



European Personnel
Selection Office



OBJECTIVITY AND EQUALITY OF TREATMENT IN PUBLIC SECTOR SELECTION METHODOLOGIES



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Abstract:







International and European Public Sectors face the same challenges on the job market as private sector and non-profit organisations to select, recruit and retain the best talents. This is particularly important in the current evolving and agile global work environment. To do so Public Sectors need to demonstrate their overall attractiveness to a diversity of talents from all spectrums of society at the very outset, meaning at the very initial selection stage. Whilst private sector and non-profit organisations may benefit from more 'wiggle' room in their selection processes, Public Sectors have to balance their attractivity measures with their core selection credence of ensuring objectivity and equality of treatment in all aspects of their selection procedures. This paper reviews the various selection methodologies including the newer computer assisted technologies used in most Public Sectors and weighs the strengths and weaknesses of each in terms of delivering on objectivity and equality of treatment. Whilst acknowledging that there is no single test or methodology that can deliver 100% on both of those criteria, nevertheless the nature of the tests, the way they allow the collection of information, the way they rely on human assessment versus computer, and the way they are combined, will have a direct impact on the capacity to guarantee objectivity and equality of treatment in the future.

Keywords:

selection, assessment, objectivity, equality of treatment.



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1.

European Public Sectors competing for talent

The Public Sector, a major employer in each European Member State, faces the same challenges as all other employers – that of the war for talent. Ageing staff, the shift towards a digital world and its correlated need for new competencies and skills, being attractive to the younger generations, the necessity to reconnect with the constituencies through increased diversity and transparency, are all good reasons for organisations to reconsider and review past and existing practices and work on innovating them to remain, or even become, truly competitive and attractive.

Besides the usual package of attractiveness (meaningful job, working conditions, competitive package, career development prospects), selection and recruitment are the first real contact between the future employee and the employer. In the complex process that brings an employer to meet their future employees, selection and recruitment are naturally amongst the earliest points of contact. Aside from the information and knowledge previously acquired from various sources, it is only when visiting the website, opening the application page, and reading the instructions and the selection process, that a concrete contact is established with the employer. If attractiveness is of the essence, it is crucial that at this moment the employer demonstrates that their workplace is the right place to join.

Several aspects of the selection process may have a direct impact on the attractiveness of an employer. The desired competencies, the type of tests used, the way the tests are delivered, the speed of the whole selection process, the predictability of its occurrence, the transparency about the expectations and the profile of the assessors are all important cues for potential candidates in search of information about the working environment of a given employer.

The onset of the Covid pandemic had a direct impact on the working conditions of staff in the Public Sector. Teleworking (working from home) became the rule and even now that the situation has returned to normal, new episodes of confinement are not ruled out and teleworking seems to remain to a certain extent. Although IT and telecommunication made working from home relatively easy from the onset, it clearly appeared that it required that Public Sector staff master several new competencies. New skills like digital literacy, cyber-awareness, and working on shared platforms became necessary. And certain other competencies, previously considered as “nice to have” became essential, such as self-management, spirit of initiative, openness to continuous learning, and even a sense of intrapreneurship. Teleworking also prepared the field for the implementation of remote assessment testing. Selection, once based on the use of either test centres or in presence oral tests, migrated to remote assessment, with all the attendant challenges and opportunities it involved for the test portfolio, the candidates and the assessors alike. Many tests, previously relying on the use of protected, securised documents, were now to be delivered in an open environment, with an obvious risk of leakage. Very soon it became clear that those tests would either need to be replaced by other tests, or that the documents would need to be made available as ‘predefined published material’². After almost two years of forced use of this approach in EPSO, the first indications are that tests delivered with this methodology, maintain a satisfactory discriminant

power, and that the approach might not only be a fallback plan in case of pandemic, but instead become the mainstream way to deliver tests based on content.

Although the Public Sector shares all the above with the other segments of the job market, the private sector and non-profit organisations, the Public Sector has an additional concern with two very specific priorities, those of guaranteeing objectivity and equality of treatment in their selection procedures.



2.

