Emotion Regulation Responsibilities and Psychological Well-being:

Effects of Emotional Labor on HR Managers and Organizations

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Abstract

The concept of emotional labor – the regulation of feelings and expressions for organizational purposes – has shown exponential attention since its naming by sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild in 1983. However, most of the studies on this subject focus on employees on non-professional jobs in the service sector. Over the same 30 years, following the realization that competitive advantage could be seized and sustained through the wise utilization of human resources, the HR profession has emerged as a strategic partner and is more and more expected, beyond its original “people care” role, to regulate others’ feelings, as a change and culture champion or supporting managers who lack the skills, energy or time to perform emotion management. So far the impact of these emerging emotional responsibilities on the psychological well-being of HR professionals has not been explored. This study examines the effects of the full human resources emotional labor on HR Managers and organizations. Results from the analysis of semi-structured interviews of HR Managers in large corporations confirmed the transferability of several findings made on other professions. It was in particular established that emotional labor was a key constituent of current HR Management and that its impact on the psychological well-being and performance of the HR manager was correlated to several individual differences and contextual factors. Further, practical suggestions are proposed to increase the effectiveness of HR emotional labor in organizations and reduce its psychological impact on HR Managers.

Keywords:

Emotional Labor, Interpersonal Emotional Regulation, Human Resource Manager, Well-being, Dissonance, Change Management, Toxin Handler, Authenticity, Personality Traits, Social Support
Introduction:

The focus and context of human resources management, both in its practice within organizations and in its study within academia, have undergone major development in the past 30 years (Schuler & Jackson, 2007). The successive HR evolutions to business partnership (Ulrich, 1998) and human capital management (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013) have deeply modified the responsibilities and required competencies of the HR profession. A large part of these emerging requirements are extending the emotion regulation activities of HR managers beyond their historical “caring for the people” key contribution: change and culture management, employee engagement and support to leaders who lack the skills, energy or time to perform emotion management with their teams.

Recent studies (Kulik, Cregan, Metz, & Brown, 2009) have leveraged the work of Frost (2003) on “toxin handling”, i.e. the managerial activities associated with helping organizational members cope with difficult, volatile emotions in the workplace, to start exploring the psychological impact of HR emotion management at work while “caring for the people”.

However, no work has so far captured that the extension of the emotional requirements on HR managers made the profession move further to a true context of emotional labor. This concept was described by Hochschild (1983) as the regulation of feelings and expressions for organizational purposes and its psychological impacts have been well documented, albeit mostly for non-professional jobs in the service sector. Emotional labor, as opposed to emotion management at work, occurs “when emotion regulation is performed in response to job-based emotional requirements in order to produce emotion towards – and to evoke emotion from – another person to achieve organizational goals” (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013).
This study therefore takes a unique approach in that it explores the current human resources management job requirements through the emotional labor lenses to identify how they impact the HR manager and the organization in terms of well-being and performance. As organizations are striving to make the HR function leaner and more ‘strategic’ (Francis & Keegan, 2006) and as their much needed strategic agility appears increasingly related to emotion management (Huy, 2011), the exploration of HR emotional labor is critical to maintain the well-being and performance of HR managers despite the changes in job requirements and therefore to ensure, through transformation and employee engagement, the realization of organizational goals.

In this study the literature on emotional labor (EL) will be reviewed through the main lines of research to propose an integrated view. A specific attention will be given to the transposition of EL beyond non-professional service jobs, to its impact on well-being, and to its relation with individual differences.

Findings from the analysis of semi-structured interviews of HR Managers in large corporations will be discussed with respect to the extent to which emotional labor is actually experienced by HR managers and in what way contextual and individual factors affect the psychological impact and effectiveness of HR emotional labor. Coping strategies by HR managers and social support by their managers will be examined. The impact of emotional labor on the feeling of authenticity by HR managers and organization members will be discussed.

Finally, implications of these findings will be suggested and areas for future research identified. It is proposed that the impact of emotional labor on HR managers can be reduced through the integration of personality traits in selection and development of HR managers, if
specific social support measures are put in place, if the emotional requirements are formalized or if HR managers are trained to antecedent based emotion regulations and relaxation.

Research aims and objectives:
This study aims to confirm the existence of emotional labor in the role of modern HR managers, to explore how it is experienced by the HR managers themselves and to identify the main factors that influence the effectiveness and psychological impact of HR emotional labor. This will allow us to draw practical recommendations for HR managers and their line managers with regards to the selection, development, support and training of HR managers.

Literature Review:

Emotional Labor
Three decades ago, sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild published a seminal and groundbreaking book: The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings (1983). In this book she was proposing that the growth of the service sector and the increased attention to interpersonal job demands gave birth to a new type of occupation called “emotional labor”, a parallel concept to cognitive labor or physical labor. The term “labor” allowed to differentiate emotional labor (i.e. managing feelings and expressions in exchange for a wage) from emotion management that could be performed for personal use and potentially in a private context.

Three main perspectives have been used to study EL (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013):
- The original view of Hochschild, seeing EL as *occupational requirements*, identifying *EL jobs* that require managing feelings and expressions (display rules) in exchange for a wage, by opposition to emotion work done in private for personal motives. It shows EL to be functional for the organization but dysfunctional for the employee.

