

Orchestrating closure success: the Closure Planning Practitioners Association's model for building professional closure planning capacity

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Abstract

Successful mine closure depends on more than technical studies and engineered designs – it depends fundamentally on the capability of the professionals who orchestrate environmental, social, financial and regulatory considerations across the mining life cycle, drawing together diverse specialist inputs much like a conductor leading an orchestra. The Closure Planning Practitioners Association Incorporated (CPPA), a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2018, was established to promote global leading practice skills in closure and to build professional capacity across Australia's closure planning workforce.

This paper outlines how the CPPA has strengthened professional closure planning capability and capacity through 4 significant achievements. First, the CPPA delivers a globally recognised technical webinar series and maintains a growing knowledge hub, providing contemporary, accessible learning for practitioners at all levels. Second, the CPPA released a closure planning competency framework and companion self-assessment tool that define practice streams, proficiency levels and technical capabilities; industry practitioners now use these to inform professional development plans and capability mapping. Third, through sustained engagement in the national review, the CPPA secured formal recognition of closure planning as a specialist occupation under the Occupation Standard Classification for Australia (OSCA, formerly known as the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations), establishing an identifiable workforce category that enables education pathways, labour market analysis and future accreditation. Finally, the CPPA hosts regional networking and an innovative mentoring program, using event-driven fireside chat and speed-mentoring formats to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate knowledge transfer.

While these achievements represent meaningful progress, the CPPA's work is far from complete. Professionalising closure planning is an evolving journey – one that requires sustained effort to strengthen capability, deepen practitioner identity, and embed ethical, competent practice across all mine closure themes. As the CPPA continues to mature, adapt and expand its initiatives, the CPPA model offers a practical and transferable approach that can be applied across international jurisdictions seeking to build the professional closure planning capacity required for successful mine closure.

Keywords: closure planning, capacity and capability building, competency framework, professional development

1 Introduction

Across Australia and internationally, industry, governments, traditional owners and communities are beginning to respond to the growing number of mining, energy, industrial and infrastructure assets that are approaching the end of their operational lives (Boggs et al. 2025a). This expanding pipeline of closures includes large, complex sites with long operating histories, significant legacy impacts, high financial liabilities

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and intense stakeholder scrutiny. At the same time, expectations regarding closure performance have shifted markedly. Regulators increasingly require demonstrable progress toward closure objectives, investors now scrutinise closure liabilities as material balance sheet risks, and communities expect closure to facilitate safe, productive and socially acceptable post-mining land uses.

Despite this shift, there remain few Australian examples of large-scale assets that have been successfully closed, relinquished and transitioned to productive post-mining land uses in accordance with contemporary expectations (Campbell et al. 2017). Where closure outcomes have been achieved, they have often required prolonged timeframes, extensive remediation and substantial financial investment. This has contributed to persistent concern among regulators, communities and financiers regarding the readiness of industry to deliver closure outcomes that are technically robust, socially legitimate and financially credible.

Historically, closure planning was commonly treated as a late-life technical activity, frequently positioned within environmental departments and focused primarily on regulatory compliance and rehabilitation. Experience across jurisdictions has demonstrated that this approach is insufficient. Closure outcomes are shaped by decisions made throughout the life of an asset, including mine design, operational sequencing, stakeholder engagement, financial provisioning and risk management. Closure planning has therefore emerged as a critical, integrative discipline that underpins sustainable resource development and long-term liability management.

However, while expectations of closure planning have increased, the capability of the workforce responsible for delivering closure outcomes has not kept pace (Dejkovski 2024; Boggs et al. 2025b). Global guidance, industry standards and regulatory frameworks provide important direction, but they are typically high level and require experienced practitioners to translate them into site-specific, multidisciplinary strategies. The lack of capability in closure planning was further exacerbated by the lack of a clearly articulated professional identity, consistent competency expectations and structured professional development pathways. Professional development opportunities were fragmented, often discipline specific, and poorly aligned to the integrative nature of closure planning practice. The CPPA was established in 2018 to address this gap by focusing on the people, skills and professional structures required to deliver quality closure outcomes in practice.

