

Barriers to Employment

1) Interviewer Ignorance

In the IT jobs market the artisan is assessed by the novice, the old are judged by the young, the specialist is evaluated by the generalist, the wise are managed by the ignorant. Little wonder the captains of the computer industry are forever bleating about their insoluble 'skills shortage'.

Trial By Buzz Words

There is a topical fashion within the Information Technology [IT] industry. It is called *outsourcing*. Rather than have an internal department provide a particular service, a company will buy in that service from an outside specialist provider. In line with this outsourcing policy, firms now tend more than ever to pass the task of finding staff over to specialised agencies. These are for the most part staffed by young opportunists who have seized on an easy way of 'earning' a lucrative living. They rarely possess technical knowledge in any IT specialism and are too young to have any significant experience. Yet it is through them, almost exclusively, that the IT specialist must pass to get a job.

A fellow sufferer of this phenomenon was once in the same Job Club as I was. He was 50 years old. He was highly qualified. He had vast experience of project management. He had worked for big names in the financial sector. He had applied for a job through an agency. One time when he rang the agent she told him that she would not be able to deal with his application for three weeks because she was going on holiday and she had not yet had the chance to assess his suitability for the position in question.

Making casual conversation, my friend asked her where she was going. She said that she was going to Fiji with her boy friend. As the conversation progressed, it transpired that she would be 22 years old the following week and had no actual IT experience. Yet she was the front line decision-maker on whether or not my friend should even be put forward for the job for which, in his far better judgement, he was ideally suited.

This is not extraordinary, it is typical. So by what process does an agency profess to be able to assess the suitability of a high-tech specialist for a vacancy? The answer is, by buzz words. The employer specifies to the agency the systems and packages they use and with which the applicant will therefore have to work. The agent determines an applicant's suitability simply by scanning his CV for relevant technical buzz words such as Word, Access, Excel, Oracle, Informix, Acrobat, PICK, CICS, VMS, Windows, OS/2, Unix, TCP/IP, Sage, SAP. She invariably hasn't a clue what they mean. She then puts forward the applicant with the most matching buzz words. If she finds none, the applicant is rejected. Normally, the applicant is rejected anyway if he is [too old](#).

This is unfair. It is inefficient. It leaves highly knowledgeable and experienced people permanently unemployed. It deprives the industry of vitally needed skills. It thus puts national companies at a disadvantage in a highly competitive global market compared with those which are indigenous to countries in which age and wisdom are respected.

CV Illiteracy

Most agencies, many corporate personnel people, and the two proprietors of one Job Club I attended seem to share too short an attention span to be able to read and take in the whole of a one page CV.

I applied through an agency for a programming job. I sent [my CV](#). On it I listed all my programming skills and the languages and operating systems I have used. Among the bullet points under the heading of **Programming Skills** was

- Long working knowledge of 'C'.

I got a phone call from the agent. He said, "I've read through your CV... so you've not done any actual 'C' programming, then. That is what we want." This perhaps typically illustrates the instant, superficial and impulsive way decision makers 'read' (if that is the word for it) CVs.

Even the two people running an executive Job Club I attended had the same disease. After having supposedly picked through my CV with a fine toothed comb one of them commented "It's a pity you have no experience in *selling* software." I told him I had. He passed my CV to his colleague and said "Can you see anything to suggest he had any selling experience there?" "No, I can't see anything to suggest that," came the almost instant reply. Both missed completely an italicised statement at the top of my CV which stated that I had experience in both the selling and marketing of computer software. It was there on my CV staring them in the face. "But it doesn't stand out," they said. But I had been through all that before with them. If I emphasise one aspect of my experience it de-emphasises all the others. Then people will say that there is nothing to say that I have ever done any programming, systems analysis, system design, training, installation or support. If people will not *read* what is there in front of them, you cannot win.

Formal Qualifications

In the rare event that anybody in my age bracket gets through the agency barrier to an actual interview with their client, the next hurdle is the corporate personnel department. Sorry, this is now usually called the Human Resources department or simply HR. This change of name reflects the increasingly de-humanised attitude with which corporates regard their employees. Human beings are, more than ever, seen as nothing more than cogs within the corporate machine. They are just one more commercial resource along with materials, energy, machinery, storage, transport and finance. In the minds of their captains they are no longer *people* who form a working community. In fact, they never have been, so perhaps the name 'Human Resources' is a more honest one.

HR staff have no inward frame of reference against which they can assess the technical knowledge and skill of an applicant. They must therefore rely on something else. About two centuries ago people had this same problem. They needed to know the quality of the knowledge and expertise of providers without having that knowledge and expertise themselves. They needed a grading system for each trade and profession. Trade lodges and professional institutes were formed to provide this. They guaranteed that all their members had proven themselves to be of a required minimum standard.

Nowadays, apart from law, accountancy, medical and a few other professions, these instruments of restrictive practice are all but gone. They have been for the most part replaced by the free market in which one's only protection is the admonition "Let the buyer beware." Nevertheless, there is one remaining instrument of universal restrictive practice which has lingered. That is the academic qualification, namely, the university degree and the college diploma, and their prerequisites such as O-levels and A-levels. These have survived as convenient means for capitalists to grade the types and qualities of the human cogs which they need to drive their corporate machines.

There is nothing wrong with grading knowledge, skills and experience. However, there is a lot wrong with the way academic qualifications attempt to do it which means that in reality they are neither a guarantee nor even a good guide to quality.

When I sat for my degree, the whole outcome was based on what I did in a few three hour papers which all took place within the space of a single week. That was the sum total of communication which ever took place between me and those who examined me. What I have done or achieved in the 32 years since then compensates not one jot for my failure on *one* of those papers in the eyes of human resources managers. Nor are they interested in the entirely non-academic reason for my failing that one paper. My academic qualifications or lack of them convey *nothing* about my knowledge, skills and experience within IT - particularly after 32 years.

Inane Questions

Despite how obvious the above must seem to any thinking person, I am at interviews frequently asked how I feel about my 'GCSE' grades. I think they must mean O-levels. It is over 40 years since I sat my O-levels. What relevance they could have to a job I am applying for today I cannot imagine. How I am expected to remember anything about them now I also cannot imagine. But they seem to think this is relevant. Perhaps it is because the interviewers themselves are so young that 'GCSEs' do not seem very far away. Nevertheless, I would have expected anybody who had been given the authority and responsibility to select people for employment to be able to make the mental leap necessary to see that it is an inane question to ask somebody in their 50s. This is not unusual, it is typical. And not just for me. I have heard many wry comments from my jobless peers on this subject.

