



Better Returns Programme



6: Target Easier Management for Better Returns

Manage your time • Reduce costs • Make sheep less work





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May 2006

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**Better Returns
Programme**



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Farming sheep intensively - in terms of cash invested, and more importantly time committed - has been the route to profit for some. However, the mantra of “work smarter, not harder” - so popular amongst business gurus also applies to our profession.

The harsh facts of life today are that you need to be master of more than one trade and have the time to make the most of the resources that you and your business have to generate revenue. And you need time to “have a life”.

This is where “Easier Management” fits in. It is not a recipe for putting your feet up; it is ways that may free-up time to use more wisely - either to boost existing business productivity, develop new revenue streams, or simply to improve your quality of life.

We are indebted to the Easicare® system developed by SAC for much of the ideas in this booklet. The concepts have been tried and tested. The most fervent advocates claim to handle less than five ewes in every 1,000 at lambing. You may not want to reach such dizzy levels or make such drastic changes. However, I hope in the following pages you will find some thoughts to seriously challenge the way you do things, I know I have.



D Raine

David Raine
Chairman
Better Returns Programme
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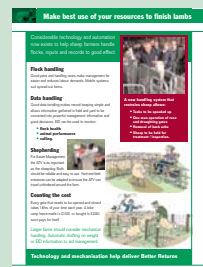
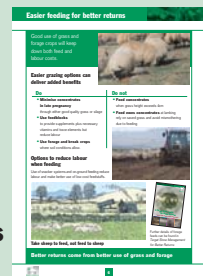
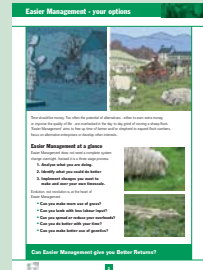
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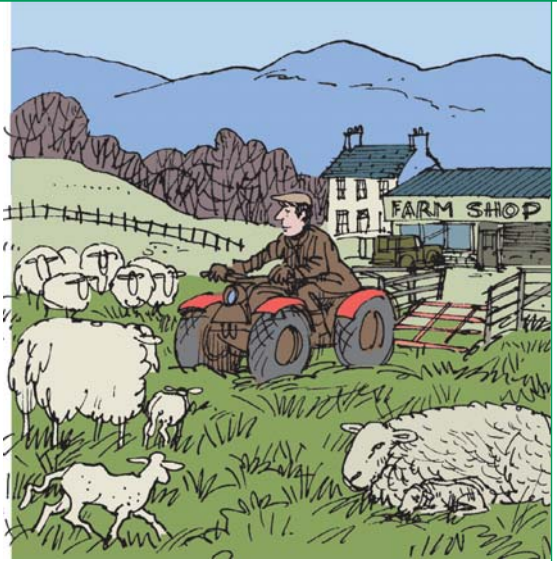
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Easier Management needs strategic planning



Time should be money. Too often the potential of alternatives - either to earn extra money, or improve the quality of life - are overlooked in the day to day grind of running a sheep flock. 'Easier Management' aims to free up time for the farmer and/or shepherd to expand flock numbers, focus on alternative enterprises or develop other interests.

Easier Management at a glance

Easier Management does not need a complete system change overnight. Instead it is a three stage process:

- 1. Analyse what you are doing**
- 2. Identify what you could do better**
- 3. Implement changes you want to make over your own timescale.**

Evolution, not revolution is at the heart of Easier Management.

- **Can you make more use of grass?**
- **Can you lamb with less labour input?**
- **Can you spread or reduce your overheads?**
- **Can you do better with your time?**
- **Can you make better use of genetics?**



Can Easier Management give you Better Returns?

Lambing for most flockmasters is the most labour-intensive operation of the year.

Where flocks are lambed indoors, ewes and their lambs can be handled two or three times as they are moved through various pens.

Outdoor lambing is an Easier Management option to consider. Most flockmasters have reduced handling to around 5% of ewes lambed.



Timing and expectations

Outdoor lambing relies on a good supply of grass for the pregnant ewe which means late April lambing in many parts of England. So this is not an option for those aiming to catch premium markets.

Lambing percentages may slip a little, however any assessment of such change must consider reductions in costs, particularly labour and feed.