- Seeing EL as *emotional displays* (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) (active or effortless expression of work role-specified emotions) that can be congruent or incongruent with feelings and can be authentic or inauthentic. It shows EL as functional for organization and employee, unless it is highly effortful and inauthentic.

- More recently, seeing EL as as *intrapsychic processes* (Morris & Feldman, 1997) (Grandey, 2000) to effortfully manage one’s feelings (deep acting) or expressions (surface acting) when interacting with others at work. It shows EL as functional for organization and employee in the case of deep acting but dysfunctional in the case of surface acting, when there is a tension (emotional dissonance) between feelings and expressions.

**Proposed integrative model**

For the purpose of this study, we propose to integrate these views in the following model (Chart 1), building on previous attempts (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003) (Holman, Martinez-Iñigo, & Totterdell, 2011) (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, Bringing Emotional Labor into Focus, 2013).

First, *display rules* (or emotion requirements) are set, implicitly or in a formalized way, by the organization for a given job. The emotions that are required to be displayed can be either *integrative* (such as love, loyalty and pride that “bind groups together”), *differentiating* (such as fear, anger or contempt that “cause group differences”) or masking (such as emotional neutrality and restraint) (Wharton & Erickson, 1993).
Employees are then constantly comparing their feelings with the display rules associated with their job. In case of congruence, they can release a genuine expression of their feelings or automatically regulated emotions and are said to be in emotional harmony (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

Otherwise, there is an emotion-rule dissonance (Holman, Martinez-Iñigo, & Totterdell, 2011) that can result in either the employee not complying with the display rules, putting oneself in emotional deviance which is dysfunctional for both the organization and the individual. Complying with the display rules creates an emotion-display dissonance (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013) that can be solved through:

- **Antecedent-focused emotion regulation** strategies also called deep acting to modify feelings before they are fully present, through cognitive reappraisal of the event that
generated the feeling or through refocusing one’s attention. These strategies are functional for the organization and the employee.

- **Response-focused emotion regulation** also called surface acting to suppress, amplify or fake the observable expression while fully keeping the original feeling internally. Such regulation is dysfunctional for the employee and often for the organization due to its perceivable inauthenticity.

The service sector has been the primary focus of EL research, mainly around professions such as flight attendants, health care providers, teachers, paralegal or call center workers (Erickson & Ritter, 2001). However, more recent work consider EL to be a central component to other jobs requiring interpersonal contact (Diefendorff, Richard, & Croyle, 2006) and leadership roles (Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008).

**Human Resources**

Although some recent research (Kulik, Cregan, Metz, & Brown, 2009) has started investigating the emotion regulation activities of HR managers in their traditional “toxin handler” role (helping organizational members cope with difficult, volatile emotions in the workplace) (Frost & Robinson, 1999), the EL component of HR roles as not been studied yet and literature only refers to HR as a factor to the EL of other organizational members. In particular, the academic literature is silent on the potential psychological impact of the successive extensions of the HR mandate to business partnership (Ulrich, 1998), human capital management (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013) and the associated emotion regulation requirements: change and culture management, employee engagement and support to leaders who lack the skills, energy or time to perform emotion management with their teams (Huy, 2011).
Methodology:

Beyond the confirmation that EL is a key component of the HR Manager role, the main goal of this study is to identify the individual and contextual factors that can affect the effectiveness and psychological impact of HR EL and to propose theoretical and practical implications for the HR profession. That interest led to a qualitative research methodology being chosen and in particular to the use of the grounded theory approach which provides “flexible, successive analytic strategies for constructing inductive theories from the data” (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008) and are “particularly well-suited to developing theoretical models from unstructured data” (Harper, 2008).

The basis was the collection, through recorded semi-structured interviews, of “grounded events”, i.e. actual incidents that could potentially require emotional labor from HR Managers. The incidents were then analyzed to reveal patterns.

Data Collection

Interviews were led following the critical incident technique (CIT), a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior (Flanagan, 1954). Incidents can be “any specifiable human activity sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions about a particular activity” (Silvester, 2008). In organizational and job analysis, CIT has been used to collect role-related behavior information from role incumbents directly and from managers of role incumbents.

Critical incidents were defined as any event, combination of events, or series of events, between an HR Manager (the interviewee or one of his subordinates) and one or more interlocutors, that caused the HR Manager to regulate his/her feelings and expressions for organizational purposes.
Interviews were performed either face to face or remotely through phone or video and audio recorded with interviewee’s consent. The sample size was determined using a *post hoc* method, considering that adequate coverage was achieved when the addition of critical incidents to the sample was not adding critical behaviors anymore.

Flanagan suggests that “if full and precise details are given, it can usually be assumed that this information is accurate. Vague reports suggest that the incident is not well remembered and that some of the data may be incorrect.” Interviewees were therefore probed to provide details and, when situations remained vague, the incidents were removed from the data collection.