This is not the only inane kind of question I frequently get from interviewers - especially young ones. Another recurring example is that I am asked why I have changed jobs such a lot. I have held 5 jobs in 32 years. That is an average of over 6 years per job. I think that for the IT industry that is a very long stay per job. But to the predominantly young interviewers 5 jobs seem a lot. It would be for them. Their careers are probably no more than 8 years old. So to them I am perceived as a butterfly. Again, they do not make the mental leap. Pointing it out to them does not generally go down well.

Aptitude Tests

If, as an applicant of 50+, they have not already rejected you on the grounds of your O-level results, the intrepid Human Resources next subject you to the ever-invasive all-decisive aptitude test. I have never been able to perceive any practical connection between the content of these tests and the processes involved in developing computer software, or of managing a software development project.

Aptitude tests are the lazy, technically-ignorant recruiter's convenient cop-out. They insulate him from the retribution precipitated by a bad decision. They protect him, his reputation and his career in the event that he accept an applicant who later proves to be inept. This is because he can always say, "Well [don't blame me], he passed the aptitude test all right." The lazy recruiter thus successfully side-steps the responsibility for his decision to employ a particular applicant.

At the close of the 1960s I was working for a manufacturer of digital flight simulators. I had been programming the software for them for about 2½ years. The systems I had completed *worked*. They had passed every clause of their comprehensive acceptance schedules. They were also compact, efficient and well documented. They were fast. They were faultless. They had to be. The lives of air crew and passengers depended on their being so. As to the fact that I was a good programmer there was no question.

Suddenly we were all required to take a battery of special aptitude tests. These were purportedly designed to determine who had and who hadn't the aptitude to become a good programmer. We were told that our futures with the company depended on our results. We were all desperate to pass them. Along with roughly half my colleagues, I scored about 5%. The other half scored around 95%. The

company's managers were perplexed. Rumours abounded. We heard that they had written to the firm of Chicago psychologists who had devised the tests asking why half their solidly project-proven programmers should fail the tests miserably. The answer said to have come back from the psychologists was that "some people are simply no good at doing aptitude tests".

We all thought that the psychology-based aptitude test had thus been once and for all completely discredited. But it hadn't. Shortly afterwards when I was seeking a new job I was from time to time confronted by these insidious things. Even the biggest of names in the industry used them. They were a complete barrier. Happily there were still those companies who believed in the practical approach of having one or more of their own seasoned programmers talk shop with you for half an hour. You can't bullshit a tekkie, but an aptitude test can mindlessly filter out valuable talent.

Now, 30 years later, these aptitude tests, far from having been discredited, form a total and universal barrier to my employment as a software developer. I think the systems I have written which are right now working successfully and efficiently in the field - plus [working examples on my web site](#) - bear a far more powerful witness to my aptitude for programming than does some silly thirty minute battery test. Yet modern employers trust the latter implicitly. No wonder they have a constant [skills shortage](#). The 'right people' they 'cannot find anywhere' are well and truly filtered out by their silly irrelevant tests. The practical face-to-face approach to gauging one's aptitude seems to have totally disappeared. The barrier is impervious.

And there's [another critical reason](#) why the results of an aptitude test *foisted suddenly* upon a person are unlikely to give an accurate picture of that person's aptitude or ability in the skill or subject concerned. This is especially so if they are not currently up to speed in a skill they have previously gained but not used for a while.

The Narrowing Door

Years ago, the barrier to employment imposed by psychometric and aptitude testing could be circumvented. Companies who did not yet bother with such tests were still quite numerous. One simply carried on searching. One would soon come across a job being offered by such a company.

However, this is no longer possible. Personnel (or Human Resources) management has since become a far more formal profession. Its knowledge base has become far more monolithic. Its methodology has become far more structured. The once diverse policies and methods of personnel managers in different companies and industries have become far more alike, if not identical.

Personnel managers in all companies in all industries now more or less play in the same orchestra under a single conductor. That single conductor is the current thinking of the universal college of occupational psychology. Company personnel managers thus no longer comprise a complex dynamical profession of free independent thinkers, making each his own judgement of the interviewee before him. They are now no more than the mindless molecules of a [quantum fluid](#) - mere invigilators for proprietary battery tests.

A psychometric test may determine to which kind of job an applicant is best suited (although this I doubt). However, this necessarily means that applicants who do not fit any of its pre-defined profiles are deemed unsuitable for *any* kind of job. They are therefore rejected. Used by one employer in isolation, such a test would not cause too much harm. However, psychometric tests have now gravitated towards a single norm. This norm is now becoming universally adopted by employers to screen applicants.

This means that only applicants with acceptable psychometric profiles will be accepted for employment by *any* company. An applicant whose psychometric profile is rejected will thus be

rejected by *all* companies. I am such a one. I am thus made universally unemployable, irrespective of the aptitudes, knowledge, experience and skills I have within my field. Psychometric testing thus locks me out of the economy permanently.

I sense from their content that a lot of these so-called psychometric tests, unwittingly or otherwise, simply determine the applicant's *personality type*. We are thus faced with the spectre that the time is nigh when only those with what is deemed a commercially compatible *personality type* will ever be employable, locking all the rest of us out of the economy completely and permanently, irrespective of our technical skills.

Generic vs Proprietary

If, in the almost impossible event that you get past the agency *and* the human resources department of your prospective employer, you finally get to meet someone you can relate to. You are interviewed by a technical peer. At last you think you are home and dry. In the distant past you may have been. But not today.

"You can't bullshit a tekkie," I said above. That is true. You cannot. But the marketing spin machines of those who dominate the software industry can. And they do. It is not by chance that the industry is dominated by the young. It has been engineered this way for sound commercial reasons. With regard to the proprietary commercialisation of generic technology, the minds of the young can be captured: the minds of the old can't.

On one very rare occasion I got as far as an interview with a technical line manager with a software company. He was considerably younger than I was. Everything the company produced ran on a recently heavily marketed operating system called Windows NT. I doubt whether this young line manager had ever dealt with any other kind of operating system.

