Determinants of customer satisfaction with professional services – a study of consultant services

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Although models of service quality and customer satisfaction have been well researched within the consumer goods and services area, much less attention has been paid to high involvement business-to-business service satisfaction. The objective of this study is to contribute to this stream of research through a survey of customers of *the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture.* Information on which factors are the determinants of customer satisfaction is important to consultants since customer satisfaction is what the service business depends on for repeat business. In this study we found that customer satisfaction is mostly influenced by the perceived competence of the consultant and the technical reliability demonstrated in the project. However, the perceived service quality is also influenced by the way the customer is treated during the service production process.

Information on which factors are the determinants of customer satisfaction is important to firms since the likely consequences of customer satisfaction are customer loyalty and repeat purchase of the service. Therefore, customer satisfaction is closely associated with the growth and survival of the company.

The argument in the marketing literature for this positive correlation between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and earnings is that increased customer satisfaction often leads to a lower turnover of the company's present customers. The correlation between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty has also been well documented in empirical research. Kristensen *et al*. (1998) performed analyses based on data from The American Customer Satisfaction Index1994 (NQRC, 1995). The results showed a strong correlation between customer satisfaction and loyalty. Similar conclusions can be drawn on the basis of Norwegian data (Norsk Kundebarometer), which showed that in the automobile industry, out of 76% customers who were satisfied 78% were also loyal (Kristensen *et al*., 1998). Thus, since the cost of attracting new customers are higher than keeping current customers, satisfaction and loyalty are associated with higher earnings. Timm (1990) states that an average company loses 20% of its customers annually due to dissatisfaction. However, if the company is able to minimize the number of dissatisfied customers, it can increase its earnings considerably. Thus, Reichheld and Sasser (1990) find that as customer loss decreases by 5%, profitability increases by 35 to 85% depending on the industry. In addition to being loyal, satisfied customers are often said to be less price-sensitive and more willing to pay a higher price than other customers (Anderson *et al*., 1994). Therefore, there are several reasons why companies should give customer satisfaction high priority and continuously monitor its level of customer satisfaction.

Parasuraman *et al*. (1985) find that services are more difficult to evaluate than products given that services are characterized by intangibility, heterogeneity, simultaneity of production and consumption, and a high proportion of credence versus search and experience properties. Further, professional services are complex in nature, and their effects are often delayed, which makes even post purchase evaluation difficult. Also, professional services are mainly bought on an irregular basis preventing the client from accumulating experience on what to expect and demand from a service encounter. The client also typically lacks the expertise to perform the service himself and consequently may have problems in judging the objective performance of the service provider (Day & Barksdale 1992; Day *et al*.

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1988). These are all issues which complicate the evaluation of the quality of professional services. However complicated the evaluation of professional services may be, the client will still form an overall impression of the quality of the service delivery in one way or another. Therefore, uncovering these evaluation criteria is necessary in order for the service provider to control service quality and ensure customer satisfaction.

Although models of service quality and customer satisfaction have been well researched within the consumer goods and services area, much less attention has been paid to high involvement professional service satisfaction. This is surprising given the extensive use of professional services and that these types of services possess a unique set of characteristics which may cause the customer satisfaction process for such services to differ from that of consumer services (Patterson *et al*. 1997). The objective of this study is to contribute to this stream of research through developing and testing a model of customer satisfaction with consultant services. The context of consultant services is chosen since these types of services cover a wide spectrum of professional services, ie., marketing and management as well as more technical and production-oriented advisory tasks. Further, to our knowledge only a few studies have been carried out in the context of consultant services (Patterson *et al.* 1997; Patterson & Spreng 1997). Thus, the objective is to uncover which dimensions customers use to evaluate consultant services, and which factors determine customer satisfaction. To attain this objective, a model of customer satisfaction is developed and tested through an empirical survey carried out in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ltd, a consultant and research institute located in Tromsø, Norway.

What are the determinants of customer satisfaction?