Options for Easier Management at lambing

- **Grass** - needs to be saved over Feb-April so it is at 8-15cm at turnout
- **Stocking** - 17 ewes/ha for twins; 27 ewes/ha for singles, less on upland farms
- **Ewe condition** - needs to be condition score 2-2.5 at turnout. Ewes must not be fat
- **Pre-lambing** - provide Vitamin E supplement but no daily concentrate feeds
- **Inspect** - three times a day using ATV
- **Foster** - indoors

Housing pre-lambing

Housing ewes in the period from three months until 3 weeks before lambing can also bring benefits:

- **Grass can be saved for lambing**
- **Feeding can be managed more easily and condition managed more closely.**



Easier management at lambing can slash labour requirements



Adopting Easier Management principles will reap rewards for your enterprise, your business and you.

When and how you lamb has big implications for strategy, labour use and returns



Flock type

	Traditional housed lowland spring lambing		Easier Management outdoor lambing	
	% Assisted	% Handled	% Assisted	% Handled
UK Crossbred ewes	25	50	2	5
Lambs scanned	180		170	
Lambs sold	150		145	

Flock type

	Traditional housed lowland spring lambing	Easier Management outdoor lambing
Cost/ewe		
Winter feed: forage +concentrate	£6 - £10	£4 - £8
Winter power/labour and housing	£25 - £35	£10 - £20

Reaping the rewards

Just as there is no single Easier Management system, nor is there one way for you to gain rewards from making changes. Options include:

- **Increasing flock size to spread overheads**
- **Using free management time to:**
 - earn income from other enterprises
 - develop new enterprises.

It will pay to think harder about your business, rather than just work harder.



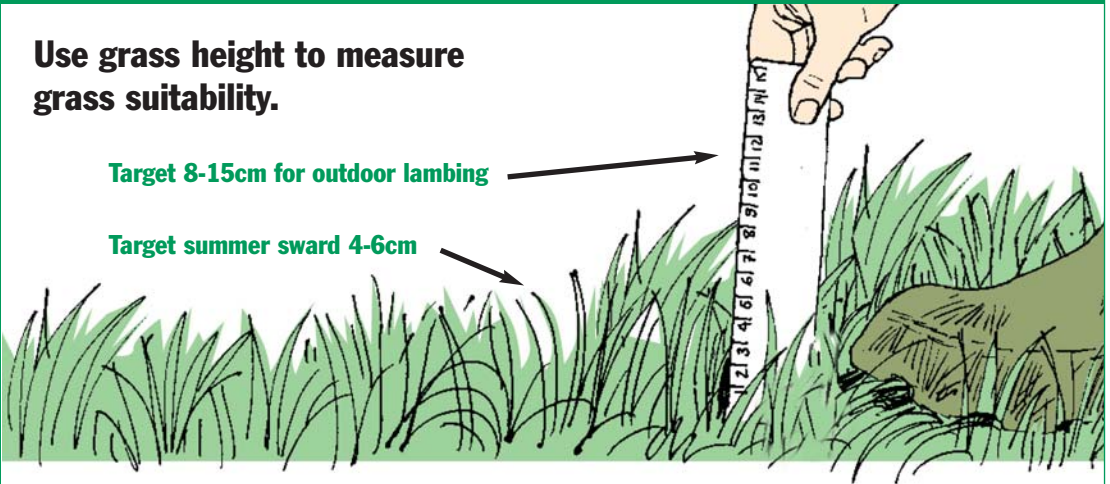
Consider your options for Better Returns

Effective grass management and use is at the heart of Easier Management concepts. Well-managed grass should sustain 220-250g/day liveweight gain without high levels of supplements to weaning.

Use grass height to measure grass suitability.

Target 8-15cm for outdoor lambing

Target summer sward 4-6cm



Encouraging spring grass

Correcting plant nutrient deficiencies in spring, particularly N and P, makes grass grow. Grass breeding has made real progress in recent years so use recommended varieties for regular reseeding, and where appropriate, apply fertiliser as soon after T-Sum T200 as possible.