Objectivity of selection methodologies

Wherever a test is used, two questions are always raised: the validity and the reliability. The validity touches upon the capacity of the test to assess a performance that is related to the expected outcome. It is a fundamental question, as it is about the relation between what the test assesses, and what it is supposed to assess. The reliability, on the other hand, is about the consistency, or stability or trustworthiness of the test. It is also a fundamental question. A given test can be very valid, but not reliable. Another can be very reliable, but not at all valid for a specific purpose. Although the Public Sector shares the validity concern with all the other segments of the job market (private sector, non-profit), the Public Sector has a particular, singular attachment to reliability, as objectivity and equality of treatment are a direct consequence of it.

Objectivity, fairness, neutrality, have a special place within Public Sector selection procedures. They are intrinsically related to the Rule of Law, the very basis of the Public Sector. So, caring about objectivity in public administration is not just for the sake of a generic good practice, it is an essential, fundamental component of its *"raison d'être"*. In that sense, selection in the Public Sector is unique compared to all the other sectors. It is generally recognised that, in the private sector, whilst objectivity receives attention to a certain extent it is certainly not a must. It is not unusual to hear high level entrepreneurs claiming that selection is about first impressions or "gut feelings", all notions explicitly referring to an all-out "subjectivity", the opposite of the very concept of objectivity. In the many and not always congruent definitions of objectivity, two main aspects seem to return: firstly, objectivity involves the idea that a *"truth"* exists, and secondly this truth is somehow *independent* from the various, subjective opinions, impressions, or perceptions. This notion of

a neutral independence of the measurement, is one of the two most important principles that guide the choice of selection tests. The other principle being the validity of the test, meaning its capacity to measure what it is supposed to measure. The classical ways to ensure objectivity in testing in the Public Sector, are the use of blind free text tests (anonymised written tests), the use of blind standardised tests (multiple choice questionnaires), the use of panels of assessors for oral tests, the use of standardised and structured interviews, and the training of the assessors.

Multiple-choice questionnaires serve the purpose of independence of measurement: the scores are calculated on the basis of the correctness of the answer, no matter who answered. And the scoring is made by an algorithm that is fully reliable in psychometric terms (test-retest correlation is equal to 1). Blind free text tests partially serve the purpose of objectivity, because they are based on a measurement which is independent from the author of the answer. But the human marking requires the use of more than one marker, and the adoption of standardisation between markers (see Equality of treatment).

The use of standardised and structured interviews, involving a clearly established list of elements to be assessed and objective, standard scoring systems, are certainly a condition of the validity and reliability of the assessment.

The use of panels of assessors, raises several questions. Although the panel is there to reach objectivity by adding up subjectivities, it is clear that those subjectivities are not really independent from each other. In terms of internal structure, panel members have usually not the same weight in the decision making, nor the same expertise. Moreover, the panel approach has also a logistical constraint as it requires to bring together several assessors at the same time, with the consequence that panels tend to regroup in one single test the assessment of many different competencies and skills. Adding up competencies in a same test, impacts the independence of measurement (creating for example the well-known 'halo' or 'horn' effects).

The training of assessors is mandatory especially in cases where the oral tests are conducted by non-HR specialists. Being trained on the skills and competencies to be assessed, on the scoring method, and on the observation and interviewing skills is certainly necessary in providing homogeneity amongst assessors. But when the subject of the

training is objectivity itself, or bias-free assessment, there can be reasonable concerns regarding the link between knowledge (knowing the biases), attitude (develop a bias-free mentality) and behaviour (avoid bias). Over the recent years there has been a wealth of training packages on unconscious bias or bias free assessment, and these training have certainly helped raising awareness about the problem. However, when it comes to really assessing candidates, one may wonder how much of this learned awareness improves the objectivity of the assessors.

Bringing together assessors (panel) and preparing them better (training) can contribute to an improvement in terms of objectivity, but the real improvement can only come from the way the assessment is structured. If objectivity relies on independence of the measurements, assessors and tests should both be split in small testing events, each performed independently. This is the essence of the Assessment Centre method. Skills and competencies assessed by different assessors, in different tests, clearly allows to make the assessments independent, and consequently to make the whole assessment exercise objective. Using more tests also makes possible to assess fewer competencies and skills per test, with an almost automatic positive effect on 'halo' and 'horn' effects. The Assessment Centre methodology has also other very relevant aspects, such as being based on work-related simulated exercises instead of the classical declarative interviews, or to assess competencies instead of knowledge. But in terms of objectivity, the Assessment Centre appears as the best way to guarantee a satisfactory level of objectivity when humans assess other humans in oral tests.