In the literature there has been some confusion over the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Some researchers state that service quality and satisfaction measure the same underlying concept and therefore are the same. Other authors argue that satisfaction with a specific transaction precedes the perception of the overall quality of the firm and therefore is the antecedent of perceived quality. Finally, others suggest that the concepts of satisfaction and quality are different, and that it is the perceived service quality that will affect customer satisfaction. Fornell (1992) finds that, as a general psychological phenomenon, satisfaction is primarily a function of a customer's quality experience with a product or service. So overall it is expected that the greater the perceived quality, the higher the level of customer satisfaction. According to Yi (1991), this latter assumption is in agreement with a growing number of marketing studies.

Our model is based on the assumption that perceived quality is the driver of satisfaction. We therefore seek to uncover which factors clients use to evaluate the service quality of consultant services.

Szmigin (1993) proposes a model of service quality that she finds particularly well suited for business services. We draw on this framework as the basis of our model, since it takes into account the specific characteristics of professional services and also reflects that each service delivery consists of many encounters and interaction between the service provider and the customer rather than "one moment of truth". Thus, to reflect the time span of most business services, the model is divided into two phases distinguished by time, namely the service production process and the outcome of the service delivery. The logic is that the customer evaluates not only the outcome of the service, but also the process of the service production. Hence, the client of an advertising agency does not only evaluate the final campaign, but also the process through which the campaign was created – was the agency willing to listen and communicate with the customer, was the campaign produced on time within the promised budget etc.

Further, Szmigin distinguishes between two elements of the service production process, which she labels perceived soft process quality and perceived hard process quality.

These concepts closely resemble what Grönroos (1984) classifies as functional and technical quality. Soft quality refers to the interaction process between the client and the service provider and covers aspects such as, eg, communication, and cooperation and reflects the way the client is treated by the service provider during the service production process. Soft process quality also covers functional reliability such as the service providers' ability to keep contracts, budgets and deadlines. Hard quality refers to non-interactive elements and covers the professionalism, skills, and physical resources that the service provider uses when working towards the technical solution.

This separation of hard and soft quality is consistent with several authors contesting that interactive and non-interactive functions should be considered separately in professional services (Lapierre & Filiatrault 1996).

Finally, outcome quality is what the customer is left with when the service production process has ended. A client of a consultant firm is left with, eg, a report or an organizational scheme, a restaurant customer is left with a meal, and an airline passenger has been transported to his point of origin. Outcome quality is different from hard quality in that it cannot always be controlled by the service provider. According to Szmigin "outcome quality is different from hard quality in as much as a company may perform excellently in the hard area and still not achieve the desired goal or outcome... A lawyer may present a superb case but the court can still rule against the client" (1993, p. 9).

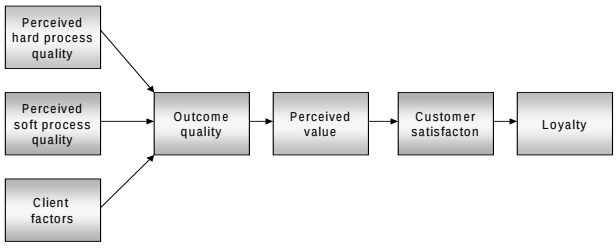
The nature of consultant services is mostly characterized by a high degree of complexity regarding the technical level, and in that many projects have a time span of several years from start-up to finish. Often the consultant's job is not to provide a "turnkey solution", but to work with the client in specifying the problem and solving the project. It is a process where the client is actively participating in the service production and thereby also influences the outcome quality. Since the conditions under which the project is implemented also affect the outcome of the project (Guimaraes & Armstrong 1998) we add a third element to the service production process, which we believe influences the outcome quality, and label it client factors.

Finally, we also add perceived value to our model, since research in business services suggests that customers pay attention to the value received relative to money spent when evaluating the service quality (Freeman & Dart 1993; Patterson & Spreng 1997).

To sum up, our model states that the outcome quality of a project involving a consultant and a client is influenced partly by the consultant and his or her technical ability to solve the project, partly by the interaction between the consultant and the client, and finally by the conditions under which the project is implemented in the client's organization. The perceived outcome quality of the project determines the degree of customer satisfaction, although modified by perceived value. Since value is evaluated against the price paid, a service of relatively low quality can still represent good value to a customer given that the price is also relatively low. Hence, the customer can still be satisfied with less than optimal quality provided value and cost correspond. And finally, loyalty as argued earlier is the consequence of customer satisfaction.