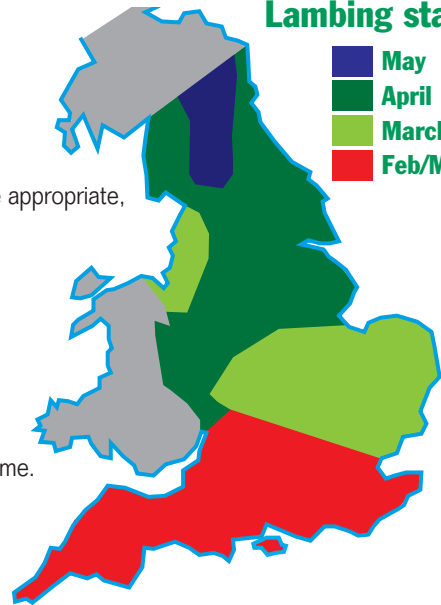
Matching your locality to your lambing date

T-Sums are the well-established indicator for optimum nitrogen application on grassland. Published weekly through the spring, T-Sums show accumulated thermal time. T200 (ie 200 day degrees from 1 Jan) is the optimum time for nitrogen application.

- Ensure later born lambs grow without check.
- Although, nematodirus risk is less, worms must be controlled.
- Monitor FEC and check drenches work.
- Reduce weaning stress by removing ewes, not lambs, from field.

Lambing starts

- May
- April
- March/April
- Feb/March



Good grass management is vital for Better Returns



Good use of grass and forage crops will keep down both feed and labour costs.



Easier grazing options can deliver added benefits

Do

- **Minimise concentrates in late pregnancy**
through either good quality grass or silage and monitor ewe condition.
- **Use feedblocks**
to provide supplements plus necessary vitamins and trace elements but reduce labour.
- **Use forage and break crops**
where soil conditions allow.

Do not

- **Feed concentrates**
when grass height exceeds 4cm.
- **Feed ewes concentrates** at lambing.
Rely on saved grass and avoid mismothering due to feeding.

Options to reduce labour when feeding

Use of snacker systems and on-ground feeding reduce labour and make better use of low cost feedstuffs.



Take sheep to feed, not feed to sheep



Further details of forage feeds can be found in *Target Store Management for Better Returns*.

Better Returns come from better use of grass and forage

Considerable technology and automation now exists to help sheep farmers handle flocks, inputs and records to good effect.

Flock handling

Good pens and handling races make management far easier and reduces labour demands. Mobile systems suit spread out farms.

Data handling

Good data handling makes record keeping simple and allows information gathered in field and yard to be converted into powerful management information and good decisions. EID can be used to monitor:

- **Flock health**
- **Animal performance**
- **Culling.**

Shepherding

For Easier Management, the ATV is as important as the sheepdog. Both should be reliable and easy to use. Yard and field entrances can be adapted to ensure the ATV can travel unhindered around the farm.



Counting the cost

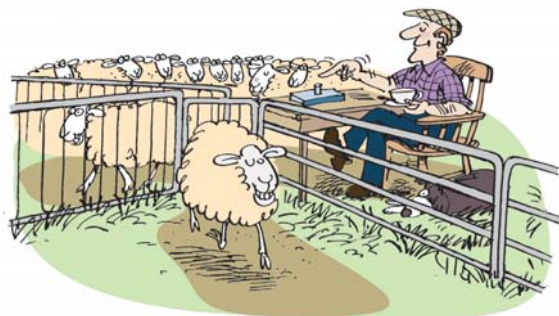
Every gate that needs to be opened and closed takes 18hrs of your time each year. A bike ramp home-made (c.£100), or bought (c.£200), soon pays for itself.

Larger farms should consider mechanical handling. Automatic drafting on weight or EID information to aid management.



A new handling system that restrains sheep allows:

- **Tasks to be speeded up**
- **One man operation of race and draughting gates**
- **Removal of back ache**
- **Sheep to be held for treatment / inspection.**



Technology and mechanisation help deliver Better Returns



Stock can be selected for traits that will ease management, as will rigorous culling. Ease of lambing is a key genetic trait carried by both ram and ewe.