He saw from my CV that I had not used Windows NT myself. I had used and had experience with many computer operating systems before they first became named as such. They were first known as 'organisers' and 'executives'. I had used mainframe operating systems like OS/360. I later had a long affair with Unix and a passing one with VAX VMS. I also delved - often quite deeply - into the microcomputer and PC operating systems like CP/M, Applesoft, PC DOS and OS/2. I had even built into an accounting suite I wrote, a complete disk operating system which handled everything down to track-sector address level. The little machine it ran on did not have an operating system. I had even developed applications for Windows 3.x and had become an extensive user and configurator of Windows 95. But I had never used Windows NT!

The product line, on which this young line manager was working, used a communications network. It involved 'client' software in satellite PCs accessing databases which were centralised on 'database servers'. These servers had to 'listen' on various network 'sockets' for service requests from 'clients'. At the lowest level, these servers were implemented as what are termed software *daemons*. The 'daemon' has been a well known concept in Unix systems for longer than I can remember. The concept itself has existed under many other names within project groups for even longer.

This young line manager gingerly introduced me to the notion of a daemon with the words, "it's implemented as a *daemon* - that's an NT thing - ...". He thought that because I had not used Windows NT, or been on a Windows NT course, I could not possibly get my head round the notion of what a daemon was and how it worked. Not having Windows NT on my CV he even wondered why I had been sent to him for interview. I tried to explain to him that a daemon was a generic concept which applied to systems in general. Unfortunately somebody else had done a much better job of indoctrinating him with the idea - either directly or by overwhelming implication - that it was a concept unique to the proprietary Windows NT operating system.

Another instance springs to mind when I applied for a job of setting up Internet web servers. I was asked by the young director of the company what software I would use to set up a web server. I said that on a Unix machine I would probably use the Apache server and on a Windows PC I would probably use one I liked called "Web Site" by O'Reilly Associates. "Wrong answer," he said, "Never heard of them." Then he began to rubbish Unix and talk as if nothing other than Windows NT existed. "The right answer was of course the..." He mentioned some new proprietary product I had not heard of. I would like to keep abreast with Windows NT, but to do that I would have to pay rather a lot of money to buy the software and then attend expensive proprietary courses to become accredited as somebody who knew something about it. And the price would be far beyond what my State [welfare](#) budget would allow.

Younger people are now in the positions of power. They are now the employment decision makers. But unlike mine, their technical up bringing has been dominated by proprietary market forces. As a result they are unable to discern the demarcations between what is generic and what is proprietary in computer software. This renders them unable to see common principles which inhabit all systems of a kind irrespective of which corporate interest is reproducing, repackaging, renaming and marketing them. Consequently, they cannot recognise generic knowledge when it is not encapsulated within some familiar proprietary wrapping. Hence those of us with deep solid life-long foundations in real software principles and practicalities cannot get jobs.

The principle of what is happening here is perhaps best illustrated by a parable. I call it the parable of the van drivers. A certain goods delivery company in East Kent had two vacancies for van drivers. They wanted drivers with a good knowledge of the highways and byways of East Kent to drive two of their Ford Transits. They advertised the jobs in the local press.

The first responder to the advertisement was a local. He had lived in East Kent all his life. He knew it like the back of his hand. He had an exemplary driving record. He had worked for a long-standing delivery company which had ceased trading because its proprietor had retired. He was invited for interview. Unfortunately at the interview it transpired that his former employer had always used Volkswagen LT35 vans. "We are very sorry," said the interviewer, "but we are looking for somebody with experience of driving Ford Transits." He was rejected.

Another person applied. He had been a delivery van driver too. But he had spent all his career so far driving Ford Transits. He was invited to an interview. "You are just what we need," said the interviewer. However, he then discovered that the applicant had been doing all this delivery work in South Essex. His brother-in-law had cut the advertisement out of his local paper and sent it to him. "But I am very quick at learning new routes," said the applicant. "I was sent to do deliveries in East Herts for a while and I picked up the routes very quickly. I should have no trouble. I have a knack for it." "I am sorry," said the interviewer, "but we really need somebody with a knowledge of East Kent." He was rejected.

The interviewer then throws his arms in the air exclaiming, "One simply cannot find the right people nowadays!"

The first applicant would have been perfectly at home in a Ford Transit after two miles. The second would have known exactly where to go without even looking at his map after a week. There would have been no measurable shortcoming in either applicant's performance compared with that of the employer's more seasoned delivery drivers.

Of course, in the real world, both drivers would have been hired. Nevertheless, their counterparts in the computer software industry would not. The software industry's reasons for rejecting applicants really are that stupid. It is because those judging the abilities and skills of others are simply not

qualified to do so. It is also because large and powerful interests want to commandeer the entire market for their own profit.

There has always been a problem with terminology in the computer industry. Each sector of the industry has tended to become very cloistered in its outlook. This has invariably led it to evolve its own private sub-language or jargon. Such a jargon can be understood fully only within a very restricted domain. This may include a particular technical area such as 'finance' or 'aeronautical engineering'. Frequently however, a jargon cannot be understood properly outside the company within which it originated. Some jargons are privy only to members of a single department or project team.

This has resulted in applicants, who are familiar with the general software concepts and principles used in a prospective employer's domain, not understanding the cloistered terminology the interviewer is using to question him about them. The upshot is that the interviewer becomes convinced that the applicant is not only ignorant and unsuitable, but that he is in fact an impostor - not a genuine software person at all.

Cloistered terminology still survives. Nevertheless, it is far less of a barrier to obtaining employment than are the proprietary wrappings which now encapsulate the timeless generic concepts of computer software.

Manual vs Automatic

During the 1980s I clocked up well over 15,000 hours of programming in Microsoft QuickBASIC. But the character string "QuickBASIC" does not equal the character string "Visual BASIC". Therefore an agency operative sees them as different. The result is that I cannot get a job now that requires experience in Microsoft Visual BASIC. I have never acquired the Visual BASIC developer's kit, firstly because I cannot afford it and secondly because I found Java - whose development kit is free - fulfilled most of my ancient wish list for an ideal programming language.

Visual BASIC, as I understand it, is still 'basically' BASIC. But it has quite a lot of built-in features to ease my task of presenting my output in a Windows environment and interfacing to certain proprietary databases and other helper applications, which in QuickBASIC I had to provide myself as part of the application. It would thus make my task easier.

