RELATIONS BETWEEN BUSINESS PRACTICE AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SPHERE - PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION MANAGERS AND EMPLOYERS (BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PODLASKIE PROVINCE)

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Abstract
Building relationships involves the exchange of benefits. Referring to the relationships between business practice and the sphere of education, the question arises, who acts as a supplier and who is the client. The answer is not clear-cut in this case. The difficulty of these relationships is that since both parties to obtain a full cooperation effect must play two roles simultaneously. The aim of this paper is to show the specificity and the extent of the relationships of companies with the sphere of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province (Podlasie). The importance of vocational education increases. It is fully responsible for providing high quality junior and senior professionals. It is also an important link in improving the orientation of companies focused on knowledge management. In order to achieve the objective, cooperative relationships formed by vocational schools and enterprises in the Podlaskie Province was used as an example.

Key words: *relational context of the organization, vocational education, cooperation between vocational education and business*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relational context of the organization is an important issue in the theory of management sciences and business practice. Relations refer not only to building relationships with elementary groups of stakeholders. The prestige of a company in the environment increases when it strengthens its ties with the representatives of the institutional environment, including the sphere of education.

The aim of this paper is to show the specificity and the extent of the relationships of companies with the sphere of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province (Podlasie). The importance of vocational education increases. It is fully responsible for providing high quality junior and senior professionals. It is also an important link in improving the orientation of companies focused on knowledge management. In order to achieve the objective, cooperative relationships formed by vocational schools and enterprises in the Podlaskie Province was used as an example. The conclusions were supported by the results of qualitative research conducted among entrepreneurs and education managers in Podlasie in the study entitled "The analysis of the situation in the field of vocational training in the Podlaskie Province" (*Podlaski absolwent*, 2013), whose authors of this paper participated in its implementation.

2. CONDITIONS OF THE PROCESS OF SHAPING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND BUSINESS

The functioning of modern enterprises in a dynamic market environment is oriented at creation of long-term relationships. They mean an interaction with the main groups of stakeholders. From the point of view of the objectives of the company a priority is given to customers, but also suppliers, competitors or the representatives of the institutional environment. Due to the increasing importance of knowledge capital within the organization, relationships with the institutions of an educational

environment gain importance, including universities and vocational schools. The primary point of contact in the process of building relationships in this case is providing into the labour market graduates who meet the requirements not only of employers, but the economy in general. As the realities of business practice and the analyzed scope of cooperation show, it is still an area of cooperation requiring continuous improvement.

Vocational education by its very nature is inextricably linked with business practice, which determines its relational specificity. It is most commonly defined as a process whose aim is to give students a particular way of knowledge and skills in industry, agriculture and services in a broad sense. This process includes the transfer of a particular resource of general knowledge and specialized theoretical and practical skills, the exercise of which gives the right to practice a particular profession. The result of vocational education are qualifications obtained in a particular specialty. (Dziewulak, 2013)

Building relationships involves the exchange of benefits. Referring to the relationships between business practice and the sphere of education, the question arises, who acts as a supplier and who is the client. The answer is not clear-cut in this case. The difficulty of these relationships is that since both parties to obtain a full cooperation effect must play two roles simultaneously. Entrepreneurs perform functions as suppliers and as buyers of knowledge at the same time. Industry, along with business practice, shapes educational needs, affects their nature and scope, while education offers graduates equipped with a certain level of knowledge and skills, representing a potential source of human capital. Important in this regard is not only an identification of the needs of each party, but primarily determination of the benefits that may result from mutual cooperation. It turns out that there are striking differences in their perception by each party of the exchange.

The main benefits resulting from cooperation with vocational schools from the perspective of entrepreneurs include the following: (Wojciechowski, 2011)

1. The possibility to learn about the skills and competencies of students entering the labour market due to vocational training made during their education.
2. The possibility of increasing human capital of a company with the opportunity to recruit the best graduates.
3. Lowering the costs of employment by involving trainees in achieving the objectives of the organization.
4. The high flexibility of labour and remuneration laws makes companies able to hire graduates cheaply in order to verify their skills in practice, and then easily dismiss those who prove to be the least effective.
5. In the medium and long term cooperation of companies with vocational schools allows them to build the image of a “good employer“. This in turn contributes to the effect of positive selection, which consists of the increase in graduates’ interest in joining the company. Looking for new employees, the company recognized among students of vocational schools as a “good employer” can choose from a greater number of attractive candidates for the job than little-known companies or those not having a good reputation.
6. In the medium and long-term perspective, effective cooperation of enterprises with vocational schools may also – through effective recruitment of suitably qualified staff – reduce staff turnover and, consequently, reduce recruitment costs.