This paper responds to this challenge by reframing professional capability as a critical control for mine closure outcomes. It presents the CPPA's practitioner-led model for building closure planning capacity, demonstrating how role definition, competency frameworks, professional development systems, ethical standards and occupational recognition together strengthen closure performance. Rather than introducing new technical standards, the CPPA model focuses on enabling existing guidance to be applied effectively and consistently through a capable, accountable and professionally recognised closure planning workforce.

2 The evolving role of the closure planner

Closure planning is inherently multidisciplinary and integrative. Closure planners routinely engage with engineers, scientists, social practitioners, cost estimators, accountants, lawyers, project managers, regulators and community representatives. Occupational assessment undertaken as part of the OSCA submission process demonstrated that closure planning draws on competencies across multiple occupational families, including planning, engineering, environmental consulting, geoscience and social professions. Closure planning therefore does not sit neatly within any single traditional discipline.

What distinguishes closure planners from supporting technical specialists is not depth in one domain, but the ability to integrate across domains. Closure planners are responsible for synthesising diverse technical and non-technical inputs into coherent closure strategies, balancing environmental protection, social transition, financial constraints and regulatory requirements over long time horizons and under conditions of uncertainty. They regularly manage trade-offs, reconcile competing objectives and maintain alignment between closure intent and evolving operational realities.

In practice, closure planners coordinate landform design, infrastructure demolition planning, ecological rehabilitation, water and contamination management, cultural heritage protection, stakeholder engagement, economic transition, cost estimation, and regulatory approval pathways. This role has frequently been described by practitioners as analogous to a conductor leading an orchestra: individual specialists contribute expertise, but the closure planner sets direction, integrates inputs, manages timing and ensures that outcomes are coherent and achievable (Ferguson 2024).

Despite the complexity and accountability associated with this role, closure planning has not historically been recognised as a profession. Job titles, scopes of responsibility and expectations vary widely across organisations and jurisdictions. In many cases, closure planning responsibilities are distributed across multiple roles or subsumed within other disciplines, limiting accountability and weakening professional identity. This variability contributes to inconsistent practice quality and closure outcomes. Formal recognition, structured competency frameworks and professional development pathways are therefore essential to support practitioners, improve consistency and strengthen closure outcomes.

3 Closure Planning Practitioners Association: formation and professionalisation journey

The CPPA's journey began with recognition that closure planning exhibited many characteristics of an emerging profession but lacked several foundational elements of professionalism. Feedback from practitioners consistently identified a shortage of closure-specific professional development opportunities, uncertainty with respect to role definition and progression, and limited recognition of closure planning as a distinct practice within organisations and regulatory systems.

To establish evidence of the capability challenge underpinning closure planning, a market survey on demand for professional development and certification of closure planning practitioners was undertaken. In total, 77 responses across industry, consulting and regulatory organisations were received (CPPA 2023). Assessment of responses from members and non-members found that closure planning is widely recognised as business critical, with over 70% of respondents identifying it as critical to their organisation and a further 20% describing it as somewhat critical. More than 77% of responding members identified themselves as closure planners, and 66% indicated that closure planning was recognised within their organisation as a professional discipline, supported by the fact that over 45% of respondents held roles explicitly titled 'closure' or 'closure planning'. Notwithstanding this recognition, approximately 75% of all respondents reported that their organisation was concerned or somewhat concerned about the current quality and consistency of closure planning practice. Commonly cited issues included insufficient capacity and capability of experienced practitioners, limited maturity of site knowledge bases and baseline datasets, poor integration of closure planning with life of mine planning, and misaligned or inconsistent expectations between regulators and mining companies. While respondents broadly supported improved professional development and clearer role definition as mechanisms to address these risks, support for near-term competency-based certification was comparatively lower, indicating that industry demand is presently focused on strengthening practitioner capability and integration rather than immediate regulatory or certification-based controls.

In response, the CPPA adopted a staged professionalisation approach aligned with established models articulated by the Professional Standards Councils (Figure 1). A profession is defined as a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and are recognised by the public as possessing specialised knowledge and skills derived from education, training and experience, applied in the interest of others (Australian Council of Professions 2003). This approach recognises that professionalisation is not achieved through a single intervention, such as certification, but through the gradual establishment of multiple interdependent elements, including role definition, competency frameworks, ethical standards, professional development systems and governance structures.