I liken it to changing from driving a manual stick-shift hatch-back car to an up-market automatic car. I get out of my old manual 1989 VW Golf CL and get into a new *state of the art* Mercedes automatic. The Mercedes changes gear for me. All I need to do is concentrate on the traffic. I delete my old QuickBASIC compiler kit and open up my new Visual BASIC development environment. It does all my screen and database interfacing for me, leaving me to concentrate on the *application logic*. I feel like a cross country rally driver, adept at his lightening heel-and-toe down-shifts round rising muddy hairpins, settling down to a comfortable new job as a limousine driver.

Unfortunately the character string "stick shift" does not equal the character string "automatic". Therefore an agency operative sees them as different, and consequently deduces that the rally driver cannot possibly master the controls of a limousine without going on an unaffordable course run exclusively by the manufacturer of the particular limousine concerned. Besides, at 35 the rally driver is too old to be worth retraining. At least, this is the way IT recruiters see it as they continue to bleat about the industry's insurmountable skills shortage.

Proprietary 'Qualifications'

Right from the beginning of my career, my employability was curtailed by my lack of an *academic* qualification resulting from my failure of a single 3-hour maths paper on one day in June 1966. Notwithstanding that I have since gained knowledge in that subject far beyond the level of that paper, this has manifested itself as an eternal difficulty regarding employment ever since. But as if this barrier imposed by the powers of academia were not enough, the powers of corporate self-interest have now taken it upon themselves to erect an even greater barrier to employment. It seems that to be able to get a job today, doing what I once did very well for the first 25 years of my career, I now must have an additional *proprietary* qualification.

In the not too distant past I could present myself as a computer software person and be accepted by default as such by my market. But this is no longer the case. By sheer length of experience and depth of reading I am confident within myself to install and configure any system or application on a personal computer. But employers no longer share my confidence. This is because somebody has told them that nobody is capable in such things unless he is what is called a 'Microsoft Certified Engineer'. Unfortunately I am not a member of that species. It is therefore as if the sum total of all my years of acquired knowledge and experience has suddenly evaporated and become as nothing.

So why don't I become one? Firstly it costs too much. Certainly for anybody existing on State welfare its cost is prohibitive. Secondly, I am not eligible to become one and I have no way of becoming eligible. As far as I am able to find out, to be eligible I have to be already working for a company who has some kind of relationship with Microsoft. So I would have to get such a company to employ me first. They will not employ me unless I am one to begin with. It is a vicious cycle.

References

The ignorant interviewer does not have the background to be able to assess my technical competence himself. Neither does he possess the discernment to be able to judge my integrity. And he knows it. He is therefore reluctant to take personal responsibility for his decision regarding whether or not to hire me. Consequently he looks to *others* to tell him that I am technically competent and of good character. Then, should I later prove to be the contrary, he escapes blame by passing it on to those *others* who recommended me to him. He thereby saves face and protects his position and his future career prospects. Those *others* - his scapegoats - are what we call referees.

My problem is that I do not have any. I exist on State welfare. It provides for food, clothing and shelter: nothing else. It certainly does not provide for maintaining social contact. It is therefore not possible for me to maintain contact with friends and former colleagues. Not, that is, if I do not wish to starve. Once I could no longer afford to hop on a train to meet such people from time to time, contact with them soon evaporated. They moved on. I quickly lost touch.

I left my last employer over 20 years ago. That company has since disbanded. The customers of my former business did not know of my personal technical expertise. They saw only delivered products. For all they knew I could have hired others to design and develop what I sold. Besides, prospective employers simply will not accept the customers of my former business as referees in place of a former employer.

Anyone interviewing me therefore has nobody else on whom to pass the responsibility for verifying my technical expertise and good character. So because no interviewer I have ever encountered has had the personal self-confidence and knowledge to judge what he sees before him, the absence of references is yet another barrier which it is beyond my control to circumvent.

This reveals the applied principles by which, in this society, one is granted the privilege of being permitted access to means of turning one's labour into one's needs of life.

1. You are presumed inept unless or until you can present an acceptable referee who will witness to your technical competence.
2. You are presumed untrustworthy unless or until you can present an acceptable referee who will substantiate your moral integrity.

In other words, what you say at your interview is assumed to be a pack of lies unless or until you can present referees who are able and willing to confirm what you say. Truly, you are presumed guilty until proven innocent.

Salesmanship

The true necessary and sufficient skill sets for most jobs do not include the skills of the salesman. Yet increasingly, the person who gets the job nowadays is the one who is the best at selling himself rather than the one who would actually be best for the job. It is appropriate to note here that being a good salesman is not necessarily the same thing as being a good communicator. I was considered an excellent technical communicator but I have never been a very persuasive salesman.

The value of an employee to an employer is entirely determined by his ability to do the job for which he is hired. It is nothing to do with his ability to sell himself. (That is, of course, unless he is hired as a salesman.) Consequently, I would expect the one vital quality for a professional interviewer to be the ability to discern the true suitability and skill level of a candidate irrespective of that candidate's ability to sell himself. Especially when, as in most cases, such an ability is wholly irrelevant to the functionality of the job on offer. I was well aware of this in the days when I sat in the interviewer's chair.

Nevertheless, in my experience as an interviewee I have rarely witnessed this quality. Interviewers are as susceptible to salesmanship as the impulsive domestic consumer. The result is that the best person for the job is rejected and remains unemployed while a vital position which demands top technical expertise is filled by a salesman. Hence it is of little surprise that every elemental activity in the entire economy is now managed as if it were a sales situation, no matter how laughably unfitting and inappropriate the sales model may appear to the rational observer.

The absence of natural sales ability, and the inability of most interviewers to discern relevant skills from interviewee salesmanship, poses yet another barrier to my being considered for jobs for which I am technically well suited.

Conclusion

Interviewer ignorance has been one of the most potent barriers to my acquisition of jobs for which technically I would have been ideally suited. It has relentlessly filtered me out at every stage for such utterly silly reasons as:

- not having the right technical buzz words on my CV
- illiterate agency staff not reading my CVs properly
- not having qualifications even though they are irrelevant to the job in question
- my inability to give 'psychologically correct' answers to inane questions
- being good at my job but bad at aptitude tests which 'prove' that I am
- interviewers assuming that their cloistered terminology is universal
- being excluded from the market by expensive proprietary qualifications
- having no referees onto whom interviewers can readily pass the buck

Thus it is not the *best* product which wins, but the *best-marketed*. So too with a job, the winner is he who best sells himself: not he who is best for the job.