Following the analysis of the main wave of interviews, personality traits appeared to be a potential significant factor of the nature, effectiveness and impact of HR EL. Several studies on other professions have established a relationship between Emotional Labor and some of the Big Five personality traits, in relation with Emotional Intelligence (Chi, Grandey, Diamond, & Royer Krimmel, 2011) (Joseph & Newman, 2010). All interviewees were therefore asked to complete a web based Big Five personality trait inventory (Potter, 2009) based on the works of UC Berkeley psychologist Oliver John (John & Srivastava, 1999).

**Data Analysis**

Following Glaser’s guidelines (Glaser, 2012), the coding of incidents and subsequent grounded theory generation was made in an inductive way, progressing as the interviews were performed and analyzed in four successive waves: informal discussions, first pilot interviews, main series of interviews, verification interviews.

As the term “critical incident” can refer either to a complete story or to discrete behaviors contained within a story, the first step was to delineate the unit of analysis. It was determined that discrete behavior would better preserve the specificity of the data. Therefore, main
incidents were, when applicable, coded into separate critical behaviors. For instance, when an HR Manager was experiencing different emotional stages during a same meeting, each stage was recorded as a separate incident. For each incident, four emotions were described: the one required to be displayed by the HR Manager (“Required”), the one experienced by the HR Manager (“Felt”), the one expressed by the HR Manager’s interlocutors (“Received”) and the one actually expressed by the HR Manager (“Actual”).

In order to categorize the different incidents, the four previously mentioned emotions were classified as per:

- their expected effect on groups, either integrative, differentiating or masking (Wharton & Erickson, 1993)
- and their nature, based on Robert Plutchik’s circumplex model (Chart 2). Plutchik’s psycho-evolutionary theory of emotion is one of the most influential classification
approaches for general emotional responses. It considers that all emotions occur as combinations, mixtures, or compounds of eight primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy.

The emotional work performed by the HR Manager is then described as:

- the emotion-rule relation, either harmony or dissonance
- and the kind of emotional work performed by the HR Manager, as per the integrative EL model proposed above: Genuine expression, auto regulated expression, antecedent focused emotion regulation, response focused emotion regulation or emotional deviance.

Finally, for each incident, the strategies used by the role incumbent to manage the situation and/or to later recover from it, are captured.

**Description of the Research Setting:**

In order for interesting patterns to emerge from the data, following a grounded theory approach, interviewees have been carefully identified and selected to have a wide variety of experiences. For convenience, potential informants have been selected from my professional network with the goal to interview generalist HR Managers whom have been expected to perform significant emotion regulation (through change management, restructuring, heavy industrial relations or working with dysfunctional leaders) and/or have shown signs of potential psychological distress (burnout, excessive stress, refusal to comply or to continue as HR) or visible emotional serenity and/or don’t have an HR boss to support them (remote jobs or Chief HR Officer roles). Given my experience in large multinational corporations, all potential informants had experience mostly in large organizations. This bias was actually thought to be positive as large companies are the most likely to reflect the HR evolutions to
business partnership (Ulrich, 1998) and human capital management (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013) described above.

Potential interviewees were then categorized according to known information (experiences or profiles) that could be predictors of a wide enough variety of experiences: showing strong emotional stability or not, having showed signs of stress or burnout or not, having considered or decided to leave the HR function or not, having worked previously in other functions or not, having experienced intensive labor relations or not, having experienced restructuring or not, having HR peers in the location or company or not, working in different industries, being from different countries.

From this list, 21 potential informants were identified as covering a wide enough range of profiles and were invited for interview. The first 15 of them to be available were actually interviewed before the sample was considered adequate.

**Pilot wave**

The first two people to answer were invited for pilot interviews for the calibration of the questions. Both were former colleagues and had been informally discussing work situations before this study. Interviews respectively lasted 60 and 90 minutes and confirmed the necessity of emotional labor in the HR Manager function and the existence of an impact on the psychological well-being of the role incumbent. Ten critical incidents were described during these two interviews. The interview notes and recordings were later analyzed with the goal to codify the incidents. Due to a lack of details in the description of the situations, this first classification would not have been possible without the information gathered before the interviews and my knowledge of the described organizations. This realization led to a revised interview structure for the second wave.
Main wave

Building on the return of experience from the pilot wave, subsequent interviews consisted of open-ended questions and individually adapted follow up questions. Participants were asked to report “stories” (critical incidents) when they thought their role elicited them to manage the level or nature of their emotional displays, whether they actually did it or not. The expected elements of the story were:

- the emotional landscape of the organization and of the HR function in the organization (what emotions were promoted, accepted or proscribed)
- the context for the role incumbent and in particular the stakes, antecedents and availability for support
- the stakeholders
- the factual events
- the emotional displays of various stakeholders
- the felt emotions of the informant
- the impact on the informant and the strategies used to manage, mitigate or recover from the incident.
- When not covered in the narratives, open ended questions were asked to clarify the context of the situations and to include enough details.

Eleven HR managers were interviewed in this phase, for 45 to 90 minutes each, and 39 critical incidents were captured, coded and analyzed. The various levels of impact on the psychological well-being of the incumbents and the diversity of the strategies used by different people to manage, mitigate or recover from similar situations were an obvious learning from this wave but could not immediately be linked to the critical incident categories identified at that stage. As extraversion and emotional stability had been spontaneously
discussed by participants, these personality traits appeared as promising factors but interviewees were difficult to categorize accurately on such scales. Rather than guessing or relying on auto-evaluation from interviewees, it was decided to ask all informants to take a personality test inventory. For reason of scientific validity, convenience for the respondents and free availability, a web based Big Five Personality Test (Potter, 2009) based on the work of Oliver John (John & Srivastava, 1999) has been selected. The URL was sent to all interviewees, asking them to return the test results by email.