Figure 1 Process model for becoming a profession (adapted from Wilensky 1964)

The CPPA's strategic intent has therefore been to focus initially on building capability and professional identity, rather than pursuing immediate accreditation or statutory recognition. This sequencing reflects both the experience of other emerging professions and evidence from CPPA member and industry surveys indicating strong demand for professional development, but limited readiness for competency-based certification in the short term (CPPA 2023).

The CPPA operates as a not-for-profit professional association with a stated purpose of promoting global leading practice skills in closure planning and building professional capacity across Australia's closure planning workforce (CPPA 2024a). Since its establishment in 2018, the CPPA has matured from a small practitioner network into a national professional association with steadily increasing membership and engagement (Figure 2). As a volunteer-led association, the CPPA has also had to balance ambition with capacity. Significant effort has been invested in governance foundations, including committee structures, professional development and technical sub-committees, and formal documentation. Over time, administrative support has been introduced to enable sustainable delivery and reduce the burden on volunteer leaders. This incremental approach reflects an understanding that professionalisation is a long-term process requiring sustained effort, resourcing and adaptation.

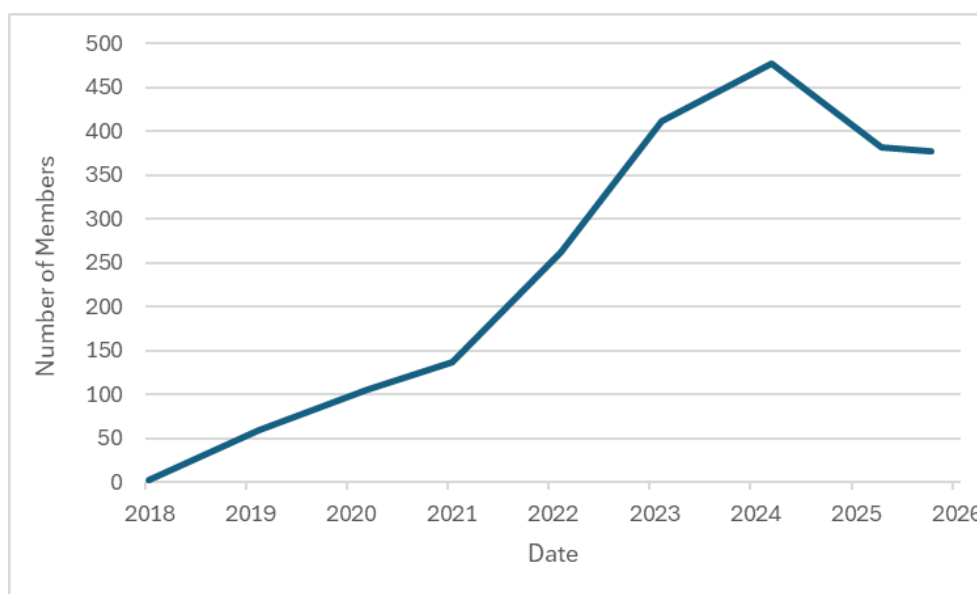


Figure 2 Closure Planning Practitioners Association total membership from 2018 to 2026

4 Key initiatives that have strengthened Australia's closure planning capability

As it starts its journey toward professional certification, the CPPA has focused on several initiatives which have focused on capability development and recognition.

4.1 Technical webinar series and knowledge hub

In 2021, a membership survey conducted by the CPPA revealed that the technical presentations and content offered the most value to their membership (CPPA 2021a). A central pillar of the CPPA's capacity-building approach has been the delivery of a sustained technical webinar program. Over the 4-year period between

2022 and 2025, the CPPA hosted 48 technical presentations (10–13 per year). Table 1 lists the diverse topics the technical webinar program has covered over the last 12 months and shows substantial uptake, with the number of registrations consistently between 100 and 200. These webinars provide accessible learning opportunities across the breadth of closure planning practice, including environmental, social, financial and regulatory topics. Importantly, the program is designed to reflect the multidisciplinary reality of closure planning rather than reinforcing disciplinary silos.

