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Factors that Increase the Probability of a Successful Academic Library Job Search



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ABSTRACT

Finding a position in an academic library can be challenging for recent Library and Information Science (LIS) graduates. While LIS students are often encouraged to seek out experience, network, and improve upon their technology skills in hopes of better improving their odds in the job market, little research exists to support this anecdotal advice. This study quantifies the academic and work experiences of recent LIS graduates in order to provide a better understanding of what factors most significantly influence the outcome of their academic library job searches. The survey results demonstrate that the job outlook is most positive for candidates who applied early, obtained academic library experience (preferably employment), participated in professional conferences, and gained familiarity with committee work.

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INTRODUCTION

Finding a position in an academic library can be challenging for the newly minted library and information science (LIS) graduate. Fortunately, there is no shortage of job-seeking advice for prospective candidates. From librarian blogs to professional magazines and websites such as “I Need a Library Job” (www.inalj.com), suggestions and recommendations abound. In their 2010 C&RL News piece, Cannady and Newton recommended making the “best of the worst of times” (p. 210) and gave specific advice for each phase of the job search: application, phone interview, and face-to-face interview. Singleton (2003) recommended building a network of professional contacts and being prepared to show effectiveness in professional assignment, professional development, and service. In “Academic Library Job Search Blues,” Baker (2010) advised making oneself more marketable by finding internships, becoming involved in organizations, and taking a balanced blend of classes.

While this advice may be sound, it is largely based upon the subjective experiences of the authors. The overabundance of such anecdotal advice can make a difficult job search even more challenging. With the variety of choices in coursework, internships, and other opportunities students are advised to pursue during their short time in graduate school, how will they know which activities are the most beneficial for ensuring a successful academic library job search? The objective of this study is to

quantify the experiences of recent LIS graduates to better understand what factors might help job seekers obtain their first professional position. By comparing the academic library job search outcomes of survey respondents, this study shows that applying early, obtaining academic library experience (preferably employment), participating in professional conferences, and gaining familiarity with committee work increases the probability of being able to obtain a first post-degree position. The results of this study also identify trends in LIS students' graduate school involvement (academic and extracurricular) and recent LIS graduates' perspectives of the academic library job market and the process of securing a job.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The labor market for LIS graduates has been described, in general, as “relatively ‘recession proof’” (Morgan & Morgan, 2009, p. 299), and indeed, librarianship has endured the Great Recession of the late 2000s. The 2012–13 edition of the Occupational Outlook Handbook stated that employment of librarians is actually expected to grow by 7% from 2010 to 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor & Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, 2013). While slower than average for all occupations, this is growth nonetheless. According to an analysis done in 2012, salaries are up 5% while unemployment for recent graduates held at 6%, suggesting that positions are available, with similar numbers for 2013 (Maatta, 2012, 2013).

ACADEMIC LIBRARY JOB MARKET

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, later in the decade prospects should be even better as older library workers retire and

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population growth generates openings (U.S. Department of Labor & Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, 2013). However, it should be noted that this optimistic prediction is reminiscent of the early 2000s expectation that the availability of academic library jobs would increase “due in large part to the ‘graying’ of the profession” (p. 408), an estimation that never came to fruition because budget constraints, especially in local government and educational services, slowed demand for librarians (Tewell, 2012).

The academic library job market for recent LIS graduates is competitive, and for those lacking significant practical experience, it is a “potentially insurmountable challenge” (p. 422) (Tewell, 2012). Nearly three-quarters of academic librarian positions in 2011 preferred or required work experience (Triumph & Beile, 2011). Also, in 2012 almost three-quarters of academic library jobs were non-entry level, and of those 26% of all job advertisements were administrative, creating a tough market for recent graduates (Tewell, 2012).

