Chapter I

Introduction

“Deprived of meaningful work, men and women lose their reason for existence; they go stark, raving mad.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Contemporary discourses on work and career increasingly highlight the opportunity and the desire for individuals to attend to the questions of meaning and purpose. Changes in the employee-employer relationship, the growing presence of alternatives to the traditional forms of employment (e.g., temporary, part-time) and decreasing security provided by organizations to their employees have given rise to contemporary careers that can be characterized as multi-directional, dynamic and self-directed (Baruch, 2004; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Cappelli & Keller, 2013). The self-directed nature of the contemporary career suggests that individuals are now taking greater responsibility for the development and management of their careers (King, 2004; Sturges, Conway, Guest, & Liefooghe, 2005) and are relying on their careers as an important locus of work identification in the contemporary work environment (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Actively taking initiative toward one’s career stimulates individuals to engage in sensemaking about their work- and career-related motivations, values and beliefs, which are important for their successful career development (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). By engaging in career-related sensemaking, individuals can satisfy their desire for finding meaning and purpose in their careers (Savickas, 2000; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Mcmorland, 2006), which is increasingly expressed by today’s workforce and especially by those individuals who represent the new
generation (Moore, 2014). While the topic of work-related meaning and purpose is increasingly recognized as important by scholars and practitioners, our understanding of what career means to individuals in the contemporary work context and especially how it can contribute to their career and work behaviors remains incomplete.

Given the emphasis of contemporary careers on individual career agency and responsibility, there has been a growing body of research examining the positive outcomes of the contemporary career for individuals and organizations. The majority of scholars focused on examining the positive effects of the contemporary career on individuals’ career attitudes and behaviors, such as employability, career success and well-being (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Scholars who contributed to the limited but growing research on the organizational outcomes of the contemporary career, however, appeared to disagree on whether the self-directed contemporary career benefits or damages organizations. While some scholars related the contemporary career to higher employee organizational commitment, task performance and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Çakmak-Otluoğlu, 2012; Baruch, 2014), others showed that it results in lower organizational commitment, higher employee turnover and decreased social capital in organizations (e.g., Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Rodrigues, Guest, Oliveir & Alfes, 2015).

One of the ways to address the debates that exist on the outcomes of the contemporary career and to contribute to the further development of career theory (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989; Gunz & Peiperl, 2007) is to attend to the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers. One’s career serves as an important source of purpose, belonging, and identity, suggesting that the understanding of where and how individuals find meaning in work is fundamental to how they approach, enact and experience their work and working environment (Schein, 1978; Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 2010, 1990;
The emphasis on the “subjective” nature of the contemporary career is also reflected in the way it is defined – “the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over a span of the person’s life” (Hall, 2002, p. 12). This definition clearly suggests that one’s career means more than just a functional description derived from the nature of an occupation or an organizational structure. Furthermore, because the meaning of one’s career is constructed in a context (Young & Collin, 2004), zooming into what career means to an individual provides an opportunity to capture the contextual nature of careers.

The abovementioned logic suggests that attending to the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers can matter for our understanding of individual career and work behaviors. The importance of understanding individuals’ career-related meanings was recognized by career scholars in studies of individual career success (e.g., Heslin, 2005; Lee et al., 2006; Dries, 2011). However, limited research has explored how these meanings can enrich our understanding of individual career and work behaviors. Research studying meaning of work (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Rosso et al., 2010) and calling (e.g., Hall & Chandler, 2005; Duffy & Dik, 2013) have been the primary fields giving attention to this topic. This doctoral thesis advocates for the need to integrate the insights from these research fields with those from the careers research. In this way, it responds to a recent call for the careers field to open up its horizons to other research fields (Baruch, Szűcs, & Gunz, 2015). Drawing on insights from the careers, meaning of work and calling research fields, this thesis explores how the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers (the meaning of career) guide individual career and work behavior in the contemporary work environment. Given the relative newness of research on the meaning of career in relation to individual and organizational outcomes (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) and the
“subjective” nature of the concept itself, I focused on using qualitative research methods in three out of the four studies. Nevertheless, in one of the studies, I used a quantitative research method to test the ideas developed in the exploratory studies. Further, I outline main concepts about where and how individuals find meaning in their careers. This conceptual overview is followed by reflections on the main themes that highlight how the four studies collectively and in their own unique ways contribute to the contemporary discourse in career studies. In conclusion, I provide a short summary of the remaining chapters, focusing on each of the conducted studies and their integration within the framework of this thesis.

