

# Training & Employment

## PATHWAYS TO THE VALIDATION OF ACQUIRED EXPERIENCE:

### Long, complex itineraries with an uncertain outcome

*Searching for information, advice, career guidance, positioning recommendations, obtaining confirmation of eligibility, preparing application files, and undergoing assessments: the pathway to obtaining a diploma in France via the Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) scheme is long and complex, as many candidates have agreed. They are expected to collect together a large number of resources, such as mentoring services, time, funding, the ability to formulate what their work involves, etc., and to combine these resources appropriately. The strong commitment required by all these efforts is often undermined by tensions, most of which are inherent to the scheme itself and make the outcome highly uncertain: although many candidates set out on this path, very few eventually make it to the goal.*

The validation of acquired experience (VAE) involves as many different sets of regulations as there are ministries delivering vocational qualifications in France and other structures participating in this scheme. The regulations governing the way VAE is organised and defining the procedures involved set the paths taken by those who decide to take this option. Their journey is often a difficult one, and those who set off do not all manage to reach the finishing-point. Candidates asked to speak about their itineraries (see the inset on page 3) described the problems they encountered, how they mastered the constraints involved in the scheme and how they went through the various stages in this lengthy procedure.

#### Candidates looking for markers

VAE processes begin with one or several stages consisting in seeking for information, career guidance, advice and positioning recommendations. The first problem they encounter already arises at this stage: how to decide which structure is liable to inform and advise them best. There exist various places dispensing information and advice on VAE matters, such as drop-in points (Points relais conseils, PRCs) and services set up by the ministries involved in VAE schemes. Although this diversity is not really an obstacle to gaining access to the scheme, it often makes the upstream supply of services difficult for candidates to apprehend: *"It's not at all helpful, there is not centralisation. Nobody simply tells you: "Oh yes, for VAE, just go to such and such a place".* This statement expresses the feelings of many candidates. They eventually choose an information point depending on several factors: how they found out about the existence of the VAE scheme (via internet, in the social or family context, via public employment agencies, the media, etc.), what details they had acquired about the specific qualifications corresponding to their previous experience, the state of advancement of their career projects, etc.

Those who consult several information points find they have to attend a whole series of meetings and generally express the feeling that access to VAE needs to be speeded up: *"I called all those organisations. The meetings were really a waste of time. Instead of telling you 'Listen there's a VAE centre at the school down the road', they make you waste two months before telling you that the person who is going to help you in the end will be Mr X."* This circuit nevertheless helps people to find out what VAE qualifications are available and what procedures are involved: *"I decided to start all over again because I didn't want to miss anything. I was completely lost at the beginning, so I want to go through the whole process a second time"*. Most of the candidates are looking for answers to occupational problems and are strongly motivated from the start to carry out the VAE

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procedure. However, many of them, especially the most fragile individuals, whether they are job-seekers or employees whose occupational paths have been highly precarious, express the need to be taken in hand and followed up much more closely than these structures are intended to do at this stage: *"They let people start up the procedure but drop them after that: they couldn't care less what happens to us"*

Before applying for VAE, candidates must specify what qualifications they are targeting. For this purpose, they can have one or several personal interviews to help them position themselves appropriately and draw up their application file. The aim of these interviews is to analyse the candidates' VAE projects, to examine their CV and to check whether they meet the initial criteria. They are sometimes based on an initial application file summarizing the candidates' experience and competences, which makes it possible to weigh up the consistency and the feasibility of their individual projects.

Candidates are positioned by comparing several standard qualifications with the activities they have carried out at work. Some of them have a fairly good idea of what skills they want to validate before being interviewed by an adviser: *"It was I who asked the question, because I knew I wanted a diploma in human resources, and so all she said was that I could go ahead and apply for it"*. When higher qualification levels are proposed than those initially targeted, the initial assessment can improve candidates' self-confidence: *"I was not very sure of myself at the beginning. I had more than 20 years of sales activity behind me, and without thinking very hard about what diploma this was worth, I used to imagine it would just be a BEP certificate. During the personal interviews, however, we examined the occupational standards quite thoroughly, and in view of the experience I had acquired, which was there on my CV, the adviser said that I met all the criteria corresponding to a vocational baccalauréat in sales work"*. When, on the contrary, these assessments lead to candidates being directed towards lower levels of qualification than those initially targeted, these people tend to lose interest in the scheme. At university level, the procedure includes a discussion with the head of the diploma course about the feasibility of the project, to check whether the candidates fulfill the criteria and whether their competences correspond to the field and the diploma level targeted: *"I was interviewed by the head of the course and given an oral exam on the content of the modules in the course. He said he thought I could get qualifications corresponding to roughly half of the modules"*.