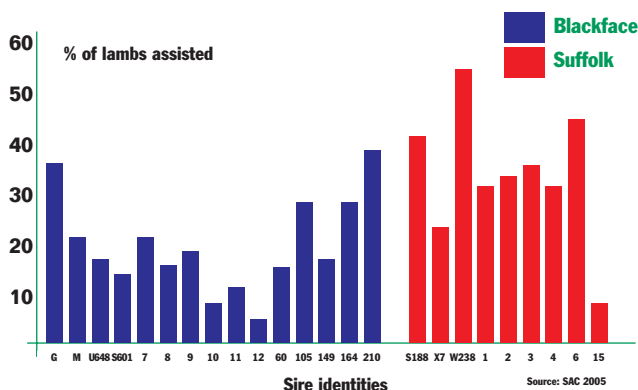
The first step to Easier Management is selecting sires that were born without assistance. For example, Suffolk sire No.15 in the graph below is better than most Scottish Blackfaces as only 10% of his lambs needed assistance. Ask your breeder for lambing score figures on rams.

Single breeds and closed flocks?

Replacements

Crossbred sheep do well on Easier Management systems provided rams producing lambs with "get up and go" are selected.

Differences between sires and breeds in % of lambs assisted to be born



The ultimate in Easier Management and biosecurity is a closed flock with only rams bought in. Fortunately, Easier Management performance traits such as growth rate to weaning and muscle depth, are measured by Signet. So over a five year period - buying rams on performance and culling for management defects - removes most need for lambing interventions.



Selection should be based on performance not on looks

Key traits for Easier Management

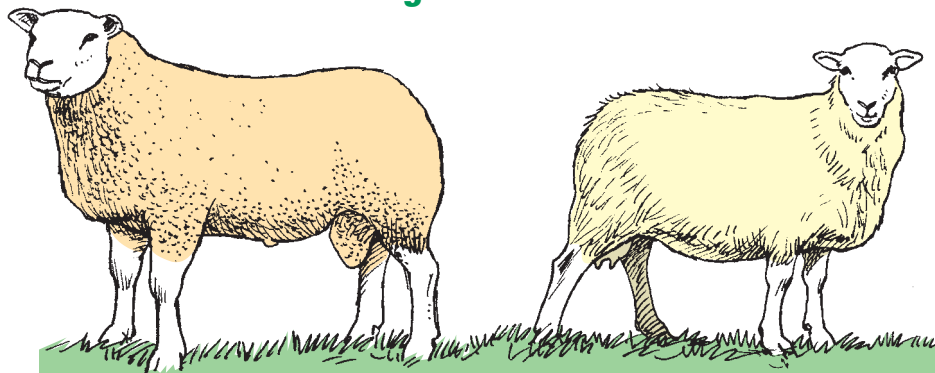
- **Lambing ease** - there is no EBV available for this at present, but marking or tagging ewes that need help will assist culling decisions.
- **Lamb survival** - is strongly influenced by the sire.
- **Time to stand and suck** - is important if intervention is to be avoided. These traits are highly heritable.
- **Grazing ability** - is often masked by feeding high levels of concentrates.
- **Other traits** - include mothering ability, clean backsides, footrot and worm resistance.

Selection for Easier Management offers Better Returns

Buying stock for Easier Management

EBVs should be the base on which any stock purchase is made. These will help you ensure you will achieve Better Returns through meeting market needs in terms of weight and carcase specification. However, there is a range of other factors to consider and you should ensure sellers can provide information on whether stock has been assessed for Easier Management traits.

Easier Management traits to look for



Vigorous at birth
High growth rates
Sound feet
Worm tolerance

Unassisted birth
Mothering ability
Good constitution
Dag free

Culling your way to Easier Management

If you have to intervene and save a life, mark the animal - using ear notches or permanent marker - do not keep its offspring. Decide on how many times you are prepared to accept intervention and cull if the threshold is exceeded. For instance, if you have to assist a ewe at lambing two years running and your threshold is two, the ewe should be culled.

Your culling checklist should include:

- **Assisting ewe at lambing**
- **Assisting suckling, either through poor mothering or weak lamb**
- **Repeated footrot treatment**
- **Excessive dagging**
- **Prolapse**
- **Backing/casting (ewe stuck on its back).**

Your one to three threshold should be set by how quickly you want to move your flock to Easier Management. With prolific breeds, eg Lleyln, set your threshold lower.