The complete model of customer satisfaction is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 Determinants of customer satisfaction



Research design

The empirical survey and test of the model were carried out in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ltd in Tromsø, Norway. In the first phase of the study a qualitative survey among the institute's customers in Norway was undertaken. This helped us operationalize the service quality determinants for the consulting service, and clarified which issues were important in this specific context. In the second phase a questionnaire was designed and then pretested in Norway. This indicated that only minor adjustments of the survey instrument were necessary, before the third phase could be executed. The questionnaire was mailed to 120 customers of the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ltd, addressed to the person in charge of the project that was last completed in cooperation with the institute. The questionnaire contained a total of 80 questions on aspects of the perceived service quality of the institute as well as the degree of satisfaction, which the respondent was asked to evaluate on 7-point Likert scales. The respondent was also asked to evaluate internal company factors. A total of 54 usable responses were obtained through two mailings, yielding an effective return rate of 45%.

Measures

In this section the operationalization of our model is discussed.

Service quality determinants

The most advanced scale for measuring service quality is SERVQUAL developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985; 1988; 1991). SERVQUAL originally contained ten dimensions, but was later reduced to the five dimensions Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy, which Parasuraman *et al*. claim to be applicable for measuring service quality across a broad spectrum of services.

In spite of Parasuraman *et al*.'s substantial contribution to the theory of service quality, SERVQUAL has also been widely criticized. One of the issues debated is context and the relevance of a universal scale to measure quality (Carman 1990; Paulin & Perrien 1996). Carman performed a study across different services to assess how generic the dimensions of SERVQUAL are. The conclusion was that even in the case of professional services he found most of the dimensions that Parasuraman *et al*. recommended. However, Carman also states.... "these dimensions are not so generic that users of these scales should not add items on new factors they believe are important in the quality equation." (1990, p. 41).

One of the important lessons from this study is that if a certain factor is very important to clients, it may break into subdimensions which should be considered separately. In line with this Carman further recommends "that items on seven or eight of the original ten PZB (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry) dimensions (rather than five) be retained until factor analysis shows them not to be unique" (1990, p. 50).

Lapierre and Filiatrault (1996) relate the five dimensions of SERVQUAL to Grönroos's concept of functional and technical quality. We build on this work in order to determine which SERVQUAL items are related to soft and which to hard quality.

While the SERVQUAL items have been used as a starting point for generating items for our survey, also Day and Barksdale (1992) provided input to which criteria clients use in quality evaluation of professional service firms. Another source was the initial exploratory qualitative interviews with clients of the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture. These additional items reflect the specific nature of our context, consulting services. As an example, several authors have argued that competence is the most important factor for evaluating the quality of professional services (Day & Barksdale, 1992; Lapierre & Filiatrault,

1996). In SERVQUAL, items on competence have been collapsed into the dimension of assurance which does not seem appropriate given the findings on criteria used in evaluation of professional services.
Further, items have also been added to the measurement of technical quality (hard quality) and outcome quality, since the SERVQUAL items have been criticized for not measuring these and only measuring functional quality (Buttle, 1995; Freeman & Dart, 1993; Weekes, 1996).

Traditionally, service quality is measured by disconfirmation, as the difference between customer expectations and the perceived performance of the service provider. However, we choose to measure the service quality items by perception scores only for the following reasons. There is little evidence that customers assess service quality as a gap model by subtracting expectations from perceptions (Buttle, 1996). According to Buttle even one of the authors of SERVQUAL has questioned the disconfirmation paradigm which SERVQUAL is based on... "a team of researchers, including Zeithaml herself (Boulding *et al.*, 1993), has recently rejected the value of an expectations-based, or gap-based model in finding that service quality was only influenced by perceptions" (Buttle 1996, p. 14). Also other empirical studies have shown that perception scores alone are a better predictor of customer's quality assessment than difference scores (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Another problem associated with measuring expectation is concerned with the data collection itself. Usually data on expectations are collected at the same point in time as data on perceptions, where ideally expectations should be measured prior to purchase. This ex-post measure of expectations will therefore no longer be "pure measures of expectations" given the influence of experience (Martensen & Grønholdt, 1998).