At the initial positioning assessment, the adviser may conclude that the qualifications

the candidate is targeting may only be partly awarded or not at all. This prognosis tends to dissuade candidates from going on to apply for VAE qualifications. The adviser may also warn the candidate that the experience acquired does not entitle him to certain modules in the diploma course, and that further vocational training will be necessary to fill the gap.

In the case of qualifications delivered by the French Ministries of Employment, Social Affairs and Youth and Sport, candidates can take a shorter route: they can download an application form on the ministry's website, fill it in and send it along with the requisite documents to the departments responsible for deciding whether they qualify to undergo the assessment procedures involved. Although this method is faster, the disadvantage is that candidates who are not well informed about the range of qualifications available and the conditions under which VAE qualifications are awarded are liable to have their application refused.

Candidates' files are then assessed by experts or a special commission to decide whether they are eligible. Most candidates think of this stage as a weeding-out process more than a real test. Those who pass this test are often unaware of the legal aspects: they see it as simply confirming that the qualifications they targeted are within their reach and in some cases, that they have been granted financial support enabling them to benefit from mentoring services while drawing up their final VAE application file.

### **Mentoring services are indispensable while drawing up VAE applications**

In most of the departments responsible for awarding VAE qualifications, the outcome of assessment processes depends on how the final file has been drawn up. Candidates have to describe their activities and line them up with the relevant qualification standards. Those interviewed recognized the advantages of this method, which might be called the explanatory method: *"It makes one aware of one's assets. It's at this stage that we realize that we really have some competences. At the same time, it consolidates something inside us which we hadn't really weighed up properly before"*. The procedure is extremely unwieldy, however, as it involves applying complex presentation guidelines and takes a great deal of time: *"Drawing up the file took far too long and I was working at the same time as well: it took me almost three months and I had to submit all those documents and present evidence of all my achievements"*. To make matters worse, taking ages to prepare a VAE application file is risky because it may result in demotivation: *"If only I had known it was going to take so long: it took me from January to September to prepare my*

VAE application file. Actually, if they would just say "you must do it within three months", you would get on with it and finish the job, but this way, it takes so long that you end up by losing interest". The special skills required to describe the candidate's work experience appropriately make the whole process highly selective, which can have dissuasive effects .

Practically all the candidates agree that it is necessary to be assisted and followed up by specialists during this phase: "They help to describe our occupational paths, to explain what we have done so far and what we would like to do now, to see how we stand in relation to our work so as to be able to present it properly and make sure we have not missed out any of the abilities involved". The specialists also help with the presentation of the candidates' files: " There are some points, especially as far as the presentation is concerned, which require special attention, and I would certainly have missed some of them if I had not been given special assistance". The reason for writing it out is to make one's own experience explicit: "To analyse the situation accurately and be sure you get it right, you have to answer questions of the same kind several times. I re-wrote the entries in my file over and over again because I wanted everything to be perfectly clear and concise". Apart from providing methodological assistance, the mentors therefore work on people's language and their attitudes, which have to meet with the assessors' approval. When a feeling of mutual trust has been set up, they also provide moral support, which is not at all negligible, given the rigours of the procedure.

Another stumbling-block candidates are liable to encounter is the financial cost of the mentoring process, which usually amounts to about 500 euros, not counting the cost of enrolment in the examinations. Up to now, Public Unemployment Policies have not systematically covered these fees\* and very few people with no funding manage to persevere with their applications or obtain the full VAE qualifications they initially targeted.