SEARCH COMMITTEE PERSPECTIVES

The academic library job search and hiring process provides an additional challenge for recent graduates. During times of economic distress when employment opportunities are few and the number of applicants increases, candidates must be aware of the rigorous academic library job search process (Durán, Garcia, & Houdyshell, 2009). In their survey of search committees, Hodge and Spoor found that 78% of respondents are receiving more applications per position opening now than in previous years, but 80% do not interview more candidates (2012). Search committee members can suffer from fatigue while reviewing such large numbers of applications and may overlook qualified candidates (Howze, 2008).

The Association of College and Research Libraries' Discussion Group of Personnel Officers “agreed that previous library experience was an important requisite for an entry level position. The majority also indicated that the experience should be in an academic library” (Neely, 2011, p. 4). Previous work experience is an indicator of future job performance, as Wheeler, Johnson and Manion highlighted when they suggested that questions about a candidate's experience are more effective than situational questions (2008). Demonstrated performance of job requirements is very important. In their 2010 study, Wang and Guarria found that 90% of the 243 survey respondents (individuals who served on faculty search committees) believed that a demonstrated ability to perform job requirements was very to extremely important (p. 83).

In addition to work experience and the ability to perform job requirements, candidates must demonstrate they are leaders, not just workers. Search committees want librarians who are creative, proactive, risk takers, innovators, independent yet collaborative, lifelong learners, and visionaries (Harralson, 2001). Reeves and Hahn (2010) reminded LIS students that employers prefer individuals who have good communication skills, work well with others, take initiative, are adaptable and dependable, and have a “service orientation, a predilection for collaboration and cooperation [and] a penchant for participating in teams” (p. 118). Employers also look for applicants who can acclimate quickly to organizational culture. In Wang and Guarria's survey, over 90% of the 243 survey respondents said potential fit is very or extremely important in an academic library (2010). For recent graduates with less work experience, this further emphasizes the importance of potential fit with the organizational culture.

METHODOLOGY

In order to learn more about the graduate school experiences and job search successes of recent LIS graduates, an electronic survey was created using SurveyMonkey (Appendix A). In March 2013, a link to the survey was emailed to 2008–2012 graduates from the LIS programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and North Carolina

Central University. The survey link was also emailed to members of the ALA New Members' Round Table (NMRT) listserv, distributed on index cards to ACRL 2013 conference attendees during a related poster presentation, and electronically posted on the ACRL New Member Discussion board. At the request of the LIS program at Dominican University, the survey link was not emailed to their graduates until July 2013. In addition to being the three universities from which the three researchers graduated, these institutions represent a cross section of different LIS programs around the United States in that they have different U.S. News & World Report rankings, program formats, enrollment numbers, and local job markets. Respondents from the three universities and the NMRT listserv provided a diverse sample of recent LIS graduates from ALA-accredited programs around North America. While the respondents graduated in different years throughout the last decade, the survey questions only addressed their time in graduate school.

The survey questions were divided into seven primary categories: basic information, job search, professional effectiveness, professional development, service, technological competency, and previous careers. Questions focused on the student's graduate program, the parameters of their job search, their academic and work experience, as well as other skills or professional involvement that might impact their success in landing a first job. In addition to these questions, the survey concluded with an open-ended response question that asked, “What advice do you have for current LIS students?” This question and all other free-response questions were coded by the researchers and differences in coding were resolved by mutual agreement. The inter-coder reliability averaged Kappa = .9, which represents an almost perfect agreement according to Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165).

LIMITATIONS

The results are based upon a limited sample size of recent LIS graduates since the survey was sent to three specific universities. This limitation was offset to a certain extent by also sending the survey to the NMRT listserv, posting it on the ACRL New Member Discussion board, and passing out links at the 2013 ACRL Conference, which allowed for gathering responses from graduates from many other LIS schools. Due to the numerous avenues by which the survey link was dispersed, it is not possible to calculate the response rate. The results are also limited due to the fact that survey questions were optional and not all elicited an adequate number of responses for the following analysis.