The measures of service quality are listed in table 1.

Client factors

The conditions in the client company under which the project is implemented also affect the outcome of the project (Guimaraes & Armstrong, 1998). On the basis of a review of the organizational development literature, the relevant variables identified were resources, management support, communication, and employee involvement.

Table 1 Measurement of service quality

Quality dimension	*Quality measures*	*Explanation*
Perceived Soft Quality	Reliability	Punctuality and ability to keep agreements, contracts, budgets
	Responsiveness	Speed and timeliness of service delivery
	Access	Ease of contact
	Understanding	Ability to understand client's needs
	Security	Confidentiality
	Courtesy	Friendliness of personnel
	Relations	Cooperation between client and personnel
	Communication	Consultant listens and keeps client informed
Perceived Hard Quality	Competence	Skills and knowledge of consultant
	Tangibles	Tools and equipment
	Reliability (technical)	Doing things right
Perceived Outcome Quality	Implementability of solution	Can the solution be implemented practically?
	Fulfilled proposition	Live up to claims
	Objectives reached	Goal of project reached
	Reception within client organization	Is the result evaluated positively throughout the firm

Table 2 Measurement of client factors

	Measure	*Explanation*
Client Factors	Resources	Time, finances, skills
	Support from management	Throughout the whole process
	Communication	Two ways-on the purpose and progress of the project
	Involvement of employees	In the planning and implementation phase
	Willingness to change	Perceived advantages in the organization of implementing the project

One of the most cited barriers in organization development projects is lack of time (Harmsen, 1996), but also other resources, such as commitment of the required financial resources and the skills of employees participating in the project, influence the outcome. Another widespread assumption is that employee participation reduces resistance to change (Leonard-Barton, 1988; Moosbruker & Loftin, 1998). Thus, we include items on involvement of employees and departments affected by the project in the planning as well as the implementation process. In the same manner another factor which facilitates the willingness to change in the organization is two-way communication regarding the purpose and the goal of the project. Finally, management commitment to the project is included as an important determinant of success, not only in the start-up phase, but throughout the whole process.

The measures of client factors are listed in table 2.

Customer satisfaction, perceived value and loyalty

In accordance with the American Customer Satisfaction Index (National Quality Research Centre, 1995) overall customer satisfaction was operationalized through three measures: 1) an overall rating of satisfaction, 2) the degree to which performance lives up to expectations, and 3) a rating of performance relative to an ideal service provider. In the same way Perceived Value was operationalized as evaluation of quality relative to price, and price relative to quality.

Loyalty was operationalized through two variables: 1) Is the customer willing to recommend the consulting firm to a colleague or friend? and 2) Is it likely that the customer will choose the consulting firm the next time he or she needs to purchase a similar service?

Analysis and results

Factor analysis (principal components method, varimax rotation) showed that for hard quality, client factors, outcome quality, value, satisfaction and loyalty only one dimension with eigenvalue greater than 1 could be derived (see appendix). Soft quality split into two dimensions. However, this is due to the fact that *access* loads 0.618 on factor 1 and 0.693 on factor 2. Since this item loads almost equally well on both factors, and all other items measuring soft quality clearly load higher on factor 1, we interpret soft quality as a unidimensional construct. Also, reliability analysis of items was performed, which revealed high Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.73 to 0.91, indicating adequate measurements of the constructs by the indicators (see appendix).

Relative importance of the quality dimensions

Regression analysis (on the basis of factor scores) was conducted with hard quality, soft quality, and client factors as independent variable and outcome quality as dependent variable. The analysis showed that hard quality explains the main part of the variance in outcome quality. Hence, this dimension is the most important in the service production process (β=0.80; $p< 0.001$). So it is the technical competence of the consultant and the consultant's ability to solve the project that first of all determines how the outcome of the service production is perceived.

Soft quality is less important relative to hard quality, though not unimportant, in explaining the variance of the dependent variable (β=0.21: $p<0.01$). Client factors

have least importance in explaining outcome quality (β=0.05: p<0.05).

