along the way as they rise up the ranks and so when they rise up very quickly this reduces the time they have to learn in that space. Zema echoes this sentiment and acknowledges that when FSOs rise up too quickly they are put into situations where they don't have enough information to respond. Zema goes further to say that management skills is one skill set one must have at the FS O1 or higher level. She views knowing how to handle performance management and conduct issues as the 'final check' before going to that next stage in the Foreign Service. Zema encourages staff to take all the trainings available on this topic and to get to know colleagues in HCTM/ELR, HCTM/FSC, and GC/EA as well as the RLOs at post so you have support when difficulties arise.

Debunking promotion myths

Myth #1: Working in a position at a higher grade than your personal grade will get you promoted.

Oh how many times have I heard of FSOs bidding on the highest graded position they can because they want to get promoted? The thinking goes that if I take on a stretch assignment and work in a position that is way above my personal grade then I am more likely to get promoted. True or false? I'm sure we've all seen FSOs that stretched and struggled, and others that rose to the occasion. So how important are position grades to an FSO's promotion trajectory? I'll let you decide after I share with you what I found out from 2 HCTM staff I interviewed. One staff shared his concern with me that during every assignment season FSOs place so much weight on the position grades when he knows that those grades are not the most accurate representation of the job duties that need to be carried out because 1) the grades are rarely updated, so a highly graded position from a decade ago will rarely be seriously considered for downgrading despite likely changes in the job duties and/or mission portfolio, and 2) it is in the mission's interest to inflate the grades of their positions so they can attract more bidders. He knows this, and likely everyone else does too. I raised the question regarding the importance of position grades to another HCTM staff, a member of the Foreign Service Performance Management and Promotions team who confirmed with the following: "Promotion boards have access to the FSO's position history so they can easily see the grade level of the positions held by the FSO. But they are instructed not to give the position grade any weight in the scoring process. Skills and the other 2 factors are assessed based on expectations for personal grade, and contributions and skill proficiency demonstrated, regardless how the position was graded." There you have it. There are a number of reasons why an FSO should or shouldn't bid on a position or take on greater responsibilities. With this additional information I'll let you make the best decision for yourself.

Myth #2: It's financially more beneficial to stay at FS O1 longer to get your annual/biannual step increases then to join the SFS where you get performance bonuses instead of step increases.

Maybe, maybe not. Joining SFS is a personal decision and each person should do their own math to figure out what's right for them. HCTM has posted a webinar [here](#) with information on

SFS salaries for 2023. Salary caps for the three SFS ranks are higher than for FS, topping out at \$212,100 for Career Ministers in 2023 as compared to \$183,500 for FS-01s. FS-01 officers receive a salary increase when promoted into the SFS, then are eligible for annual increases thereafter based on their performance. For 2023, as shown in the slide deck, the annual increase was 5.86% for SFS officers receiving a B grade from the performance board, and 6.46% for those receiving an A grade. In addition, SFS individuals demonstrating strong performance may be recommended by the Consolidated Senior Foreign Service Performance Board for bonuses and Presidential Rank Award nominations which also have monetary value. So, the takeaway is you need to do your own homework on this one!

Oppositional Forces to Promotion

I asked all unicorns, "Were there any opposing forces to your promotion?" Most often the answer was no or the unicorn asked me to define what I meant by 'opposing forces'. I would elaborate just to say it meant whatever came to mind for them and if they couldn't think of an opposing force that answers the question too. It was interesting to note that most unicorns interviewed could not name any substantial oppositional force to their promotion. Several people commented that the quirky and unpredictable nature of the promotion system with all of its obscure rules can itself be an opposing force to their promotion but that was mostly it. The only exception was a unicorn who self-identified as African-American, she shared that she has been in situations where certain majority staff in senior positions did not want her sitting at the table and went out of their way to ensure she did not. She hopes the agency can find more ways to support officers that are in similar situations. She states that currently, there are two possible avenues for seeking assistance and they are with the Office of Civil Rights and HCTM's Office of Employee and Labor Relations, and she believes these should be a last resort as the burden should not be on the victim for seeking a non hostile and non toxic workplace environment. She believes, "...the agency [should] come up with a way for senior leaders to understand, support, and engage FSOs in general and in particular those from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds at the outset to provide them with a solid pathway to promotion opportunities."