### When the uncertainty persists

The culminating point in candidates' VAE application process is the experts' assessment of their application files. Most of them subsequently undergo an interview with a jury, which has the final right of decision as to whether the qualifications targeted will be awarded. At the interview, which is not systematically run by all the validating organizations, candidates often feel that the examiners adopt a rather stern and teacherly attitude, almost as if they were being

taken to court to have their long and difficult personal efforts accepted or refused. Some of them said that the jury were either looking for gaps in specific fields of knowledge or that they simply checked a few points, which seemed a rather flimsy attitude in comparison with the huge amount of work they themselves had put into their application: "I was expecting to be thoroughly examined, to be asked questions about the jobs I had held or to confirm some of the statements I had made in writing. Instead of that, I got the impression that they hadn't even looked at my file". However, other candidates had the opposite impression: "I had the feeling they had read my file closely because some of their questions were very direct and reflected exactly what I had written".

In the case of VAE qualifications delivered by the French Ministry of Employment, candidates do not have to draw up application files of this kind. In this case, the assessment is based on a practical test of the candidates' competences in a simulated on-the-job situation. According to the candidates who were tested in this way, the advantage of this more demonstrative method is that it simulates real working conditions: "it went very well and I felt at ease. They even had to stop me because I was acting as if they weren't there and simply doing what had to be done". This method is not necessarily easier to apply than the explanatory method, since candidates have to be able to play the specific role defined by the simulated setting and prove that they are able to sustain that role throughout the test.

The outcome of the jury's deliberations are often made known only several weeks or months after the examination. No follow-up is proposed to those who obtained only part of the VAE qualifications

### For further information about VAE procedures

- "Validation des acquis de l'expérience : du droit individuel à l'atout collectif" (Validation of acquired experience: from individual rights to collective assets), T. Audige, J. Debeaupuis, P. Segal and D. Vilchien, a report submitted to the Inspection générale des Affaires sociales (the General Inspectorate for Social Affairs), June 2005.
- "La validation des acquis de l'expérience en actes" (The validation of acquired experience at work), A.-C. Benhamou, report on a special mission, June 2005. These documents are available at the following website: [www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr](http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr).
- "Validation des acquis de l'expérience : objectifs partagés, pratiques diversifiées" (Validation of acquired experience: common objectives, various practices", C. Labruyère and J. Rose, *Nef* no. 15, Céreq, May 2004.

### Oral accounts of VAE experience

The study published in this issue of the *Newsletter* was based on interviews with a group of candidates for VAE, which were part of a survey carried out by Céreq from July 2004 to July 2005 in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region at the request of the DRTEFP (Direction régionale du Travail de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle: the Regional Directorate for work, employment and vocational training). The reason for this survey was that few of the individuals who attend the first meetings to find out about the VAE scheme pursue the whole validation process right up to the end. This survey was therefore launched by Céreq to analyse the modes of access to VAE qualifications in France, the paths taken by the candidates and the pitfalls they are liable to encounter during this lengthy procedure.

For this purpose, sixty-six interviews were carried out with candidates who had either dropped out of the VAE scheme at one point or another or pursued it up to the end. These candidates included both men and women, employees and job-seekers with various levels of occupational seniority, initial training and qualification. ■

\* Until January '06 (update April '07).

## Candidates for VAE and their rationales

Based on the candidates' accounts, four main approaches to VAE can be seen to exist, reflecting various reasons for engaging in this process. These rationales are based on different combinations between the candidates' motivations and their occupational trajectories, as well as depending on factors such as school background, transition to work and conditions of employment.

- The first rationale, which focuses on **protection**, is that adopted by job-seekers and employees threatened with redundancy, who need a diploma to be able to find work or keep their jobs and therefore apply for VAE qualifications.
- The **deferred transition** to work rationale is that adopted by employees whose early careers were fraught with unstable employment and low wages. These candidates hope that obtaining VAE qualifications will lead to steady jobs and better working conditions.
- The **reconversion** rationale involves individuals making a change of occupation. By obtaining VAE qualifications, they expect to reach a sufficiently high diploma level to qualify for a job in a new occupational field.
- Those motivated by **promotion** are people who have either already been promoted or are about to have an opportunity of moving up the career ladder. For the members of this group, obtaining VAE qualifications is a means of obtaining social recognition and filling the gap between their initial vocational training qualifications and the functions they perform, or those they hope to perform. ■

