

Career Transitions in Midlife: Exploring Meaning-Making and Role Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of individuals undergoing career transitions in midlife. The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with 27 participants aged 41 to 55 from various regions of India who had undergone significant career transitions within the past two years. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews were conducted in English or Hindi, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 software, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. The research emphasized narrative richness and contextual understanding, and efforts were made to enhance credibility through member checking and reflexive journaling. Analysis revealed four main categories: Triggers for Career Transition, Meaning-Making During Transition, Role Adjustment in New Careers, and Personal Growth and Transformation. Participants reported diverse triggers including health challenges, organizational pressures, identity conflict, and a desire for work-life balance. Meaning-making processes involved re-evaluating life purpose, redefining success, and integrating past experiences. Role adjustment included identity reconstruction, acquiring new skills, and adapting to new work environments. Ultimately, participants described growth in self-awareness, resilience, and empowerment. These findings highlight that midlife career changes are deeply emotional, cognitively complex, and contextually influenced, often serving as transformative turning points. Midlife career transitions involve more than occupational change—they encompass shifts in identity, values, and life orientation. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the psychological and contextual dimensions of such transitions and calls for more responsive support systems, both organizational and societal, to facilitate healthy and purposeful change during this life stage.

Keywords: Midlife career transition, meaning-making, role adjustment, identity reconstruction.

1. Introduction

Emerging research shows that midlife is accompanied by physiological, psychological, and cognitive changes that can shape decision-making and role expectations. For example, cognitive performance in areas like memory, verbal fluency, and processing speed begins to shift during this stage, sometimes influencing occupational capacity or self-perception of competence (Blodgett et al., 2021). Additionally, neurobiological and endocrinological changes, such as those linked to menopause in women, have been associated with increased vulnerability to mental health challenges that may impact career stability or satisfaction (Horst et al., 2025). Similarly, cognitive decline in midlife has been linked to earlier life factors such as long-term glucose variability (Kang et al., 2024), body mass index (Kang et al., 2023), or antibiotic use (Mehta et al., 2022), reflecting the cumulative biopsychosocial burden experienced by many individuals. These physiological challenges, combined with shifting family roles, financial pressures, and a reevaluation of life priorities, often culminate in career disruption or voluntary transformation.

The psychosocial context of midlife further complicates career trajectories. Role strain, especially related to caregiving responsibilities and work demands, is a common stressor in midlife, and it has been shown to significantly predict cardiovascular and emotional health in women (Stewart et al., 2019). These stressors are not only a source of discomfort but may also serve as catalysts for reevaluating long-held values and professional commitments. Stewart and colleagues found that stress and reward from social roles significantly influence women's long-term health trajectories (Stewart et al., 2020). Midlife, therefore, becomes a window for deep self-reflection, prompting individuals to seek new meaning, restructure priorities, and pursue roles more aligned with intrinsic motivations.

Meaning-making, a process rooted in cognitive and emotional reinterpretation of life events, has been identified as a central mechanism through which individuals navigate change and reconstruct identity. Career transitions during midlife often involve an internal reassessment of what constitutes success, purpose, and fulfillment. Studies on midlife cognitive trajectories demonstrate that neighborhood socioeconomic status (Cheng et al., 2024), early-life metabolic factors (Hazzouri et al., 2020), and social determinants such as road proximity (Parker-Allotey et al., 2022) influence mental and emotional functioning in ways that can either support or impede such reinterpretations.

These findings underscore the importance of understanding midlife not simply as a chronological milestone but as a deeply context-sensitive life phase, shaped by layered histories and current environments.

Parallel to this, the physical embodiment of aging and its associated markers—such as periaortic fat (Khoudary et al., 2019), gait speed (Blodgett et al., 2021), and body composition (Jyväkorpi et al., 2020)—can impact perceived vitality and workplace performance. Bao and colleagues found that being overweight in midlife was linked to an increased risk of cancer later in life, further connecting this life stage to long-term health trajectories (Bao et al., 2019). The awareness of bodily decline or health vulnerability often acts as a powerful motivator for career change, as individuals seek vocations that offer not just financial stability but also holistic well-being.