Table 1 CPPA’s technical webinar program from April 2025 to March 2026

Month	Webinar title	Number of registrations
Apr 2025	A ‘sleeping giant’: sustainable closure of Barrick’s legacy Giant Nickel tailings storage facility	149
May 2025	Landform stability and grazing as a post-mining land use	140
Jun 2025	So, you think you’re ready? An overview of Rio Tinto’s Closure Readiness approach	191
Jul 2025	Integrating Cultural Knowledge and Values into Mine Closure	113
Aug 2025	Unlocking Post-Mining Land Use: Reducing Risk, Reforming Regulation, and Enabling Transition	134
Sep 2025	The Queensland Mine Rehabilitation Commissioner - the first five years	109
Oct 2025	CRC TiME – The last 5 years and where to from here?	82
Nov 2025	Opening the Black Box: Demystifying Closure Cost Estimation and Business Integration	147
Dec 2025	Voids to Waterways: Hancock Iron Ore’s Progressive Rehabilitation and Creek Reinstatement Program	113
Jan 2026	Building a Better Rock Dump for Source Control	105
Feb 2026	CRC TiME Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment and Management	62
Mar 2026	Communities and Social Performance in Responsible Mine Closure: What Works, What Matters?	193

Webinar recordings and supporting materials are curated within the CPPA Knowledge Hub, which provides members with structured access to technical guidance, standards, case studies and learning resources aligned to the CPPA Competency Framework (CPPA 2024b). The CPPA Knowledge Hub is explicitly positioned as a professional development resource, supporting ongoing capability uplift across closure planning practice streams rather than one-off knowledge transfer. Its structure reflects the technical breadth of closure planning and provides a mechanism for practitioners to access contemporary guidance and emerging practice across jurisdictions.

4.2 Closure Planning Competency Framework and Self-Assessment Tool

The development and ongoing refinement of the CPPA Closure Planning Competency Framework represents a cornerstone of the CPPA's professionalisation model. The framework defines the competencies required for effective closure planning across multiple practice streams, including strategic planning, knowledge development, compliance and auditing, stakeholder engagement, cost estimation and execution oversight (CPPA 2021b). These streams reflect known closure failure modes, including poorly defined closure objectives, underestimated closure costs, misaligned completion criteria and late identification of stakeholder and regulatory risks.

The CPPA Competency Framework is publicly documented and maintained as a core professional resource, defining closure planning practice streams, proficiency levels and technical experience expectations. The framework is supported by the CPPA Professional Development program, which links competency elements to learning opportunities, mentoring pathways and knowledge resources. This integration ensures that competency definition is not static but is actively connected to professional development pathways and accessible learning content, enabling practitioners and organisations to systematically build capability across the closure planning life cycle.

Proficiency levels within the framework recognise progression from experienced practitioners through to senior, specialist and principal roles, reflecting increasing responsibility, complexity and autonomy. Importantly, the framework distinguishes between capability, competency and experience. Capability refers to the range of activities a practitioner can undertake; competency refers to the demonstrated ability to perform those activities to an acceptable standard; and experience reflects exposure to complexity and decision-making contexts over time.

The framework is operationalised through a structured Proficiency Self-Assessment Tool (Figure 3). The tool enables practitioners to assess current proficiency across defined technical aspects and elements, aligned to the competency framework, and to identify aspirational proficiency targets over 1-year and 5-year horizons. Proficiency levels are explicitly linked to typical experience ranges and role expectations. The self-assessment process requires reflective justification of scores and the development of targeted professional development plans, with mentor involvement encouraged to improve accuracy, self-awareness and career planning.

