



Financial Mistakes to Avoid When You Make Partner

A Practical Guide for Senior Lawyers

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LET'S BE HONEST.

Law school didn't teach you a lot about personal finance, and you have dedicated the last few years to making a name for yourself, not making your money work for you.

Making partner is recognition of the service you have given to the firm; delivering great client outcomes, making a solid financial contribution, and being recognised as a "go-to" person in your area of expertise. It's also a reward for the gruelling hours you've invested, and the personal sacrifices you've made, to earn your professional reputation.

While making partner is a career-defining moment, it's also a time of great change and adjustment. Many senior lawyers misjudge how significant this window of opportunity can be - especially when it comes to their personal finances.

A new era of wealth accumulation

Being promoted to a partner affects you in many ways. You are no longer an employee with a known salary and all the associated employee benefits. Instead, you are a self-employed business owner with a taxable profit share. Your tax status is different, your wealth pathway is different—and this will impact your savings and investment choices in more ways than you can imagine. Managing the transition requires a degree of financial literacy that, quite possibly, you've never had to think about before.

There's also the potential to make a lot of money.

How much money? The short answer is, anywhere between £80,000 and £2,000,000 a year, depending on the type of firm, location, market performance, firm's performance, your own performance and what the firm's remuneration structure is!



A pandemic may have struck in 2020, but Freshfields, one of the magic circle of elite law firms in London, announced a profit-perequity partner of £1.82m, with Allen & Overy and Linklaters not far behind.¹ Across the magic circle generally, salaries for newly minted partners averaged around £350,000 in 2020, while new partners in a mid-sized city firm made around £170,000.²

There's a lot at stake.

Promotion demands attention

The good news is, some planning now can provide structural safety, give clarity around the challenges and opportunities, maximise your wealth, and put you in control as you plan toward a time when you don't have to work as hard.

The biggest danger is drift, where you avoid making decisions...

Yes, the transition to partnership often coincides with personal milestones such as marriage, a home investment and children coming along. You're busy, and it's easy to get complacent and think "I'm probably saving enough," or "it will sort itself out in the long run." Before you know it, opportunities have been lost and you're missing out on benefits that can truly compound over time.

'...planning now
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This guide can help

While every person's situation is different, this common-sense guide presents 10 financial mistakes we see over and over again as lawyers are promoted to the partnership, along with some tips on how to avoid each one.

We hope it will help you embed the right behaviours to eliminate the risks of drift and set you up to enjoy the corresponding benefits of making regular financial decisions.



1 Global Legal Post, '<u>Fresh</u> <u>ields' pro</u> <u>its remain stable as Magic Circle</u> <u>irm pushes ahead with US expansion',</u> 23 July 2020 2 Noble Legal, <u>Salary Survey 2020</u>



Not Weighing Up the Risk of 'Borrowing to Buy In'

The personal risks of joining a partnership depend on the structure of the firm. The extreme position is that of a traditional partnership where all your personal assets may be at risk to creditors, including your home as your liability is unlimited. This could happen if, for instance, the partnership becomes insolvent as a result of trading difficulties or there's a negligence claim that exceeds the professional indemnity insurance cover.

Most law firms today are limited liability partnerships (LLPs), which reduces the exposure level considerably—typically to the value of the investment you have made in the firm. This investment could be capital accounts, undrawn profits or directors' loans. Your personal assets should be protected, though clawback provisions could reduce your personal protection if there's proof of trading while the firm is technically insolvent.

Throughout this paper, we're going to assume that your firm is structured as an LLP.

You are about to have significant wealth tied up in the partnership

It is usual when you become a partner to contribute capital into the business. Each firm has its own approach; however, you likely will need to make a lump-sum contribution either straightaway or phased over a couple of years.

How much money will you have to commit? A recent benchmarking database from the Law Society's Law Management Section³ found that the median partner capital account was £228,381 in 2020, a 9.2% increase on the previous year. As you might expect, partners' capital increases in line with the size of the firm. The lowest entry point for a small firm may be £50,000 rising to around £150,000.



3 Law Society's Law Management Section, <u>Financial Benchmarking Survey 2021</u>

continued

The capital you contribute will be placed on your capital account and forms part of the overall equity of the LLP. This will stay untouched in many circumstances, right up until you retire or leave the firm, unless further contributions are required as you progress to full equity partner.

If the firm is successful, the capital contribution may well be the best investment you will ever make. But there's no avoiding the fact that the money, whilst remaining a personal asset, is **not liquid**, is **at risk** and **rarely attracts a return.**

Borrowing to buy in

Unless you have access through personal or family funds, a partner equity loan is the most efficient way of financing the capital contribution. These loans are openly available through high street banks and from some of the specialist legal sector funders. Firms usually have a relationship with their bankers to provide a competitive rate of interest and the interest is typically deductible on your tax return⁴.

So far, so good. But tax benefits aside, if you borrow the money to fund your capital contribution, you have just added:

- An **overhead** in the interest payment
- The risk of losing the money if the firm is unable to repay you when leave the partnership
- More risk because you are now leveraged even friendly bankers get grumpy when payments are missed!

Borrowing to buy in isn't the mistake here and, for most new partners, it's unavoidable. The mistake is failing to recognise the partner equity loan for what it is—a debt to raise cash that you won't get back until exit—and failing to adjust the rest of your portfolio to balance out the risk.

HMRC pays close scrutiny to LLP salaried partners who are engaged on terms like those of employees. The tax authorities need to see that you have capital at risk in order to treat you as a full LLP member and self-employed for tax purposes.