Gender also plays a critical role in shaping midlife career decisions. Women, for instance, often navigate midlife transitions alongside menopause-related symptoms, caregiving roles, and ageism in the workplace, creating a layered experience of constraint and potential growth (Horst et al., 2025). In this context, emotional regulation, cognitive endurance, and resilience become essential psychological tools. Moreover, midlife depression and anxiety, especially among women, have been linked to reduced physical performance and increased social withdrawal, reinforcing the urgency to understand how psychosocial distress interacts with vocational functioning (Ganasarajah et al., 2019).

Career transition in midlife is not solely about exiting one role and entering another. It is an embodied, emotional, and social process, often marked by identity disruption and reconstruction. Individuals may experience grief for lost roles, anxiety over uncertain futures, and excitement about new beginnings—all of which require a reinterpretation of self and a renegotiation of one's place in the world. The stress-reward balance of these transitions often determines whether individuals perceive them as opportunities or threats. As shown by Saint-Maurice and colleagues, lifestyle factors such as physical activity from adolescence through midlife play a significant role in modulating health outcomes and may indirectly shape vocational adaptability and resilience (Saint-Maurice et al., 2021; Saint-Maurice et al., 2021).

Notably, the decision to undergo a career change in midlife is rarely purely rational or economic. It often reflects deeply personal narratives of dissatisfaction, aspiration, and alignment with values. Studies show that long-term

psychological conditions, such as affective symptoms accumulated across adulthood, are associated with cognitive decline in midlife (John et al., 2020), which may compromise job performance and prompt career reassessment. At the same time, cognitive and physical activity are known protective factors against age-related decline (Najar et al., 2019), suggesting that midlife career shifts, particularly those requiring new learning and social engagement, may serve as buffers against decline.

Yet, while quantitative studies have illuminated many correlates of midlife well-being, they often fail to capture the emotional texture and contextual complexity of career transitions. This is particularly true in the Indian context, where economic precarity, evolving gender norms, intergenerational obligations, and cultural expectations intersect uniquely during midlife. Moreover, the stigma attached to career changes at this stage of life can compound feelings of uncertainty and isolation. Research by Kasani and colleagues has further shown that midlife obesity and related health factors correlate with markers of neurodegeneration, raising the stakes for timely intervention and lifestyle reconfiguration during this critical phase (Kasani et al., 2024).

Given these intricacies, it is essential to explore how individuals in midlife make sense of their career transitions and reconstruct their roles and identities in culturally embedded ways.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how individuals in midlife experience and interpret career transitions, with particular attention to the processes of meaning-making and role adjustment. The approach was grounded in an interpretive paradigm, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences. The target population consisted of individuals between the ages of 40 and 55 who had recently undergone a significant career change, such as shifting industries, starting a new profession, or returning to education in preparation for a new career. Using purposive sampling, 27 participants (14 women and 13 men) from various regions across India were recruited. Inclusion criteria required that participants had completed their career transition within the past two years and were willing to reflect on their experiences. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with no new themes emerging from the final interviews.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in either English or Hindi, based on participants' preference, and were held either in person or via secure online video platforms, depending on accessibility and convenience. The interview guide was developed to elicit narratives around the reasons for career transition, emotional and cognitive responses to change, challenges faced during the transition, and the strategies employed to reconstruct meaning and adjust to new roles. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility and dependability, member checks were performed with a subset of participants, and detailed field notes were maintained throughout the research process.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. After initial familiarization with the transcripts, codes were generated inductively to capture meaningful patterns within the data. These codes were then organized into broader themes and subthemes that reflected participants' experiences of career transition. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12) was employed to manage and organize the coding process systematically. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, coding was conducted independently by two researchers, and any discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion. Reflexive journaling was also used throughout the analytic process to account for the researchers' perspectives and maintain analytical rigor.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 27 participants from various regions of India who had recently undergone a career transition during midlife, ranging in age from 41 to 55 years ($M = 47.3$). Of the participants, 14 identified as female and 13 as male. Regarding marital status, 23 were married, 2 were divorced, and 2 were single. In terms of educational background, 11 participants held a postgraduate degree, 10 had a bachelor's degree, and 6 had completed professional or technical certifications. Participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds, including education ($n = 6$), healthcare ($n = 5$), corporate management ($n = 7$), small business ownership ($n = 4$), and social services ($n = 5$). At