targeted. Since they are given no guidelines or recommendations, they are often at a loss as to what to do next: *"I have heard nothing further. It's quite destabilizing because it makes one feel one has made all those efforts for nothing, one is given no information, and there is no individual follow-up"*. Those who have been assisted by a mentor sometimes find some informal solace for their disappointment by contacting their mentor. Others feel reluctant to pursue the VAE process any further because of the financial investment involved: *"I would have had to pursue further studies: there was a list of books and articles which had to be read and a vocational training course which had to be taken. I received the programme giving the various modules I would have to pass, along with an estimate amounting to 1 500 euros. At that point, I gave up completely because I couldn't afford to invest in a project of that kind"*.

### The VAE pathway: a virtuous set of resources

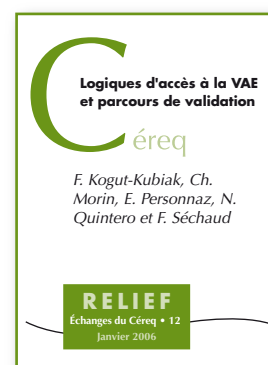
All in all, these candidates' statements about their VAE pathways show that these pathways are either pursued or abandoned as the result of two contradictory processes. Collecting the requisite resources is a key step: finding out about the most favourable opportunities available in terms of qualifications and assessments, obtaining financial support to pay for mentoring services when drawing up the application file and preparing for the oral examination, having

enough time to perform the many tasks involved in the procedure and mobilising the right people to help solve special problems (collecting evidence, finding documentation, and having the application file read by an appropriate person) are all basic activities on which the ultimate success of the procedure depends.

Another key factor focuses on the many tensions inherent to these procedures. Lack of information (especially about the qualification standards and how to continue the process if only part of the qualifications targeted have been awarded), lack of self-confidence and lack of trust in those in charge, and the paucity of financial subsidies for job-seekers can destabilise candidates to such an extent that they give up altogether. Most of these departures occur at a very early stage, before the application for VAE is submitted, and the drop-outs turn to vocational training instead. To improve the performances of these schemes, which emerged in response to the strong demand for safer trajectories and social improvement (see the table above), all those responsible should start looking at the risk factors involved and the reasons why some candidates give up before reaching their goal.

*Elsa Personnaz, Nathalie Quintero and Fred Séchaud (Céreq)*

## Further reading



- "Logiques d'accès à la VAE et parcours de validation" (Candidates' approaches to VAE qualifications and the pathways involved), F. Kogut-Kubiak, Ch. Morin, E. Personnaz, N. Quintero and F. Séchaud, *Relief* no. 12, January 2006, Céreq.

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# Briefing

## Updates



### Fifth meeting of the *Société française de statistiques*

Monday 5th to Wednesday 7th November 2007

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Institut Universitaire  
de Formation des Maîtres, IUFM  
Marseille

✓ For further information (call for contributions, programme, enrolment, the proceedings of previous meetings, etc.), see the following website: <http://www.cereq.fr/sondages2007/>

The fifth meeting of the *Société française de statistiques* is to take place in Marseille in the autumn of 2007. The aim of this meeting is to take stock of practices and methods in various fields, especially those relating to medical and social research, where surveys are carried out on sample populations. It will be attended by statisticians from academic institutions and public and private organizations as well as by research scientists in the fields of social science and life science using methods of this kind. After the previous meetings in Rennes (1997), Brussels and Lille (2000), Autrans (2002) and Quebec (2005), the event in Marseille will benefit from the synergies of two kinds resulting from encounters between several continents and between specialists from various spheres and disciplines: statisticians and users of statistical tools (demographers, economists, epidemiologists, political specialists, sociologists, etc.) working at universities and government departments and in the private sector.