Vocational schools also achieve relational benefits, resulting from cooperation with business practice (Wojciechowski, 2011):

1. As part of the cooperation, companies often offer schools trainings for vocational teachers, which are aimed at enhancing their skills and update their vocational knowledge.
2. Some companies equip school laboratories with equipment, models or other teaching materials that improve the quality of vocational education.

3. The success of many students of the school in the smooth transition from an education system to employment can be a pride or promotional tool in the recruitment process.

As it turns out, in Polish conditions maximization of the benefits resulting from cooperation between business practice and vocational education is limited. Firstly, this is due to the weakening importance of vocational education not only in the present system of education, but mainly from the perspective of planning career paths by potential graduates. In Poland vocational education is subject to systematic depreciation, whereas in the world it is considered to be one of the most important factors of competitiveness. (Shieh Cf. Ch.-J., Wang F.-J., 2009) This state of affairs is not a barrier to the development of vocational education only from the perspective of the education sector, but it is an unfavourable factor for economic development. It requires undertaking promotion actions aimed not only at changing the image of vocational schools, but also exposing the real benefits of solid vocational education. (*Diagnoza potrzeb…*, 2010) It is obvious that today the development of knowledge-based economy is a major factor in the competitiveness of Polish companies. Vocational education can stimulate this process by providing the labour market with skilled workers of lower and middle level. Unfavourable image of vocational education is not only a consequence of systemic solutions, but is also the result of a lack of cooperation model. Companies want to participate actively in constructing mechanisms of vocational education. Currently, they do not feel involved strongly enough in the process of its improvement. They expect to strengthen the role of vocational education through (*Diagnozy i rekonendacje…*, 2011):

1. The creation of a positive image of vocational education and implementation of an interministerial media and social campaign.
2. Implementation and dissemination of a dual system of education
3. Strengthening the role of employers and their organizations in relations with government and local administration.
4. Diversification of activities of information and counselling character for young people making the choice of their educational paths and vocational training. State patronage of traditional and unique occupations.

As the experience of Western countries shows, employers are more involved in shaping the image and the role of vocational education (*Niemiecki system…*, 2013). An opportunity to strengthen the relationships will be the implementation of the dual education system meeting the requirements of the knowledge-based economy. The dual system forces to build stronger ties of cooperation, because it is based on the two-way education – at school and at the employer's, which affects the clear division of roles in the process of delivering knowledge. With such solutions, entrepreneurs can educate the student according to their needs, requirements and standards. The employer also has the ability to "choose" the student for a traineeship, which minimizes mistakes often made in standard recruitment. Companies which enrol students for vocational training in terms of the dual education can shape the employer brand. Entrepreneurs also gain a reputation in the labour market, which has a positive effect on the perception of their company in the market. Thanks to the dual education entrepreneurs may perceive their participation in vocational education as a long-term investment in their own employees as well as the possibility of obtaining a relatively "cheap" employee. (Lachman, 2012)