the time of the interview, 18 participants had completed their career transition within the past year, while the remaining 9 had transitioned within the last two years. All participants

voluntarily took part in the study and provided informed consent.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Category (Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Triggers for Career Transition	Voluntary Decision-Making	Desire for personal growth, pursuit of passion, dissatisfaction with previous job, need for autonomy
	External Pressures	Organizational restructuring, layoffs, industry decline, forced relocation
	Health-Related Factors	Chronic stress, burnout, physical health decline, mental health concerns
	Family and Social Influences	Support from spouse, family obligations, peer encouragement, intergenerational expectations
	Financial Motivations	Better income prospects, retirement planning, debt pressure
2. Meaning-Making During Transition	Desire for Work-Life Balance	Long working hours, parenting needs, aging parents, burnout recovery
	Identity Conflicts	Inauthentic professional self, mismatch with personal values, role dissonance
	Re-evaluation of Life Purpose	Midlife reflection, existential questioning, reprioritizing goals, spiritual inquiry
	Narratives of Self-Discovery	Rediscovering strengths, confronting fears, uncovering hidden talents
	Redefinition of Success	Shift from status to fulfillment, letting go of societal benchmarks, valuing internal satisfaction
3. Role Adjustment in New Careers	Coping with Uncertainty	Embracing ambiguity, developing trust in process, tolerating risk, self-reliance
	Integration of Past Experiences	Learning from failures, building on prior skills, reinterpreting past roles
	Emotional Processing	Grief over loss of identity, anxiety about future, relief from change, hopefulness
	Identity Reconstruction	Constructing new professional self, aligning self-image, identity experimentation
	Adapting to New Environments	Navigating new organizational culture, communication challenges, learning norms
4. Personal Growth and Transformation	Skill Reorientation	Acquiring new competencies, upskilling, transferring past skills
	Managing Expectations	Facing early setbacks, adjusting goals, recalibrating career ambitions
	Social Reintegration	Building new networks, feeling accepted, mentorship seeking, social anxiety
	Increased Self-Awareness	Recognition of personal needs, values clarity, emotional intelligence growth
	Empowerment and Confidence	Assertiveness, self-efficacy, independence, decision-making improvement
	Resilience Development	Overcoming obstacles, bouncing back, inner strength discovery, adaptability
	Changed Perspective on Life	Letting go of past regrets, greater appreciation for time, redefining priorities
	Positive Outlook on Aging	Embracing maturity, finding meaning in midlife, reduced fear of aging

The analysis of semi-structured interviews with 27 midlife individuals from India revealed four overarching categories: *Triggers for Career Transition*, *Meaning-Making During Transition*, *Role Adjustment in New Careers*, and *Personal Growth and Transformation*. Each category encompasses several subcategories, which are described below with representative participant quotations to support and illustrate each theme.

Within the category *Triggers for Career Transition*, the subcategory of *Voluntary Decision-Making* emerged strongly. Participants described initiating career changes out of a desire for personal growth, passion, or autonomy. One participant shared, “I felt I had more to offer, and staying in

the same job was limiting who I could become.” Others expressed a longing to pursue dreams they had deferred earlier in life.

The subcategory *External Pressures* included accounts of layoffs, organizational restructuring, and shrinking industries as reasons for unplanned transitions. A participant recounted, “My company downsized, and I had no choice but to think about what else I could do with my life.” These experiences often acted as abrupt catalysts for deeper life reassessment.