All received answers were incorporated in the coding of the critical incidents for analysis.

**Validation wave**

To validate the findings of the first two waves, two more participants were interviewed and ten critical incidents were captured.

**Demographics of interviewees**

All interviewees were from the HR function although three had previously worked in other functions. All could be described as HR Managers although at different level: 3 held the top HR role in large international corporations and, at the other end, two were professionals and individual contributors. In terms of age, two interviewees were below 35 and five above 50 years old. Five were women and ten were males. Although most respondents had international roles and experience, only one was not a French citizen and was German.

Out of fifteen interviewees, twelve accepted to communicate their Big Five test results. The results are displayed below (Chart 3 and Table 1). Each full line represents the percentile scores of one respondent on each one of the five personality dimensions: Openness to Experience/Intellect (O), Conscientiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A) and Neuroticism (N). The red dotted line represent the median score of all respondents.
Three personality dimensions of the respondents significantly differ from the comparison sample (general population):

- only 18% of the comparison sample have a lower Neuroticism score than the median of the interviewees. Although the standard deviation is quite high (19.96 for an average score of 23.42), only two respondents have a Neuroticism percentile above 50 and none have a percentile above 60. We can consider that there is a significant prevalence of low neuroticism scores among the respondents compared to the general population.
- only 34% of the comparison sample have a higher Conscientiousness score than the median of the interviewees. Only three respondents have a Conscientiousness percentile below 50 but the standard deviation is too high (23.09 for an average of 62.75) to consider the high conscientiousness prevalence as significant.

- only 35% of the comparison sample have a lower Openness score than the median of the interviewees. Only four respondents have a Openness percentile above 50 but the standard deviation is too high (23.41 for an average of 40.75) to consider the low openness prevalence as significant.

Specifications of critical incidents

Fifty nine critical incidents were recorded. They were categorized by type of main interlocutor, i.e. who the interviewee is facing during the critical incident, and by type of situation (Table 2):

- Crisis : facing life threat, accidents or death of employees
- Dismissal : managing the departure of employees through individual or collective redundancy or dismissal
- Integrity : being confronted to divergent values or ethical dilemmas
- Interviews : face to face discussions with employees or candidates for any other purpose than dismissal
- Labor relations : dealing with employee representatives, trade unions and authorities
- Communication : communication or retention of information and opinions
The settings of the stories are, due to the demographics of interviewees, quite balanced in term of industry but with, in terms of country, a clear over representation of France (Table 3).

### Data Gathering and Analysis

As the interviews were performed and analyzed, multiple dimensions progressively appeared as promising for a better understanding of the emotion regulation strategies during these situations. The contextual dimensions are:

- **C1:** Purpose of felt, required and actually displayed emotions: integrative, differentiating or masking (Wharton & Erickson, 1993)
- **C2:** Nature of received (C2r), felt (C2f), required (C2q) and actually displayed (C2a) emotions as per Robert Plutchik's circumplex model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocutor / Situation</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Dismissal</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Labor Relations</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coachee</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>Managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Number of narratives by type of interlocutor and type of situation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country / Industry</th>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>High Tech</th>
<th>Industrial</th>
<th>Insurance</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Distribution of narratives by country and industry*
- C3: The kind of emotional response performed, in line with the proposed integrative model above (Chart 1): genuine expression, auto-regulated expression, antecedent focused emotion regulation, response focused emotional regulation or emotional deviance

- C4: The type of interlocutor: boss, candidate, coachee, employee, external stakeholder, managers or representatives

- C5: The type of situation: crisis, dismissal, integrity, labor relations, communication or interviews

- C6: The estimated relative level of emotional intensity during the critical incident: low, medium or high. This ranking was based on the description of the emotional display of the interlocutor or of the emotional state of the interviewee, based on Robert Plutchik's circumplex model. For instance, the emotional intensity was ranked as high when the interviewee used words of the same level as in the center of the model such as “rage”, “terror”, “admiration” or “grief” or when the interviewee directly described the intensity level (e.g. “fear was everywhere, palpable” or “there was an extreme tension in the room” or “he suddenly became purple and threw away the report across the meeting room”).

- C7: The estimated relative level of impact of the critical incident on the emotional well-being of the interviewee: low, medium or high. This classification was based on either direct or indirect feedback. For instance, a situation was ranked with a high impact when the interviewee directly stated the impact (e.g. “this situation deeply impacted me and my colleagues”) or described consequences of the impact (e.g. “I started to develop phobias” or “I could not concentrate for the rest of the day” or “For the first time in many years, I completely lost my temper”) or was showing obvious signs of agitation and stress when referring to the incident during the interview.
- C8: The main HR competency put in practice or expected from the interviewee during the critical incident, based on the Ulrich model (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013): capability builder, change champion, credible activist, HR innovator and integrator or strategic positioner.

