



# Integrating Service Systems at the Point of Transition for Youth with Significant Support Needs: A Model that Works

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*This article discusses a new model for service delivery, the Transition Service Integration Model (Certo, et. al., 2003), which integrates resources and expertise of the three primary systems responsible for transition from school to adulthood for individuals with significant support needs. These entities are local public schools, the rehabilitation system, and the developmental disabilities system. The model involves school districts forming a partnership directly with private nonprofit agencies that typically serve adults with significant support needs. Through this partnership personnel from the school district and private agencies work together during a student's last year in public school (i.e., typically 21 years old) to develop a paid direct-hire job and a variety of inclusive community activities to engage in when not working. In doing so, they provide supported employment services and job accommodations that enable individuals with significant support needs to secure gainful employment in inclusive job settings and stable access to other integrated community environments prior to graduation, and a seamless transition to a person-centered and self-determined adult lifestyle by securing funding to continue these services after school exit from the rehabilitation and developmental disability systems. This article illustrates the impact of the model on student employment outcomes and shares implications for widespread adoption of these practices.*

High unemployment rates among people with disabilities continue to pose serious issues in American society. According to Harris (1998), securing and maintaining employment continues to be the area that results in the largest discrepancy between those who have disabilities and those who do not. Harris found that eight out of 10 adults without disabilities were employed full or part time, compared to only three

out of 10 adults with disabilities. In addition, it is estimated that approximately 75 percent of adults with severe disabilities and 92 percent of adults with profound disabilities are unemployed (La Plante, Kennedy, Kaye & Wenger, 1996).

This is not a new problem. Working age adults with disabilities were no more likely to be employed in 1998 than they were nearly two decades ago, when the federal government began a more concentrated focus on employment outcomes (Will, 1984), even though almost three out of four who were not working stated that they would prefer to be employed (Harris, 1998). In terms of students with more significant support needs (that is, individuals often labeled as having moderate to profound intellectual disabilities, many of whom also have secondary sensory or physical disabilities) exiting public school special education systems, the *National Longitudinal Transition Study*, reported by Blackorby and Wagner (1996), found that only 25 percent of those students identified as having mental retardation and 15 percent of those identified as having multiple disabilities were competitively employed two years after high school exit. This number rose slightly to 37 percent and 17 percent, respectively, three to five years after exit (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Further, when examining the data of students who exited school exclusively by aging out of the system at 22 years old (the age group this model addresses), this same study found that only 13 percent were competitively employed two years after high school and 25 percent of this same group were competitively employed three to five years after exit (National Council on Disability, 2000). In addition, these same individuals were at greater risk for poverty due to their lack of employment (La Plante, Kennedy & Turpin, 1996; Butterworth & Gilmore, 2000) with many relying solely on cash benefits from federal income support programs, which alone were substantially below the poverty level (Social Security Administration, 1995; National Council on Disability, 2000).

To compound the problem, the U.S. General Accounting Office issued a report in 2001 entitled, "Special Minimum Wage Program: Centers Offer Employment and Support Services to Workers With Disabilities, But Labor Should Improve Oversight," which documents that there are about 424,000 employees with disabilities who earn less than the minimum wage under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, that the average wage for these individuals is less than \$2.40 per hour, and that many of these individuals have been in the same segregated facility for over 20 years. Further, the report also found that most employers of people earning sub-minimum wages are in fact work centers that provide employment support to individuals with disabilities and that most 14(c) workers have mental retardation and earn very low wages. Without new models

of transition service this is the likely fate of youth with significant support needs now preparing for exit from publicly supported education services.

Based on federal law, three publicly funded services systems – special education, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and developmental disabilities – have separate responsibility for the same outcome related to the transition of youth with significant support needs. Special education is responsible to provide, up to the attainment of age 21, educational services for these youth, services that can and should prepare them for employment and adult life (Certo, et. al., 1997). The VR system is responsible for funding short-term services related to employment preparation and pursuit, usually *after* youth exit publicly supported education. The developmental disabilities system provides long-term and often indefinite supports that usually begin after both school exit and the provision of VR funding. The result is often disjointed and uncoordinated service delivery and, unfortunately, disappointing employment outcomes.