Health-Related Factors were cited as another compelling reason for career shifts. Chronic stress, burnout, and physical ailments were frequently mentioned. One participant noted,

“I was having anxiety attacks every Sunday night. I knew I couldn’t go on like that.” For many, health crises served as a wake-up call to prioritize well-being.

Family and Social Influences were influential in shaping decisions, including the encouragement or expectations of family members. As one interviewee said, “My wife reminded me I had always wanted to teach—she gave me the push I needed.” Others made career changes to meet family needs, such as relocating or caregiving.

Financial considerations, addressed in the *Financial Motivations* subcategory, also emerged. Participants expressed desires for more stable or improved income and better retirement planning. One person reflected, “After the pandemic, I realized I needed to think long-term—my job wasn’t sustainable financially.”

The subcategory *Desire for Work-Life Balance* included narratives about escaping long hours, demanding roles, and prioritizing family time. As one participant stated, “I wanted to be present for my children—I didn’t want to miss their childhood for a job I hated.”

Finally, in *Identity Conflicts*, participants reported misalignment between their professional roles and personal values. One interviewee shared, “I was living someone else’s idea of success. It took a toll on me.”

In the second main category, *Meaning-Making During Transition*, the subcategory *Re-evaluation of Life Purpose* included reflections about aging and reevaluating what mattered most. One participant remarked, “I started asking myself what I wanted to be remembered for, and climbing the corporate ladder wasn’t the answer.”

The subcategory *Narratives of Self-Discovery* revealed how transitions prompted deep introspection. Participants spoke about uncovering forgotten passions and realizing inner strengths. “I surprised myself. I had skills I didn’t know existed until I stepped out of my comfort zone,” one participant noted.

In *Redefinition of Success*, individuals described shifting their benchmarks from external validation to inner fulfillment. As one shared, “Success isn’t about the title anymore. It’s about how I feel when I wake up.”

Coping with Uncertainty* was another central subcategory. Participants described strategies for managing fear and ambiguity. “It was scary not knowing what’s next, but I learned to take it one day at a time,” one individual said.

Integration of Past Experiences highlighted how individuals found value in previous roles, even if different from their current path. One interviewee observed,

“Everything I’ve done before somehow fits into what I do now.”

In *Emotional Processing*, participants described a range of feelings from grief to relief. One remarked, “Leaving my old job felt like a divorce—I had to mourn it before I could move on.”

The third main category, *Role Adjustment in New Careers*, began with the subcategory *Identity Reconstruction*. Participants detailed how they redefined who they were professionally. One participant shared, “At first, I didn’t know how to introduce myself. It took months before I felt like a real writer.”

In *Adapting to New Environments*, individuals described the challenges of adjusting to new workplace norms and cultures. “I was the oldest intern in the room,” one participant laughed, “but I learned to see it as an advantage.”

The *Skill Reorientation* subcategory emphasized learning new competencies and repurposing old ones. “My old job taught me how to manage people, and now I use those skills running my own business,” a participant noted.

Managing Expectations included struggles with early failures and the need to recalibrate ambitions. One interviewee shared, “I thought everything would fall into place quickly. It didn’t. I had to be patient with myself.”

In *Social Reintegration*, participants spoke about building new networks and managing social anxiety. One said, “Starting over meant building a whole new circle—it was lonely at first.”

The fourth and final category, *Personal Growth and Transformation*, started with *Increased Self-Awareness*. Participants described gaining insight into their needs, values, and emotional patterns. “This experience made me look inward—I now know what I truly want,” one participant stated.

Empowerment and Confidence emerged as a key subcategory. Participants discussed becoming more assertive and independent. “I no longer wait for permission. I take the lead,” one person explained.

In *Resilience Development*, participants described overcoming setbacks and cultivating mental strength. “There were days I wanted to give up, but I kept going. I’m proud of that,” one said.