1.1. Conceptual Background

What does your career mean to you? The contemporary discourse in career studies suggests that this question is likely to trigger individuals to reflect on the things that matter to them in the context of their work(life), grounded in their personal identity rather than their identity coupled to a specific job or an organization (Hall, Briscoe, & Kram, 1997). Often referred to as a career identity (Hall, 2002; Fugate et al., 2004) or professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), identity in the context of careers represents one’s self-concept as informed career-related values, motivations and beliefs that provide an answer to the question, “Who am I?” (Lysova, Richardson, Khapova & Jansen, 2015). Career identity, thus, serves as an important source of meaning in one’s career.

One way to understand what career means to individuals is to explore their work-related values. Defined as “the end states people desire and feel they ought to be able to realize through working” (Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990, p. 21), work-related values serve as an important source of meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010) and, thus, shed light on what career means to individuals. However, what are the work-related values that
matter in the contemporary work environment? A growing discourse on workplace spirituality, ethics and making a difference behavior (e.g., Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2013) emphasizes the importance and relevance of pro-social or other-oriented work values for understanding today’s individuals, organizations and society. Thus, in this doctoral thesis, I chose to distinguish between the meaning of career as triggered by work values that are more “self-centered” (i.e., concern for personal gains and acting according to self-serving goals to maximize expected personal outcomes) and those that are more “other-oriented” (i.e., concern for the welfare of others) (Korsgaard et al., 1997; Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004). This approach corresponds to existing research that argues for the importance of differentiating between perceptions of work meaningfulness originating from actions directed toward the self and actions directed toward others (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Rosso et al., 2010).

Further, the meaning of work literature suggests that individuals’ beliefs about the role or function of work in life also serve as a source of meaning in one’s work and career (Rosso et al., 2010). These beliefs, thus, can also shed light on what career means to individuals. In particular, research suggests that this type of understanding can be acquired by examining whether individuals have a job, career or calling work orientation (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). According to Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997), people with a job orientation see work as a means to an end that allows them to acquire the resources needed to enjoy their life away from work. In turn, individuals with a career orientation have a deep personal investment in their work aimed at achieving the rewards that accompany career advancement. Finally, people with a calling orientation find work to be an end in itself; thus, they work for the fulfillment that doing the work brings, and they see their work as contributing to a greater good. The ability to find and pursue one’s ultimate purpose in life and work has great importance for many individuals, which
explains why in the last decade there has been growing scholarly attention to the topic of calling (e.g., Hall & Chandler, 2005; Duffy & Dik, 2013). In addition to the growing discourse on the meaning of work (e.g., Rosso et al., 2010), the concept of calling reflects the discourse on self-centered versus other-oriented work values (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Lips-Wiersma, 2002). Thus, the calling concept is closely linked to the understanding of the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers, and can facilitate my exploration of individual career and work behaviors through the prism of the meaning of career.

The scholarly debate on calling addresses how people derive identity, meaning and purpose from their working lives (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Elangovan, Pinder & McLean, 2010). While this concept has a long history, as it is widely used in religious and philosophical studies (Hardy, 1990), only in the last decade has it received growing attention in the management and vocational psychology literature. Given the history of the concept, authors tend to disagree about the nature and definition of calling. While most agree that one’s work can express or provide a sense of purpose and meaning, they differ in the conceptualization of calling’s origin, such as whether callings emerge from an external caller or an inner drive (Duffy, Allan, Bott, & Dik, 2014). Specifically, some scholars note that calling can be understood as meaningful or purposeful engagement in a (work) domain arising from a sense of being “called” by God or some other external source (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). Other researchers see it stemming from a sense of destiny (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 51) or from a strong sense of centrality to one’s identity (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). While the first group of scholars relies on a more sacred understanding of calling, the latter group suggests a more secular understanding.

Considering the subjective and experiential nature of the contemporary career, in this thesis, I regard calling as a secular concept because it allows an enriched understanding of what career means to individuals and how it guides their career and work
behaviors. A growing stream of research supports this argument by showing that the secular understanding of calling is associated with important career-related and organization-related attitudes and behaviors (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Hirschi & Hermann, 2013). Further, I suggest that the calling concept corresponds to and complements the discourse on the contemporary career and, in particular, the discourse on the protean career (Hall, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). According to Briscoe and Hall (2006), the protean career is “a career in which the person is 1) values-driven in the sense that the person’s internal values provide the guidance and measures of success for the individual’s career, and 2) self-directed in personal career management – having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands” (p. 8). Both calling and the protean career emphasize an action orientation toward one’s career (Elangovan et al., 2010). Furthermore, Hall and Chandler (2005) propose that the protean career allows an individual to follow his or her own distinctive “path with the heart” and, thus, to experience one’s career as a calling. Thus, these experiences are associated with enhanced self-awareness and adaptability, which support individuals in proactively guiding their career and clarifying the meanings that they ascribe to their careers (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