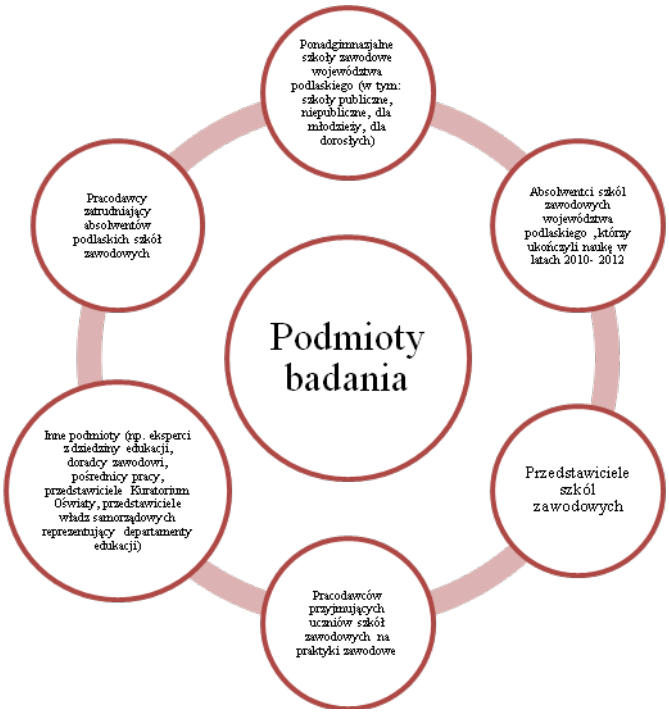
The dimension of the relationships between the practice and the sphere of education is complex. It should be seen in the organizational, economic, as well as marketing dimension. Focusing on the marketing dimension of the relationship, both by companies and vocational schools, stresses the necessity to focus on the individualized needs of each party. This can result in the formation of cooperation based on achieving long-term benefits, and thus building relationships on added values, which may be highlighting the offer, the effective positioning or the desired image. As shown in the analysis, complex conditions mean that vocational education and business practice operate not only in the configuration of mutual dependence, but they are a system whose cohesion is threatened by the lack of developed model of cooperation.

3. METHODOLOGY

One of the main objectives of the study entitled "The analysis of the situation in the field of vocational training in the Podlaskie Province in the years 2010 – 2012" conducted by the IBiA VIVADE sp. z o.o. by order of the Provincial Labour Office in Białystok was to assess the situation in the area of vocational education in the region. In addition, the analysis of the situation in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of vocational education in all the identified types of schools and all identified trades takes into account the following wide objective scope:

- the concept of measuring the effectiveness of vocational training;
- the analysis of the causes of graduates' failures in the labour market;
- the analysis of the graduates' successes in the labour market;
- the assessment of practical and theoretical vocational training of graduates to use it at work in their profession;
- the assessment of the situation in the labour market from the point of view of trained professions of vocational education for next five years in relation to the regional labour.

The situation of vocational education is important from the point of view of many entities: secondary vocational schools, vocational school graduates, principals and teachers from vocational schools, employers and others involved in vocational training. Therefore, a diverse scope of subjective analysis is assumed in the study (Figure 1).



[Subjects of the research:
secondary vocational schools of the Podlaskie Province (including: public schools, non-public, for young people, for adults)
graduates of vocational schools of the Podlaskie Province who completed their education in years 2010-2012
representatives of vocational schools
employers who enroll students of vocational schools on traineeship
other institutions (e.g. experts in education, career advisors, job agencies, representatives of a board of education, representatives of local authorities from education departments)
employers hiring graduates of vocational schools of Podlasie]

Fig.1. Subjective scope of the analysis

Source: (Podlaski absolwent…, 2013).

These research objectives in the objective and subjective scopes were possible to achieve through the use of diverse sources of information and different informants (triangulation of data), and the use of appropriate, various research methods and techniques (triangulation of methods). It was assumed that the comprehensive results of the study must be preceded by using a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative. As a result, it was possible to obtain reliable and in-depth knowledge of the system of vocational education and the environment of its stakeholders (graduates, employers, representatives of labour market institutions).

The study used quantitative, qualitative and expertise methods. Qualitative studies were carried out with the use of:

- the Oxford debate,
- individual in-depth interviews (IDIs),
- focused group interviews (FGIs).

The research process was preceded by an Oxford debate on the subject of: the system of vocational training provides satisfaction of the needs of the regional labour market. According to the rules of the Oxford debate the meeting was to verify a specific thesis, directly related to the object of the study. The implementation of the debate has enabled not only the promotion of the research, but also helped to popularize the idea of the research among strategic groups of stakeholders: graduates, employers, school principals, representatives of education supervisors of vocational schools and representatives of labour market institutions, including the Provincial Labour Office (WUP) and the District Labour Office (PUP). The meeting of participants of the research process in one place led to greater involvement in the survey and qualitative study. In addition, the debate was the starting point for in-depth reasoning and strengthening the recommendation layer of the report, which is the effect of the research. The Oxford debate was organized in compliance with all rules associated with this kind of methods: a discussion of opponents and defenders of the thesis, providing leadership of the Marshal moderating the discussion, the division of the public into supporters and opponents of the thesis. The Oxford debate was carried out while maintaining the required stages:

- the start of the debate,
- the debate of the disputing parties,
- the audience opinion,
- the summary,
- the final voting.