Regression analyses were also performed to estimate which specific elements were most important within hard quality, soft quality and client factors.

The regression analysis performed with outcome quality as dependent variable and the quality elements that constitute hard quality as independent variables, showed that competence and reliability are the most important elements of hard quality. So clients seem to emphasize the competence of the consultant as well as the technical reliability, rather than tangibles such as tools and equipment. Reliability is demonstrated through the ability to perform the service correctly the first time, and the ability to correct mistakes in a professional manner if these occur.

- Ability to perform the service right the first time (reliability) (β 0.50: p<0.001)
- Ability to correct mistakes (reliability) (β 0.48: p<0.001)
- Knowledge of the industry (competence) (β 0.08: p<0.05)
- The consultants ability to formulate a clear goal and plan for the project (competence) (β 0.21: p<0.05)

The regression analysis conducted with outcome quality as dependent variable and the quality elements that constitute soft quality as independent variables showed that when evaluating the soft quality dimension, customers seem to emphasize:

- understanding (β 0.38: p<0.05)
- security (β 0.34: p<0.05)
- communication (β 0.40: p<0.05)
- enthusiasm (relations) (β 0.12: p<0.11)

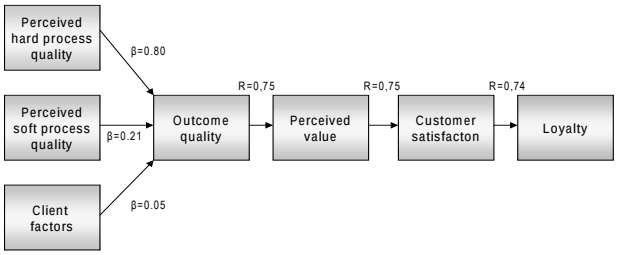
It is therefore important that the consultant understands the needs of the client; that the customer feels secure with regards to the confidentiality of information revealed to the consultant; and that the consultant make sure there is an ongoing dialogue and communication with the client during the process. What also seems to be important to the perception of quality is the degree to which the consultant demonstrates enthusiasm for and interest in the project.

Interestingly reliability and responsiveness, which are some of the other elements constituting soft quality (see table 1), apparently are not as important as issues of communication, security and understanding. This is despite the fact that our qualitative interviews and other studies have found functional reliability to be an important quality determinant of professional business services (Lapierre & Filiatrault, 1996). However, examples of studies that conclude that reliability is not important when compared with some of the other elements of quality can also be found. In a study of the advertisement industry Venetis and Kasper (1998) found that keeping deadlines and budgets apparently do not influence the customer's overall quality assessment to the same degree as some of the other quality elements.

As for client factor the most important element is resources. This indicates that not only the competence of the consultant matter, but also the competence and skills of the participants from the client organization.

- Knowledge and skills of internal participants (resources) (β 0.77: p<0.001)
- Involvement of employees (β 0.12: p<0.14)
- Perceived advantage of implementing the project (willingness to change) (β 0.13: p<0.12)

Figure 2 Determinants of customer satisfaction



As for the relationship between the service quality elements and the remaining elements in our model, regression analysis also showed (see figure 2) a strong positive association between outcome quality and perceived value (R=0.75), between perceived value and satisfaction (R=0.78), and finally between satisfaction and loyalty (R=0.74). Therefore there is a connection between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction and between satisfaction and repurchase intentions.

Discussion and implications

The results of our study show that the most important determinants of perceived outcome quality are the competence of the consultant and the technical reliability. Perceived outcome quality is also influenced by soft quality, though not to the same degree. Client factors had only a minor effect on outcome quality. Therefore it cannot be concluded on the basis of our study that client factors have a substantial effect on outcome quality. However, to further investigate the possible influence of client factors a larger survey must be carried out which discriminates between different types of projects, since elements such as management support, willingness to change, and involvement of employees typically will be more important in the case of genuine organizational development projects, than in the case of more limited projects such as, eg, a market analysis.