1.2. The Main Focus of the Research: Key Themes

The theoretical overview of the main concepts presented above and covered in this doctoral thesis aims to draw attention to the yet underexplored topic of what meanings individuals ascribe to their careers in the context of the contemporary work environment. This thesis proposes that attending to one’s meaning of career could provide unique insights into individuals’ career and work behaviors. By making a connection between one’s career, the meanings individuals ascribe to it and individuals’ career and work behaviors, in particular, this thesis contributes to the scarce research on the relation
between careers and organizational outcomes (e.g., Becker & Haunschild, 2003; Lam, 2007; Dokko, Wilk, & Rothbard, 2009). In this thesis, I integrate the insights from careers, meaning of work and calling research to answer the following main research question:

*How do the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers guide them in their career and work behaviors?*

In so doing, this thesis pays a tribute to individuals as powerful actors in their careers and in their organizations, which reflects the contemporary discourse in careers research. It also demonstrates that attending to the meaning of one’s career matters for understanding not only how individuals develop their careers to enable their career success but also how they engage in important work behaviors that can contribute to organizational success. To achieve the main research objective, this thesis relies on four empirical studies that reflect three key themes: the meaning of career and (a) individual career-related outcomes, (b) innovation in organizations, and (c) individuals coping with contextual uncertainty. I will now further introduce each of the key themes and highlight the importance and relevance of studying them.

**1.2.1. The Meaning of Career and Individual Career-Related Outcomes**

So far, I have discussed the changes in the contemporary career environment that resulted in individuals taking more responsibility for their career development and in career becoming an anchor of one’s meaning and work identification. These changes suggest that a better understanding of what career means for someone can advance our knowledge about individual career-related outcomes. To achieve this, it is important to integrate the discourses on the meaning of work and contemporary careers. However, the existing studies have only integrated these discourses to a limited extent. For example, research has shown that an understanding of what career and work means to someone is
related to increased career satisfaction (e.g., Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005), job satisfaction (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), and well-being (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Steger & Dik, 2009). These findings suggest a positive influence of the meanings individuals ascribe to their careers on their career-related experiences. However, our understanding of how this meaning influences individuals’ career development and career-related decision making remains incomplete. In a recent paper (Duffy & Dik, 2013), the authors suggest that more research is needed that focuses on behavioral outcomes of performing work with purpose and meaning. Specifically, in this doctoral thesis, I propose that being clear about one’s motivations, values and beliefs could facilitate individuals in acquiring career capital, thus enabling their employability in today’s turbulent work environment (Arthur et al., 1995; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Therefore, when considered in the context of the contemporary discourse in careers research, the meaning that individuals ascribe to their careers should enable their engagement in career-related behaviors that are proactive and self-directed in nature. Thus, attending to the meaning of career should provide an enriched understanding of individual decision making in the work domain. In addition, given that the meaning becomes clarified in the processes of individual career sensemaking that are shaped by the context and other people (Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, 2004; Bosley, Arnold, & Cohen, 2007), focusing on the meaning of career allows one to capture its multi-domain nature. Acknowledging the impact of context and factors reflecting different life domains on individuals’ career decision making is increasingly recognized as an important research direction given the continuous blurring of the work and non-work domains (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2008; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

1.2.2. The Meaning of Career and Innovation in Organizations

A growing stream of research suggests that innovation has become an increasingly important determinant of organizational performance and long-term survival because it
allows organizations to build their competitive advantage (e.g., Anderson, Potočnik, & Zhou, 2014). This research often defines innovation as the development and introduction of new and improved ways of doing things that occur at different levels (e.g., individual or organization, etc.). In contemporary work environments, organizations increasingly rely on employee innovation, which suggests that employees need to take a proactive approach toward their engagement in organizations (Grant & Ashforth, 2008; De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Given the importance of innovation and (related to it) proactive work behaviors in today’s work environment, scholars have become increasingly interested in what drives these behaviors. Many scholars suggest that to answer these questions, it is important to examine individual-level predictors of proactive work behaviors aimed at bringing about change and innovation in organizations (Anderson et al., 2014; Ghitulescu, 2013). However, limited research to date has specifically focused on the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers as one of these potential individual-level predictors. Rosso and colleagues (2010) suggest that the meanings that individuals give to their work guide their enactment of their work environment, which can then take the form of proactive and innovation-related behaviors. The aforementioned addresses innovation occurring at the individual level, but what about innovation occurring at the organizational level? Founders play a crucial role in shaping their company’s values, culture, strategic choices and performance outcomes (e.g., innovation, survival, etc.) (Schein, 1992; Nelson, 2003; Baron, 2007). Thus, exploring the meanings that founders ascribe to their careers might provide important insights into organizational innovation (i.e., innovative product development). Existing research has only recently started to acknowledge the importance of attending to the meanings that founders ascribe to their work for understanding organizational outcomes and has emphasized the need for future research that addresses this issue (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Powell & Baker, 2014).
1.2.3. The Meaning of Career and Individuals Coping with Contextual Uncertainty