- C9: The availability or not of another HR person in the workplace, either a peer or above in the hierarchy of the corporation but excluding subordinates.

The individual dimensions are:

- I1: The type of strategy to deal with the emotional situations in general: either “congruence”, ie. when respondents were seeking a full alignment between the opinions and emotions of their personal and professional selves, or “separation” when respondents were seeking to dissociate the emotions and opinions of their personal selves from their professional ones. This classification was based on direct statements (e.g. “I am someone else when I am at work” or “There is no such thing as an HRD me or a personal me, there are no boundaries”) or indirect indications (“I tend to protect my family and friends from anything that is work related” or “although it is not always appropriate, it is usual that my political opinions are known at work”).

- I2: The Big Five personality profile of the interviewees and especially Agreeableness (I2a) and Neuroticism (I2n)

- I3: The experience of the interviewee across companies and/or functions

- I4: The demographics of the interviewees: age (I4a) and gender (I4b).

The categorization of all incidents on each one of these dimensions was made based on the careful analysis of the interviews and of the biographies of the interviewees. The results were then consolidated in a database in order to perform crossed analysis of all parameters.
Several interesting patterns emerged around five main angles: the interlocutors faced, the type of situations, the HR dimension at stake as per the Ulrich model, the personality traits of the HRM and finally the Emotion Regulation strategy used.

**Analysis by interlocutor**

As shown above, Employees and Representatives are the two most recurring interlocutors (C4) in the narratives, followed by bosses. It is also interesting to note that these three categories of interlocutors are also the only ones associated to situations with high Intensity (C6) or high Impact (C7), as shown below (Table 4 and Table 5). Unsurprisingly, the results indicate that although interactions with representatives are the most often involving intense emotions, interactions with bosses are the ones most often highly impactful: more than half of the highly intense situations are involving representatives but “only” one third of them have a high impact while more than 70% of narratives with bosses resulted in a high impact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocutor / Intensity</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachee</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>External stakeholder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Distribution of narratives by interlocutor type and intensity level*
### Analysis by Situations

Given the frequent occurrence of Representatives in the narratives, Labor Relations is the main type of highly intense and highly impactful situation (C5), followed by Dismissals. Communication situations, although representing more than 18% of the situations, are never described as highly intense or having a high impact (Table 6 and Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation / Intensity</th>
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*Table 6: Distribution of narratives by situation type and intensity level*

<table>
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</table>

*Table 7: Distribution of narratives by situation type and impact level*
For a deeper understanding of the situations, it is interesting to identify the nature of the emotions (C2) involved in each one of the four emotional components of a narrative: the emotion received from the interlocutor (C2r), the one required (C2q) from an HRM (e.g. the “rule”), the one spontaneously felt (C2f) by the HRM as a person and finally the one actually displayed (C2a) by the HRM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocutor Emotion / Situation</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Dismissal</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Labor Relations</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Distribution of narratives by received emotion and situation

The most often received emotion (C2r) is by far aggressiveness and in close to 80% of the cases it comes in Labor Relations situations (Table 8). Given the wide range of seniority and industries, this could come as a surprise if such a large portion of the narratives would not have taken place in France where Labor Relations is marked by a culture of class conflict (Morvan, 2013) and relative impunity from courts and companies in case of verbal or physical abuse towards management in general and HR management in particular (Canonne, 2014). Recently, current of former French HR executives have started disclosing the personal impact of these situations on them (Vergne, 2013) (Lhoumeau, 2013) (Grenet, 2011). Beyond
aggressiveness in labor relations, other recurrently received emotions are fear in cases of dismissal, disapproval for what has to be communicated and interest for what cannot be communicated.

A joint analysis of required (Table 9) and felt (Table 10) emotions by situations shows the most frequent emotional dissonance experienced by HRMs. For instance, in Communication situations, the most frequent dissonance is when HRMs are expected to display optimism, for instance about the company strategy but feel disapproval. In cases of dismissal, the most frequent dissonance is when the required emotion is acceptance, for instance of the rationale of the termination, while the felt emotion is remorse. In Labor Relations situations, more than half of narratives reported feelings of anger, contempt or fear while neutrality and restraint was required.

Despite significant differences by type of situation for received, required and felt emotions, it is interesting to note that more than half of the actually displayed (C2a) emotions are Neutrality, Restraint or Acceptance (Table 11). This is true in general but also for each one of the main types of situations: communication, dismissal and labor relations. It should also be noted that anger is the fifth most frequently displayed emotion but should not be interpreted as deviance as, in 75% of the cases, it is in a labor relations context and in line with the expected behavior.
### Table 9: Distribution of narratives by required emotion and situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Emotion / Situation</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Dismissal</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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### Table 10: Distribution of narratives by felt emotion and situation

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</tbody>
</table>
### Analysis based on with Ulrich’s HR competency model

Classifying the narratives according to the main required competency domain (C8) and the type of situation (C5) shows several associations (Table 12):

- Almost all Labor Relations situations are linked to the Change Champion competency domain. This counter intuitive result is a strong indication of the labor relations dynamics in France where the legal requirement to consult representatives for any significant change of strategy, organization, method or tool has led to opposition to change being often used by representatives to gain negotiation power, popularity or status (Morvan, 2013).

