CONTACT CENTER CHALLENGES & PRIORITIES FOR 2020: THE YEAR OF THE AGENT

“As centers tackle their challenges and pursue their priorities, I believe we will see a strong focus on the agent experience, and the result should be better customer experience, as well.”
SPECIAL REPORT

CONTACT CENTER CHALLENGES & PRIORITIES FOR 2020: THE YEAR OF THE AGENT

Findings from our fifth annual survey reveal a strong focus on the agent experience.

By Lori Bocklund, Strategic Contact

2020 VISION

The big picture results are shared in FIGURES 1 AND 2. Here are some observations that stand out this year:

- Attrition catapulted back to the No. 1 challenge position with a big lead over the others at 27% (up from 19.2%)
- Last year’s No. 1 challenge, the desktop tools, is No. 2 but

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SURVEY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Contact center management and executives are again the majority of participants (57%), followed by corporate executives (13.5%), and support analysts (8%). The balance was contact center consultants (7%), supervisors (5%), sales and marketing (3%), IT (2%), vendor/contract/program managers (1.5%), and “others.” FIGURES 3 AND 4 show the industry representation and distribution of center sizes. The sizes are well-distributed and reflect the overall market—many small centers (50 and under), fewer large centers (over 500). We analyze the data by verticals and size so you can see targeted results in addition to the big picture. This year we also asked a bonus question about the most important goal for the center and we’ll share some results about how challenges and priorities align with goals.
FIGURE 1: Biggest Challenges

WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES TODAY?

- High attrition: 27.0%
- Lack of and/or bad desktop tools (CRM, KM, collaboration, etc.): 21.2%
- Lack of understanding and respect for the center's role: 16.8%
- Not enough staff to handle workload (i.e., no budget for additional staff): 16.1%
- Lack channels and/or integration (omnichannel): 15.7%
- High absence rate/low schedule adherence: 15.7%
- No budget approval for technology investments: 15.3%
- Poor cross-departmental collaboration: 14.6%
- Lack of and/or bad self-service (IVR, web, mobile, etc.): 13.9%
- Managing security/fraud/regulatory requirements: 12.8%
- Lack of and/or bad performance tools (QM, WFM, analytics, etc.): 10.9%
- Lack of support resources or know-how (e.g., analysts): 10.6%
- Poor training (quality, quantity and/or delivery method): 10.6%
- Lack of and/or bad core technology (routing, reporting, CTI): 10.2%
- Increasing handle time: 9.5%
- Lack of focus on coaching/development: 9.1%
- Increasing/high costs: 8.4%
- Increasing contact volumes: 8.4%
- Poor system performance and/or support: 8.0%
- Inability to achieve service level or ASA: 7.7%
- Poor performance on customer experience KPIs (e.g., quality, cSat, FCR): 6.6%
- Other: 5.1%
- High abandon rate: 3.6%

FIGURE 3: Industries Represented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>Financial Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>Consumer Products/Retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>BPO/Outsourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>Professional Services (including consulting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>Education/Nonprofits/Associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>Telecommunications/Wireless/Cable/Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>Software/B2B Software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>Utilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>Hospitality/Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 4: Survey Participant Size Distribution

HOW MANY FTE CONTACT CENTER SEATS DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION SUPPORT ACROSS ALL SITES?

- Less than 25: 28.10%
- 26-50: 20.07%
- 51-100: 19.34%
- 101-250: 10.58%
- 251-500: 7.66%
- 501-1000: 5.84%
- 1001+: 8.39%

Workload and Performance
Frontline Staff
Technology
Strategic
CONTACT CENTER CHALLENGES & PRIORITIES FOR 2020

FIGURE 2: Top Priorities

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP PRIORITIES TO WORK ON IN 2020?

- Implement/improve self-service (IVR, web, mobile) 24.1%
- Improve employee engagement and empowerment 22.3%
- Increase focus on coaching/development 20.8%
- Redesign/improve/automate processes 20.8%
- Improve knowledge management access, content, processes 17.9%
- Implement/improve performance tools (reporting, analytics, WFM, QM, etc.) 16.4%
- Improve training (amount, content, and/or quality) 15.7%
- Implement/improve desktop (CRM, KM, collaboration, etc.) 15.3%
- Raise awareness of the center’s vital role and impact 14.6%
- Implement or plan for artificial intelligence 14.2%
- Improve reporting and analytics 12.8%
- Address security/fraud/regulatory requirements 12.4%
- Implement or integrate additional media (omnichannel) 12.4%
- Staff properly to match workload (i.e., gain budget approval for additional staff) 12.4%
- Improve collaboration with other departments 12.4%
- Improve performance management practices to meet KPIs 12.0%
- Improve recruiting & hiring practices 11.7%
- Incorporate new staffing approaches (e.g., outsource, home agents, temps) 8.0%
- Add support resources (e.g., analysts) 4.0%
- Implement/improve routing/skills 2.9%
- Other 1.8%

