2004 research study
Display of corporate publications on Australian university websites

The University of Melbourne

University Web Centre
2004 research study:
Display of corporate publications on Australian university websites

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If you test your own site against a major competitor's, you'll likely find a 68% difference in measured usability (this is the average, though actual scores vary considerably). What does that mean for your project?

If it turns out that you are 68% better than your competitor, break out a bottle of champagne and toast your Web team. Gloat. But don't slack. Unless your competition is utterly incompetent, they'll be running their own competitive studies and will shortly learn about their site's shortcomings and improve them. On the Web, all advantages are temporary, and you must keep innovating to stay ahead.

Summary of findings

Findings from the literature review

The 'Official Publications' page lives on

The 'Official Publications' page has a place in corporate and government websites. Located in the 'About Us' section of a university website, it provides a helpful search/navigation tool for people unfamiliar with the university's activities and reputation.

Web users don't like PDFs

PDFs are typically inaccessible and disrupt the web user's experience of a site. Always provide accessible alternatives such as an HTML summary and a telephone number and email address for requesting a printed copy.

The 'About Us' pages should establish the organisation's credibility

People unfamiliar with the organisation are more likely to seek background information in the 'About Us' section of a website. Failing to provide clear, concise, factual information damages the organisation's credibility. 'About Us' pages should be highly usable and written for people unfamiliar with the organisation.

Findings from the survey

Most universities have an 'About Us' page that's easy to find

Most of these pages are linked from the home page. A simple, clear page title like "About [name of university]" makes the page easy to find and recognise.

Some universities have more than one 'About Us' page, which can be confusing or add unnecessary clicks to a visitor's pathway through the site.

Mission statements are a 50-50 bet

Half the surveyed universities publish their mission statement on the web, usually as part of an 'About Us' section.

A 'Corporate Publications' page appears on half the surveyed sites

This is typically located in the 'About' section, a media relations section or a governance/management section.

Annual reports are mostly inaccessible on the web

Three-quarters of universities publish their annual reports as PDF documents. Less than half-a-dozen universities provide an HTML version or other alternatives (such as a telephone number) for people who cannot access PDFs.
Annual reports are hard to find and use

Universities' annual reports are hard to find with internal search engines. Too many faculty, department, centre and other 'local' annual reports clutter up the results pages. The Australian Catholic University's search facility is a notable, highly usable exception.

Most universities provide only the most recent version of their annual report, which means web users are unable to compare reports (and the university’s performance) from year to year.

Strategic plans are mostly inaccessible on the web

Around half the universities publish their strategic plans as PDF-only. Around one-quarter provide additional or alternative versions, and the remainder do not make their strategic plans available on their public websites.

Strategic plans are hard to find and use

Some universities present their strategic plans in the context of a planning framework, quality assurance system or other supporting documentation. This is particularly helpful when the university uses a non-standard name for the strategic plan.

There is little commonality in the way strategic plans are dated. Some use a single year in their titles, others cover a span of three years or more; yet others have no dates at all in their document titles.

Five universities provide historical copies of their strategic plans.
Good practice for Australian university websites

Provide an 'Official Publications' page

A generic 'Official Publications' page can help people find information on your website. Consider placing this page in the 'About Us' section of the site, and cross-reference from the site index. If possible, customise your search engine's results to display this page when a user enters a common publication title (see Finding the reports for an example).

Depending on your website's structure, it may be useful also to provide tailored 'Publications' pages for specific topics and audiences:

- Course and study-related information: handbooks, prospectuses, application kits
- Media relations: reports, newspapers and magazines
- Stakeholder, investor and community relations: annual financial and operational reports, research reports, strategic plans, prospectuses

Make publications accessible

For annual reports, strategic plans and other official corporate publications, create an HTML 'gateway' page that:

1. Is linked from the 'Official Publications' page
2. Summarises the content of the publication
3. Allows the user to either download the whole publication with one click or to select a specific section of it
4. Describes the plugin or other technology required to access the full report
5. Provides a link to the download page for the plugin
6. Uses descriptive anchor text for all links, including the title of the target document, file size and format
7. Gives a telephone number, email address and title of a person or department, so that the web user can request a printed copy or other format
8. Includes links to archived copies of annually-produced documents

Downloadable publications should satisfy the World Wide Web Consortium's accessibility standards.