- All Dismissal situations are linked to the Credible Activist competency domain. Ulrich defines HR credibility as a combined result of execution, trust and reliability and expects an activist to show consistent integrity (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013). Many emotional dissonance narratives for dismissals refer to a
perceived disconnect between credibility requirements (e.g. the commitment or obligation to execute dismissals efficiently) and activist role (e.g. showing respect, care and attention to employees or refusing unfair dismissals).

- Communication situations are linked to three competency domains: Credible Activist, Change Champion and HR Innovator and Integrator. This reflects the wide variety of information and opinions HR Managers are expected to push throughout the workforce: values, strategy, HR practices, etc. Most interviewees have underlined that the HR Manager, when in a generalist role, always need to control his communication, even during moments that seem informal as all other people in the workplace are employees and therefore potential subjects for HR activities.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Communication</th>
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<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>59</td>
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</table>

Table 12: Distribution of narratives by HR Competency and Situation

As Dismissals and Labor Relations narratives are the ones with the highest intensity and impact, the associated Credible Activist and Change Champion competency domains are the ones involved in high intensity (C6) or high impact (C7) situations (Table 13 and Table 14).
### Analysis by personality traits

Given the significant prevalence of low neuroticism scores among the interviewees and the impact of this personality trait on emotional stress (Schneider, 2004), we tried to verify its correlation to the impact of emotional labor on the psychological well-being of the HR manager. In order to do so, interviews were scanned to detect all references to either burn out syndromes, psychological distress or situations where the HRM felt he had to leave his job, company or the HR function, in relation to the emotional narratives. Crossing this analysis with previously known situations allowed to list “impacted” HRMs, i.e. HRMs who, at any point in their career, had their psychological well-being damaged or seriously threatened. We called this dimension “I5”. This list was then crossed with the Neuroticism (I2n) score, expressed both in absolute terms versus the general population (i.e. compared to the score of 50) and in relative terms versus the group of interviewees (i.e. compared to the median score of the sample, 18).
Although the numbers are too small to draw final conclusions, it is striking to see that the two interviewees having a high neuroticism score in absolute terms have been “impacted” and that out of the ten having a low neuroticism (I2n) score in absolute terms, nine have not been “impacted” (I5) (Table 15). Given the very low median, the results in relative terms are less polarized but still in the same direction: the proportion of “impacted” interviews is doubled when the neuroticism score is high in relative terms.

This is confirmed by a positive correlation coefficient of 0.501 (Chart 4).

<table>
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<th>Neuroticism / Impacted</th>
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<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Distribution of interviewees by neuroticism score and past well-being impact

Chart 4: Distribution of neuroticism scores by past well-being impact

As per a recent study (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, The dimensionality and antecedents of emotional labor strategies, 2005), Agreeableness (I2a) is, among the Big Five personality traits, the only disposition to be uniquely related to all three emotional labor strategies (C3):
genuine expression, antecedent focused emotion regulation and response focused emotion regulation. We could not replicate these results with significant correlation levels, although the direction of the correlation is the same: agreeableness is slightly positively correlated to antecedent based emotion regulation (Pearson’s $r = +0.06$) and slightly negatively correlated to response focused emotion regulation ($r = -0.14$). The weakness of the correlation could well be explained by the fact that rather than assessing general behavior of participants we were focusing on specific critical incidents identified by the interviewees when they were asked to think about different kinds of situations. This could have very well led them to artificially re-balance their emotion regulation strategies despite their natural disposition to one approach.

In order to assess the impact of Agreeableness on HRM’s emotional labor strategies, a crossed analysis was made with the overall congruence/separation strategy (I1) of interviewees, showing a positive correlation of agreeableness to congruence ($r = +0.42$). This result would tend to confirm that individuals who tend to value highly positive interpersonal relations are more likely to seek authenticity through the unity of their professional and personal opinions.

As several respondents had justified their use of separation rather congruence by a need to protect themselves, a first hypothesis was that separation could be negatively correlated to past well-being impact (I5). Such correlation could not be verified on our sample.

However, the existence of a past well-being impact seems to significantly change the agreeableness to congruence correlation. For interviewees not having suffered from past well-being impact (I5), the agreeableness (I2a) to congruence (I1) correlation coefficient ($r = +0.77$) is 80% higher than for the whole sample (Chart 5). This confirms that individuals who tend to value highly positive interpersonal relations are likely to seek authenticity through the unity of their professional and personal opinions but also indicates that they may adapt their
behavior, consciously or not, to more separation when they have been impacted in their psychological well-being.

Chart 5: Agreeableness score by congruence and past well-being impact

**Analysis by kind of emotional response**

The kind of emotion regulation (C3) performed differs depending on the situations (C5). As interviewees were asked to describe emotion regulation situations, it is not surprising that most critical incidents show emotional dissonance rather than emotional harmony. In Communication, Crisis and Interviews, the most frequent approaches have been response focused while Dismissal was mostly handled through antecedent focused ER. The most frequent situation, Labor Relations, was handled in both ways (Table 15).