with a higher percentage selecting it this year (21.2% vs. 19.2%)
• Lack of understanding and respect for the center’s role also moved up significantly with 15.7% selecting that as a top challenge
• Raising awareness of the center’s vital role and impact correspondingly moved up the priorities list with 14.6% choosing it
• Workload and performance challenges are in the lower third; technology, strategy and frontline staff issues predominate (however, workload and performance captured the No. 3 and No. 4 priority spots)
• Improving self-service (24.1%) and employee engagement and empowerment (22.3%) continue to jostle for the No. 1 priority, swapping positions this year, with self-service bumping up a couple points and engagement dropping a couple
• Coaching and development moved up as a priority, as did process improvement; they both sit at 20.8%
• The alignment of priorities and challenges is strong at the top; the highest ranking priorities should help with the profound attrition problem

TOP CONTACT CENTER CHALLENGES
With attrition garnering so many votes, we see a bigger drop in the percentage of folks selecting other challenges than we have in the past. Beyond that high pain point, there is a wide diversity of other factors hindering service, sales, and the customer and agent experience. The good news is centers seem to be meeting performance targets. The bad news is
that attrition, bad desktops, the lack of respect for the center’s role, and not enough staff to handle the workload can all contribute to a vicious cycle that impacts performance and the customer experience.

**CHALLENGES BY INDUSTRY**
Slicing the data by industry, the attrition challenge is dominant for most, with BPOs being the worst with over 50% citing that top issue. That is, perhaps, not surprising, although industries like healthcare, telecom, insurance, and consumer products also had over 30% choose this challenge. The desktop problem is also common, at least for those with more complex contacts and systems, with 40% in healthcare and 28% in financial services reporting that difficulty.

**TABLE 1** lists the top challenges by industry (where we had 10 or more inputs) and the color-coding shows trends across the years.

**CHALLENGES BY SIZE**
Attrition was again consistent, although only 18% of the smallest centers chose this top challenge. In all other size bands, attrition was chosen by over 27%. Desktop tools ranked high for those up to 100 seats, and over 500, but the midrange (101-500) did not note this as a top challenge.

Here are two other interesting numbers for specific sizes:
- The lack of respect is noted most by the smallest centers (less than 25 seats)—23.4%
- The biggest centers (1,001+) most frequently indicated that omnichannel is an issue (39.1%); the next highest band was 18.8% for 501-1,000 seats

**TABLE 2** shows the top challenges by size, with the past two years included for comparison. The consistent problem of attrition is evident here.

**TOP CONTACT CENTER PRIORITIES**
I find the battle for the top-priority spot interesting. Both self-service and employee engagement have staying power as perennial priorities, but in this case staying power is not necessarily a good thing. If these priorities were being addressed, we might see more movement. In addition, they
Self-service is a consistent priority for many industries. It was selected by over 40% in government and insurance. Employee engagement was more variable across industries, ranging from zero to 43%. Another priority with consistency was process improvement, chosen by 20%-40% of respondents in eight industries. No single priority garnered 50% within a vertical. Some other numbers that jumped out were these verticals where over 30% agreed on these top priorities:

- Healthcare—desktop, process improvement, self-service
- Education/Non-profits/Associations—collaboration with other departments, awareness of the center’s role, reporting and analytics
- Government—recruiting and hiring, self-service
- BPOs—AI, employee engagement

I selected the agent theme because of how boldly the attrition challenge jumps out, and what I see and hear every day in our industry. It’s an exciting time for technology, and the top priority shows there is a lot of hope placed in self-service (perhaps too much, especially by anyone who thinks they can just get rid of agents!). Improving self-service could take some of the burden off agents, especially for more routine informational inquiries and transactions, and for authentication. That’s the indirect impact on the agent experience. Now look at the rest of the top priorities and you can see a direct line to improving the agent experience through coaching, process improvement, a variety of tools, and training.

