

## **Vocational training systems in ten countries and the influence of the social partners**

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### **1 Introduction**

At the beginning of the 1950s, only a minority of young people in the development industrialised countries went to university. The vast majority acquired a basic education in school and then went on, in numbers that varied from country to country, to obtain vocational qualifications, whether in apprenticeship systems or vocational schools of one kind or another. It has almost been forgotten that the USA and the UK, for example, had highly developed vocational training systems (Marsden 1995, Thelen 2004) that enabled many young people from working-class backgrounds to move into relatively well-paid occupations with high social prestige. Besides their direct vocational orientation, one important characteristic of these apprenticeship systems was that the linking of work and study allowed trade unions and employers to exert considerable influence over the system. Working alone, together or in conjunction with governments, they developed training programmes and controlled their implementation as well as, to some extent, access to the labour market. The extent of the influence exerted by trade unions and employers depended very much on their structure (e.g. craft vs. industrial unions) and their strength in the various labour markets.

In many countries, vocational training has now declined in significance. Five reasons for this can be identified. Firstly, following the unprecedented expansion of higher education in recent decades, many jobs are now reserved for graduates. Secondly, the supply of well-qualified labour has increased to such an extent that many companies find it hardly worth their while to provide vocational training themselves. Thirdly, the links between the vocational training and general education systems have long been inadequate. The former took trainees down what was effectively a cul-de-sac, in the sense that they offered few opportunities for further study. As a result they lost much of their attractiveness for young people. Fourthly, the provision of vocational training has not kept pace with structural change; it has remained largely confined to traditional industries and has not gained a foothold in the expanding service sector. Fifthly, apprenticeship systems were very dependent on trade union power, particularly in countries with a long-established tradition of craft unionism. They were regarded as bastions of trade union power and as such aroused hostility among employers and conservative governments. They shrank as 'union-free areas' became more widespread and coverage by collective agreements declined (e.g. in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada).

Only in countries with strong trade unions and a tradition of corporatist cooperation (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and, in some respects, Denmark and Norway) have new apprenticeship programmes been successfully established in manufacturing industry as well as in the service sector. These countries have not seen their vocational training systems decline in significance to the same extent and, from an international perspective, seem almost like exotic blooms. This is all the more true since not only highly developed countries but also upcoming former developing countries and Central and Eastern European countries have adopted development strategies based largely on general secondary and tertiary education. In many cases, the weakness of their employers' associations and trade unions leave them with little choice but to rely on statist strategies.

The consequences of the decline of vocational training systems are now evident. Companies in many countries are complaining of a shortage of vocationally qualified labour. What is missing, between a growing share of university graduates with their largely theoretical training and a high share of workers without any training, is the intermediate tier of trained workers with both practical and theoretical skills. In some instances, classic craft unionism has shifted up a level and now occurs in new forms – sometimes in craft unions, sometimes in professional lobby organisations – among the liberal professions, such as doctors, teachers and engineers. Many governments are trying to raise the status of vocational training. New apprenticeship systems are being established, school-based vocational training is being expanded and, in those countries with weak vocational training systems, the universities are reacting to firms' needs by increasing their provision of courses with a strong vocational content.

It is unclear whether there will be a renaissance of vocational training or whether this is actually possible without the social partners playing a strong role. This is the question we intend to investigate in this paper. We suspect that the broad-brush typologies developed in the 1980s and 90s are no longer capable of adequately describing current developments. Our analysis is based on the initial results of a research project in which the vocational training systems in 10 countries (D, DK, F, USA, UK, Can, Aus, Morocco, South Korea and Mexico) were compared with each other<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, we will examine developments in only some of these groups of countries. We begin by looking at two countries with modernised apprenticeship systems (D, DK) (section 2). We then turn our attention to two Anglo-Saxon countries (section 3). In section 4, we analyse one of the up-and-coming industrialised countries, namely South Korea.

## **2. The dual system of vocational training in Germany and Denmark**

In Denmark, approximately one third of school-leavers go into the dual system of vocational training. In Germany, almost two thirds opt for vocational training of some kind; of these, three quarters go into the dual system and one quarter into school-based training. There are strong similarities between the two

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countries' vocational training systems, as well as some significant differences. Both countries base their system on the notion of occupation. The end goal of the training process is competency in a broadly defined occupational area; this competency is acquired in the course of a three to four-year course of training. The training process is not divided up into individual modules, since this would compromise the broad occupational base of the training and its recognition in the labour market. Admission to a vocational training programme is dependent on the conclusion of a training contract with a company. Learning in the workplace is combined with theoretical study in vocational schools.