Always include a date in the document's title. If the document covers a span of years, include the first and last years in the title.

For good usability, link anchor text must match the destination document's title. For accessibility, include the destination document's file format and size in the link anchor text (this helps people with non-graphical browsers and screen readers).
Review the content, structure and usability of 'About Us' pages

Poor usability, inaccessible documents and inappropriate content in the 'About Us' section of a university’s website can damage the university’s credibility.

Pay particular attention to conveying information about:

- What the university does
- When it was established
- Where it is physically located: main campus and any others
- Size of the university: number of students, employees, revenue
- Background and history, accomplishments
- Mission statement: philosophy, goals, values
- Biographies and photos of senior managers (academic and general)
- Financial position and history
- How to contact the university: provide an email address and telephone number as well as an accessible web form

Be succinct. Provide links to more detailed information elsewhere on the site.
Introduction

This comparative study proposes a good-practice standard for publishing strategic plans, annual reports and other 'corporate' publications on Australian university websites.

The study was conducted in June 2004 by Margaret Ruwoldt on behalf of the Web Centre, Information Division, University of Melbourne. The study involved a literature review followed by visits to 40 websites in search of specific information.

Method

1. Conduct literature review:
   - Web Centre's reference library
   - Web-based magazines about usability, web development and content management
   - Self-published essays and articles by leaders in the fields of web usability, web development and content management

2. Visit the websites of 40 universities. For each university, locate:
   - latest annual report
   - current strategic plan
   - mission statement
   - a description of the university's size, character, history and goals

3. Record the formats in which the annual report and strategic plan are published.

4. Record any notable features of navigation, presentation, accessibility and usability relating to the four types of content listed above.
Literature review

In search of guidelines for good practice, I reviewed a range of commentary and guidelines (see References). I was looking for data and opinions about:

- Relationship between 'publications' and 'website'
- Usability and accessibility of PDF documents
- Providing information about an organisation's finances and management

In general, commentators on web usability and content development address these questions indirectly, usually in relation to the 'About Us' section of an organisation's website. The Nielsen Norman Group's various reports of usability studies and Rachel McAlpine's articles are particularly relevant, as are the World Wide Web Consortium's content accessibility guidelines.

Pertinent ideas are summarised below, followed by a brief discussion about their value in the Australian university sector.

Relationship between 'publications' and 'website'

A publication can be defined as an important, enduring, authoritative document. In the past, a publication has normally been a printed document. These days, it may also be a digital document such as a CD-ROM, DVD, database, HTML page or PDF file.

Early websites often had a publications page that listed all the books, brochures or magazines available from the organisation, with instructions for ordering printed copies of those publications.

Now that digital formats are displacing printed formats, some organisations are integrating their content into other parts of their websites and removing the publications page.

McAlpine (2004a) observes:

[R]emoving the publications page altogether is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

If it is a popular, much-visited page, there's a reason. People assume that documents called 'publications' are authoritative and not ephemeral. People assume that good stuff will be found on the publications page.

The publications page is eminently bookmarkable. For that reason alone, let it live. At the very least, it can list links to... indexes of publications grouped by topic or function.

A universal solution is not possible and probably never will be. Much depends on how far sites have advanced towards the ideal of having all important documents available in HTML first, with hard copy or PDFs a secondary alternative.

A Google search for the phrase "corporate publications" reveals 38,700 pages; the phrase "official publications" returns 249,000 results. Clearly the publications page is not yet dead.
Burying corporate information in PDFs means that most people will not read it. Participants in this study were turned off by PDFs and often skipped them instead of using them to research information. Some people who tried opening PDFs quickly abandoned them.

(Loranger and Nielsen, 2003)

See Publications page in the Survey results for a summary of the types of publications typically provided for downloading from Australian university websites.

Usability and accessibility of PDF documents

McAlpine (2000) points out:

When a document is offered in PDF format only, this is done for the convenience of the website owner, not for the convenience of the customer or website visitor. It saves you the bother of mailing publications and forms and journals. It saves you the bother of converting documents to HTML...