RESULTS

Out of 360 total survey respondents, 56% (N = 201) indicated that they wanted to work in academic libraries. Eighty-two respondents wanted to work in public libraries with smaller numbers selecting “special libraries” or “other”. The survey respondents provide a varied sample of LIS graduates. The 201 respondents who selected academic librarianship were recent LIS graduates from the years 2005–2013 with the highest percentage (28%) graduating in 2011. Respondents represented 33 different LIS programs with the highest number of students graduating from the University of Illinois (56) and Dominican University (39).

SUCCESSFUL RESPONDENTS

Successful respondents are defined as the subset of survey respondents who were able to find a full-time or part-time, tenure-track or professional academic library job after graduation. Respondents were asked about the outcome of their job search and 186 (n = 186) individuals responded to this question. Sixty-eight percent (126) indicated that their job search was successful and 23% (60) reported an unsuccessful job search. In the following analysis, percentages are based upon the number of successful respondents who answered each question. As

Number of Successful Applications

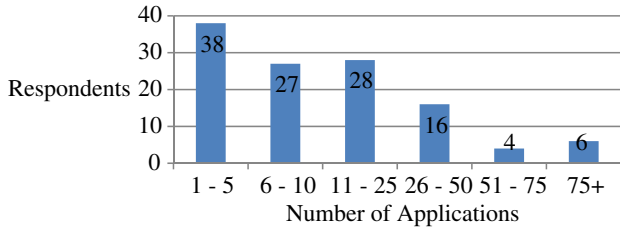


Fig. 1. Number of successful applications.

this study's aim is to determine the factors that lead to success in obtaining a job, our analysis focuses only on the successful respondents.

BASIC INFORMATION

Over 60% (75) of our successful respondents were full-time students. In terms of program format, 44% (56) attended their program in-person, 30% (43) enrolled in a hybrid program, and 24% (30) completed their degree online.

JOB SEARCH

Respondents were asked when they began applying for jobs, and 62% (75) reported having started the application process four months or more prior to graduation. In terms of the number of positions applied for, the highest percentage (32%) of successful respondents applied for five or fewer jobs, while the lowest percentage (8%) of respondents reported applying to over 50 positions (Fig. 1). Almost half of successful respondents (52) found a position before graduating, and 40 respondents found a position within one to three months after graduation.

Just over 50% of respondents (65) were limited to a specific geographic area with 56 reporting the ability to move for a position. Almost half found a job as a reference and instruction librarian (Fig. 2). The next most common type of position was one in technical services.

The types of positions reported varied in status, and 86% (108) reported landing full-time positions. Over half of successful respondents (62) described their position as “professional,” and a third (42) described their position as “faculty” or “tenure-track”.

PROFESSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Survey respondents were also asked to select their coursework choices and extracurricular activities from a provided list (respondents

could select multiple options). Results indicated that 82% (103) took at least one class in academic librarianship, 66% (83) worked in an academic library, and approximately 51% (64) had an internship in an academic library. Some respondents also gained experience by volunteering at libraries. Of these respondents, 23% (29) volunteered in a public library, 15% (19) in a special library, and 8% (10) in an academic library.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Approximately 67% of respondents reported having attended conferences (84) during graduate school. A similar percentage attended workshops and seminars (77). Almost 25% (30) participated in conferences. Finally, 14% (18) had either authored or co-authored a publication of some type.

SERVICE

Over 50% (81) of the respondents were involved in library associations and/or were active in library student groups (65).

TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETENCY

In response to a general question about participation in elective technology courses while in graduate school and self-reported technological competency level, seventy-six percent (96) of respondents rated themselves as either “Competent” or “Very competent” with technology.

PREVIOUS CAREERS

Just over 50% (64) came to librarianship as a second career and 86% (75) of them worked for ten years or less in their previous careers. Of these respondents, 66% (58) felt their previous job helped them land their library job. Respondents were asked to name their previous career(s), and their answers were coded based upon the occupational groups identified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics' in the Occupational Outlook Handbook. For successful respondents, the most common previous careers were in the fields of education, training, or libraries.