In both countries, the dual system has kept pace with structural change. New service occupations have been defined and the old occupational profiles have been modernised, mainly by merging related, highly specialised occupations. In Germany, for example, 45 metalworking occupations were reduced to 16 in 1987 and then, in 2005, these 16 occupations were merged to form 5 basic occupations. Teaching methods have changed considerably in recent years in response to changes in work organisation (Bosch 2000). In the past, work organisation systems were based on a functional and hierarchical division of labour. These systems were mirrored in the subject-based training curricula. In modern work organisation systems, the various occupations, working in teams, coordinate their activities on a decentralised basis. Thus the training model that prevails today is based on work in teams to which responsibility has been devolved. Consequently, the focus is on team-based learning and project work; this also enables trainees to acquire the soft skills they need and means that training can be concentrated at an early stage on the competences trainees will require subsequently during their working lives. In both countries, initial training is combined with opportunities for further vocational training for master craftsmen and technicians or the equivalents in the service sector. In Germany, for example, 12% of all those who gain an initial qualification in the dual system subsequently take part in upgrading training programmes. The decisive factor in establishing and maintaining the close linkage between the training system and the labour market is the participation of the social partners. In both Germany and Denmark, employers and trade unions work together, with government support, to develop occupational profiles for initial and upgrading training programmes. This facilitates both the recognition of training certificates in the labour market and their embeddedness in the wage systems. Middle management positions are usually filled by workers who have completed an upgrading training course. It is true that there are differences of opinion between the social partners about the content of vocational training, the payment of trainees and other issues. However, vocational training is not linked to trade union job control or demarcation between the various occupations. This prevents it from being an arena for disputes between the social partners about basic principles.

Similar problems can also be observed in both countries. The reputation of vocational training has fallen as a consequence of the expansion of higher education; this has happened to a greater extent in Denmark than in Germany because of the higher share of young people going to university. As a result, it is frequently the academically weaker youngsters who go into the dual

system. In both countries, attempts are being made to make the dual system more attractive and also to provide transitions into higher education. Furthermore, firms' willingness to provide training is declining in both countries, because of the ever greater pressure of competition and the increasing short-termism of their own planning. The willingness to train has declined more sharply in Germany than in Denmark – albeit from a higher level. This is due primarily to the low rates of economic growth following the collapse of the East German economy.

Besides these commonalities, there are also some pronounced differences. Education and training policy in Denmark is more strongly social democratic in nature than it is in Germany. The distinction between vocational training and general education, as well as that between the various types of school in the lower secondary stage of education, was regarded in Denmark as a source of social inequality. As a consequence, Danish social democrats planned to integrate vocational training into the school system, along the lines of the Swedish model. However, this plan was not implemented, since by the 1980s the Danish Social Democratic party was no longer the only party in government and its coalition partners, the Liberal party, insisted that vocational training should be closely linked to economic realities. In Germany, on the other hand, the selective tripartite school system remains in place today. As in Denmark and Sweden, the German Social Democrats wanted to introduce non-selective comprehensive schools on a national basis, but were unable to push this project through. True, there were opportunities for pupils from the two lower types of secondary school (*Hauptschule* and *Realschule*) to move on to higher-level schools, where they could obtain the upper secondary school-leaving certificate (*Abitur*); in practice, however, mobility of this kind was very much the exception. The strongly elitist nature of the German education system and the comparatively slow expansion of the tertiary sector meant that the number of university students was limited. On the other hand, the dual system did offer access to secure and relatively well-paid jobs, even at middle-management level, which now makes it attractive even to school-leavers with the *Abitur*. Four more significant differences between the two countries can be identified. Firstly, the reduction in the number of occupations has been considerably greater in Denmark than in Germany. In Germany, training is provided for 365 different occupations, while the figure for Denmark is now only 85. This has to do with the way in which interest groups are organised in Denmark and the size of the country. With only five million inhabitants, Denmark is unable to provide appropriate vocational school training courses in a large number of occupations on a nationwide basis. In Germany, with a population of 84 million, the individual occupational groups are highly organised on the employers' side (in the craft sector, for example) and are able to block attempts to merge occupations. Secondly, vocational training in Denmark has a higher theoretical content. Before they begin their actual training programme, all trainees in Denmark have to complete a course of basic education, which may last up to one year depending on individual needs. Thirdly, the influence of trade unions is considerably greater in Denmark. Together with the employers, they sit on the management boards of local vocational training schools and decide who should be appointed director. In Germany, vocational training schools are run