Given legislative mandates, public schools, the VR system, and the developmental disabilities system should be working together to actively facilitate the transition from school to work and community living for youth with significant support needs. In doing so, they could provide supported employment services and job accommodations that enable individuals with significant support needs to secure gainful employment in inclusive job settings *prior to graduation*. Moreover, working together could allow individuals to receive *continued support* to maintain and expand their employment and living outcomes throughout adulthood, in addition to accessing other community environments or activities.

The Transition Service Integration Model (Certo, et. al., 2003) expands the availability of integrated career, community living and post-secondary education options for individuals with significant support needs who, primarily, are in their last year of public school (i.e., age 21). This model is designed to combine the resources of school and post-school systems to share the costs of a student-driven approach to transition planning resulting in integrated competitive employment with wages paid directly by the employer and integration in other typical community environments when not working. It features the planned integration of both service delivery and coordinated sharing of staff and fiscal resources of previously disparate systems. This article outlines the Transition Service Integration Model, shows the impact of the model on student outcomes and discusses implications of the model for future service delivery.

## **Transition Service Integration Model**

The Transition Service Integration Model is designed so that during participating students' last year in school, their school system enters into a formal service contract with a local private non-profit community rehabilitation program (CRP) that serves adults with significant support needs and that agrees to work with pending graduates *before* and *after* school exit, with the school district funding services before school exit, the rehabilitation system funding work support after exit and developmental disability systems funding other community activities (i.e., non-work) support after exit. Under this model, the CRP is referred to as a "hybrid agency" because it is vendorized as a provider by both the VR system and the developmental disabilities system and is prepared to provide the services and supports needed to fully immerse the students with significant support needs in integrated work *and* community activities during off-work hours prior to graduation. Since the intended result is fully integrated direct-hire employment and community activities, there is no need to assign students to a fixed classroom or school site during their last year of school. The instruction that they receive during this last year in school is provided entirely in natural job and community settings. Thus, the schools and the hybrid agencies jointly provide services to students with significant support needs who concurrently are enrolled in public school but are receiving educational services outside of the school building.

During the student's last year in school, the costs of these services for pending graduates are paid by the local school district. However, direct services are provided within the administrative structure of the hybrid agency in conjunction with school system professional personnel who work with and in the hybrid agency. Typically, a certified special education teacher, who directs the instructional curriculum and is responsible for the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as required by law, is assigned to a class of 8-10 students. The teacher is employed by the school district. Additional staffing, usually two or three employment specialists, is provided by the hybrid agency under a contract agreement with the school district. The teacher and the employment specialists work entirely in the community. There is no set classroom, as students are engaged in activities at job sites and other community locations, although the hybrid agency's office may be a common gathering place for agency staff and public school teachers to use for planning and attending to administrative functions, such as record keeping.

The participating school district redirects funds allocated from their personnel budget line items for instructional aides to the hybrid agency. The staffing ratio, then, is roughly three staff to 8-10 students, including the public school teacher,

who is responsible for implementing instruction according to the IEP, and two adult agency staff who assist in the support of the individual students as they pursue their learning objectives. The number of staff and students is ultimately determined by the number of students participating and by the needs of the students as determined by the IEP. In some cases, the IEP dictates a higher staffing ratio.

The integration of the efforts of the school system's teacher and the hybrid agency's staff establishes a formal link for students and their families with the hybrid agency, giving them a whole academic year to evaluate the appropriateness of the agency and its services prior to school exit. It also gives the students and their families time to plan for adjustments to income benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income, caused by work income. Once the school system commits to implementing this model, students participate based on their and their families' choice. If the pending graduate and his or her family are not satisfied with this approach to adult life preparation, they are free to choose any other service provider funded by VR or developmental disabilities systems when they exit school.

### **Model Implementation During the School Year**

In the day-to-day implementation of this model, students spend their time primarily on the job. Each job identified is based on student interest and choice, determined through a person-centered planning process that occurs in the summer before the school year begins. This process also helps identify preferred activities in which students engage during off-work hours. As such, job preferences are identified prior to the start of the final school year, and significant concentrated efforts are expended to develop these jobs as early as possible during the students' last school year. All jobs are in integrated settings with wages paid directly to the student by the employer. Job development is often a shared endeavor between the school and hybrid agency staff, although one or the other may agree to take the lead responsibility for helping the student with the job search. When students are not working, they are engaged in individually arranged activities, including shopping, use of generic recreation facilities such as a YMCA, auditing community college classes, and community service.