The IT industry suffers skills shortages not because the necessary skilled people are not there but because there is a chronic bottleneck between those with the skills and those who need their services. The IT industry is in serious need of bypass surgery to make a way round the arterial constrictions imposed by recruitment agencies and modern HR department practices.

2) Age Prejudice

The employment market perceives the older professional as undesirable. His knowledge is perceived to be outdated. The breadth of his experience is thought to 'dilute' his specialist expertise. His mature disposition makes him a perceived career threat to younger ensconced 'superiors'.

Age-Based Filtering

I am told by ex-personnel managers, and have seen it widely restated in the industry press, that personnel departments have to deal with far more applications for jobs than is manageable. They therefore get junior staff in the personnel department to filter through applicants' CVs advancing the date-of-birth forward until the pile of CVs is of a manageable size. In the computer industry, this process currently (circa 1994) locks out of the job market anybody over the age of 36.

The only way anybody my age can change jobs or get a job if they do not have one is to know personally (ie 'go back a long way together with') the decision-maker who is in the position to offer a job. Such jobs are not advertised. I do not know or 'go back a long way' with anybody since all my contemporaries had the good sense to leave the U.K. when they were still young enough to do so.

Outdated Expertise

Older people are unconditionally assumed to have out-of-date knowledge. Only the young are credited with being equipped by the degree or college course they have recently completed to be able to use and apply the latest methods and techniques. What those making this judgement fail to ask themselves is where these latest methods and techniques came from. Who discovered them? Who invented them? Who developed them? It does not require much thought to conclude that they were not discovered growing on trees or buried in the ground somewhere. They are the result of long and painstaking effort by those who were working in the industry before the latest rash of graduates left primary school.

Many of the methods and techniques which are known by firm names and coined phrases have been known and used by the older members of the industry for many years. In fact, far from leaving me behind, technical progress within the IT industry to me seems painfully slow. As far as standardising advanced methods and techniques is concerned, it is not yet even half-way down my personal wish-list. The same goes for hardware development. The notion that new graduates are somehow far ahead of those who have been in the industry for years is plainly stupid.

'Dilution' of Experience

Over the past 10 years, I have sent mailshots to a large number of employment and contract agencies with a view to assessing my options for any kind of work in Information Technology in any area of the country working either freelance, contract, on retainer or permanent, home-based or otherwise. I have received little response, and only 2 interviews (via agencies). I decided to follow up the rejections and where possible I quizzed those concerned to try to find out why. The answer proved to be directly or indirectly related to age.

One particular example stands out as typical. The agency said that they were looking for people with at least 5 years experience in 'real-time' systems. I have about 15. When I pointed this out, the person at the agency said "yes, but you have done other things". I said "yes, but how or why does that

matter?" They answered "well this makes you appear to be a bit of a jack-of-all-trades and tends to *dilute* the quality of your experience in 'real-time' systems." I said that if anything, my experience in other areas tended to reinforce my 'real-time' systems experience through the cross-pollination of ideas and techniques from other disciplines. They replied "perhaps, but that is not the way our clients see it, and we have to go by what the market wants".

The upshot was that nobody who actually had sight of my CV was remotely qualified to assess it on a technical or any other basis: all they could do was scan it for buzz-words which they were told to look for. (I try to avoid such things.) Again, uninformed and ignorant decision-makers.

The notion that somebody's experience in one area of application becomes 'diluted' by their experience in another is to me completely inane. Yet this notion is typical of these individuals who find themselves in decision-making positions at too young an age. Their judgements about the abilities and aptitudes of older and far more experienced people are necessarily unqualified. Not surprisingly, therefore, they are invariably wrong.

If while still in my 30s I had possessed experience in as many areas as I do now, I would indeed have been somewhat of a jack-of-all-trades. However, with over 30 years in the industry I have had time to become expert in all these areas. But this is something which a young agency operative or line manager is simply not equipped to be able to see because they have never been there. Yet they are the ones whom blind free-market forces have catapulted inappropriately into positions which give them ultimate control over whom shall be and whom shall not be employed. Research done by a fellow sufferer of long-term unemployment found that many of the agency staff who make the exclusive decisions over whether or not a highly qualified and experienced candidate shall or shall not be put forward for a job are actually in their early twenties!

A Threat to The Young

Older subordinates are a threat to younger superiors. Consequently an older person like myself is viewed by a younger middle manager as a personal career threat. The result is that a good prospective employee becomes rejected not because of inadequate qualification or obsolete experience, but because of over-qualification and too much experience.

3) Length of Unemployment

At the time of writing (summer 2001) I have been unemployed for over 10 years. This alone leads employers to perceive me as permanently unemployable.

This false perception is based on the false notion that the longer one has been unemployed the more out of touch one becomes with one's industry and its current techniques, methods, trends, fads and fashions. The truth is that with no productive work dissipating one's time, one naturally spends it (apart from applying for jobs) reading about and practising, these very things. That is what I have been doing during every spare moment of every 'working' day since I became unemployed. This, I feel sure, is plainly evinced by the content of the Internet [web site](#) I have constructed since becoming unemployed.

Nevertheless, the job market, like all other sectors of the so-called 'free' market is ruled by irrationality. This false perception will therefore continue to ensure that being among the longest out of work, I shall be among the last ever to be considered for a job. The unemployment line will therefore remain, as always, a first-in last-out queue.

4) Prior Self-Employed Status

Prior to my current 9+ years of unemployment, I was self employed for 15 years. This means that I have not been in permanent employment for over 24 years. My last employer closed down almost 12 years ago. This does not make me an attractive candidate for re-employment.

No References

Consequently I have no means of obtaining a reference from my previous employer. For practically all job applications this is an insurmountable barrier. The only other option allowed is a reference from one's former college, but this option is for students who are just starting work. Besides, I left college well over 30 years ago. They would have no idea who I was.

Customers of my former business for whom I supplied and installed software knew me mainly as the 'salesman' representing my business. They did not know that it was I who had written the software which I supplied. As far as they were concerned I could have bought-in the software or had a team of programmers writing it. I never tried to dispel this illusion since with them it lent credibility to what I was selling. None of my former customers can therefore supply me with a reference as to my technical competence.

No one customer ever saw enough of me to be expected reasonably to form a view as to my character. I simply installed their systems and thereafter spoke to them once or twice a year by telephone. Neither therefore would they be able to provide me with a character reference which would be acceptable to a prospective employer.