But presenting files online solely as PDF documents actually makes more work for the customer, not less. So the PDF-by-default policy is a hostile, alienating policy when carried to extremes. It is simply not the way of the Web.

Nielsen (2003b) acknowledges that cost is often an objection to the idea of publishing a substantial document in HTML rather than PDF, but he argues that "It's actually not very expensive to, say, create a set of Web pages for annual report information as long as the Web design is done while the annual report is being written. The cost comes when companies have a glossy annual report already finished and then say, 'Webbify this.'"

Nielsen (2003a) lists several usability problems that PDFs can cause:

- Long documents are difficult to scan and unpleasant to read on screen. Lack of navigation and searching functionality within the PDF.
- The Acrobat Reader plugin uses different commands and menus from the browser, causing a jarring experience for the user who wants to navigate, print or save a PDF. Difficult to return to the website after reading the PDF.
- Crashes and software compatibility problems.
- Delays while the PDF downloads, the plugin launches and the file is opened.
- Layouts are optimised for a standard sheet of paper, not for a computer screen: this can cause unexpected jumping (instead of smooth scrolling) and viewing difficulties (for example, the user cannot resize the fonts).

McAlpine (2004b) comments that "Online publication ruthlessly exposes the flaws of imperfect documents." This is especially true of most PDF versions of annual reports and strategic plans.

[Drawing on my own experience in corporate publishing at two Victorian universities, it seems to me that these corporate documents are typically designed and laid out by print design specialists, primarily for the purpose of producing a full-color, glossy booklet. Exporting to PDF tends to be an afterthought in this process, and little attention is given to structuring the original layout and then marking up the PDF so that it is accessible to screen readers and other adaptive technologies.]
Even when you use the right tools in the right way to produce the PDF, the file format itself is still not a fully accessible way of publishing documents on the web (Alexander, 2003).

The World Wide Web Consortium’s "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0" (WCAG) make three relevant recommendations:

1. Divide large blocks of information into more manageable groups where natural and appropriate (checkpoint 12.3)

2. Clearly identify the target of each link (checkpoint 13.1)

3. Provide information so that users may receive documents according to their preferences (eg language, content type etc.) (checkpoint 11.3)

Suggested alternatives to PDF-only delivery of publications:

- For long documents, provide an HTML summary of the publication and give people the option of either downloading the PDF or ordering the printed version.

- On the HTML summary page, state the PDF’s page count and download size. Break big PDFs into sections and offer separate annotated links to each file, as well as providing a single link to download the complete publication.

- Convert shorter documents into HTML. Break the text into scannable sections, use subheadings as internal (anchor) links and add ‘top of page’ links at regular intervals.

Nielsen (2003b) recommends that you never provide a link directly to a PDF: instead, always link to the HTML summary page. He also suggests “adding instructions for how to download the PDF file without the annoyance of having it open in the browser. Unfortunately, this is difficult for average users to do with current technology”.

Providing information about an organisation

Trust and credibility are major issues on the Web, where even the biggest company exists only as a few words and pictures inside a browser window. The most deceitful and unethical company can look as good as a company with a long history of community involvement and honest customer relationships. Explaining who you are and where you come from does matter, as do simple things like providing management biographies and photos.

(Loranger and Nielsen, 2003)

A person’s familiarity with an organisation affects how she responds to the information on its website. If users are unfamiliar with the organisation, they are more likely to look for an ‘About Us’ page and to browse through the products/services sections of the site.

They are looking for information about:

- What the organisation does
- When it was established
- Where it is physically located
- Size of the organisation: employees, locations, revenue
• Background and history, accomplishments
• Mission statement: philosophy, goals, values
• Biographies and photos of executives
• Financial history

Failing to answer these questions on the website damages the organisation's credibility in the user's eyes (Loranger and Nielsen, 2003).

Loranger and Nielsen (2003) make recommendations about the structure, content and presentation of 'About Us' pages. An 'About Us' page should answer the above questions clearly and succinctly. Important corporate publications, such as annual reports or strategic plans, can be provided as additional information for the user to follow up if desired.