Ideally, once the final school year is underway, each student has an individually determined schedule that includes time on the job and time pursuing other integrated community activities. This approach necessitates careful planning between the teacher and the hybrid agency staff so that support is available to all students when they need it. Occasionally, this may result in more than one

student engaging in the same community activity, but they are never at the same job site and they are only in these group activities by choice and by expressed interest. Table 1 illustrates a sample schedule of how one student may spend a typical day. Similar schedules are maintained by each student in the class.

**TABLE 1: SAMPLE INDIVIDUALIZED DAILY STUDENT SCHEDULE**

PROGRAM FEATURE			PROGRAM ADJUSTMENTS
Personalized Schedules for 21-Year-Old Pending Graduates: FOR EXAMPLE:			No School Bus, Lunch; Hours May Vary
Leave home @ 8:30 a.m. on public transportation with staff ↓ Paid Work ↓ Lunch ↓ Store ↓ Gym ↓ Return home @ 2:30 p.m. on public transportation	Leave home @ 8 a.m. by car with parent ↓ Coffee Shop ↓ Community College ↓ Lunch ↓ Paid Work ↓ Return home @ 2:30 p.m. on public transportation	Leave home @ 10 a.m. on public transportation alone ↓ Community College ↓ Basketball ↓ Lunch ↓ Volunteer Work ↓ Return home @ 5 p.m. by car with coworker	Public transportation with or without staff assistance or other alternatives (e.g., parents, neighbor, coworkers) Breakfast at home or buy at coffee shop Buy lunch or bring lunch  FLEXIBLE SERVICE DAY:  30 hours of service each week, days & times may vary.  May include evenings and weekends.

As a result of working directly with the student throughout the year, the hybrid agency becomes intimately familiar with each student and family. In addition, the close collaboration between the teacher and the hybrid agency staff enables the hybrid agency to be completely prepared to maintain and expand support for students after graduation, ideally using the same staff that had been involved prior to graduation (within the constraints of staff attrition).

### **Model Implementation After Graduation**

During the participating students' last year of school, a formal planning group meets to plan for post-school maintenance of effort. This group is comprised of administrative and direct service representatives from the public school system, the hybrid agency, the VR system, the developmental disabilities systems, and selected students and families. This group meets regularly to discuss student progress and to resolve policy or service issues. The meeting process is used as a focal point for agreeing on work and non-work activities and for requesting authorization for the continuation of services by the same hybrid agency following graduation, that is, to ensure that the agency is positioned to receive authorized and relevant funding from VR and developmental disabilities systems so that the services to the students continue seamlessly after graduation. This prevents categorical fragmentation of services, waiting to receive authorization that might disrupt service and ensuring that each system follows its respective funding mandates without sacrificing the integrity of the model.

Under this scenario, funding for this model not only comes from the school system but also the VR and developmental disabilities systems. Following graduation and at the end of public school responsibility, the latter two systems split the cost of maintaining and expanding work and non-work preferred activities by authorizing the hybrid agencies to continue services on the first day of formal exit with rehabilitation funding short-term work support and developmental disabilities funding all non-work activities and long-term employment support. For the students, then, the first day after graduation looks no different than the day before. They are prepared to seamlessly transition into their adult working lives with a job and the support to maintain that job already in place.

From the graduate's perspective, the services provided by the public schools mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are maintained after graduation, eliminating the problem of being confronted with the choice of either a rehabilitation-funded work program or a developmental disabilities-funded program that primarily addresses non-work or simulated work activities. More importantly, it eliminates the possibility of sitting on a

waiting list for programs funded by rehabilitation and developmental disabilities systems. The student maintains the outcomes that are in place at the point of transition without disruption. The primary features of the model are summarized in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: FEATURES OF THE  
TRANSITION SERVICE INTEGRATION MODEL**

- An organized class, completely community based, of 8-10 youth with severe and/or multiple disabilities who are in their last year of school.
- Employment in integrated settings where they are hired directly by the employer.
- Non-work activities in integrated, community settings.
- Individualized schedules and individual choice of employment options.
- Adult agency employment specialists working in conjunction with school personnel.
- Blended funding resources of the school system, state VR services and state developmental disabilities agency.
- An outcome of paid work with post-school support in place before school exit.