RESPONDENT ADVICE

The survey concluded with an open-ended response question crafted to elicit perceptions on how to be successful in securing a job. Respondents were asked what advice they had for current LIS graduate students (Fig. 3). Answers varied, but some pieces of advice came up repeatedly. Of successful respondents, 40% felt that experience was

Positions Obtained by Successful Graduates

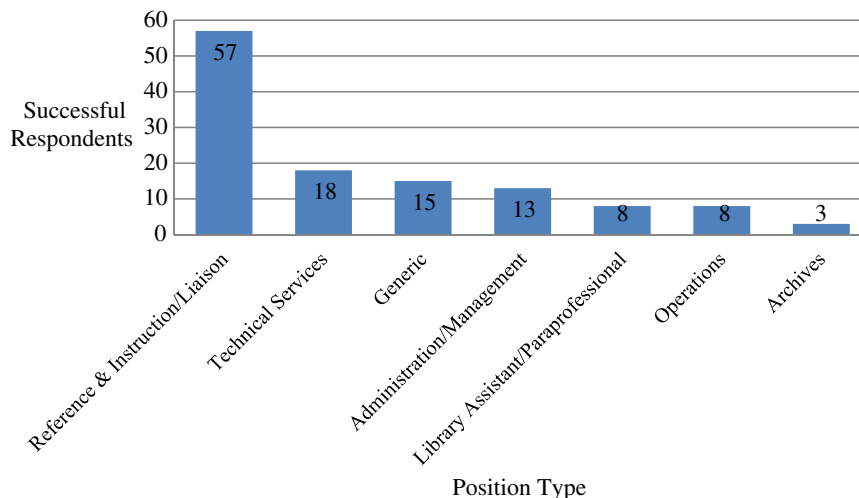


Fig. 2. Positions obtained by successful graduates.

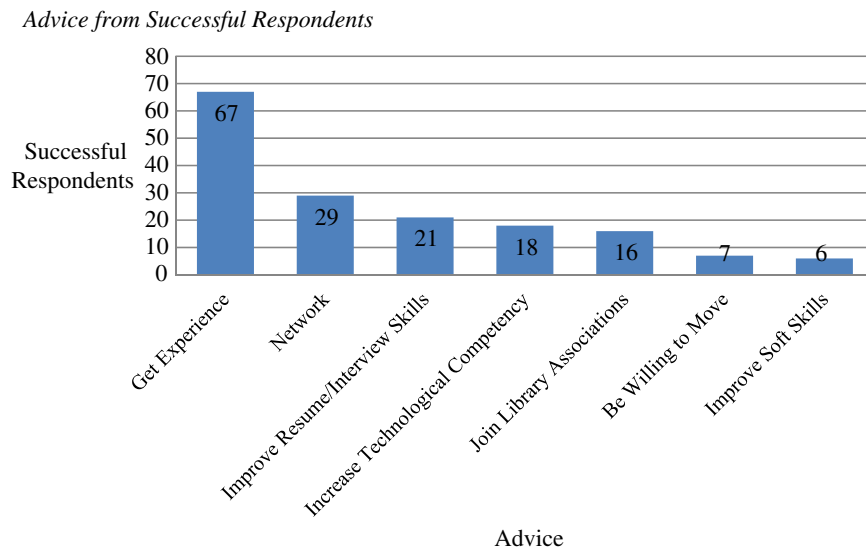


Fig. 3. Advice from successful respondents.

important and 18% recommended networking. Twelve percent recommended job market preparation, perhaps in the form of help with formatting and writing cover letters and resumes. Just 11% pushed for graduates to increase their technological savvy, and only four percent respondents recommended that students be willing to move for a job.