A unicorn that self identified as a 'well educated, white woman, from upper middle class background' acknowledged her own privilege. She said that because she grew up going to social events at places like country clubs she felt she had experience dressing and speaking the part at diplomatic receptions and in interactions with senior officials. She also felt comfortable asking senior government officials for greater professional opportunities as she saw them, and noted that not everyone would have the privilege to do that. She was aware that for FSOs from less privileged backgrounds, there may be a learning curve on how to interact in the diplomatic environment and they would be less comfortable asking for opportunities the way she did. This difference in background could be an opposing force for promotion for those FSOs.

This unicorn also identified as 'married with children' and she observed that she was one of the few women in a senior position with this status. While this study did not request information on marital status or number of children, two other unicorns interviewed did share that because they were single with no children this allowed them to go to posts and work in ways that others with

family obligations could not. From these comments, I deduce that choosing to have a family may be an opposing factor to promotion for some FSOs, and further research is needed to confirm this.

Advice for FSOs who wish to get promoted quickly

Literally, every person I interviewed had great advice for FSOs wishing to get promoted. If I were to share all the great advice I heard I could easily write a book dedicated to that topic alone (which I just might because it was all that good!). In this section I will share some soundbites of advice I got from interviewees in their own words:

Ask yourself, Am I contributing to the whole? Giving more than I am taking in every interaction?

Be pretty good at your job and be really easy to work with and the promotions will follow. (Advice received by a unicorn that rings true to him)

Don't be a jerk. All eyes are on you. Don't be nice just to your superiors, be nice to everyone, have mentors including FSNs. Be kind to others and to yourself, learn, stay flexible, and the rest will fall into place hopefully.

Learn your job. Noone can take that away from you.

Learning how to be a contrarian in this environment is a talent that takes time and refinement and there's value. There's value in being a rebel in this space.

Rethink why you joined the agency. We all have different reasons. Know the why. Work towards that why.

You can't learn if you don't admit your own ignorance. Try to maintain a healthy sense of professional humility.

Be conscious that you are building a cathedral, if you are a stone mason laying the base of the tower, it may not be finished for another 200 years but if you don't lay the foundation well the tower will collapse. Focus on how you can do the best work right here and now.

The promotion process is subjective. Many eyes determine whether you are promotion worthy. Because of that, do not have high expectations. Go in and do your best. Allow that to speak.

Come up with an idea and propose it. Don't sit back, problem solve.

It's a marathon not a race. It's easy to get frustrated in the bureaucracy. Pause and reflect, know that you're going to confront the bureaucracy. Take it in stride. Just do your best.

Next step does not have to be Deputy Office Director, Office Director, Deputy Mission Director, etc. This doesn't have to be the trajectory. There are many nontraditional positions in DC. It may not be a promotion enhancing opportunity but it is career enhancing and makes you a better officer.

Come into work with a positive attitude. If you are a Debbie Downer person who thinks I should have been promoted, people see that.

Conclusion

Unicorns take on roles and tasks because they are internally driven by a desire to learn and grow, they are problem solvers, they want to leave every person and place better off from them having been there, and they believe in USAID's mission so deeply they are willing to answer the call when the Agency asks them to step up even when it involves great personal sacrifices. I am impressed by the passion, drive, and humility I saw in all the unicorns I interviewed. My goal in doing this study was to find out what worked for them and to share this knowledge more widely with the rest of the foreign service corps to help those who are stuck at various grade levels. After speaking with so many unicorns, I personally have a renewed sense of pride and faith regarding our promotion system.



About the Author

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