### **Encouraging Results**

The Transition Service Integration Model has been implemented successfully by the authors in 14 school districts located in California and Maryland during the last five academic years (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002). Table 3 shows that 293 graduates with significant support needs have been served during these five years of implementation. The competitive employment outcome, summarized in Table 3 for the five years of implementation, has been high at 97, 72, 56, 48 and 53 percent respectively, yielding an overall cumulative percentage of 60 percent for the five academic years. The average wage for this five-year period was \$6.20 hourly, or \$4,340 annually, and employees worked an average of 14 hours each week. In addition, all graduates have left school with well-developed schedules of preferred community activities in place during off-work hours, including recreation, leisure, post-secondary courses and the transportation skills or support in place to maintain these activities. Further, the vast majority of graduates experienced no disruption in services at the point of exit, with services authorized to continue by the rehabilitation and developmental disability system in 100, 83, 95, 81 and 91 percent of the cases, respectively, across the five years, yielding an overall five-year cumulative percentage of 89 percent.

**TABLE 3: EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME:  
GRADUATES AY 1998-2002**

Academic Year	Number of Graduates	Seamless Transition		Employed at Exit	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1998	31	31	100%	30	97%
1999	54	46	85%	39	72%
2000	59	56	95%	33	56%
2001	81	66	81%	39	48%
2002	68	62	91%	36	53%
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>60%</b>

Source: From Model Site Data

Table 4 on the following page presents a summary of available maintenance information for individuals who graduated during the first three years of implementation. As summarized in the table, data from hybrid agencies reported maintenance information from academic years 1998, 1999, and 2000, on a total of 103 individuals. Of these, 10 students dropped out for various reasons, and 93, or 90 percent, still continued to be served by the same hybrid agency that served them during their last year in school. Further, 66 of these 93 students, or 71 percent, were employed at the time of reporting with average incomes and hours employed remaining similar to those measured at the point of graduation.

The state of Maryland was the second state in which school systems have implemented this model, and the results in Maryland suggest that the model can be generalized across states. In two years of implementation in two Maryland school districts the results are equally significant. Of the 14 students who participated in the model, 13 exited with jobs and all but one exited seamlessly into the adult service system served by the same hybrid agency that served them in conjunction with the school system prior to exit. The average salary of participants in Maryland was \$5.99 per hour and the average weekly hours worked was 14. Clearly, the results to date from this Transition Service Integration Model, with a cumulative outcome of *60 percent competitive*

*employment* at the point of graduation and *71 percent competitive employment* up to three years after graduation, stand out in stark contrast to the national outcome of *13 percent competitively employed* two years after high school (National Council on Disability, 2000) for students, like those we have served, who exited high school by aging out of the system (i.e., turned 22 years old). This employment outcome is in addition to an average of 89 percent of graduates who transitioned to their hybrid agencies seamlessly, that is, experienced virtually no break or disruption in service, and 90 percent still being served by those same hybrid agencies up to three years after school exit. In contrast, national studies have found that the average wage of individuals with significant support needs, most of whom are served in segregated facilities as adults, was less than \$2.50 per hour (General Accounting Office, 2001).

**TABLE 4: EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES:  
SELECTED MAINTENANCE DATA AS OF JUNE 1, 2001**

Cities	School District	Hybrid Agency	AY98 Grads.	AY99 Grads.	AY00 Grads.	Cumulative Total	Grads. Dropped Out	Currently Served	Currently Employed	Average Hourly Wage	Hrs. per Week Employed
San Francisco, CA	San Francisco Unified	WorkLink	3	6	5	14	2	12	12	\$7.21	8
		The ARC of San Francisco	N/A	N/A	3	3	0	3	2	\$6.62	7
San Diego, CA	San Diego City	TMI, Com. Opt., ARC, Stein, Easter Seals	N/A	24	26	50	8	42	20	\$4.76	20
	Grossmont Union	Community Opt.	4	5	13	22	0	22	18	\$6.63	12
Oakland, CA	Oakland Unified	Choices	N/A	2	6	8	0	8	8	\$7.70	11
Danville, CA	San Ramon Unified	Choices	N/A	3	3	6	0	6	6	\$7.76	19
Total:	5	10	7	40	56	103	10	93	66	\$6.78	13
								90%	71%	\$4,407	Per yr.