Statistical monitoring of the scoring provided by assessors is also a way to grant objectivity to a selection process, and its importance raises exponentially with the number of candidates to be assessed and the number of assessors involved. There are basic statistical checks that must be set in place and explained to the assessors before the assessment takes place. T tests, Pearson's correlations and ANOVA's can be used to check the existence of classical biases like gender or age bias. In case of long testing period (several days or weeks), similar analyses can be performed on a longitudinal perspective, in order to check if the scoring patterns change with the period of testing (usually, they do). Halo and horn effects can be measured by using simple correlational calculation within tests and between tests. One of the most blatant demonstrations of the existence of halo/horn, is the difference, systematically observed, of correlation between "within test" and "between tests" conditions. Correlations are almost always much higher within tests, which indicates that the halo/horn is let free to act if there are fewer tests involved (see above on the weaknesses of the panel approach).



Another very simple, and very intuitive source of objectivity, is increasing the number of measurements per candidate. In our era of data science, we speak about data points: the more data points that exist for a given object, the more the object is “objectively” known. A 30-item multiple choice questionnaire on a given topic, offers 30 data points per candidate on that topic. An anonymous written test measuring four competencies and marked by two markers, offers 8 data points per candidate. A panel interview on the same four competencies, where the assessors discuss and agree their scores rather than scoring individually (which is almost always the case), offers only 4 data points. The Assessment Centre

approach, favouring the multiplication of tests assessed by various assessors, automatically increases the number of data points per candidate, hence improving the objectivity. And if, within each test, each assessor is also allowed to enter his/her own scores independently from the other assessor, it further multiplies the objectivity of the process.

Amongst the recent developments in testing methodology, certain formats appear to be interesting for the purpose of objectivity. The Multi Mini Interview approach (MMI), which consists in dividing classical interviews of thirty to fifty minutes, into three to five ten-minutes short interview slots with different assessors, seems to provide interesting results not only in terms of objectivity, but also in terms of validity and efficiency. In a similar way, the use of video-recorded interviews (VRI), which presents the same features of the MMI and is fully compatible with remote assessment, appears also as a valid, objective, and efficient way of assessing candidates in the Assessment Centre.



3.

Equality of treatment

As we argued that objectivity is an essential element of the “*raison d’être*” of the Public Sector, we might consider that equality of treatment *is* its *raison d’être*. Whilst concerns about objectivity are rarely cited in an explicit way in candidate complaints and requests for review, however, claims about inequalities of treatment are amongst the most common complaints.

The first and foremost move towards equality of treatment, is to ensure that candidates start the process on an equal footing. The simplest way to this, is transparency, which is not limited to solely granting access to information according to Regulation EC nr 1049/2001³, but also and mainly about good administration by making public all relevant information before the selection procedure starts. The publication of the criteria of selection, the disclosure of the skills and competencies that will be assessed, and even the publication of the material to be used in upcoming written tests or in some oral tests (see above on predefined published material), should be done well in advance when possible. It should be provided on a systematic basis for all, within a reasonable timeframe to allow all candidates adequate time to prepare. The experience accumulated over the last two years by the public administrations that adopted this approach, seems to confirm that the selection is not negatively impacted and that tests maintain their discriminant and predictive powers.

Even if allowing candidates to start with an equal access to information, and even if all the measures have been set in place to guarantee objectivity (see above), the selection process will need to tackle two sources of potential inequalities generated by the system itself: the time and the human factor.

raison d’être

[râzón ‘detrə] *noun*

The most important reason or purpose to someone or something’s existence.