Changed Perspective on Life captured the broader life shifts that accompanied career change. One participant reflected, “I don’t sweat the small stuff anymore—I see the bigger picture.”

Finally, *Positive Outlook on Aging* revealed how participants embraced midlife as a time of opportunity. “I

used to dread turning 50. Now, I see it as a fresh chapter,” one participant concluded.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of individuals undergoing career transitions in midlife, focusing on the processes of meaning-making and role adjustment. Four major themes were identified: Triggers for Career Transition, Meaning-Making During Transition, Role Adjustment in New Careers, and Personal Growth and Transformation. These findings illustrate that career change in midlife is rarely a linear or solely pragmatic decision; rather, it is embedded within complex emotional, cognitive, and contextual landscapes. Participants' narratives revealed that career transitions often emerge from a convergence of internal reflections and external pressures, followed by intense personal transformation and renewed clarity about values, identity, and purpose.

The first major theme—Triggers for Career Transition—revealed a multifaceted range of motivations, including voluntary re-evaluation, external job loss, health challenges, and family-related factors. These results align with previous findings that midlife is frequently marked by occupational discontent and physiological vulnerability, which may prompt reassessment of life trajectories. Research has shown that burnout, chronic stress, and health-related limitations often reach critical levels in midlife, increasing the likelihood of career reconsideration (Ganasarajah et al., 2019; Horst et al., 2025). Health concerns were a particularly salient trigger, echoing findings that physical decline and mental health issues in midlife significantly shape individuals' decision-making and life satisfaction (Hazzouri et al., 2020; Jyväkorpi et al., 2020). Furthermore, external pressures such as organizational restructuring and industry obsolescence parallel evidence that rapid workplace transformations in the digital era frequently affect midlife professionals, leaving them vulnerable to displacement and identity crisis (Henning et al., 2022).

The second theme—Meaning-Making During Transition—captured the internal processes through which participants reinterpreted their past experiences, questioned long-held values, and redefined success. This aligns with literature suggesting that midlife serves as a turning point for existential questioning and narrative reconstruction (Cheng et al., 2024; John et al., 2020). Many participants described a shift away from extrinsic rewards such as status and financial gain toward intrinsic values such as purpose,

balance, and authenticity. This process is supported by longitudinal data demonstrating that midlife individuals increasingly prioritize emotional meaning and flexible goal adjustment over rigid performance metrics (Henning et al., 2022). Moreover, the process of integrating past failures and repurposing earlier skills reflected the psychological resilience associated with positive aging trajectories (Saint-Maurice et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2019). Participants' narratives highlighted the importance of coping with uncertainty and emotional upheaval, echoing previous findings that the ability to reinterpret adversity and maintain psychological flexibility in midlife is predictive of better health and emotional well-being in later life (Najar et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019).

The third theme—Role Adjustment in New Careers—illustrated the challenges and adaptations required in transitioning to unfamiliar work environments. Participants described a process of identity reconstruction, the acquisition of new skills, and the navigation of unfamiliar social and professional networks. These findings resonate with evidence that cognitive agility and social adaptability are key to successful vocational transitions in midlife (Blodgett et al., 2021). The process of letting go of previous professional identities and adjusting expectations mirrors earlier research indicating that midlife workers must manage both loss and opportunity simultaneously, often without institutional support or guidance (Bao et al., 2019; Mehta et al., 2022). Additionally, the importance of social integration during this phase aligns with studies suggesting that support networks and mentorship are critical to successful midlife transitions, particularly in new occupational settings (Khouday et al., 2019; Parker-Allotey et al., 2022). Participants also noted that age-related biases and feelings of social displacement often complicated the process of integration, consistent with previous studies on midlife workplace ageism and intergenerational mismatch (Kasani et al., 2024).