Given the correlation between outcome quality and customer satisfaction (mediated by perceived value), it can be concluded that customer satisfaction with this type of consultant services is determined by the outcome quality which is mostly affected by hard quality. This finding is consistent with several authors who find that competence is the most important factor for evaluating professional service quality (Lapierre & Filiatrault, 1996). However, there are examples of empirical surveys that find that the way the client is treated during the service production process is more important for the quality perception than the technical dimension. In a study of the advertisement industry, Halien (1994) found that the process was more important than the technical result.

Ultimately, the development of a long-term relationship between a service provider and a client will depend on the outcome of the service. However, it is possible that the soft quality and the way the client is treated during the production process will be used as an indicator of service quality when the client finds it difficult to evaluate the quality of the technical competence and the technical outcome. However, the results of this study indicate that, as difficult as it may be for the clients to assess the competence of the consultant, they apparently do so and incorporate this in their quality perception of the service provider.

Our study found that soft process quality is relatively less important in the quality perception. This indicates that consultant firms should mostly concentrate on the hard quality area in order to influence customer satisfaction. However, it is possible that hard and soft process quality is interrelated in a way that our model does not take into account. It is likely that, if the relational aspects of the cooperation between client and service provider are working well, the client may be willing to overlook some errors in the technical areas and vice versa (Grönroos, 1984). Research within industrial buying behaviour has shown that both customer and supplier often perceive the relationship as a long-term investment and therefore are guided by other motives than strictly rational buying motives (Szmigin, 1993, p. 7). The qualitative interviews with the respondents in our survey showed that customers of the Norwegian Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture choose to purchase services from the institute based on arguments such as "we know the consultant of the institute, we know their background, and they have performed services for us in the past". This indicates that the customers purchase services from the institute based not only on an assessment of the institute’s technical competence, but also out of a need to reduce uncertainty and risk. Szmigin (1993) even speaks of a resistance to terminating the relationship between a buyer and a supplier once this has been formed, even when issues

arise that should question the existence of future relationship.

So, even if soft quality is relatively less important in the customer's quality assessment, it is possible that there is a direct influence from soft quality to loyalty and repurchase intentions, as opposed to only through outcome quality as our model states.

Also, the customer's requirement with regards to the relationship and the perceived importance of the different quality dimensions are likely to vary across the different phases of the service production. The measurements in our survey are collected after the completion of the project, and it is possible for the client to evaluate the result of the project. This may influence the importance put on the technical aspects of the relationship. Cases in which a service delivery process spans several years, the technical outcome will not manifest itself until the end of the phase and some times even not till long after the completion of the project. However, if the day-to-day working relationship is not going well, the chances are that the relationship will be terminated before the technical outcome has a chance to influence the quality experience.

Therefore successful management of customer satisfaction in the long run depends on the service provider's ability to know and understand the customer's changing requirements to soft and hard quality during the different phases of a project.

Appendix

	Item	*Scale reliability*	*Loadings*		*Explained variance*
Customer satisfaction	Overall satisfaction	0.909	0.874		78%
	Performance vs. expectations		0.857		
	Performance vs. ideal service provider		0.924		
Loyalty	Willingness to recommend service provider	0.826	0.923		85%
	Repurchase intentions		0.923		
Value	Quality relative to price	0.902	0.908		82%
	Price relative to quality		0.908		
Outcome quality	Transfer of knowledge	0.869	0.660		68%
	Fulfilled proposition		0.905		
	Objectives reached		0.950		
	Reception within client organization		0.743		
Hard process quality	Competence	0.892			
	Item 1		0.857		70%
	Item 2		0.785		
	Reliability (technical)				
	Item 1		0.877		
	Item 2		0.785		
	Tangibles		0.878		
Soft process quality		0.910	Factor 1	Factor 2	77%
	Reliability		0.882	-0.185	
	Responsiveness		0.820	0.083	
	Access		0.618	0.693	
	Understanding		0.775	0.343	
	Security		0.770	- 0.467	
	Courtesy		0.794	- 0.424	
	Relations		0.844	- 0.163	
	Communication		0.816	0.288	
Client factors	Resources	0.735	0.335		58%
	Support from management		0.818		
	Communication				
	Item 1		0.801		
	Item 2		0.870		
	Involvement of employees		0.852		
	Willingness to change		0.732		

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Notes

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