1. PROFICIENCY TYPE (CPPA competency framework)		2. CURRENT PROFICIENCY		3. ASPIRATIONAL PROFICIENCY TARGET			4. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (what, when, how)	
Technical Aspect	Technical Element	Proficiency Score (current)	Comment	Proficiency Score (1-year career goal)	Proficiency Score (5-year career goal)		1-Year Plan	5-Year Plan
Strategic planning	Land Use Planning	2		2	4			
	Social and Economic Transition Planning	2		3	4			
	Mine closure plan (MCP) preparation	2	2	3	4	4		
	Business Case Development	3		4	4			
	Integration of closure with mine and business planning	2		3	4			
Compliance and auditing	Policy and Guidance Development	2		2	4			
	Legal Obligations Register	3	1.75	3	4	3		
	Compliance Auditing	1		1	1			
	Relinquishment/Asset Transfer	1		2	2			
Monitoring and maintenance	Monitoring and Maintenance Program Design	3	3	3	3	3		
Knowledge development	Baseline Knowledge Analysis	2		2	2			
	Technical Knowledge Studies	3	2	3	3	2		
	Social Knowledge Studies	0		1	1			
Risk and Investigation	Qualitative Risk Assessment	1	1 <i>E.g., participated in a risk assessment workshop</i>	2	2	3	3 <i>E.g., Support risk assessment facilitator. Provide technical input on water quality for internal Q3 closure risk assessment</i>	<i>E.g., Facilitate closure risk assessment and develop critical control plans for water management</i>
Scope development	Objectives and Completion Criteria Development	2	2	2	2	2		
	Options Assessment	3	2	3	2	3	2	
	Engineering Development	1		2	2	2		
Cost estimating & financing	Cost Provisioning	0		2	2	2		
	Closure Cost Estimation	0	0	2	2	2	2	
	Financial Risk Assessment	0		2	2	2		
	Liability Transfer	0		2	2	2		
Stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder identification and assessment	0	0	2	2	2		
	Stakeholder engagement planning	0		2	2	2	2	
	Stakeholder engagement	0		2	2	2		
Execution project & studies delivery	Contract Management	4		4	4	4		
	Execution scheduling	1	2	2	2	3	2	
	QA/QC	0		0	0	0		

Figure 3 Structure of the CPPA Closure Planning Proficiency Self-Assessment Tool (example assessment shown)

4.3 Occupation Standard Classification for Australia recognition

A significant milestone in the CPPA's professionalisation journey was securing recognition of 'Closure Planner' as a specialist occupation within OSCA. Prior to this outcome, closure planning roles were typically classified under adjacent occupations such as environmental management, engineering or urban and regional planning. This resulted in closure planning being effectively invisible in national workforce data, despite its growing importance to mining, energy and industrial asset closure.

Recognition within OSCA is technically significant because it establishes closure planning as an identifiable workforce category within a nationally consistent classification system used for labour market analysis, Census reporting, workforce forecasting and education pathway development (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024). Without occupational recognition, it is not possible to accurately quantify the size, distribution or experience profile of the closure planning workforce, nor to assess future skills demand in response to the growing pipeline of asset closures.

The OSCA submission process required the CPPA to demonstrate that closure planning constitutes a distinct professional role characterised by integrative, asset closure-focused practice rather than a subset of existing disciplines. Occupational assessment showed that closure planners draw on competencies across planning, engineering, geoscience, environmental science, social science and financial domains, but are uniquely responsible for integrating these inputs into coherent closure strategies and decision-making frameworks.

This integrative accountability was a key differentiator supporting recognition of closure planning as a specialist occupation.

Formal occupational recognition also enables alignment with national education and training systems, supports future development of targeted learning pathways, and provides a foundation for potential accreditation or regulatory mechanisms when industry and regulatory demand emerges. In addition, inclusion within OSCA enables closure planners to self-identify consistently in national data collections, such as the Australian Census, supporting evidence-based workforce planning and policy development. In this way, OSCA recognition represents a foundational systems-level enabler for the longer-term professionalisation of closure planning.

4.4 Networking and mentoring initiatives

Recognising that experience and guided practice are critical to professional development, the CPPA has also invested in networking and mentoring initiatives (Figure 4). Drawing on analysis of mentoring models used by other professional associations, the CPPA deliberately adopted an event-based approach using fireside chats and speed-mentoring formats integrated into existing networking events. This model was selected because it is proportionate to the size and resources of the CPPA, reduces administrative overhead, and encourages participation by senior practitioners who may not commit to long-term mentoring programs. Early implementation has demonstrated strong engagement and value in accelerating knowledge transfer and strengthening professional identity.



Figure 4 Attendees at a CPPA mentoring and networking event

5 Capability as a critical control for mine closure outcomes

While CPPA initiatives focus on people and professional capability, their impact is realised through improved closure outcomes. Capability is a critical control that determines whether closure guidance, standards and tools are applied effectively in practice. Even the most comprehensive technical guidance cannot compensate for inadequate practitioner capability.