DISCUSSION

We compared successful and unsuccessful job seekers in order to determine whether any trends existed for either group. Overall, the two groups were largely similar. Of the seven question categories, only certain factors in job search, professional effectiveness, professional development, and service made a significant difference in improving a candidate's odds of success in landing a job. Among these factors were academic library experience, committee work, conference attendance, and publications. These factors significantly increased or decreased the odds of getting a job after graduation; odds ratios were calculated and analyzed for respondents using 95% confidence intervals (Ekstrom & Sorenson, 2011, p. 321).

JOB SEARCH

Recent graduates were asked when they began applying for jobs. The odds ratio (6.78) showed that candidates who began applying for jobs four to six months before graduation were nearly seven times ($p = .0092$) more likely to obtain a job than candidates who did not. Based on the confidence intervals (1.26, 5.6), we can be 95% confident that the entire population of LIS graduates who begin applying for jobs four to six months before graduation are between 1.26 and 5.6 times more likely to get a job compared to those who do not. Applying for jobs four to six months before graduation increased a candidate's odds of success more than any other factor.

PROFESSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Having any academic library experience increased the odds that a job seeker would be successful, although not all types of experience were significant. The odds ratio of getting a job for candidates who had been employed in academic libraries compared to those who had not was 4.71 ($p < .0001$). The 95% confidence interval for this odds ratio is between 2.41 and 9.22. Participation in an academic library

internship or practicum also significantly improved the odds that a recent graduate would successfully find a job. Candidates who had participated in an internship or practicum improved their odds of success by 2.75 ($p = .0027$) compared to candidates who had not completed an internship or practicum, with the 95% confidence limits for the entire population of recent graduates ranging from 1.41 to 5.38.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Recent graduates were also asked about professional development experiences. Candidates who had attended conferences increased their odds of success by 3.33 ($p = .0002$) when compared to candidates without this experience, with the 95% confidence limits for the entire population being between 1.76 and 6.33. Candidates who had attended workshops and seminars increased their odds by 2.05 ($p = .023$), with 95% confidence limits from 1.1 to 3.83. Finally, candidates who had publications increased their odds by 4.83 ($p = .0246$), with 95% confidence limits from 1.08 to 21.6.

SERVICE

The last category that significantly impacted success was service. Recent graduates were asked which service opportunities they participated in while in graduate school including association membership, student groups, committee work, volunteering, and fundraising. Of these, only committee work was significant. Candidates who did committee work increased their odds by 3 ($p = .0274$), with 95% confidence limits between 1.09 and 8.23.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to provide a better understanding of which quantifiable factors can significantly influence an academic library job search. Based on these results, time of application, academic library experience, committee work, conference attendance, and authoring or co-authoring a publication appear to increase the odds of a recent graduate's ability to break into the field.

In addition to the factors that improve the odds of success in a job search, this study also found other factors addressed in the survey did not appear to significantly affect a graduate's chance of securing a job. Among these factors were: program format, graduation date, grade

point average, enrollment status, study abroad experience, independent study, and technological skills. It is difficult to quantify whether potential fit impacts success in landing a library position, but the literature suggests that a candidate's personality and potential fit with a library is a large consideration when hiring committees make their hiring decision. Due to the fact that successful and unsuccessful respondents were fairly similar, it could be deduced that potential fit plays an important role in the hiring process.

While students are ultimately responsible for preparing themselves for a job search, LIS programs can do more to assist them. Based on this research, we recommend LIS programs provide opportunities for students to obtain some form of academic library work experience. Considering the importance of early application, LIS advisors should also ensure that students are prepared for the unique considerations of the academic library job search process. LIS programs should also focus on connecting students to professional development and publication opportunities.

Our research represents an initial look into several factors in the academic library job search, yet many other variables warrant further exploration. More research could be conducted on what job market preparations are offered at different LIS programs and the potential

impact of online portfolios and professional social networking. While this study focused on academic library job seekers, public and other types of libraries have yet to be examined. Further research could also explore the experiences of unsuccessful library school graduates in order to determine whether trends exist.