The final theme—Personal Growth and Transformation—emphasized the long-term outcomes of these transitions, particularly the development of self-awareness, resilience, and empowerment. These experiences reflect the concept of midlife as not just a stage of potential crisis but one of renewal and positive transformation. Studies have shown that individuals who actively reconstruct meaning in midlife and engage in life-enhancing behaviors—such as physical activity and continuous learning—report higher levels of well-being and lower risks of chronic illness and cognitive decline (Saint-Maurice et al.,

2021; Yang et al., 2019). Furthermore, the participants' increased sense of agency and redefined life purpose suggest that career transitions can become powerful catalysts for growth when supported by adequate psychological resources and social frameworks (Mosconi et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2020).

These findings also highlight the intersectionality of gender, socioeconomic status, and health in shaping midlife experiences. For example, several female participants discussed how caregiving duties and menopause-related changes influenced their decision to leave or modify their careers. This is consistent with previous literature that underscores the gendered burdens of midlife and the biological and social demands placed disproportionately on women (Horst et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2020). Additionally, the diversity of participants' backgrounds illustrates the role of contextual factors such as urban infrastructure and access to support networks. For instance, studies have shown that midlife cognitive outcomes are influenced by environmental exposures like road proximity and neighborhood SES, which can indirectly affect occupational decision-making and post-transition adjustment (Cheng et al., 2024; Parker-Allotey et al., 2022). These findings suggest that midlife career transitions cannot be fully understood without considering the layered interaction between individual agency and systemic structures.

The present study enriches existing quantitative findings by offering a nuanced, narrative-based understanding of midlife career change. While prior studies have established associations between midlife indicators—such as fasting glucose variability, antibiotic use, and cardiometabolic risk—and cognitive and occupational outcomes (John et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2024; Mehta et al., 2022), this research provides context and depth to those patterns, illustrating how such variables manifest in the lived experiences of real individuals. It supports the assertion that midlife transitions are psychologically charged events involving identity redefinition and long-term recalibration, often driven by accumulated health, emotional, and social factors (Kang et al., 2023; Kasani et al., 2024). By focusing on meaning-making and role adjustment, this study contributes to a broader understanding of midlife development as a period of potential flourishing, not just decline.

While this study provides rich insights into the subjective experiences of midlife career transitions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to 27 participants from India, which, although diverse in

professional backgrounds, may not capture the full range of experiences across different cultural or economic contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduces the potential for recall bias or social desirability effects, particularly given the sensitive nature of career identity and emotional adaptation. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to trace long-term outcomes of participants' career transitions. Longitudinal methods could better capture the evolving nature of meaning-making and role reconstruction over time. Additionally, the study did not explicitly examine the impact of organizational support or policy structures, which could provide a more systemic view of midlife transitions.

Future research should consider expanding the scope of inquiry to include comparative studies across different cultural, geographic, and occupational groups to better understand how midlife career transitions are shaped by diverse sociocultural factors. Longitudinal qualitative research could also offer valuable insights into how narratives of meaning-making evolve over time and how individuals maintain or revise their newly constructed identities in the years following a career shift. Moreover, integrating mixed-methods approaches could bridge the gap between lived experiences and measurable psychological or health outcomes. Specific focus on organizational structures, mentorship, and re-skilling programs would also help illuminate the broader systemic factors that facilitate or hinder successful transitions in midlife. Finally, gender-specific analyses are warranted to explore how men and women experience these transitions differently, particularly in contexts where traditional gender roles remain pronounced.

In practice, these findings suggest the need for career counseling programs that are specifically tailored to midlife individuals, acknowledging the emotional, cognitive, and identity-related dimensions of career change. Employers should develop flexible career development policies and provide training opportunities to support older workers seeking transition. Mental health support systems within organizations can also play a critical role in helping employees manage the emotional toll of career shifts. Educational institutions, too, can contribute by offering re-skilling and adult learning programs that accommodate midlife learners. Finally, public policies should recognize career flexibility and lifelong learning as essential components of workforce sustainability, enabling individuals to adapt and thrive at all stages of life.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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