See also the guidelines in Coyne and Nielsen (2001) about presenting corporate information for public relations and media relations.
Survey results

The survey consisted of visits to 40 Australian university websites: see Attachment: List of universities and URLs for the complete list. Detailed results are in Attachment: Detailed survey results.

The 'about' page

Some universities have more than one version of an 'about' page; others have no such page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE OF 'ABOUT' PAGE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About [name of university]</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About [name of university] and [name of city]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About [acronym of university]</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the university</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About us</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Name of university]</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to [name or acronym of university]</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our university or The university</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 'other' category includes:

1. An Overview of USQ
2. Discover the... Australian Maritime College
3. Discover UNE: a reputation for excellence
4. Introduction
5. Overview of the ANU
6. Profile
7. UWS and its region
8. Vice-Chancellor's Office: about the University of Ballarat
9. Visiting: Welcome
10. What is ACU National?
Mission statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRESENTATION OF MISSION STATEMENT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HTML, on its own page</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDF</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of handbook or calendar</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mission statement</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Publications page

Slightly more than half the surveyed universities have a web page for corporate publications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPORATE PUBLICATIONS PAGE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typically the publications page is located in one of three site sections:

1. 'About'
2. media relations, public relations or communication office
3. governance or management (usually a subset of the 'about' pages)

Most publications pages provide annotated links to handbooks, university newspapers or magazines, prospectuses, annual reports, strategic plans and other 'corporate' publications whose scope is the entire university.

Annual report

Format of most recent report

Most universities publish their annual reports online as PDF only: many fail even to label the individual links as PDFs (this omission can cause accessibility and usability problems).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAT OF MOST RECENT ANNUAL REPORT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PDF only</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTML</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available online</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A very few universities provide either an HTML version or other alternatives (such as a telephone number) so that people unable to use PDFs can get access to annual reports.
**Older reports**

In general, publicly funded universities are required to submit their annual reports to the relevant parliament by April each year. Typically a glossy version of the report is published mid-year for community stakeholders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANNUAL REPORTS AVAILABLE ONLINE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earlier</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No archives</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The earliest reports available are dated 1992.

The University of Canberra provides a copy of its 1992 annual report as an historical record of the year it became a university (formerly the Canberra College of Advanced Education).

The Australian National University also provides a copy of its 1992 report.

**Finding the reports**

Most reports were findable by one of two methods:

1. From the 'about' page, look for either a media and publications subsite or a statistics and planning subsite. The annual report was likely to be on one of those subsites.

2. From the home page, use the search engine to search for "annual report".

Search results pages often identified many different annual reports produced by the university's faculties, schools, departments and research centres. The university's official, all-encompassing annual report often appeared very low on the first page of results, or even on a second or third page. Modifying the search to "university annual report" or "annual report 2003" sometimes helped.
The Australian Catholic University is a notable exception. When you search the ACU site for "annual report", the search engine returns only one result:

Clicking either the word "Publications" or the word "More" takes you to a page with the URL http://www.acu.edu.au/search.cfm?id=7113B8CB-8188-4165-89B737A9004ED96B&s1=annual%20report – that is, another search results page. This second page looks like a normal 'Corporate Publications' page:
Strategic plan

Format of current strategic plan

Most universities publish their strategic plans only as PDF documents. Eight provide either full text or a summary in HTML, with a PDF or other downloadable version as well. Three universities provide two or more different downloadable formats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAT OF CURRENT STRATEGIC PLAN</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PDF only</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDF and another format</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTML full text</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTML summary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOC</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTF</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet access only</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available online</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presenting plans in context

Several universities provide a brief text summary of their planning framework. A small number provide additional information such as related plans, processes and planning cycles, and links to relevant Commonwealth Government sites.

Explanatory text is particularly helpful when a university has its own name for 'strategic plan'. Seven universities use alternative names for their strategic plans:

- Corporate Plan
- Dissolving the Boundaries
- Leading the Way
- Our Mission, Our Future (an abridged version of the conventionally-named Strategic Plan document)
- Statement of Intent
- Statement of Strategic Intent
- Strategic Directions

The Planning Unit at Charles Darwin University [www.cdu.edu.au/planning/strategic.html](http://www.cdu.edu.au/planning/strategic.html) provides perhaps the most comprehensive set of planning documents.