### PRIORITIES BY INDUSTRY

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**TABLE 2: Size Matters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENTER SIZE (FTE)</th>
<th>&lt;25</th>
<th>26-50</th>
<th>51-100</th>
<th>101-250</th>
<th>251-500</th>
<th>501-1000</th>
<th>1001+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHALLENGES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget for Staff</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Channels</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cross-departmental Collaboration</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desktop Tools</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing Costs</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Tools</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-service</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the CC’s Value</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **PRIORITIES**   |     |      |        |        |        |          |       |
| Coaching/Development | ☐   | ☐    | ☐      | ☐      | ☐      | ☐        | ☐     |
| Collaboration     | ☐   | ☐    |        | ☐      |        |          | ☐     |
| Employee Engagement | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Knowledge Management | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Performance Tools | ☐   | ☐    |        | ☐      |        |          | ☐     |
| Processes         | ☐   | ☐    | ☐      | ☐      | ☐      | ☐        | ☐     |
| Recruiting/Hiring Practices | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Reporting and Analytics | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Self-service     | ☐   | ☐    | ☐      | ☐      | ☐      | ☐        | ☐     |
| Training         | ☐   | ☐    |        | ☐      |        |          | ☐     |

☐ 2018 Challenge/Priority ☐ 2019 Challenge/Priority ☒ 2020 Challenge/Priority (more than one represents a tie)
FIGURE 5: Most Important Goal for 2020

OVERALL, WHAT WOULD YOUR CONTACT CENTER LEADERSHIP SAY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT GOAL FOR 2020?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Overall %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve the customer experience</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the agent experience</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce/manage costs</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase revenue</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 6: Goal and Challenge Alignment

TOP 10 CHALLENGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Overall %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High attrition</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of and/or bad desktop tools (CRM, KM, collaboration, etc.)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding and respect for the center’s role</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough staff to handle workload (i.e., no budget for additional staff)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack channels and/or integration ( omnichannel)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High absence rate/low schedule adherence</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No budget approval for technology investments</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor cross-departmental collaboration</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of and/or bad self-service (IVR, web, mobile, etc.)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing security/fraud/regulatory requirements</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the years. The staying power of self-service is evident in some verticals.

**PRIORITIES BY SIZE**

Our top two priorities overall are both consistently high across sizes. Self-service is above 17% in each band and up to 43% in the 251-500 band. Employee engagement has one gap, in the 251-500 range (at 5%); the rest are above 17%, with the highest band 501-1,000 seats showing 31%. Process improvement is the only priority that is above 10% for all bands besides self-service, and it goes up to 35% for the largest centers. The highest consensus group is the 251-500, where 43% chose self-service and 28% chose artificial intelligence.

Here are some other interesting notes by size:

- In line with the challenge, the smallest centers (less than
and priorities overall. With the customer experience bucket dominant, it most strongly aligns with our overall results. Here are some interesting finds and a few thoughts about the goal focus results:

- With those who chose customer experience as their goal and selected Improve Self-Service as the most dominant priority, a caution is in order. That self-service pursuit better be done with a focus on the customer (e.g., careful design and testing—with real customers!) rather than to deflect live contacts or contain contacts within the apps. Yes, a good customer experience occurs when customers can succeed in self-service, but the applications also must be easy to use and easy to exit to an informed agent.

- Items outside the overall top 10 that jump out for those with goals other than Improving Customer Experience are:
  - Lack of support resources or know-how
  - Increasing/high costs
  - Lack of and/or bad core technology (routing, reporting, CTI)
  - Lack of focus on coaching/development
  - Lack of and/or bad performance tools (QM, WFM, analytics, etc.)

25 seats) have a high rate of prioritizing raising awareness of the center’s role and impact (22.1%)
- In line with another challenge, the biggest centers (1,001+) most frequently noted that they need to prioritize omnichannel (26.1%)
- AI was chosen more by higher size bands (101 and up), except for the 501-1,000 band
- Training seems to be of higher interest for smaller centers (under 250), with the three smallest bands showing 18%-21% chose that priority

TABLE 2 shows the diverse and changing priorities by size.

**BONUS QUESTION: ALIGNMENT WITH TOP GOALS**

We added a bonus question this year: “Overall, what would your CC leadership say is the most important goal for 2020?” FIGURE 5 shows the goal choices, with improving customer experience a strong preference. While this doesn’t support my “year of the agent” theme, I will still argue we are at a pivot point, and it’s good to look at what these results tell us. I can’t wait to see how they evolve!

We sliced the challenges and priorities by those goals to see if they aligned—which we find they did...mostly! FIGURES 6 AND 7 share the results for the top 10 challenges and priorities overall. With the customer experience bucket dominant, it most strongly aligns with our overall results. Here are some interesting finds and a few thoughts about the goal focus results:

- With those who chose customer experience as their goal and selected Improve Self-Service as the most dominant priority, a caution is in order. That self-service pursuit better be done with a focus on the customer (e.g., careful design and testing—with real customers!) rather than to deflect live contacts or contain contacts within the apps. Yes, a good customer experience occurs when customers can succeed in self-service, but the applications also must be easy to use and easy to exit to an informed agent.