Skilled closure planners underpin all the Mine Closure 2026 conference themes. Effective stakeholder engagement and social transition planning rely on practitioners who can integrate technical constraints with social and cultural considerations. Robust closure objectives and completion criteria depend on practitioners who understand regulatory expectations, ecological processes and long-term land use planning. Credible cost estimation and financial assurance require practitioners who can integrate engineering, rehabilitation and risk information across long time horizons. By strengthening practitioner capability, the CPPA contributes indirectly to improved technical quality, reduced risk and more credible closure outcomes.

6 The continuing journey of professionalising closure planning

Over the next 5 years, as articulated in its strategic plan, the CPPA intends to expand professional development offerings, implement learning management systems, embed ethical governance and strengthen partnerships with industry, academia and other professional bodies. Professionalisation extends beyond skills and knowledge to include ethical conduct, accountability and public trust. The CPPA Code of Ethics, endorsed by members at the 2024 annual general meeting, articulates the values and behaviours expected of closure planning practitioners, reinforcing obligations to act in the public interest, uphold integrity, manage conflicts of interest and exercise professional judgement. The establishment of ethical standards signals professional maturity and provides a foundation for self-regulation.

In parallel, the CPPA's professional development framework prioritises continuous professional development supported by learning management systems aligned to the competency framework. Evidence from member surveys and industry consultation indicates strong demand for professional development in the near term, with accredited certification likely to emerge as demand increases over time. The CPPA has therefore deliberately sequenced its professionalisation journey to focus on professional development and capability building before pursuing certification, recognising both resource constraints and market readiness.

The formal recognition of 'Closure Planner' within OSCA enables, for the first time, consistent national data capture through mechanisms such as the Australian Census. The 2026 Census therefore provided an opportunity for closure planners to self-identify using the newly recognised occupation, supporting evidence-based workforce planning. The CPPA actively encouraged members and non-members, who identify themselves as a closure planner, to self-identify in the 2026 Census.

7 A transferable model for other jurisdictions

Mine and asset closure is emerging globally as a critical environmental, social and governance issue, with many jurisdictions facing challenges similar to those identified in Australia. These include a growing volume of legacy and future closures, increasing regulatory and stakeholder expectations, and a shortage of practitioners with the integrative capability required to coordinate complex closure outcomes across environmental, social, financial and regulatory domains.

International experience suggests that, while technical guidance for closure is increasingly well developed, far less attention has been paid to the professional capability of those responsible for implementing that guidance. In several jurisdictions, closure planning responsibilities remain fragmented across disciplines, leading to inconsistent accountability, misaligned objectives and variable closure outcomes. Emerging discussions in countries such as Canada, Chile and the United States of America indicate increasing interest in defining accountable closure roles or 'qualified persons' for closure-related decisions, although the underlying competency requirements are often not clearly articulated.

The CPPA model offers a practical and transferable approach to addressing this gap by focusing on professional capability as a critical control for closure performance. Rather than prescribing a single regulatory or certification pathway, the model emphasises a staged progression: defining the role and scope of closure planning practice, articulating competency expectations, supporting capability development through structured learning and mentoring, embedding ethical standards, and only then considering accreditation where demand and maturity justify it.

This principles-based approach allows adaptation to different regulatory, cultural and institutional contexts while maintaining a consistent focus on integrative capability. The CPPA model does not seek to replace existing technical standards or regulatory frameworks, but to enable their effective application by strengthening the professional capacity of closure planners. The approach is therefore applicable across jurisdictions seeking to improve closure outcomes by addressing the human and organisational dimensions of closure planning alongside technical design and engineering controls.

8 Conclusion

The CPPA's journey demonstrates how a practitioner-led organisation can build professional closure planning capacity in response to increasing closure complexity and expectations. Closure planners play a vital integrative role as the 'conductors' who bring coherence to complex, multidisciplinary closure challenges. By explicitly framing practitioner capability as a critical control for mine closure performance, the CPPA model complements existing technical standards and guidance, enabling their effective application across the mine life cycle. While the journey to full professional maturity continues, the CPPA's model provides a credible and transferable framework for jurisdictions seeking to improve closure practice and enable credible, sustainable post-mining land uses.

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