The 'strategic plan' page gives an overview of the university's planning framework. Links on the same page allow you to download:

- the university-wide plan: current approved version and a draft of the new plan
• fourteen individual strategic plans for capital management, equity, financial management, higher education strategy, indigenous education, information and flexible learning, international, marketing, public relations, quality assurance and improvement, research, staffing, TAFE strategy, corporate IT

• Operational plans for 2001 and 2002

• Other supporting documents and templates

Links are annotated to show the approving authority for each plan and the date it was last approved.

**Date of current strategic plan**

The chart below shows the dates of published strategic plans, according to the title of the document or web page.

Most plans cover a span of three or more years; eight were dated with a single year.

The dates of five plans are unknown because the documents have no date in their title or anchor text, or because the documents are available only to intranet users.

|   | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | ... | 2020 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|     |      |
|   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |     |      |
Older versions of strategic plans

Five universities provide historical copies of their strategic plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>CURRENT PLAN</th>
<th>OLDER PLANS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Canberra</td>
<td>2003-2006</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1998-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999-2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Adelaide</td>
<td>2004-2008</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bond University</td>
<td>2002-2004</td>
<td>2001-2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Queensland University</td>
<td>2003-2005</td>
<td>2002-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Queensland</td>
<td>2004-2008</td>
<td>2002-2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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http://www.adaptivepath.com/


Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO): Better Practice

Boxes and Arrows
http://www.boxesonarrows.com/


Digital Web
http://www.digital-web.com/


Rachel McAlpine (2004a) "What shall we do with the publications?" Available at http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_archive/160/5/

Rachel McAlpine (2000) "PDF Files on the Web". Available at http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_archive/33/5/

Rachel McAlpine (2004b) "The paper mountain goes online". Available at http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_archive/131/5/

Rachel McAlpine (2001) "Why Print Documents Fail Online". Available at http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_archive/64/5/


Nielsen Norman Group (Jakob Nielsen et al)
http://www.nngroup.com/
http://useit.com/

Office of the E-Envoy, United Kingdom: Web Guidelines
User Interface Engineering (Jared Spool)
http://www.uie.com/

New Thinking (Gerry McGovern)
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/

Quality Web Content (Rachel McAlpine)
http://www.qwc.co.nz/

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative
http://www.w3.org/WAI/

World Wide Web Consortium (1999) "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0". Available at
http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/

Web Centre (25 June 2004) "Draft Web Publishing Policies and Guidelines". Available at
http://www.unimelb.edu.au/webcentre/guidelines/
Attachment: List of universities and URLs

Curtin University of Technology [http://www.curtin.edu.au/](http://www.curtin.edu.au/)
Deakin University [http://www.deakin.edu.au/](http://www.deakin.edu.au/)
Griffith University [http://www.gu.edu.au/](http://www.gu.edu.au/)
James Cook University [http://www.jcu.edu.au/](http://www.jcu.edu.au/)
La Trobe University [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/)
Macquarie University [http://www.mq.edu.au/](http://www.mq.edu.au/)
Queensland University of Technology [http://www.qut.edu.au/](http://www.qut.edu.au/)
Swinburne University of Technology [http://www.swinburne.edu.au/](http://www.swinburne.edu.au/)
University of Canberra [http://www.canberra.edu.au/](http://www.canberra.edu.au/)
University of New South Wales [http://www.unsw.edu.au/](http://www.unsw.edu.au/)
University of Newcastle [http://www.newcastle.edu.au/](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/)
University of Notre Dame  http://web.nd.edu.au/index.html
University of Queensland  http://www.uq.edu.au/
University of South Australia  http://www.unisa.edu.au/
University of Southern Queensland  http://www.usq.edu.au/default.htm
University of Sydney  http://www.usyd.edu.au/
University of Tasmania  http://www.utas.edu.au/
University of Technology, Sydney  http://www.uts.edu.au/
University of the Sunshine Coast  http://www.usc.edu.au/
University of Western Australia  http://www.uwa.edu.au/
University of Western Sydney  http://www.uws.edu.au/
University of Wollongong  http://www.uow.edu.au/
Victoria University of Technology  http://www.vu.edu.au/
## Attachment: Detailed survey results

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