by the government, while the employers control the implementation of vocational training through the chambers of commerce. Fourthly, a levy-grant system has been introduced in Denmark without any major controversy in order to combat problems with 'free riding' and poaching. All firms pay into one of the funds managed by the social partners and firms providing training are compensated for the wages paid to trainees on the two days a week they spend in vocational training school. The SPD-Green coalition in Germany did actually get a bill through the German parliament that would have introduced a similar system. However, the government did not dare implement it, since the employers made it clear that they would have contested it as a matter of basic principle.

### **3 USA and Canada**

Back in the 1950's both countries had developed apprenticeship systems. These apprenticeship systems were agreed upon mainly by unions and employers in collective bargaining. In some industries, for example in the construction industry, levy systems were agreed upon to finance off-the-job training of apprentices (Philips 2003, Charest 2003). Apprentices in the US and Canada are older than in Germany and Denmark. Most of them entered an apprenticeship not as a school leaver but in their twenties after some years of work experience. Apprenticeship-training was never formally and largely integrated in the school system and the state played only a marginal role mainly as a contractor for off-side training in community colleges. Therefore apprenticeship-training was dependent on collective bargaining or in absence of collective agreements on the employers' willingness to train. Consequently the number of apprentices fell with the decline in trade union density and coverage by collective agreements. The craft unions were locked into their trades in fights on demarcations. These demarcations were a barrier to the introduction of new forms of management based on team work and flexible distribution of tasks. In these two liberal market economies (Hall Sosskice (2001), there were no national trade union federations or employer organisations capable of dealing with vocational training issues (a consequence of the decentralised industrial relations system) and an intervening state who helped to bundle these fragmented tracks of vocational training into a national system and breathe new life into an old system.

The US has now about 500 000 apprentices at any given time. In Canada only about 20 000 apprentices per year complete a certification program. This number has not risen in Canada since the 1990s despite the needs of the labour market. In fact, except for the construction industry, the apprenticeship system in Canada is not highly developed and has not undergone any genuine revival. A goal of the Canadian government is to double, from 2002 to 2012, the number of apprentices who obtain their certification, which is still a very small number. Formal apprenticeship is definitely not any more an important component of initial vocational training both in US and Canada. Many companies may have reacted to the decline of the apprenticeship system by extending their own training. They often work closely together with community colleges and other providers of training. But it is difficult to get a clear picture of these interactions and the quality of training since it is not

based on generally recognized standards. In 1994 the US congress created the National skill Standards Board inspired by European systems like the German dual system and by the British System of NVQ. The Board did not succeed to establish an national system of skill standards. One of the reasons was the weakness of the employers at the national level. Some employers have cooperated with the board, but not employers collectively.

Faced with a looming severe shortage in the skilled trades, governments in Canada have been pursuing a number of initiatives in an effort to increase participation in apprenticeships. Almost all of these initiatives are promotional in nature, with a very small number aimed at directly increasing the number of apprentices hired by employers.

Today most initial vocational training in the US and Canada is school-based. Vocational training has been traditionally defined as education for occupations requiring less than a Bachelor degree. All training for occupations above this level is described as professional education. We will see that this distinction is getting blurred.

In both countries the comprehensive high school provides both vocational and academic courses. In the US in 2000 about 16.2% of all credits earned in high schools were in vocational subjects. Youth participation in the vocational system remains low in Canada, as compared with OECD countries. Only approximately one-quarter of Canadian youth obtain a diploma of vocational studies while this rate is 44% on average for OECD countries. Traditionally most vocational programs in high schools were designed to prepare for immediate work after high school. The vocational tracks were more or less terminal. An increasing proportion of the graduates from the vocational track of high school are continuing education mainly in a two or four year public college. The two colleges are a main provider for vocational training. In the US about 45% of the undergraduates are actually enrolled in the community colleges. Of those about 60% are enrolled in vocational programs. The other students are enrolled in transfer programs which entitle them to transfer to an four college to get the bachelor degree. In the past the two year vocational programs were terminal and not recognized by four-year colleges.