Prospective employers do not accept either technical references or character references from members of one's family. This leaves only individuals who are not related to me who know me sufficiently well. Nevertheless, what such people could provide would at best be accepted only as character references. Employers do not accept technical references from other than corporate sources.

Unemployment reduces one to poverty. Poverty renders one unable to meet the cost of keeping in touch with friends, colleagues and professional peers. Relationships quickly evaporate. Contact is lost. One rapidly becomes socially and economically isolated. Those non-family-members who could possibly provide references quickly disappear.

One necessary quality of my future employer is therefore that he require no references.

Wrong Profile

In the early part of my career I fitted well into the employee mould. I was obedient. I was hard-working. I was single-minded. I had a single technical job function. I was productive. I was content with what I did. I did not pester. I never complained.

Self-employment changed me. I suddenly had to do everything. I could no longer hide within my narrow comfortable technical role. I now also had to be a manager, a market researcher, a salesman, a negotiator, a buyer, an installer, a maintenance and support technician, an accounts clerk and more. I had to perform every function necessary to running a complete business, including being the boss. This broadened my outlook. It transformed me from the narrow obedient employee into a self-starting, self-motivated, self-disciplined, self-managing, highly independent professional.

The problem with being forced back into corporate employment is that my experience profile is now wrong. It is both too broad and too deep to fit the brief of a permanent job. Having run all aspects of an entire business for 15 years, a permanent job would be too narrow, unfulfilling and, above all, supremely boring. And no matter how well I may try to conceal or gloss over this truism, all employers know it!

Not a Team Player

Forcing me to take on all the roles of a business, self-employment made me become every member of my business 'team'. This was hard work. To lighten the load I used my greatest strength. I gradually delegated each general business role in turn to special software which I wrote myself. I wrote programs to handle market research, contact management, budgeting and accounting, document and word processing, project management, technical information archiving and others many years before such items became available as commercial packages. My management, production and sales teams were thus composed not of people but of computer programs. They evolved from small aids running on a Sharp programmable calculator, then became formative programs running on an Apple II, and then on to quite large packages running on PCs.

One great thing about computer programs is that they do not present you with 'people problems'. On the other hand they do not provide you with the collegiate atmosphere and companionship of a human team. Having no further need of the skills which enable one to function in a human team, the skills of this kind which I had soon faded away. I became essentially a self-sufficient loner. I can therefore in no way now be described as a 'team player' - the very thing deemed essential to modern corporate employment.

A Resentful Attitude

I always found the corporate environment to be what I would describe as political. The people who got on well were those who seemed to be far more interested in being *seen to be* doing their jobs and taking credit than in actually doing their jobs. The result was that inept and inappropriate people ended up being in charge. It was they who always reaped the rewards of salary, position, perk and privilege. I obeyed these people as I was contractually obliged to do. But however hard I tried, I could never respect them.

And they knew it. I could not hide it. I do not suffer the devious political mind gladly. I resent inappropriate authority. That is the way I am. I cannot change it. To try would be to deny what I am and the principles I stand for. The principles I was taught from early childhood. The principles I have challenged and tested. The principles I have accepted.

During my formative years of corporate employment I naively accepted the omnipresent self-seeking political mentality of the corporate world. But now, 22 years after having left it all behind, my vision of it has crystallised. I now have a clear outsider's view of market prices, profits and pay. I see how genuine hard-working productive employees are exploited and used by politically motivated peers and superiors. The upshot is that, like it or not, my formative experience etched firmly within my mind an unsuppressable resentment towards the whole insidious system of corporate employment.

5) Incompatible Modes of Employment

The capitalist free market facilitates many administrative protocols through which one may exchange one's labour for money. Unfortunately, most are mutually incompatible. They cannot be mixed. In a market of increasing diversity, turbulence and short-termism, this seriously restricts one's options.

A Permanent Job

Like most people at that time I started my working life in what is called a 'permanent' job. Officially, a job qualifies as 'permanent' only if it lasts at least a year and a day. It is also understood to be full time. This implies that the employee works exclusively for one employer for at least 35 hours a week. This 35 hours or more is also understood to be the employee's prime time - ie: his best and most productive waking hours.

In those days, a permanent job usually lasted for an employee's entire working life. The employee depended on his employer for all his needs of life. It was a form of bondage. The employee was not legally bound to his employer. Nevertheless, in most cases, he was bound economically. It was an unequal relationship. The employee was expected to trust his employer implicitly. The employer was universally regarded as upright and true. The employer, on the other hand, did not trust the employee. It was accepted by all that an employee had always to be watched, monitored, checked and supervised. Consequently the employee had to work when, where and how the employer dictated. He had to report each day to the employer's premises where he could be constantly observed. If he were ever 'seen to be' performing below expectations or committing a misdemeanour, then he would be dismissed.

At times during the 20th century, socially minded legislators placed legal obligations for employee welfare upon both employers and the State. During latter decades, however, capitalist interests have successfully engineered a steady erosion of their effectiveness.

Part Time Work

Socialist legislation has steadily increased an employer's obligations to his permanent employees. Temporary employees, however, have no such protections. To circumvent these obligations, employers are switching increasing proportions of their workforces from permanent to temporary status. Jobs are ceasing to be permanent and full-time. They are increasingly becoming fixed-term and part-time. Within a year and a day one's job ceases. The whole job market becomes ever more turbulent and fluid. With a larger proportion of opportunities becoming part-time it is increasingly necessary for one to have more than one job.

Self Employment

Over the past 22 years, [family circumstances](#) have made it impractical for me to meet an employer's insistence that I be present *on his premises* for 35 to 40 hours a week. I needed to be based at home. The only way I could realise this need was to become self-employed. I had to set up in business and work for 'customers' or 'clients'. Instead of being paid a wage, I had to invoice those for whom I worked and hope they would pay me. In the event, too large a proportion chose not to.

To be able to do my work I needed the tools of my trade. Being a software developer these obviously included an up to date computer system. They also included an office desk, filing cabinets

and all the other office paraphernalia. For an employee, these are provided by the employer entirely at the employer's expense. The self-employed, on the other hand, have to buy and maintain them out of what they are paid for the work they do for their clients. The self-employed person also has the cost of seeking out and marketing himself to a large base of potential clients.

Because the client does not have the expense of providing the self-employed person with office accommodation and equipment, he pays him that much more in fees than he pays an employee in salary for doing the same job. Consequently, the self-employed tend to 'turn over' in revenue considerably more than an equivalent employee does in salary. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the self-employed person's operating costs and insecurity, he is unlikely to be any better off. Otherwise a greater proportion of people would choose to be self-employed.