Due to the implementation of the Oxford debate general trends in the evaluation of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province were identified. In addition, the confrontation of different views on the issues concerned was possible, and the arguments presented by the participants in the debate have proved to be essential in the process of making conclusions and recommendations of the conducted study.

In the course of the research process there were two FGI panels organized, one among the representatives of employers, currently employing graduates of vocational schools of various types or declaring the demand for graduates of vocational education, and the other one among representatives of labour market institutions and representatives of local government, responsible for the supervision of vocational education.

While maintaining the correctness of making conclusions, the structure of the selection of participants for the FGI study among employers was consistent with the principles of quantitative research

conducted among employers. As a result, the group interview was attended by 11 representatives of companies representing sections: manufacturing; construction; transport, warehouse management and professional, scientific and technical activities, and the group consisting of other business activities. Maintaining these criteria in the selection resulted in the fact that the FGI study fulfilled the role of deepening the conclusions. It allowed to see the differences in the perception of the role of vocational education by representatives of various sectors. In order to highlight the broad context of ongoing research it was also necessary to know the opinion of the representatives of the labour market and representatives of local government, responsible for the supervision of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province. The selection of participants of the FGI study in this group of respondents was aimed particularly at professional advisors, representatives of local governments and boards of education. The distinction of representatives of an indicated segment of entities covered by the survey was the result of studies on graduates of different specializations conducted by the WUP Białystok. In their course the role of the institutional environment in a broad sense was often emphasizes, in determining the position of graduates in the labour market. In the group interview 11 representatives of the analysed research target group participated.

Another method of qualitative research were in-depth interviews IDIs among teachers of vocational subjects. One of the main characteristics, and thus the attributes of vocational education is teaching vocational subjects. The quality of teaching vocational subjects is important for professional career of graduates, because it is an important determinant of the attractiveness of graduates from the point of view of employers in the labour market. So it was reasonable to involve directly teachers of vocational subjects in the research process and thus to know their opinion on the quality of vocational education. The aim of the IDI research in this area was to assess the quality of vocational education by vocational teachers and to confront their expressed opinions with the opinion of employers. It was also important to learn about the assessment and prospects of vocational education development from the perspective of direct participants in the learning process. One of the results of individual interviews conducted among principals of vocational schools was the identification of good practices in the management of educational institution and the determination of the extent of the relationships of vocational schools with business practice (in the context of the needs of the labour market and improving the competence and skills of graduates of vocational schools of various types).

4. CURRENT AND DESIRED SCOPE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN EDUCATION SPHERE AND BUSINESS PRACTICE FROM PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION MANAGERS

The representatives of the education sector emphasize that the level of evaluation of vocational training is dependent on the level and scope of the cooperation of schools with business practice. They believe that the current system of cooperation should be improved without fail. But the point is to find such solutions that take into account the needs of both parties. Representatives of the education sector indicate as main barriers to cooperation with business the following:

- a low level of economic development in the region,
- the lack of developed industry,
- the structure of the regional economy based on small businesses,
- the rapid pace of technological changes limiting the flexibility of vocational schools in the process of adaptation to them,
- an absolute necessity to include rules and external procedures in the education system not always consistent with the expectations of business practice,
- unsatisfactory image of vocational education in the region, but also in the country,
- a system of verifying the competence and skills of graduates not always in line with the assessment criteria adopted by practitioners,

- lower than in general secondary schools level of students pursuing their education in vocational schools, which is not a big educational challenge,
- limited recruitment capabilities of companies of Podlasie which reduce the employment opportunities of graduates in the labour market,
- achieving the graduate profile that does not match fully with the expectations of employers,
- orientation of entrepreneurs on employment.