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  - Lack of focus on coaching/development
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**TABLE 3: Movers and Shakers Reveal Volatility**

Here are the interesting comparisons we see in the results from our 2020 survey compared to 2019. The overall theme is **volatility**. Many things that were up last year are down this year, and vice versa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHALLENGES</th>
<th>MOVEMENT UP THE LIST</th>
<th>MOVEMENT DOWN THE LIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance tools</td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor performance on KPIs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor abandon rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support resources</td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor cross-departmental collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding and respect for the CC’s vital role</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIORITIES</th>
<th>MOVEMENT UP THE LIST</th>
<th>MOVEMENT DOWN THE LIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address security/fraud requirements</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve reporting/analytics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement/plan AI</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve routing/skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase focus on coaching/development</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve performance tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement additional media (omnichannel)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve employee engagement and empowerment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<td></td>
<td>Improve employee engagement and empowerment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 8: Alignment of Challenges and Priorities

CHALLENGES

Frontline Staff
Desktop Tools
Attrition
Omnichannel
Self-service
Security/Fraud
Respect
Training
Service Level/ASA
Increasing Costs

Priorities

Desktop Tools
Knowledge Management
Coaching/Development
Collaboration
Self-service
Employee Engagement
Improve Processes
Performace Tols
Vital Role Awareness

Omnichannel
Recruiting/Hiring
Artificial Intelligence
Security/Fraud
Frontline Staff
Routing/Skills

Handling Time
Abandon Rate
Core Technology
Contact Volumes
System Performance

KPIs
Support Resources
Handle Time
Abandon Rate
Core Technology
Contact Volumes
System Performance
Employee Engagement? Technology Can Help!, Tech Corner, Pipeline, December 2019). There are many interdependencies and perhaps the biggest opportunity is for centers to develop a concerted effort to tackle attrition through engagement, coaching and development, process changes, and better use of technology. The bottom line is agents want to succeed, and when they do, they feel better about their role.

The other alignment element I like and see as an improvement is the higher prioritization of raising awareness of the center’s vital role and impact. Every year the strategic challenges of lack of understanding and respect and poor cross-departmental collaboration rate higher than the corresponding action. I have hypothesized that it feels like a problem that can’t be solved. Maybe centers are finally starting to see this can be tackled and it’s worth a try.

Two notable disconnects on alignment are that poor self-service ranks No. 10 on the challenges (14% picked it) and No. 1 on the priorities (24%), and the bad desktop was noted as a challenge by 21% to come in at No. 2 but is down at No. 8 on priorities (15%). The misalignment and percentages are similar to last year.

I like to close on a note that ties into my theme. Maybe next year when we ask about top goals, agent experience will move up. I would be thrilled to see attrition fall off its perch at the top of the challenges. If employee engagement moves down the list, let’s hope it is because things are better, and we’re focusing on other priorities. That’s my 2020 vision.

For those focused on **agent experience**:
- Attrition is a pain point for a high percentage (36%), as is absence/adherence (21%)
- Coaching and development and process improvement are top priorities to improve the agent experience, not self-service
- Many struggle with the lack of support resources and core technology
- Compared to the overall results, a higher percentage prioritize recruiting/hiring (19%) and performance management practices (14%); and a lower percent prioritize self-service (12%)

For those focused on **reducing/managing costs**:
- As expected, increasing/high costs is a big challenge for 18% of this group
- Their top priority also aligns: 26% chose “staff properly to match workload”
- Incorporating new staffing approaches also ranked high (18%)

For those focused on **increasing revenue**:
- This group was influenced by the BPO vertical (32% of the respondents that chose this goal), thus showing a very high percentage (52%) noting attrition as a top challenge
- They see empowerment, coaching, and knowledge management as strong tools to help them achieve their goals
- Self-service is understandably less important; rather, they are pursuing omnichannel, better hiring and staffing, and performance management to address their challenges (which include increasing/high costs for 20%)

**ALIGNING CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**
I like visuals and I like to compare! **FIGURE 8** shows a word cloud view of the challenges and priorities, and **TABLE 3** shows our “movers and shakers.” As I mentioned in our theme, I think we can draw some pretty good lines between the priorities and our strong top challenge. Many things can impact attrition and I’ve recently written about how technology can help with employee engagement (see Want to Improve}

Lori Bocklund is President of Strategic Contact, an independent consulting firm that helps companies optimize the value of their customer contact technology and operations. (lori@strategiccontact.com)
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