Today it is generally agreed upon that a high school graduates should have the choice to enrol in a college ("college for all"). This "de-emphasis" of vocational education has substantial implications for the curricula. They cannot be so specialized since they also have to provide enough general education to continue education in a college. In addition the time consuming practical learning is partly replaced by theoretical learning. The same development can be observed at the two year colleges. Thus the distinction between general and vocational education is getting blurred.

Education at bachelor level has always been designed to prepare for employment but the link to the labour market was weaker than for example in the traditional diploma in Germany. Those students who wanted to get a masters degree could for example earn a bachelor degree in liberal arts or history and prepare later on in an MBA for a specific occupational field like

accounting. In Germany the decision on a specific occupational field had to be made earlier since the four year diploma more or less integrated bachelors and masters studies.

With the expansion of tertiary education, the incremental replacement of the “college for all” by the “bachelor for all” ethic more and more bachelors degrees are offered for occupations which some decades ago were offered below the bachelor level. Nursing is one example. This vocational training at colleges or universities is often too theoretical for the jobs in the intermediate tier for which many bachelors are recruited. To compensate for this lack of practical learning colleges offer courses for integration into employment (“reverse transfer”). So also the distinction between vocational and professional education is getting blurred. In Canada, this “professionalisation” of vocational training is related to the presence of professional associations which affects graduates’ access to activity on the labour market (this is the case for approximately one-quarter of university students). Moreover, for the last few years, there has been an increase in university internships in these training fields where professional associations can be found.

Companies do only shape work organization along occupational training standards only if legal certification requirements exist. This is the case for many professions like doctors or lawyers. Certification requirements tend to protect highly skilled work in occupations with strong lobby organizations. Below this level in both countries the links between the vocational education and the labour market are highly informal. Skill certificates are used as signals informing employers on the skill level of an applicant in a waiting queue.

The decline of the apprenticeship training, the poor link between school-based vocational training and the labour market, and the lack of standards which reduces quality of training but also visibility of acquired training on the labour market is one reason for the continuous shortages of skilled labour in the intermediate tier. This is partly compensated for by a selective immigration policy aiming at skilled workers, by employing and by a work organization which is concentrating more competences at the upper end of the hierarchy.

#### **4 South Korea**

In the last 50 years, Korea has developed from a backward agrarian society into one of the world’s most modern economies. One of the most important engines of this development has been investment in human capital. Korea today invests around 7% of GDP in education and training; Denmark is the only OECD country that exceeds this level of expenditure (OECD 2003: 86). More than 80% of all high-school graduates now go on to university, and Korea has one of the highest shares of high-school graduates in the 25-35 age cohort (OECD 2003a: 154). Even today, the Korean education and training system is still more academically oriented than those described above.

Korea has a ‘single-track’ 6:3:3:4 system. Six years of compulsory primary education are followed by three years of middle school, three years of high-

school and two or four more years at college or university. Attendance at primary and middle school is compulsory. Universal education was achieved at primary level by 1970 and the lower secondary school level by 1985. Besides the general education channel in high schools, there is a vocational channel divided into different vocational areas (technical, commercial, agriculture). It is mainly students from socially less privileged families and with a lower level of academic attainment who enter this technical channel. In recent years, the share of pupils in high-school vocational channels has fallen from 41.2% in 1997 to 29.1% in 2004. The reason for this is the poor reputation of vocational education. Parents who want their children to have successful careers send them to the general high schools. It is true that the Korean education system also offers courses of further education at technical colleges for students with a school-leaving qualification from a vocational high-school. However, the advancement rate in this context is well below that in the general channel. When students with a qualification from a vocational school enter the labour market, the majority obtain employment as unskilled workers. Most of them say that the content of vocational training has no relevance to their subsequent job. Most young men go into manufacturing industry, while most young women are employed in office work. The fact that the vocational high schools are insufficiently integrated with the labour market is likely to be the reason why an increasing share of students leaving such schools wishes to continue their studies. Since 1990, the advancement rate has virtually quadrupled. Furthermore, the dropout rate for vocational high schools tends to be two or three times that of the general high schools and has not decreased in recent years, as it has in the general high schools.