Young culls can be crossed to terminal sires; do not keep the progeny.

Strategic culling delivers Easier Management and Better Returns



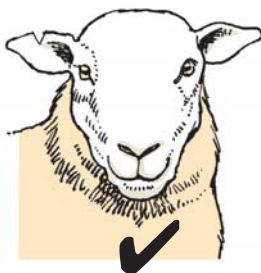
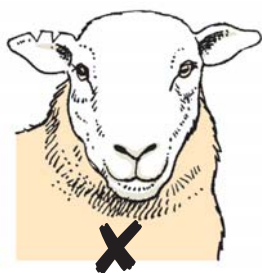
Record keeping can be a real chore, yet a simple recording system at lambing will quickly identify the stock worth keeping to build up the Easier Management potential of your flock.

The aim is to identify sheep that last and produce good lambs - easily. Tag lambs as ewe and lamb are moved from lambing area and record using this simple system:



Lambing score

	-1	0	+1
Lambing ease	Assisted	Minor help	No assistance
Mothering ability	Leaves lambs	Stands well back	Follows whatever
Lamb vigour	Has to be sucked	Slow to suck	Up and sucks



Use the scores to assess what lambs to keep and breed from. Castrate any with a negative score.

Where scores are negative:

- **Castrate ram lambs**

	Typical lowland breed	Easier Management goal
Time to stand	50 mins	25 mins
Time to suck successfully	100 mins	30 mins

The faster a lamb is up and sucking, the less need there will be for intervention.

Purchase or select sires for both carcass quality and ability to lamb outside without assistance. Rams that were born without help, produce offspring that do not need help at lambing.

When breeding your own rams you must:

- **Castrate ram lambs with any minus lambing scores**
- **Cull ram lambs that are not thriving when marking**
- **Cull excessively daggy rams or those needing repeated worming.**

After five years selecting by lambing scores you can remove the need for lambing assistance.

Better Returns are identified with Better Records

Wool, apart from specific breeds such as NZ Romney, offers no worthwhile return but leads to a lot of costly headaches.

The curses of wool include:

- **Labour for shearing and dagging**
- **Flystrike**
- **Trapped sheep**
- **Heat stress when housed**
- **Less active grazing pre-shearing**
- **Up to £2/ewe extra costs.**

Options for shearing

Winter shearing before housing pregnant sheep can increase building capacity by 30%, can reduce respiration rates and extend gestation by 1.5 days leading to larger, more vigorous lambs.

If wintershearing does not suit, it pays at least to belly shear ewes due to lamb at grass.