The organisers' choice of location was intended to facilitate the attendance of statisticians from French-speaking African countries, in close collaboration with the CEPED (the Centre for Population and Développement). The fact that Céreq, the LPED (Laboratoire Population-Environnement-Développement) and LEST are all implanted in this region makes it possible to focus on the longitudinal aspects, which are an important feature of statistical theories, but require special, often rather complex tools at each stage (sampling, collecting and processing data, analysing the results). In addition, we can expect to hear some excellent contributions on the theory and practice of health surveys presented by workers at the regional health monitoring centre (Observatoire régional de la santé Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur).

This meeting will take place from Monday 5th to Wednesday 7th November 2007 at the teacher-training institute (Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres, IUFM) on the Canebière in the centre of Marseille. It will be followed on 8th and 9th November by vocational training workshops on the methods used in longitudinal surveys, small domain estimates, advanced sampling methods, the work of the *Services de l'Information Géographique* (SIG) and spatial and temporal sampling procedures. ■



### De la réglementation nationale au certificat européen. Tensions et solutions pour trois pays : Allemagne, France, Royaume-Uni. Le cas de la maintenance aéronautique

[From national regulations to the European certificate: tensions and solutions in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The case of aircraft maintenance.]

> Joachim Haas and Maurice Ourtau

*CPC document* no.4 - 2006

After the “Bologna process”, where it was proposed to develop common curricular structures at three further educational levels (bachelor’s degrees, masters degrees, and doctorates), the links between training systems in the European Union are being extended to include vocational training and qualifications. In the special case of aircraft maintenance mechanics and the application of the JAR (Joint Aviation Requirement) in this sector, Joachim Haas from Céreq and Maurice Ourtau from CNRS-LIRHE describe the move towards standardisation reflected in the preparation of European standards and their application in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The authors analyze the responses to European directives of the national systems of vocational training and qualification and the tensions generated in these national systems by the newly imposed constraints. At a more general level, they discuss the effects of comparisons made between national systems in the framework of European projects and European directives. Lastly, they examine the contribution of the French initial education and training system and its diplomas to the development a pan-European system of qualifications. ■



### Céreq's publications go online

In the contract signed for 2004-2007 by Céreq and its associated Centres, it was stipulated that all publications would be made accessible on the internet, apart from the newsletters (Bref, Training and Employment, Calificaciones & empleo), where this was already the case. The first two steps towards this goal were taken in 2004/2005, when all the articles published more than 3 years previously in the journal “Formation Emploi” became accessible via Céreq’s documentary portal, and a series called “Net.doc” was launched, which can be consulted only via the Céreq website. All the back-issues of “Nef” and “Relief” can now be consulted at [www.cereq.fr](http://www.cereq.fr). In keeping with the preferences expressed by the readers of “Bref” and “Formation Emploi” in a survey, printed versions of these journals will continue to be published. ■

✓ Céreq website:  
<http://www.cereq.fr>

## New Publications

### Qualité des formations et emploi des formateurs. Le cas des stages proposés aux demandeurs d'emploi

[The quality of vocational training and the employment of trainers. The case of training courses for job-seekers]

> Alexandre Méliva

**Relief no. 19**, February 2007

The quality of vocational training courses and trainers' conditions of employment are topics to which little attention has been paid so far in sociological and economic studies on adult vocational training. Without claiming to address all the questions arising in this context, the author of the present study suggests some explanations for the diversity of the situations observed, based on empirical data collected in Céreq's 2000 survey on vocational training bodies (see for example "La structuration de l'offre de formation continue" (The structure of the CVT supply), J. Vero and P. Rousset, Nef no. 4, November 2003). In this article, which focuses on vocational training courses for job-seekers, various criticisms of the public vocational

training schemes launched for job-seekers during the 90s are cited. Increasing importance is being attached these days to the standard of training courses and that of the trainers themselves. Since the end of the 90s, heated debate has been focusing on defining occupational standards and specifying the activities involved. Trainers' conditions of employment are then discussed. It emerges that the great differences in the quality of the vocational training available have generated such differences between trainers' conditions of employment that some of them are in quite a precarious situation, and these differences also make it difficult to set up a properly recognized occupational group.