A self-employed person - a so-called free-trader - is legally required to become VAT registered if his total turnover exceeds a certain threshold. This threshold is below what most must turn over to be economically functional. *All* work done by a VAT registered individual attracts VAT (Value-Added Tax). At least this is what I was officially told at the time I enquired. That includes any work one may do as an employee. The protocol for paying an employee and deducting tax etc has no provision for paying VAT to an employee. There is thus a barrier of practicality to a VAT registered individual taking a permanent or even a part-time job with an employer.

A VAT registered person can always de-register. That is, provided he does not have a self-employed turnover above the registration threshold. Then he can take a part-time job to bolster his income while his self-employment business is riding out a recession. However, as soon as his self-employed turnover exceeds the registration threshold, he must re-register immediately. This is extremely difficult to manage. He must estimate in advance the point at which to re-register and begin charging VAT on his invoices. If he is found, in retrospect, to have been late, he will have to return VAT on work for which he failed to charge it.

In any case, a self-employed person is at a great trading disadvantage if he is not VAT registered. He has to pay 17½% (the rate of VAT at time of writing 1998) extra for all his business costs and capital equipment than do his registered competitors. If he buys from a registered supplier to sell on to a registered customer he either has to reduce his profit margin by 17½% or make himself 17½% more expensive to his customers than he would be if he were registered. Furthermore, if he is not registered, prospective clients are loath to regard him as a proper business. It portrays him as a fly-by-night.

On the other hand, employers offering part time work frequently will not trade with a person on a self-employed basis. They insist that the individual becomes a part time PAYE (Pay As You Earn) employee. An example of this was when a local college was keen for me to lecture on programming to an evening class. Their administration would not allow me to invoice them for the hours I taught. They would only pay me as a part time employee. Being VAT registered it was not possible for me to become their part time employee without de-registering. To do that would confuse my few remaining clients who would wonder what was happening. It was a simple thing made impossible by a combination of ill-devised dysfunctional law and corporate bloody-mindedness.

It is possible to circumvent this problem by setting up and working through one's own limited liability company. In this case, the company is registered for VAT rather than its proprietor. Its proprietor is then employed by the company as a PAYE employee. The proprietor is then free to take an additional part time PAYE job with another company as and when it is expedient to do so. I tried this to my cost in the late 1980s. It has two critical disadvantages.

- The company has to be audited every 6 months by chartered accountants. This is prohibitively expensive.
- The proprietor has to be paid a regular salary by his own company. Because he is on PAYE the company has to pay the tax on his salary to the Inland Revenue each pay period.

For one person working alone, there can be long periods when no money is coming in. There is the inevitable majority of late payers. There are those who do not pay at all. There are times when one has to develop a new product before one can start selling it. In these circumstances a self-employed person simply tightens his belt so to speak and draws less from his business until revenue starts to flow in again. However, an individual working through his own limited liability company has to pay tax and national insurance at a fixed rate for each pay period. This is normally each month. This places impossible borrowing demands on his business which incurs interest costs which he cannot afford. In fact, in any given year, the proprietor's company may not receive enough revenue to pay the salary it is paying him. The company cannot reclaim the tax until the following year. The company and its proprietor end up paying interest for a year on money they strictly never should have had to pay.

Thus the administrative protocols of self-employment and working for an employer are mutually incompatible. They cannot be mixed.

Lost Opportunity

Over the past 22 years this incompatibility has been for me one of the greatest causes of lost opportunity.

Over my past 8½ years of unemployment I could have continued the telephone support services I was providing to my former customers. This would have given me an income of £300 per customer per year. In return for this they would be able to telephone me from time to time for technical help on the software with which I had provided them. I could possibly have found about 10 such former customers initially who would have been willing to subscribe to this scheme. The potential revenue could be £3000 a year.

However, once I had received the extra £3000, my bank account level would exceed the £3000 savings limit. State welfare would then be reduced and I would have to live on the excess capital. I would not therefore be able to meet the postal, telephone and other costs of supporting the service. Furthermore, because I am receiving State Welfare, I am obliged to be actively seeking work with an employer. In the unlikely event that an employer offered me a job I would have to take it. The subscribers to my support service would then be left high and dry after having paid a full year's support. To have offered these services knowing the circumstances would have been to deceive my clients. It may even have been illegal.

For these reasons I have had to turn them down. The result is that they still telephone me and I end up giving them the technical support free simply because I do not know from one week to the next whether I will still be available. The irony is that I have 20 installations throughout the U.K. who are currently running the software for which I could provide this service. I could potentially recruit enough of them sooner or later to make State Welfare unnecessary. But I am simply not free to take on a long-term commitment or make any long-term plan.

6) The Cost of Seeking Work

The contemptuously low level of State [welfare](#) has left me, as an unemployed job seeker, with no resources with which to seek a job. I am like a commercial company trying to launch into a free market on a zero sales budget. Yet I am expected, nay required, to succeed.

Unable to Communicate

The contemptuously low level of state welfare renders me almost totally unable to communicate with my job market. I simply cannot afford to make the large number of telephone calls and send out the vast number of speculative letters necessary to locate and secure a job in today's fiercely competitive job market. The facilities provided by the now defunct executive job clubs which I was required to attend for 6 months out of every year were not, and could never be, a substitute for having my own means of being able to communicate directly with my job market. They were a million miles from the expectations of the real world with which they purported to be dealing.

For example, the actual jobs which are available for people of my background and experience are never advertised. They simply do not fit the format of the advertised job. They do not lend themselves to being processed through employment agencies.

The relevant people to whom I must send [my CV](#) and with whom I must correspond with regard to the kind of job I would be suited for nowadays expect one to contact them by electronic mail. Conventional paper mail, faxes, and even telephone calls are what the uninitiated use - people who are not up to date with the way things are now done. People who send letters and make telephone calls are people they now tend to ignore, or at least respond to only as a last resort if they are completely desperate. You cannot expect to be taken seriously nowadays in the IT industry if you cannot respond via a web site or send your CV in by email. But how does one do this on a zero budget?

Unable to Travel

The contemptuously low level of state welfare also renders me almost completely immobile. I simply cannot afford to travel to my places of prospective employment for interview. Consequently I cannot reasonably hope to find work. The government provides what it calls "Travel to Interview" costs. It reimburses an unemployed interviewee with the cost of the rail or bus fare required to get to the place where an interview is to take place.