For recent LIS graduates hoping to obtain academic library positions, the outlook appears positive for candidates who begin applying for jobs four to six months before graduation, and who are able to procure academic library experience (preferably employment), become involved with professional conferences, and gain familiarity with committee work. While these conclusions may not surprise many in the field, this study represents a quantitative understanding of oft-given job seeking advice. The advice given by 40% of successful respondents to get experience was sound; as one respondent stated, "Experience makes all the difference!"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX A. SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Library Survey

***1. What type of library did you most want to work in?**

Academic

Public

School

Special

Other (please specify)

Survey Complete!

Thank you for participating, the information you provided has been valuable to our research.

2. When did you graduate with your MLS/MLIS?

Winter (December)

Spring (April-June)

Summer (July-August)

3. In what year did you graduate with your MLS/MLIS?

4. Upon graduation, did you find a library job?

Yes

No

5. In what type of library did you find a job?

Academic

Public

School

Special

Other (please specify)

6. Is the job full time or part time?

- Full Time
 Part Time

7. What is the classification of your position?

- Professional
 Faculty/Tenure Track
 Para-professional

Other (please specify)

Job Search**8. When did you begin applying for jobs?**

- More than 7 Months Before Graduation
 4-6 Months Before Graduation
 2-3 Months Before Graduation
 1 Month Before Graduation
 Less than 1 Month Before Graduation
 After Graduation
 Other (please specify)

9. How many library positions did you apply for?

- 1-5
 6-10
 11-25
 26-50
 51-75
 Over 75
 Other (please specify)

10. What percentage of job applications would you ESTIMATE resulted in advances to the next level in the hiring process (phone/in-person interviews, etc.)?

11. How long after graduation did it take you to find a library job?

- Before graduation
 1-3 Months
 4-6 Months
 7-9 Months
 10-12 Months
 More than a year

12. What was the title of your first library job after graduation?

13. Were you limited to a specific geographic area when applying for library jobs?

- Yes
 No

14. Which school did you graduate from with your MLS/MLIS degree?

- University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana
 Dominican University
 North Carolina Central University
 Other (please specify)

15. Which type of degree did you obtain?

- MLS
- MLIS
- MIS
- Other (please specify)

16. What was your graduating GPA?

17. What was your enrollment status?

- Full time student only
- Part time student only
- Some combination of full and part time student

18. What was the format of your program?

- In person
- Online
- Hybrid

19. In which of the following experiences did you participate in during graduate school (check all that apply)?

	Public Library	Academic Library	School Library	Special Library	Other	None
Coursework	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internship/Practicum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study Abroad	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

20. Please indicate whether you took multiple elective courses in technology while in graduate school (yes or no), and rate your technological competency level:

	Not very competent	Somewhat competent	Competent	Very Competent
Yes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
No	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. Which of the following professional development activities did you participate in while in graduate school? (check all that apply)

- Conference Attendance
- Workshops and seminars
- Independent study
- Publication
- Conference Participation (papers, presentations and poster sessions)
- Grant Writing
- Additional degrees

Other (please specify)

22. Which of the following service opportunities did you participate in while in graduate school? (check all that apply)

- Join associations
- Student groups
- Committee work
- Volunteer
- Fundraising

Other (please specify)

23. Is librarianship your first CAREER?

- Yes
- No

Previous Careers

24. Please describe your previous career(s).

25. How many years were you in your previous career(s) before you began library school?

- 1-2
 3-5
 6-10
 11-20
 Greater than 20

26. Do you feel that your previous career(s) helped you to land a library job?

- Yes
 No
 Indifferent

27. Why I feel that your previous career(s) helped me to land a library job

Final Thoughts

We will be using this information to determine the extent to which graduate experiences aid in landing a job after graduation in an academic library setting.

28. Are there any other work OR life experiences/information that you typically share with potential employers at any point in the application/interview process? Please elaborate below.

29. What advice do you have for current LIS students?

30. What advice do you have for hiring managers?

Survey Complete!

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