Source: From Model Site Data

## SOLUTION IN PRACTICE: TWO CASE STUDIES

### Transition Service Integration Model in Maryland

Youth with significant support needs who live in Montgomery County, Maryland, have several things going in their favor. First, the Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS) has a long history of providing community-referenced instruction during secondary school years for youth with significant support needs who stay in school through age 21. Thus, they have exposure to many work-based learning opportunities. Second, they are likely to receive post-school services from the developmental disabilities system, since there is a long-standing initiative to provide funding for exiting students. Thus, they often do not face the prospects of occupying waiting lists before they receive services. And third, there is an established referral mechanism through the county's Department of Health and Human Services to help students and their families select the agency they wish to serve them upon graduation. As a result, they do not have to wait until the last minute to find an agency that will serve them. What these youth have not had until recently, however, is a way to connect the services of all of these entities prior to school exit. The typical scenario, therefore, was disjointed and uncoordinated services; almost all students exited school without a job in place and the adult system had to start from scratch to assist these youth to become employed. Sadly, it happened more often than not that many of these youth never achieved employment, but merely attended a day activity program with no integrative work or community elements.

After several sessions of a planning group, constituted similarly to that described earlier under the model description, a teacher was assigned to serve eight students who were entering their last year in public school and an agency was selected to partner with the school system in operating the class. The agency, Community Support Services, was known for its interest and competency in providing community-based employment services for people with significant support needs. Each student and family agreed to participate after several introductory meetings were held to introduce them to the model and to explain how the year would differ from previous school years in that the students would spend the entire day in a community setting, not in a school building.

Throughout the course of the year, the planning group met to review student progress and to plan for post-school continuation of services. Representatives

from VR and developmental disabilities were integral participants in these meetings and made sure that the applicable authorizations were in place so that Community Support Services would be in a position to receive funding for supporting each student immediately upon school exit. In addition, the teacher and the staff of Community Support Services communicated continuously to ensure the schedules of the students were upheld, they got to where they were supposed to be, and they received the support they needed for whatever community or job activity in which they were engaged. Considerable planning and coordination were required as each student spent the day in a different way and in different places. Coordinating transportation was especially challenging, since these students were no longer taking the school bus to their schools but were now relying on a combination of public transportation, family and staff to get to a host of community locations.

Not all students were able to start the year with jobs. Two had unique support needs that required more planning to implement in an employment situation, including the need for customized assistive technology. By the end of the school year, however, all eight students were in paid work situations and had individually scheduled non-work activities in place. The students averaged 14 hours per week on the job where they earned on average \$6.19 per hour, typical for youth their age and at first entry into the work force. Only one student and family opted for the services of another adult employment service provider, but she continued in the same job upon graduation.

To illustrate just one of the outcomes, two years after school exit Robert continues to work as an account assistant in the headquarters of a local fabric store where he enters data for overdue accounts. He continues to be supported by an employment specialist from Community Support Services. For its part as the subcontractor to the school system when Robert was in the transition class and as a vendor for both VR and the state developmental disabilities agencies, Community Support Services received funding to seamlessly support Robert and other participants without interruption as they left school and began their adult life.

### **Transition Service Integration Model in San Francisco**

Disruption of service to youth with significant support needs at the time of school exit was the typical scenario for youth attending San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). With consultation from San Francisco State University, SFUSD entered into an agreement with WorkLink, a local adult

employment service program operated by TransCen, Inc., to jointly serve youth in their last year of public school.