But this is not quite what it seems. You only get the money *after* you have already been to the interview. This means that you have to find the money with which to pay the fare in the first place. It is only when you have experienced living on State welfare that you realise that this is [far from trivial](#). In fact it can be critical.

Furthermore, you are only reimbursed if and when the government Employment Service has rung the prospective employer to verify that you have actually attended an interview. The person who answers the telephone call may not know anything about the interview. The interviewer may have since gone away on company business or on holiday. And there is no incentive for the employer or any of his staff to take any trouble to verify whether an interviewee attended an interview with them or not. They stand to gain nothing. They stand to lose nothing. But the interviewee is denied the

reimbursement he has been led to expect, or at least receives it very late. Either way, as a result he has to suffer a level of deprivation far beyond that which he normally has to suffer.

Of course, to anybody who has never been unemployed for any length of time this must seem a total nonsense. How can the mere non-reimbursement of a train fare cause so much of a fuss? Perhaps it will become a little clearer when I [reveal that](#) for me a typical train fare to interview is the same as the amount of money I have to live on for a week. And that is at the 'cheap day return' reduced rate.

The necessity for Employment Services to verify that the interviewee has in fact attended an arranged interview causes another problem. It informs the employer that the applicant is currently unemployed rather than simply seeking to change jobs. In the IT industry this renders the whole process completely and utterly pointless anyway. I have never come across an employer in the IT industry who will employ somebody who has been out of work for 10 years. At least not in a role befitting my background and experience. However, where the employer has not known of my status, my up-to-date leading edge knowledge is not exactly going to lead them in any way to suspect that I have been unemployed for 10 years. This is why, whenever possible, I have funded my own travel to interview.

Finally, travel to interview costs are only reimbursed for journeys which are longer than what Employment Services call 'normal travel to work distance'. This is the maximum distance which one's employed economic peers normally travel to work. There is absolutely no job market for me anywhere near my home. My economic peers almost without exception are commuters. Our job market is in London. London is currently approximately £18 distant from my home (£9.50 at the cheap day return rate).

If I had a job at the normal salary levels for the kind of work I would do I would have no trouble paying this amount to get to and from work each day. In fact, I would be able to make substantial savings by buying a long-term ticket covering a month or even a year. But as a person barely surviving on State welfare I simply cannot. £18 is currently more than 1¼ times what I personally have [to live on for a whole week](#). To pay the fare to one interview in London (which is within the travel to work distance and is therefore not reimbursed) would require me to fast for two weeks. I have done it. But not now. Not ever again. Rules or no rules, I think that under any system of human rights and morality I simply should not be required to do this. So I don't.

I think it is all a case of ignorant rule-makers having no realistic notion of the lives and circumstances of those upon whom they impose their rules. They undoubtedly have in view a stereotypical unemployed worker who does not exist and probably never has done.

Unable to Dress Appropriately

There are certain standards and expectations among employers as to how prospective employees (interviewees) should appear. For the kind of work I would do one is expected to wear a suit. I bought a new suit about 10 years ago. Ten years ago I became unemployed. The suit is worn out and no longer fits me. Now, after so long on State welfare, the very idea of buying a new suit is so ridiculous as to be laughable. Even buying a shirt is painful. I have nothing with which I could reasonably turn up to an interview. On the rare occasions when I am granted an interview I have to turn up in an old pair of grey trousers and a blazer which I happened to have. What effect this has I do not know. But there is nothing I can do about it.

Erosion of Professional Standing

Finally, the contemptuously low level of State welfare has reduced my professional standing. I was a fellow of one professional institute and a member of two others. After 5 years on State welfare I had no choice but to terminate these memberships because, try as I might, I could no longer afford the annual subscriptions. I had already squeezed to the absolute limit every other possible area of expenditure. The basic well-being of my children had to come first. I am now a member of no professional body. This reluctant and painful necessity has naturally made its own significant contribution to the creeping erosion of my chances of ever getting a job.

7) The Downshift Barrier

It appears to be a universally held belief that any qualified person who has, over the long term, failed to find any work within his own field can always and easily take a lesser job. For me at least, this has proved to be universally untrue.

My sister-in-law's husband is director of a fairly large commercial vehicle dealership. He has been director for about 25 years. Before that he served an apprenticeship in vehicle maintenance and became a mechanic. Some time after I became unemployed his own business was suffering slightly from the recession of the early nineties. While considering what he would do if his business were to fail he said with some confidence, "Well, I can always go back to tinkering with diesels".

As things turned out he had no need to worry. However, his reasoning was far from sound. If an equally long-serving director of a former competitor had come to him saying that his business had failed and could he have a job, how would he respond?

Suppose he has a vacancy as an engine fitter. Should he give it to this long-serving former director, or should he phone an agency who can provide him with one of the young fitters whom his former competitor had to dismiss when his business failed? What are the facts which he should consider?

1. Though he is probably fully conversant with all the technology of a modern engine, this former director has not actually tinkered with diesels for 25 years.
2. Having been in charge of running a fair sized business, he would find it hard if not impossible to suppress his frustration at being back on the shop floor taking orders from a supervisor who would formerly have been far beneath him.
3. The circles within which he has lived, moved and done business during the last 25 years will have made him culturally different from the other fitters on the shop floor. As a result, he may not get on well as part of the team.
4. Having to take a tremendous cut in pay he would be further disrupted and frustrated by the resulting forced change to his life-style. This frustration could well manifest itself in his work.

The young fitter on the other hand would be almost seamlessly continuing what he had been doing immediately before. He would be working with peers with whom he would fit in both technically and culturally. He would be satisfied and happy with his new job and with its normal rate of pay. Whom would you choose? I would choose the young fitter.

The above example is very tangible. My circumstances are rather less immediately visible. Though I ran my own business for 15 years, I was a working proprietor - an artisan. I was fully involved the whole time with the actual technology. I was both the 'director' and the 'fitter'. In fact I have never stopped. Throughout the 10 years of my so-called unemployment I have been working just as hard, in fact considerably harder. I am at this point fully conversant *and* practised in the very latest technologies. Yet when I apply for a job in the IT industry I am perceived as the old 'director' not the young 'fitter'. That is why I have been unable to get *any* job: not just jobs at my level and within my field.

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