In the same way that we studied, at the person level, the correlation between neuroticism and past impact on the well-being, the relation at the critical incident level between the kind of emotion regulation and the impact of the event on the HRM is interesting.
A first raw analysis shows that more than 55% of antecedent based emotion regulation situations ended up with a medium impact while 48% of response focused emotion regulation did the same. This could seem to indicate that response focused emotion regulation is more effective in mitigating the impact of emotional events, which would be quite contradictory with previous studies. The reason for that discrepancy probably is that events in our sample are not comparable because of their very different intensity.

We therefore combined the intensity variable and the impact variable to calculate a third variable called “Response Effect” (C10) with three potential values : “neutral” if intensity and impact are equal, “effective” if intensity is higher than impact and “worsening” if intensity is lower than impact. The percentage of events with an “effective” outcome gives the efficiency level of each kind of emotion regulation. On the 59 studied situations, antecedent focused emotion regulation has an efficiency level of 61%, auto regulated expression 33% and
response focused emotion regulation 13% (Table 16). Emotional deviance and genuine expression show efficiency of 0% but on too small a number of events to draw conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response / Response Effect</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Worsening</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent focused ER</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response focused ER</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto regulated expression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Deviance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Deviance (Partial)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine Expression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Distribution of narratives by kind of response and response effect

Findings and Discussion

The first result of the study is a confirmation that, although the HR function has never been studied by Emotional Labor literature, modern HR Managers in large corporations do experience emotional labor. The characteristics and effects of emotional labor for HR managers are comparable to what has been described for other occupations with a few specificities.

HR specific contextual EL factors:

Three main contextual factors differentiate HR EL. First, results show that HR Managers are exposed to intense and impactful emotional situations not only with their bosses like any worker does but also with employee representatives and with employees not seen as colleagues but as potential HR topics. The climate of labor relations in France and the increasing expectations from, and of, employees are the most often quoted explanations for the high number of intense and impactful situations with these interlocutors.
A second contextual factor is the “loneliness” or isolation of the HR Manager. In 41 of the 59 analyzed narratives, the HR Manager had no HR colleague next to him/her, other than subordinates. This situation, obvious for the Chief HR Officer of a company, also happens often when HR Managers are the highest HR person of the company in a site, country, region or division. While any other function can find relief and support from any colleague, most interviewees expressed that there was not a single person they could freely talk to in their workplace. The main quoted reasons for this inability to get support from co-workers because of speech control are the confidentiality of the topics they worked on, the necessity to keep some distance with colleagues who could at any moment become “HR topics” and the ambivalent “Business Partner” relation with the General Manager. As explained below, peer support is a key mitigation and recovery strategy for HR EL. This is consistent with the fact that, in our sample, narratives ended-up with a high impact (C7) in 32% of the cases when no HR colleague was available and in 22% of the cases when HR colleagues were available.

A third contextual factor is related to the specific HR situations (C5). Based on Ulrich’s competency model (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013) it could be anticipated that the Change Champion competency would be significantly associated to EL situations. Results for the sample actually show that the two most frequent, intense and impactful EL situations are Labor Relations and Dismissal, respectively associated to the Change Champion and Credible Activist competency domains. Although Labor Relations and Dismissals are traditional HR activities, they could very well be more emotionally demanding nowadays than a few years ago, especially in France. HR Managers are increasingly caught in between, on one side, a business need for an increased pace of change and, on the other side, employee representatives who learnt how to use obstruction to change as a negotiation weapon. Also, in the French context of high unemployment rate, legal uncertainty, exponential harassment
accusations and financial constraints, dismissals require a high degree of emotion management.

**HR specific personal factors**

Not only could we identify that interviewed HR Managers had significantly lower Neuroticism (I2n) levels than the general population on the Big Five personality inventory, we also could find a correlation between the levels of Neuroticism and of psychological well-being impact on the HR Manager. This indicates that HR Managers with low neuroticism could be less prone to have their psychological well-being at risk.

Results also indicated that the Agreeableness score of the HR manager was correlated to a congruent work/life approach of emotions and opinions. This “congruence” preference can be expected to be a positive factor to authenticity and therefore to the effectiveness of emotional labor for the organization. However, it should be noted that all Deviance responses in the sample were performed by HR Managers having a congruent approach. Finally, absolutely no correlation could be found between the impact on the psychological well-being (I5) and Congruence (I1) or Agreeableness (I2a).

**HR emotion regulation strategies**

The effect of the different kinds of emotion regulation performed in the studied narratives is consistent with what was anticipated from other studies and formalized in our proposed model (Chart 1). Antecedent based emotion regulation is by far the most efficient response to mitigate the impact on oneself of an emotionally intense situation. On the contrary, response focused emotion regulation is most often of neutral effect and almost has often worsening as effective. This would indicate a clear benefit for HR Managers to use “deep acting” rather than “surface acting”, for their well-being but also probably for organizational efficiency: although through the interviews we could not measure the impact of the narratives on the
organization, studies on other occupations (Grandey, 2000) all indicate the higher organizational efficiency of antecedent focused emotion regulation thanks to the higher level of perceived authenticity it conveys.