The Korean strategy of rapid industrialisation could not be implemented by confining education and training to the new generation of workers alone. In-company training had to be supported as well, since many workers had only low levels of education and training and technological development meant that the demands on them were increasing rapidly. With the development of new, heavily capitalised industries, such as steel and chemical, the level of in-company training proved to be inadequate. The government therefore attempted to ensure that industry itself assumed more of the responsibility. The 1976 Vocational Training Act introduced a levy system. Companies with more than 300 employees (more than 150 since 1992) that failed to train the percentage of their workforce fixed by the government had to pay a levy. Since many companies prefer to organise their own training programmes rather than having to pay for programmes outside their control and since the pro rata levy, fixed at 6%, was very high, the number of in-company training programmes increased considerably. When the expansion of heavy industry slowed down and the government reduced the levy rate, the share of companies providing training programmes fell significantly. This demonstrated just how much skills training in companies had developed as a direct consequence of government intervention and how few companies had introduced training programmes on their own initiative (Lee/Kim 2004).

The levy system was introduced in the 1990s through the employment insurance system (EIS). The EIS is a combination of an unemployment insurance scheme and a levy system for training programmes. The levy varies



by size of firm and is borne by firms alone. In practice, it amounts to a tax on companies, since the state alone, rather than the social partners, decides how the resources are used. One new feature is that this system now also covers non-regular workers. Funding is targeted primarily at in-company further training and training for the unemployed. Companies receive subsidies from government for providing in-company training measures. These grants are paid by the government on application from the companies. Companies can also still obtain loans at low rates of interest for investments in training facilities and equipment. When the number of unemployed workers rose after the Asian crisis, most of the available funds were spent on providing further training for the unemployed. Now that unemployment has fallen, the number of unemployed people receiving further training has declined considerably and the focus is now on promoting in-company training.

There has been little success to date in integrating school-based vocational training and training for the unemployed with the labour market. The Korean labour market is highly dualistic and is segmented into regular and non-regular workers. The labour market for regular workers is characterised by lifetime employment, low risk of layoffs, good social security, trade union representation (at least in larger manufacturing companies) and minimal inter-company mobility. It is primarily regular employees who benefit from in-company further training, although this is not reflected in their pay. In contrast to Japan, where in recent years seniority-based wage systems have increasingly been supplemented by performance components, the Korean wage system for regular workers continues to be based almost exclusively on seniority. The market for irregular workers can be described as a competitive market, in which there are virtually no rules imposing restrictions on hiring and firing. Wages are set in accordance with market conditions, irregular workers have little union representation, some of them are not integrated into the social security system and day labourers and agency workers are taken on for limited periods only. The share of irregular workers, defined as those working for a specific length of time and not entitled to certain allowances, rose from 42% in 1995 to 52% in 2002 (OECD 2003: 135-6). The segmentation of the labour market, the very restricted opportunities for mobility among irregular workers and employees in small and medium-sized firms and the seniority-based wage system offer many employees little economic incentive to invest in their human capital (Bosch 2005).

The Korean Ministry of Labour develops standards for vocational qualifications and implements them through an in-house body known as the Human Resource Development Service. In Korea's highly dualised labour market, however, such standards have little impact. Education and training policy in Korea is largely the responsibility of the state, which pursues long-term development goals and considers its statist approach justified in the light of companies' poor record in providing further training on their own initiative. During the period of dictatorship, trade unions were unable to develop, and even after democratisation, they remained primarily company unions for regular employees, with weak umbrella organisations. Collective bargaining also takes place primarily at company level and applies only to the core workforce, which is tied to the firm by the seniority-based wage system. This

industrial relations structure makes it difficult to integrate vocational training more closely with the labour market. Furthermore, the state has not to date been willing to give the social partners any influence over the administration of EIS resources. The integration of labour market and training is further weakened by the overproduction of graduates, among whom the unemployment rate is now higher than that of their peers who have completed vocational training courses.