The research allows to draw the conclusion that barriers to cooperation are also the result of insufficient knowledge of the learning environment on the expectations of business practice. The solution in this regard may be greater involvement in the process of practical training not only students but also teachers. The cooperation between the sphere of education and practice should be based on the exchange of knowledge, but not treated as incidental, accidental, but rather as systemic, based on the developed model of cooperation. Schools need to strengthen relationships with business practice oriented on the long-term cooperation, based on the exchange of experiences, conscious involvement of employers in the education process, consulting teaching programmes with employers, undertaking joint ventures for improving the skills of students and teachers.

The factors that determine positively the cooperative capabilities of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province include the following:

- the revival of vocational education as an alternative education,
- the demand of employers for specific competencies and skills,
- the diversity of the educational offer of vocational schools at the level of different types of education,
- a high level of awareness of vocational school leaders on the need for professional training of highly qualified specialists,
- undertaking a variety of activities, including project activities, aimed at enabling more practical education and obtaining additional competences and certificates confirming professional qualifications demanded by the labour market,
- the orientation of the education process on simultaneous improvement of hard and soft skills,
- aiming at forming a graduate profile attractive from the point of view of the labour market, but also the socio-economic development, consistent with the requirements of the European Parliament,
- long-term cooperation with employers concerning traineeships,
- the care of the image,
- a high level of teaching manifested in high positions in the rankings,
- experience in international cooperation.

According to schools, as already mentioned, it is impossible to form a graduate equipped with all the required by practice skills and qualifications. The employer, the traineeship, the inclusion of a young man in the natural environment of a job is an essential factor in determining the overall level of his education. The traineeship is a verification of his knowledge, thus in the opinion of the representatives of the sphere of vocational education, it is important to the student to have an the opportunity to take real actions related to his fundamental skills during the traineeship.

Vocational schools taking into account the level of socio-economic development in the region focus their teaching objectives on the development of competencies and skills of their own students, targeted not only to the needs of the regional economy, but also to perform work abroad.

5. CURRENT AND DESIRED SCOPE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN EDUCATION SPHERE AND BUSINESS PRACTICE FROM PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYERS

The process of qualitative research confirmed that entrepreneurs are aware of the benefits that could result from cooperation with vocational education. Analyzing the current state of cooperation they draw attention to its shortcomings. According to employers, vocational schools do not conduct monitoring of the labour market, what does not result in increased market potential, but increased unemployment. At the present situation, it often happens that students do not make a conscious choice of a vocational school, and the school does not try to establish the motives of those choices. Such a situation causes that the graduates do not intend to take work in occupations in which they were educated. Entrepreneurs recognize the imperfections of the education system in the area of vocational education. They also believe that the internal system of school management itself is not effective and not aimed at the needs of the market.

The level of cooperation of vocational schools with business is not always satisfactory, and it is not the result of ill will but the lack of awareness of the needs of each party. In building cooperation schools should be focused on the business perspective. Unfortunately, the needs of education and practice are diverged. Employers are able to cooperate with schools and vocational teachers, but it cannot be just a one-sided declaration Schools also need to work on improving the existing model of cooperation, taking into account the conditions of enterprises' functioning in the region.

According to the employers, the information system about what regional vocational schools do and their potential is very weak. There is no communication system developed specifically for the needs of employers, students and parents. Employers do not know too much about vocational schools in the region. They do not know the educational offer.

Even if the promotional activity of schools is now visible, in the opinion of entrepreneurs it is a temporary situation. Money for promotion comes from EU funds, which means that this type of action may be less intensive in the future.

According to the employers, in many situations they are the ones who take the initiative in terms of necessity to modify training programmes and improving vocational traineeships. The economic reality also affects the way how vocational schools are perceived. Nobody can see the fact that work in specific occupations is promising and is combined with high wages. In vocational schools a weak emphasis is put on teaching foreign languages, knowledge of which is an important skill of every employee, also a blue-collar worker.