As I discussed in the very beginning of this introduction, individuals currently operate in a changing work context. In such a context, individuals increasingly face uncertainty triggered by a) changes in their organizations, b) insecurity and instability in the contemporary work environment, c) the rapidly changing nature of industry, and even d) engagement in self-exploration. One of the ways to cope with this uncertainty is to engage in sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Given that sensemaking is rooted in identity construction (Mills, 2003, Weick et al., 2005), identity serves as a frame a reference for interpreting this uncertain context (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Weick, 1995). Thus, one’s identity and the individual motivations, values and beliefs it comprises matter for individual coping with contextual uncertainty. Given that it is now an individual career rather than a job or organization that an individual identifies with in the work domain (e.g., Albert et al., 2000), I propose that to make sense of uncertainty in the work context, individuals rely on their career-related identity to provide them with meaning in their careers. These career-related meanings are then likely to guide their behaviors in coping with the contextual uncertainty because when activated, career-related identity “equips individuals with a specific view on the world and guides behavior in the immediate present” (Stebbins, 1970, p. 35). Contemporary research that attends to the meanings that individuals ascribe to their careers suggests that individual sensemaking and identity construction are central to the career concept (Savickas, 2000; Cohen et al., 2004). Nevertheless, limited research has elaborated on the link between this process of meaning making, on the one hand, and individuals’ behaviors in the work domain as a way to cope with uncertain contexts, on the other hand. By addressing this shortcoming, in this thesis, I illuminate the value of employing the career perspective for understanding individuals’ career and work behaviors.
1.3. Thesis Outline and Research Approach

To address the identified main research question, the current thesis aims to examine the three important themes related to it by relying on four empirical studies that are presented in separate chapters. While each of the four chapters represents a separate study reflecting on one or more of the key themes, all four chapters are connected to each other because they all employ the meaning of career lens to answer their particular research questions. Considering the emphasis of this thesis on the meaning aspect of one’s career and the relatively nascent nature of the research on this topic (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), I have primarily focused on using qualitative research methods for the design of my studies (i.e., a single case study, a multiple case study and personal career inventories). The choice of a qualitative approach corresponds to previous research suggesting that such an approach is appropriate for exploring the meaning of work (e.g., Lips-Wiersma, 2002) and identity construction (e.g., Pratt et al., 2006). Nevertheless, I wanted to have the possibility to test some of my emergent ideas. For this reason, in one of the four chapters, I used a quantitative research method (i.e., a cross-sectional survey on two samples). In addition to the variety of methods used, each chapter has a unique study setting (public and private; profit and non-profit). As I further show, the four chapters follow a particular logical order that highlights their close connection in contributing to a better understanding of individual career and work behaviors.

Chapter 2 represents the first illustration of how attending to the meanings that employees ascribe to their careers provides unique insights into their behavior in organizations. In particular, it seeks to explore how career identity informs employees’ willingness to engage in organizational change initiatives. The chapter reports the results from a qualitative case study exploring the experiences of 29 employees involved in a planned “bottom-up” organizational change in a Dutch non-profit organization. Drawing
on the findings that emerged, I suggest that looking through the lens of the meaning of career enriches our understanding of how employees cope with organizational change through making sense of it as well as proactively engaging in it. In exploring the meanings that employees ascribe to their careers, I develop a typology of change-related behavior that distinguishes a higher level employee engagement in the change (change-supportive employee behavior) from a lower level engagement (change-inactive employee behavior). Furthermore, I propose that employee participation in an organizational change initiative serves as an important learning experience that contributes to one’s career.