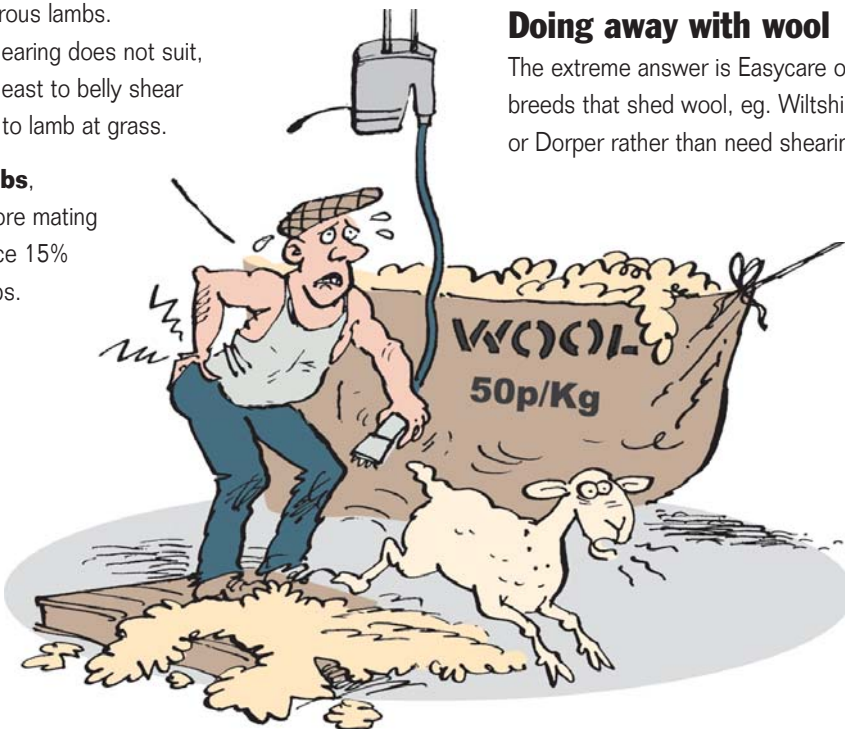
Ewe lambs,

shorn before mating will produce 15% more lambs.



Doing away with wool

The extreme answer is Easycare or similar breeds that shed wool, eg. Wiltshire Horn or Dorper rather than need shearing.





Easier Management is not about radical overnight change. It takes time and planning.

Planning and preparation

- **Study your systems** and compare them to the Easier Management options.
- **Examine your physical and financial records** to see where your business would benefit most. Paying attention to overheads and labour costs /ewe.
- **Identify those areas** that you believe you can readily adopt and manage change.



Implementation - changing to specific easy care breeds

One major decision is whether to keep buying replacements or close the flock. If you are prepared to manage sheep with heavy wool yields; then NZ breeds, eg. Romney, may be attractive.

These options are still being developed, so many farmers are reluctant to make dramatic changes. The prolific Lleyn is a good candidate ram for a closed Easier Management flock and several breeders have been selecting for easy care traits. The Meatline has proved a useful UK composite terminal sire, producing vigorous lambs with potential also as a ewe breed by using rams with good maternal traits.

To remove costs associated with shearing and wool cross ewes twice to a woolless breed eg. Easycare or Wiltshire Horn.

Regardless of your chosen breed, ask the breeder about Easier Management traits, eg ease of lambing.

Breed	Ewe weight (Kg)	Pure-bred lamb carcass weight	Crossbred lamb carcass weight	Lambing percentage reared	Comment
Lleyn	55	17kg@R3L	19kg@R3L	180	Prolific
Easycare	65	18kg@R3L	20kg@R3L	160	No shearing
Meatline	65	18kg@R3L	18kg@R3L	155	Meaty
New Zealand Romney	70	19kg@R3L	21kg@R3L	150	5kg wool worth £3.50-£4.00

Plan for Easier Management and Better Returns



Adopting Easier Management can boost your returns by either

- spreading your overheads
- releasing labour to other enterprises
- freeing your time to manage and develop alternative opportunities.

Is it right for you?

Answer the following questions:

	Yes	No
• Are your lamb sales less than 150%?		
• Did you fail to sell any lambs for breeding?		
• Did you fail to sell any lambs in early markets?		
• Do you have excess autumn grass?		
• Can your farm produce autumn feed eg forage brassicas?		
• Could you replace loss making cattle and use housing for sheep at 1sq m /ewe?		
• Do you have good replacements readily available?		
• Can you produce 1000 to 1500 lambs/worker in a new system?		
• Could you make more profitable use of your time in other enterprises on, or off, the farm?		
• Do you have a positive attitude to sheep production?		

If you answer YES to 8 or more of these questions, then you definitely need to think seriously about a significant change to Easier Management techniques into your business.

If you answer YES to 5 or more, then you could probably make a marked difference to your quality of life and your bottom line.

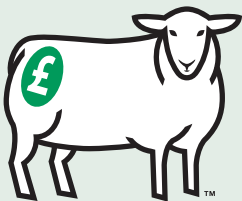
Think harder - make a living but get a life



This is one of a number of manuals produced under the Better Returns Programme.

Other titles in the series include:

- 1. Target Lamb Selection for Better Returns**
- 2. Target Ram Selection for Better Returns**
- 3. Target Lamb Management for Better Returns**
- 4. Target Ewe Management for Better Returns**
- 5. Target Store Lambs for Better Returns**



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All contain useful pointers to where you can achieve savings in time and money as well as increase the value achieved from your sheep enterprise.

Copies are available FREE to English producers, call 0870 241 8829 or email brp@eblex.org.uk

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Funded by



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