**HR mitigation and recovery strategies**

During the interviews, HR Managers were asked to list, for each situation, what they did before or during the event to mitigate the impact of the emotional situation on them and what they did after the event to recover from it. The great diversity of answers did not allow to perform the same kind of quantitative analysis as for other variables. However, some patterns appeared.

Most participants quoted distancing and preparation as key strategies used prior to emotional events. In that context, distancing means avoiding emotional involvement with any person who may later be part of an emotional situation which, in the case of an HR Manager, often means anyone in the workplace. Most HR Managers would set themselves some boundaries, for instance being social but not friendly, leaving early enough during company parties, etc. Being prepared was also often quoted as key to successful emotion regulation. It involves the knowledge of the topics discussed and of the interlocutors but also the anticipation of the potential feelings and reactions of the interlocutors, before the event.

During the event, the most often described techniques were the escape, mostly through the interruption of the meeting or through diversion, and the mental reassessment of the situation, i.e. a preparation for antecedent based emotion regulation.

After the emotional events, three main practices are used by HR Managers to recover from emotional stress. The first one is to talk to a trusted peer, colleague, friend or partner, depending on the situation. Interestingly, some isolated HR Managers said they decided at
some point to breach their distancing principles to “restate” a colleague as “friend rather than co-worker”. The second set of techniques involve relaxation or physical activities: breathing, going for a walk, etc. Finally, many HR Managers use a coach or a therapist in order to be able to share their burden without involving co-workers or having to open bridges between their professional and personal lives.

**Practical recommendations**

The first practical implication of the findings of this study is on the selection of candidates to and HR Manager position in a large organization. The amount of Labor Relations and Dismissals or the level of requirement on the Change Champion and Credible Activist competency domains are quite easy to assess and could be considered as a good indicator of the emotional labor intensity of the role. Once an HR Manager role is identified as involving intense emotional labor, it would be advisable to consider three dimensions for selection:

- Low neuroticism could be predictive of a good resilience to HR emotional labor
- Agreeableness could be predictive of the authenticity approach. A high agreeableness would tend to indicate a congruent approach which would fit well roles where a high perceived authenticity is key while deviance is either unlikely due to a participative and ethical approach or accepted by the management. On the contrary, a low agreeableness could indicate a separation approach well adapted to roles where the sensitivity to perceived authenticity is lower and where the risk associated to deviance is high, for instance due to an authoritarian leadership style or diverging values.
- Selection interviews should verify the ability for the candidate to function without friendship in the workplace if the role does not allow a lot of contact with HR peers.

In terms of talent development and learning, the resilience and efficiency of HR Managers could mainly benefit from developing three skills:
- How to prepare each emotional meeting, for instance by putting oneself literally in the other’s seat to simulate the conversation and better understand and anticipate the reactions.

- How to reassess situations and opinions about people and, more generally, all antecedent based emotion regulation techniques.

- How to relax, through deep breathing, meditation or any relaxation technique.

Finally, the work environment of the HR Manager could be adapted to minimize the impact of emotional labor:

- The hierarchical manager of the HR Manager should be made aware of the factors and consequences of emotional labor and prompted to provide regular support and listening to the HR Manager

- The emotion regulation responsibilities of the HR Manager should be formalized, in the same way as toxin handling responsibilities (Kulik, Cregan, Metz, & Brown, 2009)

- Even when no HR peer is available in the workplace, peer coaching or peer talking could be organized to make sure isolated HR Managers all have a trustable person to talk to.

- A guideline should be agreed to make sure HR Managers are always assisted by a peer or a manager when they are facing hostile groups such as Trade Unions.

- An integrity charter should be made available and enforced to limit the situations where the HR Manager has to fight alone for ethical principles, for instance in the case of discriminations.
Limitations

The main limitation of the study comes from the sample of HR Managers that was used. The number of interviewees was sized for the qualitative identification of patterns but is not large enough to validate quantitatively all hypotheses, given the number of variables. Also, the HR Managers who were interviewed were mainly coming from France and therefore cannot be considered as representative of the situation in any other country.

The qualitative grounded theory approach involved interpretation in the categorization of the narratives and in the identification of patterns. The resulting imprecision of measurement implied to work with lower correlation coefficients than with a more normative measurement.

Finally, the chosen methodology did not allow to reliably measure the efficiency for the organization of the emotional labor performed by the HR manager: all efficiency indications were given by the HR Managers and not by an independent source.

Future Research

Future research should further investigate the relation between the emotional labor strategies used by HR Managers and their effect on the organization, in particular through the measurement of perceived authenticity.

Also, HR Managers from more diverse geographies and profiles could be studied to investigate the potential replication of the findings of this study.
Conclusion

The Human Resources function has come a long way since Personnel Administration, progressively gaining credibility on more value creating activities. Now true business partner, HR is also more and more truly working on human material: engagement, culture, psychosocial risks, etc. Today’s HR Manager is getting, together with the excitement of being at the core of the business and the joy of working with so noble a material as people, the anxiety of playing with a very special kind of fire: emotions. More and more, HR leaders are asked to design the emotional landscape of organizations, to handle the toxic emotions of employees and to regulate one’s emotions. This study shows that the journey is not without dangers but also that the right people, with the right training and the right support can, by combining authenticity to themselves and to others, manage emotions effectively for the organization and safely for themselves.
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