Chapter 3 builds on the findings from the previous chapter and, in particular, on the identified connection between the meaning of career and work behavior. This chapter investigates whether having meaning and purpose in one’s career (i.e., calling) contributes to individuals taking a proactive approach toward their careers (engaging in proactive professional development and building their employability) and their organizations (engaging in innovative work behavior). To do so, I conducted quantitative research on two cross-sectional samples: a sample of employees from a healthcare organization and alumni of a large public university. With this diverse set of organizational settings, I was able to address the contextual limitation of Chapter 2. This chapter also reports the results of the two studies: Study 1 tests the direct relationship between calling and employability, and Study 2 tests the mediation model, with calling being associated with employability and innovative work behavior through proactive professional development. The results of the studies show that no direct relationship exists between calling and employability. A relationship only exists when employee engagement in proactive professional development is taken into account. Proactive professional development partially mediates the calling-employability relationship, making it indirect and positive, but at the same time, it suppresses the effect of calling on employability, making the association between the two
variables negative. Furthermore, I find that calling is positively associated with innovative work behavior, and this relationship is fully mediated by employee engagement in proactive professional development.

Chapter 4 extends the findings of the previous chapter from a focus on only individual-level outcomes of attending to individual meanings of career to a focus on organizational-level outcomes. It aims to explore how the founder’s calling influences the way founders of creative companies such as video game companies manage the tension between the need to focus on creative production and the need to focus on business goal pursuit in innovative product development. Building on a multiple case study of 20 game companies representing the Dutch video game industry, this chapter shows that attending to the game company founder’s calling toward the video game industry enriches the understanding of the strategic intent that game company focus on in innovative game development and of the strategies these founders utilize to manage the creative-business intent tension in innovative game development. For example, I propose that a stronger degree of the founder’s calling toward the video game industry induce the activation of a professional rather than a company developer role identity by the founder, thus leading to game company founders pursuing the creative rather than the business strategic intent. The focus on pursuing the creative intent only, however, can limit founders’ possibilities to build sustainable game companies. Game company founders with a strong calling who co-activate the two role identities are more likely to find a way to manage the creative-business intent tension through the utilization of integration and differentiation strategies.

Finally, Chapter 5 illuminates the role the spouse plays in managers’ career sensemaking. In this way, it addresses the limitations of the previous three chapters as focused exclusively on career-related meanings grounded in the work context while not accounting for the potential role of the non-work context and the people associated with it.
in shaping the meanings that individuals make of their careers and, thus, individuals’
career-related decisions. Building on qualitative data gathered through a personal career
inventory from 88 managers who were in the final stage of their EMBA program, I propose
that attending to the role of spouses matters for understanding managers’ career
sensemaking. The findings reveal that managers see their spouses as providing them with
emotional, informational and instrumental career support. They further show that the
meanings that managers ascribe to their careers consider their non-work role identities,
which, together with spousal career support, shape the extent to which managers involve
family considerations in their career sensemaking.

In the last chapter, Chapter 6, I summarize the key findings from all of the studies
and relate them to each other while discussing implications, limitations and future research
avenues.

1.4. Thesis Research Output

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the research output from my dissertation,
including conference presentations at international peer-review conferences and journal
articles (published and in preparation for submission to a journal) for each of the empirical
chapters (Chapter 2-5). This table also provides an overview of the study methods and
samples used in these four chapters. When working on the chapters, I cooperated with
several co-authors. For this reason, I use the first-personal plural (“we”) to refer to the
authors in these chapters.
Table 1.1. Thesis research output

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<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Conference presentations</th>
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<td>A Call to Action: The Implications of Calling for Employability, Innovative Work, and Proactive Professional Development</td>
<td>A cross-sectional survey</td>
<td>Employees from a health organization ($N = 423$) Alumni of a large public university ($N = 583$)</td>
<td>Accepted for presentation at the <em>Academy of Management Annual Meeting</em> (2016)</td>
<td>In preparation for submission to <em>Journal of Vocational Behavior</em> (JVB)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Founders and the Creative-Business Intent Tension in the Video Game Industry: What Insights Can a Calling Offer?</td>
<td>A multiple case study Interviews</td>
<td>Game companies ($N = 20$) from which 27 founders were interviewed</td>
<td>Presented at the <em>EGOS Colloquium</em> (2016); <em>Academy of Management Annual Meeting</em> (2015)</td>
<td>In preparation for submission to <em>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</em> (ET&amp;P)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Role of the Spouse in Managers’ Family-Related Career Sensemaking</td>
<td>Personal career inventories</td>
<td>Executive MBA managers ($N = 88$)</td>
<td>Presented at the <em>Academy of Management Annual Meeting</em> (2014); <em>EGOS</em> (2014); <em>Work &amp; Family Research Network Conference</em> (2014)</td>
<td>Published in <em>Career Development International</em> (CDI) in 2015. The paper received <em>Emerald Literati Network Award for Excellence 2016: Outstanding Paper</em></td>
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