Time is of the essence in every selection process in the public administration. Oral test phases can last weeks or even months. And over such long periods it is valid to ask the question on how equality of treatment is preserved. The classical approach has been, for some time, to reduce as much as possible the differences wherever possible. Always ask the same questions to everyone, make sure the same assessors meet all candidates. But in selection as in anything else in life, Heraclites' quote prevails: *no man ever steps in the same river twice*. Keeping the same question during weeks of interviews, will mean that this question is not the "same" anymore. Leakage and learning will create a condition for inequality between the very first candidates going through the interviews, and the following ones. Keeping the same assessors for all candidates, will also create inequalities, for the simple reason that those assessors will evolve, and change, based on the acquired experience, the progressive building of a norm, and the capacity to compare. Just like for the question, the same assessors will, in reality, not be the "same". Using several sets of questions partially reduces the impact of leakage and learning, but generates another problem, which is the equality between different sets of questions. As for the panel composition, keeping the same assessors all along, or changing assessors, raises the issue of equality in both instances.

The time factor and its potential effect on the scoring requires statistical monitoring aiming at identifying potential significant differences over time. If it is "true" that the likelihood of getting better scores should not be related to the moment at which a test is taken, then the averages and standard deviations of the score should not significantly differ between the beginning, the middle and the end of the testing period. In the event that the statistical analyses reveal significant differences,



the assessors should be informed and a reflection within the panel of assessors should take place in order to understand if the difference is the result of an artefact (by chance, the population of candidates was stronger/weaker in a given period) or of a time related bias (in which case palliative measures should be considered).

The human factor is the other potentially important source of inequalities. There can be differences “within assessor” (we do not score exactly in the same way in the morning or in the evening; we do not score in the same way after a very good candidate or a very weak one; we do not score exactly in the same way in one test or in another, etc) and “between assessor” (even if both equally trained and briefed, one assessor will be “tougher” than another, one assessor will make more use of the scale than another, one assessor will “prefer” some test to another). If they have been trained adequately, both within and between differences should remain of low intensity. But even small differences, if added up in a certain way, can generate substantial differences, and create inequalities. For example, if one ‘tough’ assessor is in pair with a “lenient” assessor in an interview, the effect is a zero sum. However, if two “tough” or two “lenient” assessors are in pair, the effect is not neutralised, it is summed up. ‘Docimology’ is the scientific discipline focusing on testing. It recommends rules and procedures to adopt in order to guarantee objectivity, validity and reliability when developing the tests. There are also rules and procedures for the assessors, which are usually conveyed through specific training. But as Kahnemann



(2021) demonstrated, even if a test is correctly elaborated, and even if the assessors are well trained, scoring can still be affected by the unexplained variability or randomness in the assessors' judgement, i.e. the noise, and by assessor-related idiosyncrasies. Docimology recommends to act on the score itself, using the standardisation (or Z score normalisation), a statistical process transforming the individual scores of each assessor by subtracting from mean and dividing by standard deviation. With this approach, all assessors are compared to each other and their "distance" from the "average assessor" is reduced. This method requires specific adjustments (for example each assessor must have a minimum number of assessments) and has its limits (it works poorly in case of erratic or extreme scores, and it generates a central tendency effect). However, aggregating the assessors' individual judgements in quest for the independent "truth" through this method is very important wherever equality of treatment is to be guaranteed in large scale selection processes involving high numbers of assessors and candidates.

Although, given the quantifiable data of selections decisions, normalisation can be performed reliably and cost-effectively by an algorithm, the process opens up further human challenges. Despite the considerable amount of research that demonstrates how algorithms outperform humans in judgements and decision-making tasks in numerous areas, EPSO'



experience is aligned with the findings of research data that humans distrust the calculations and “decisions” made by algorithms, and having such decisions accepted may pose a challenge. Assessors tend to trust their own intuitions better than the corrections made by the algorithm; therefore, a careful balance needs to be established between algorithmic and human judgement, where assessors do not feel deprived of their final say. Kahneman (Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021) refer to this form of judgement as ‘disciplined intuition’ and recommend the introduction of structure in complex (e.g., personnel selection) processes of human decision making, to reduce biases and noise. The defining principles of structuring complex decision-making processes are independence, which has been discussed above in the context of individual scoring, decomposition and delayed holistic judgement, which will be discussed below. Decomposition refers to the disintegration of complex decisions into smaller elements. In the specific case of personnel selection, this could entail identification of specific skills and abilities that enable and enhance performance in the given role. Candidates are then tested and scored on these elements separately and independently from each other. The benefits of such decomposition to sub-judgements are two-fold: redundant information is filtered out with the assessors focussing on a pre-agreed set of role-related aptitudes, and the scope of human decision is well defined and limited to these specific, relevant components. Drawing up a competency framework is one way of breaking down complex selection decisions. In EPSO’s competency framework, for example, each general competency consists of five pre-defined sub-elements or “anchors”. During the test candidates are observed and scored for each anchor separately and given a global score for the competency as a whole. Thus, the different tests measure different competencies, allowing independent, separate assessments of each dimension. Collecting information through these series of structural evaluations further reduces the role of intuition and individual impressions by delaying holistic judgements until all the data necessary to underpin such a decision have been collected (Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2021). Reducing the role of human subjectivity in Public Sector selection decisions and relying to the maximum extent possible on the algorithmic aggregation of scores obtained by a series of independent measurements, remain an imperative albeit challenging task to ensure the equal treatment of all candidates.