Working collaboratively during the full year of SFUSD-funded model implementation, a teacher was assigned to a group of eight students while WorkLink supplied two employment specialists in lieu of two instructional aides that the school district would ordinarily assign the group. Prior to the start of the school year, the WorkLink staff helped the students identify job preferences and preferences for other community activities. Once the school year began, the SFUSD teacher and the WorkLink employment specialists worked together to support the students in their jobs as they were developed, as well as to plan jointly for other non-work community activities that prepared students for adult life, such as using public transportation, using recreational resources, community service, etc.

The California Department of Rehabilitation opened cases on these youth and agreed to reimburse WorkLink for post-school employment services. Likewise, Golden Gate Regional Center, the local agent of the California Department of Developmental Services responsible for funding adult community services for people with developmental disabilities, agreed to reimburse WorkLink for non-work post-school services. Representatives of these two systems were involved in regular planning meetings held throughout the school year so that all services for participants were approved and in place upon graduation. At the point of transition or school exit, five of the eight graduates were employed earning an average hourly wage of \$6.38 for an average of 10 hours of work per week. As a result, the students continued to be supported in their jobs and other community activities upon school exit because the employment specialists, employed by WorkLink, were covered by contracts in place with these agencies. Like the students in Maryland, the first day after school exit looked the same as the last day of school – they had the same jobs, the same community activities and the same staff supporting them.

As just three examples of the model's impact, Ingrid now works as an accounting department assistant at the Museum of Modern Art earning \$11.60 an hour, Sara works as an inventory clerk at Borders Books earning \$7 an hour and Danny works at Virgin Records as a stock clerk earning \$7.25 an hour. All three held these jobs during their last year of school and have maintained them through the collaboration of systems that have developed complementary funding and service responsibilities.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Research and practice have consistently shown that youth with significant disabilities experience better post-school employment success when paid work is incorporated into secondary school curriculum and when links between schools and post-school service are in place (Sax & Thoma, 2002). The Transition Service Integration Model offers one approach to make this happen for youth who are about to exit mandated publicly supported education. The model requires, however, careful and strategic planning among the involved collaborators. In most locations throughout the country, there are collaborations between the school, VR and developmental disabilities systems. However, these collaborations often lack the intensive, direct and overlapping planning and service delivery as compared to the model described here.

Schools and agencies have typically viewed their involvement as an “all or nothing proposition,” often leading to unnecessary and protracted conflicts concerning which system is responsible for an individual’s service needs. Or, alternatively, they often simply wait for a “hand off” of service responsibility to occur, thus resulting in disrupted or disjointed services for the young person transitioning from school to adult service provision. This narrow view of service provision fails to take advantage of legislative provisions in IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act, as amended, that promote joint responsibility for transition across these funding and services systems. Therefore, shared costs are as logical as the explicit requirements for collaboration found in their authorizing legislation.

Further, most adults with significant disabilities have support needs that extend beyond employment and, therefore, cut across the “boundaries” for school, rehabilitation and developmental disabilities systems. By design, the Transition Service Integration Model has taken a broader view of collaboration and brought it to a level where resources and responsibility for the same student and the same point in time have been shared jointly within the regulatory constraints of each system.

Another rationale for an approach integrating these three related systems is the fact that the development of careers for individuals with the most significant support needs is labor-intensive, and none of these systems have enough funds on their own to adequately staff this important service. In spite of significant investment in special education, transition services and supported employment over the last 20 years, the level of employment has not improved (Harris, 1998). Without this kind of service integration suggested by this model, the unfortunate

and disappointing rates of employment for this group will remain as dismal as they are now in most places in the country.

In our experience in implementing this model, we have found that, collectively, the three participating systems have sufficient funds to pay for direct services needed to develop and support employment opportunities and related community participation skills. However, the critical piece missing is a cadre of hybrid agencies or programs established to provide leadership for local communities to operationalize the Transition Service Integration Model. This model offers a blueprint for hybrid agencies, along with their partners from the three systems, to plan for a new way of joint service delivery. In locations where there is immediate access to adult developmental disabilities services upon school exit, as well as in states that are working to resolve problems associated with service waiting lists, this model offers a rationale and a vehicle for funding and interagency collaboration that will most often result in seamless transitions for youth with significant disabilities. Working together, these systems can ensure that employment for youth with significant disabilities is the rule rather than the exception, and that the last day of school is no different than the day before for the new graduate.

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