## **5 Conclusions**

We asked at the outset whether, in view of the lack of intermediate-level skills, there might be a renaissance in vocational training and whether such a renaissance would actually be possible without the social partners playing a significant role. In order to answer this question, we compared the education and training systems of various countries.

The only countries in which such a renaissance could be observed are Germany and Denmark. In these countries, the integration of occupations into the labour market has been achieved through the modernisation of occupational profiles, a process in which the social partners, with their centralised organisational structures, have played an important role. Occupations are nationally recognised and closely linked to pay systems, work organisation and career structures. Even in these countries, however, there is now greater competition between the general education and vocational training systems. In order to make vocational training more attractive, attempts are increasingly being made to build bridges between the two systems, making it possible to go on to higher education following an apprenticeship or an upgrading training programme. The revitalisation of apprenticeship systems has been made possible by a revitalisation of corporatism in the vocational training system. The trade unions in Denmark play a considerably greater role in this regard than they do in Germany, albeit in a system that trains only half the number of young people that are trained in the German system. In this latter system, in which the employers play a more dominant role, general education and the direct linkage with in-company training are of greater significance. However, the fact that Denmark is a considerable smaller country, with an economy dominated by small firms, may be another reason why vocational training there is less specialised and more theoretical than in Germany, which has many larger companies and specialised labour markets.

In neither the USA or Canada has there been any attempt to revitalise the apprenticeship system. In the decentralised industrial relations systems that characterise these countries, there are no actors at national level who might have helped their craft unions and their industry specific employers associations go beyond the narrow occupational and industry focus in which their organisational structures trap them often, to the point of immobility. In both countries, vocational training is largely school-based. The aim of such training at high schools has traditionally been direct transition into the labour market. The qualifications are increasingly bivalent, that is they confer entitlement to college entry. Similar developments can be observed in the

two-year colleges. In this school-based system, vocational training is increasingly migrating upwards, to the level of associate and bachelor's degrees. This is one of the reasons why a much higher proportion of the young age cohort 24-34years has a degree from tertiary education than the countries with strong apprenticeship systems (2001 USA 39%, Canada, 50%, Germany, 22%, Denmark 28%, Korea 40% OECD 2003). However, integration with the labour market is weak. True, the qualifications are valued by firms as signals of individual productivity but, in view of the inadequate standardisation of curricula and qualifications; it is not clear whether the important factor here is just the qualification itself or whether the actual contents of the training programmes also play a role.

Korea's impressive industrial development cannot be explained without the country's high level of investment in education and training. The role of the state has been crucial here. The main emphasis has been on the development of the general education system. It is true that this system also has vocational channels, but it is mainly young people with the poorest qualifications who enter these channels. In Korea, as high as possible a level of qualification acquired in the general education system is the crucial precondition for obtaining a permanent job in the primary labour market segment with good employment and working conditions; as a consequence, the reputation of vocational training remains low. In contrast to the liberal economies, the Korean state does not leave vocational training to firms but compels them to pay a levy for further training. The funds are used to support the state's industrial strategy. The social partners play no role here. Industrial relations are decentralised and concentrated largely at firm level. Through the levy system, the state distributes considerable resources for in-company and individual vocational training. However, integration with the labour market is weak because the social partners in this highly dualistic labour market do not negotiate on pay systems and career structures which are based on training.

Given that our comparison is restricted to only five countries, a necessarily cautious response to our initial questions might run as follows. (1) All the countries are trying to raise the status of vocational training. Their efforts are meeting with varying degrees of success. The school-based vocational training systems are experiencing greater difficulties than the dual systems. (2) One fundamental characteristic in determining the attractiveness of vocational training is the linkage with the labour market, good pay and opportunities for promotion. This linkage remains weak without the close involvement of the social partners. (3) National corporatism is the decisive factor in determining the social partners' involvement, since it is only at national level that training standards can be set. Corporatism at local level is important for implementation of those standards but is no substitute for national corporatism in open labour markets. (4) When the social partners are weak, the state has to step into the breach. In Korea, with its state-driven industrialisation, this has been deliberate policy. In the USA and Canada, with their free-market ideology, it is one of history's ironies that the state plays a greater role in education and training policy than in the corporatist countries since, in the absence of other actors, it is forced to integrate vocational training into the general education system.

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