4.

New trends in selection testing

Whenever objectivity and equality of treatment are a matter of concern, as it is the case in the Public Sector selection, the choice of the tests to be used are of paramount importance. But as we mentioned earlier, selection is not only about this. It is also about validity, or, in other words, about the capacity to really assess what the test is supposed to assess. Every single test has its own strengths and weaknesses regarding validity. For example, the interview's strength in validity terms, is that it collects information on past experience, and cross-checks this information with fall back questions. But its weakness is that it is about declarative information, not about behaviour. The oral presentation has the strength of placing candidates in a real work situation, but it is weak in assessing the capacity to work with others.



Just like for validity, each test has its own strength and weakness in terms of reliability, or objectivity and equality of treatment. The interview is amongst the weakest ones in this regard, and several procedures will need to be set in place to guarantee objectivity and equality of treatment (structured interview, structured scoring, training of assessors, statistical monitoring, normalisation). In general, all tests where data collection and scoring will be made by human (assessors), will require the same type of procedures.

There are tests and ranking techniques which “score” rather high on objectivity and equality of treatment, and when designing a selection procedure, it is worth considering the presence of some of those tests. Multiple choice questionnaires, video-recorded interviews and algorithms are amongst those available today, which have already demonstrated their validity and their reliability.

Multiple choice questionnaires are not new. They have been used for decades, to assess practically any type of knowledge, skill or competency. Reasoning tests, E-trays, Personality tests, Field related tests, have proven to be able to deliver both on validity and reliability. From a validity point of view, these tests have one great strength, and one weakness too. Their strength is in their capacity to be customisable to the needs, in content and format, and to be adapted to practically any type of content. Their weakness is that it can only focus on knowledge or information. Their reliability obviously comes from the fact that the questions are structured and that the scoring is automatic. They are not totally immune to reliability issues: when the number of tests to be administered is too high to be administered in one go, several sets (test



forms) will need to be used, and the equality of treatment between the various sets will need to be monitored. But the multiple-choice questionnaire approach remains certainly the best indication when objectivity and equality of treatment are to be guaranteed, especially in the case of high-volume assessments.

Asynchronous video-recorded interviewing⁴ is a rather recent method, made possible because of the technological improvements that took place over the last decade, both in terms of connectivity and hardware pre-installed video-capabilities. The asynchronous video-recorded interview consists in delivering online pre-recorded questions, and asks candidates to answer the questions, on video, within a limited recording time. The answers are recorded and the recordings are then sent to assessors, who can watch them and score them at a later stage. This method offers the possibility to assess several general competencies (capacity to deliver quality and results, communication, prioritising) and specific competencies and knowledge, which makes it very valid. It does not offer the possibility to come with follow up questions, and this is a weakness compared to face to face interviews. However, it makes the interview much more reliable, both in terms of objectivity and equality of treatment. The questions are standardised and pre-recorded, and the scoring can be done by multiple assessors separately (no panel effect). Although video-recorded interviews cannot be deployed on a massive scale, it still offers a very valid and reliable methodology to assess big numbers of candidates.