An important determinant of cooperation between vocational schools and enterprises are traineeships. There are two approaches of entrepreneurs to the system of traineeships. According to the first one, the current system works. This applies to companies which for example use the presence of students in seasonal or cyclical work. The second approach applies to companies that during the traineeship invest in an employee and his knowledge. They believe that the existing system should in a way emphasize and protect their contribution in increasing the level of skills of the student. Companies believe that the system of traineeships should be improved, in terms of organization and financing. Traineeship programs are often not adapted to the reality of companies in which they are carried out. The realization of traineeships should be modified, variety added every time. Well-implemented traineeships are conducive to recruiting good employees, they build first relationships of young people with a company. Employers count on employees fully equipped not only with the hard, but especially soft competences and they able to support the best ones, mainly through active cooperation with schools. Not all of the invited companies have received a proposal for the implementation of traineeships by vocational school students. According to employers, it is important from their point of view to create a database of students and specializations. Then the entrepreneurs would have a choice, and trainees would be actually needed. Entrepreneurs expect form schools mutual responsibility for shaping a graduate. Creating a database of the best graduates and recommending them to work would be a form of such mutual responsibility.

To sum up, the barriers limiting the cooperation capabilities in vocational education from the point of view of employers are the following:

- vocational training system is insufficiently based on a practical education system,
- low flexibility of vocational schools in the process of adapting to changes in the business environment,
- an unsatisfactory system of disseminating information about the achievements, outstanding competences of vocational schools and talented graduates among local business,
- the development of a vocational school graduate profile, not quite equipped with the desired set of soft skills associated with the continuous desire to improve their skills, ability to work in a team, communication skills,
- a low level of knowledge of vocational schools on the local labour market and the economy.

Entrepreneurs, in spite of criticism, discern a huge contribution of the schools in the development of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province. They appreciate the efforts related to improving the image of the analyzed types of schools. They emphasize that the development of this sphere of education is often linked to their development as businesses and employers, because they have access to potential employees. In the labour market there can be met high school graduates. From the employer's perspective it is difficult to determine their competences and their implementation in the process of employment may be more risky, since they often treat their job position temporarily and do not integrate with the company.

Businesses indicate that despite the fact that the region is seen as underdeveloped and very little innovative, it is also recognizable when it comes to the development of certain industries. These industries (the construction industry, food processing, engineering, information technology) are supported by the development of vocational education. In the opinion of employers an important role is played by institutions whose task is to complement the educational system in the field of vocational training. Entrepreneurs have here in mind the associations providing assistance in finding employees with specific skills, often unique from the point of view of the labour market. This applies to the Chamber of Crafts and vocational training centres (ZDZ).

Businesses emphasize that graduates of vocational schools are sought in the labour market.Companies that are developing are able to undertake activities related to participation in the training of future employees. They are the initiators of such projects. Some companies, strongly cooperating with schools educate employees themselves, choose the best graduates. As shown by the experience, employers are committed to supporting vocational schools, even if from the point of view of the City Hall their functioning is not profitable (e.g. ZDZ No. 5). The proper functioning of vocational education is dependent on the proper cooperation of schools, local authorities and employers.

Employers also have positive experience in cooperation with vocational schools, but they think that the relationships should be further improved. They also admit that there are irresponsible employers who do not use the time spent on traineeship in a right way and require students to perform work that is not important from the point of view of their skills. This behaviour can have a negative impact on the perception of the company. Some of the companies emphasize that they have long-term agreements signed with the schools, which also proves the correctness of the relationships.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The view of employers and representatives of the education sector in terms of the nature of the vocational schools operation is fundamentally different. It is more important, however, that the will of both parties is to make a mutual effort to change the image of vocational education in the Podlaskie Province. The qualitative research confirmed that, despite differences in the assessment of the image of vocational education by business practice and the education sphere, there is not only a willingness to cooperate, but also the prospect of mutual benefits as its result. Each party expects:

- a graduate fully equipped with competencies and skills desirable by the labour market,

- an increase in the practicality of education,
- supporting regional business,
- strengthening the image of the regional vocational education.

The Oxford debate showed in particular that for obtaining the desired results of cooperation it is necessary to develop a model of cooperation, based on the exchange of knowledge and experience. The creation of such a system requires not only the involvement of each party, but also requires a definite move beyond a pattern. The final outcome of the debate showed that the perception of vocational education is not clear. Votes were divided in half, with a majority of one vote on the side of supporters of the thesis, which was the subject of controlled discussion.

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