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*This publication is available at the Céreq bookstore or by mail order to Marie-Christine Antonucci, Céreq, 10, place de la Joliette, BP 21321, 13567 Marseille cedex 2. Tel. 33 (0)4 91 13 28 89 Fax 33 (0)4 91 13 28 80. E-mail: antonucci@cereq.fr. Orders must be accompanied by payment (please include 4 € for postage and handling).*

## Formation Emploi

no. 97 January-March 2007

### "Mecanic vallée" : interactions entre système productif local et formation

["Mecanic vallee": interactions between cluster development and training]

> Joachim Haas

This paper deals with the mutually supportive interactions occurring between investment in local training and the densification of local socioeconomic systems. It focuses in particular on the mechanisms contributing to inter-firm and public/private cooperation, which obey feedback loop principles. According to this model, local cooperation leads to investments being made in the field of vocational and job training and *vice-versa*, investment in training infrastructures promotes cooperative projects in other fields in the local socioeconomic system. The "Mecanic Vallée" industrial cluster provides an excellent example of how these processes work.

### Les intermédiaires de proximité, pour inciter les PME à former

[Local mediators inciting SMEs to dispense vocational training]

> Marc Lecoutre

Among the structural effects of French State commitment to the development of vocational training (EDDF), there has been an attempt to give occupational branches a greater say in the local development of vocational training via the accredited social partners' bodies (OPCA), especially at the level of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs). In some cases, however, the State has not managed to prevent opportunistic strategies from being adopted by the OPCAs. In other cases, these developments might seem likely to result in a tendency for OPCAs to become organized on a more territorial basis, although current practices have not actually confirmed this prediction. The appeal



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Vocational  
training and the  
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of local structures is partly due to ideologies according to which whatever is local is bound to be good.

### **Petites entreprises et territoire, un lien surestimé ?**

[Small firms and the territory: an overestimated link?]

> Stéphane Michun

The question of small firms' access to continuing vocational training (FPC) in France provides a good example of how territorial links tend to be overestimated. Since the FPC system has not significantly improved the situation for workers at small firms by giving them greater access to vocational training, it might seem sufficient to increase the numbers of local employment and vocational training mediators and to advocate the good practices adopted at the firms dispensing the most vocational training. However, the author explains that this would mean neglecting the specificities of small firms and their diversity, as well as overlooking the importance of affinities (which are not necessarily based on spatial proximity alone) for forming links at small traditional firms (which correspond by far to the majority of small firms).

### **Les thèses CIFRE, un indicateur de la structuration spatiale de la recherche**

[CIFRE doctoral theses: an index to the spatial structure of research]

> Rachel Levy and Raymond Woessner

Joint public and private networks play an essential role in the development of innovative projects. In this context, the doctoral research carried out at firms in the framework of the CIFRE scheme (which involves industrial agreements on vocational training via research) makes it possible to measure the links formed between firms and university research departments. The resulting map of the French territory shows a highly uneven pattern of distribution. The Paris region constitutes the main hub, and the other cities occupy very secondary positions. Some urban clusters seem to be emerging, however, as the result of the bilateral and multilateral exchanges developing in addition to the links already existing with Paris.

### **Formation et territoire : des approches renouvelées**

[Vocational training and the territory: some novel approaches]

> Maiten Bel

In the context of decentralisation, studies have been focusing increasingly on the territorial approach to the links between employment and vocational training. The authors of all the analyses reviewed here consistently challenge the idea that these links involve self-balancing processes and suggest that they result rather from various interactions. They often use terms such as territories, networks and mediators without defining exactly what these terms are intended to mean. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this paper examines how these terms are used in various disciplines dealing with the links between employment and vocational training. It shows how polysemous they are and stresses the need for authors of these analyses to define exactly what these terms are intended to mean.

### **Les gardiens d'immeubles : le présent conjugué au passé**

[Building caretakers: the present viewed in terms of the past]

> Hervé Marchal

The caretakers of buildings in the social environment have few legitimate grounds (such as the fact that they enjoy institutional recognition or a high occupational status) on which to base the definition of what their occupation involves. Since this is the case, the author points out how these employees make use of their past experience in their everyday work to define the scope and the limitations of their occupational role. Based on a quantitative nation-wide survey carried out in France, which included many interviews and observations on the field, the author discusses the concrete examples encountered where caretakers' image of their functions was determined by their own past history.



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