Algorithm-based methods are flourishing and clearly taking the space in the field of selection, just like it does in any other field involving big sets of data. Taken at its basic meaning, it simply indicates any approach involving a systematic, mathematical calculation based on a given set of data. It does not automatically involve artificial intelligence, even if artificial intelligence relies on the use of combinations of algorithms. Algorithm based approaches simply use the vast sets of data provided by candidates and compute a calculation to rank or categorise the applications. The use of algorithms is at the centre of heated debates regarding the use of machines in general, and also in the field of selection. It has been severely criticised for its proneness to bias, its opacity, its openness to absurd output, or simply for the dehumanising threat it represents for the future of the discipline. Considering the recency of the method, it is presently difficult to evaluate its validity, as validity studies require a large quantity of empirical evidence gathered over an





extended period of time, which is simply not available yet. But regarding objectivity and equality of treatment, the approach appears obviously as a very promising one. Algorithms can have different levels of complexity and it is indeed important that, for the sake of transparency, algorithms are simple enough to be explained (to assessors and candidates) and understood (by assessors and candidates). The criticism of opacity, for this reason, is a valid one when the algorithm is over-engineered but is not inherent to the algorithmic approach. The proneness to bias is another, and one of the most recurrent, criticisms made against the use of algorithms. Although it is true that algorithms can create bias, there are two considerations that should be taken into account. First, when an algorithm generates a bias, it does it in a very “reliable” way, reliable in the psychometric sense of “test-retest reliability”. This means that the bias created will always occur and always remain the same, even if the calculation is repeated over time, or if the screening order is changed. And second, the bias created by the algorithm can easily be controlled, identified, and consequently corrected. Instead of criticising the proneness to bias of the algorithmic approach, the

real question to be asked is how biased the algorithmic approach is compared to the human assessment. If asked in this way, the answer is unequivocal. It is very well known that human judgement is biased, but human bias is never “reliable”, and very rarely identifiable. If a same batch of hundred curriculum vitae is screened by an algorithm and by a human assessor at two different moments (test-retest reliability), the output of the algorithm will be exactly the same, meanwhile the output provided by the human assessor will be very different. And the human instability of judgement will be observed in many other circumstances (split-half reliability, parallel form reliability, interrater reliability). It is simply impossible to deny that the algorithm is biased but very reliable, meanwhile human is biased, and much less reliable. As for the fear that algorithmic approach could one day make the human assessor irrelevant, or redundant, it must be noted that this criticism is not totally baseless. Although algorithms are not there to take selection decisions but to help assessors take the right decisions, it has been observed that when human assessors start to get used to the use of algorithms, a tendency to “blindly rely on” the output provided by it occurs very naturally and very quickly. One might say

that the risk for human assessment in involving algorithm in judgement, is not so much the one of being pushed away, but the one of relying too much and blindly on it.

There are many other promising developments in the field of testing, like gamification based on situational judgement, interactive tests like role plays assisted by artificial intelligence, scoring of essay-type tests assisted by algorithms, and it is unavoidable that testing will evolve in the direction of computer-assisted scoring methodologies. Apart from all the valid questions that this trend will raise, special attention will need to be brought to the performance of tests in terms of objectivity and equality of treatment. And from these points of view, the increase in computer-assisted approaches in tests relying on human assessment, can reasonably be considered as a positive trend.



5.

Conclusion

Objectivity and equality of treatment are a must for the selection in the Public Sector. The traditional approach to implement them through the improvement of the quality of the assessor and the standardisation of the selection process, is and will remain valid. But it is clear that to attain satisfactory levels in terms of reliability, a proper assessment methodology should also include multiple assessments, multiple testing, standardised tools and scoring, statistical monitoring, and an increased use of computer-assisted methods.

For the sake of objectivity, promoting multiple assessment by splitting existing tests in small tests, splitting the competencies amongst these tests, splitting the assessors amongst the tests, keeping the process as blind as possible, and implementing basic statistical monitoring, are already very feasible and pragmatic actions that will almost automatically significantly increase objectivity.



6.

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Endnotes

- 1 The European Personnel Selection Office. This article refers to the methodology adopted by the Office between 2010 and 2020.
- 2 Testing based on predefined published material has been adopted in EPSO since 2020. The material to be used by the candidates during their tests, has been made publicly available weeks before the test takes place.
- 3 Regulation EC nr 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents
- 4 Video-recorded interviews are of two types: synchronous, where assessors and candidates are present at the same time and the interview is recorded, and asynchronous, where the candidates face pre-recorded questions and answer in absence of assessors.



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