4 based on the 2022/23 tax rules.



Inadequate Provision for Self-employed Taxes

Until now, the firm will have deducted income tax and national insurance from your salary under the PAYE scheme. Subject to any other sources of income, this results in a simple personal tax return and a small settlement to or from HMRC each year.

Now that you are a partner, you are very likely to become selfemployed for tax purposes—and your personal tax return is about to get a lot more complicated.

Three diary dates

As a self-employed person, you are responsible for paying tax in three tranches:

- The first payment on account, due 31 January in the tax year, based on 50% of your previous year's tax liability
- Second payment on account, due 31 July after the end of the tax year, based on 50% of your previous year's tax liability
- Balancing payment, due 31 January after the end of the tax year, which is the actual tax and national insurance due to fewer payments on account.

It's up to you to pay your tax on time. If payments are wrong, the excuse of "my firm did it for me" will cut no ice with HM Revenue & Customs.

National Insurance when you're self employed

National Insurance contributions are also different for both the firm and the individual member of an LLP.

In an employment situation, Class 1 National Insurance Contributions are payable by the employer, subject to certain thresholds, usually at the rate of 13.8%. Once an employee becomes an LLP member and thus self-employed, the firm no longer makes this payment.

continued

Employees also pay Class 1 National Insurance Contributions, subject to certain thresholds, usually at the rate of 12% (2% for income above the upper earnings limit). This is deducted from gross pay through the payroll each month. Again, once an individual becomes self-employed, they no longer make this payment. Instead, Class 2 and Class 4 National Insurance Contributions kick in, which the self-employed partner remits themselves to HMRC.

Class 2 NICS are currently a fixed rate of £3.45 per week. Class 4 NICS are based on the level of profits, and currently stand at 9% for earnings between £12,570 and £50,270 and 2% for earnings over this amount. Some law firms will retain money from drawings in order to pay tax and NICs; however, most people pay through their Self Assessment tax return.

But I thought I'd already paid....

If that sounds straightforward, understand that new partners are subject to a terribly confusing concept called overlap profits. This can result in what will feel like double tax in your first year.

Overlap profits remain a mystery and you'll need specialist tax advice to fully understand what's going on. But it boils down to HMRC wanting to make sure that you start paying tax on your share of the partnership profits as soon as possible, so you likely will be taxed more than once on some profits in the first 1 to 3 years.

In other words, there's an additional tax burden that you may not have accounted for. You won't get this money back until you retire.

How much have you set aside?

Thanks to the payment-on-account rules, it may be some time after you become a partner that you actually make your first tax payment. It's a good idea to take advice on the potential tax payments in your circumstances, and make sure that your accruing liability is set aside and available at the right time—particularly in the first, second and possibly third year as a self-employed person when overlap rules are in play.

'...new partners are subject to a terribly confusing concept called overlap profits'



Confusing Drawings and Taxable Profit

As a partner in an LLP, you're not operating in fixed-salary territory anymore. Instead, you are likely to have a profit-share allocation where your earnings for tax purposes are the amount of the profits during the tax year that have been allocated to you. If that amount, in a simplified example, is £300,000, then you pay tax on partnership profits of £300,000 in your self-assessment tax return.

This is unlikely to be the amount that you have been paid in cash.

A partner is assessed for tax on their share of taxable profits, not on how much they take home.

You will pay tax on more than you receive

Any amounts that you receive as cash payments during the year and any non-cash benefits will be treated as "drawings on account of future profits." These drawings may be lower than the profit allocation, depending on the cash flow of the firm.

In fact, it's fair to say that drawings almost always are lower than profit allocations, although there may be periodic cash distributions to catch up. This means you will be paying tax on amounts more than those you have actually received. To continue the previous example, if your drawings come in at £275,000, you would be liable to pay tax on the profit allocation of £300,000.





All of these allocations and drawings take place in your current account. The current account can be an asset where you are owed money, or liability where you owe money to the LLP. Thus, it is much more liquid than your capital account.

Whether it can be overdrawn from time to time depends on the terms of the LLP deed.

What are your earnings, anyway?

To further confuse matters, many firms seek to structure their remuneration so it resembles what you would receive if you were an employee and shareholder: Salary + Bonus + Dividend.

Invariably, each component is paid at different times and in different tranches:



Salary: you may receive a basic allocation roughly equivalent to the appropriate level of salary and often paid monthly.



Bonus: You may also receive a rachet or uptick percentage on the salary amount that is the equivalent of a bonus. This could be based on your own performance or that of your team or department, and paid quarterly, half yearly or annually.



Dividend: Finally, you might receive a share of the residual profits after all of these priority allocations have been made across the membership of the firm.

Before you can plan anything, you need to get clear on what you are earning gross of tax, when that is going to be paid, and what deductions the firm will make from the payment before distributing it to you. It's only with a clear view of income that you can stabilise your tax affairs and have more predictable cash flows to plan for.



Thinking You'll Have More Money

In most law firms, assistants and associates are promoted each calendar year automatically and receive a corresponding salary increase. Volatile and uncertain economic environments aside, you almost always will be making more money next year than you are this year. This makes it easy to establish a savings regime and finance a lifestyle.

Now with partnership, there are expectations of greater wealth and influence. So it may come as a nasty shock to find out your income is (temporarily) less than it was before.

The new partner pay wars

In the early days of partnership, many new partners find that their net take home pay has reduced when compared to their previous positions. It is not unusual for income to be lower in the first two years, and only return to pre-partner levels in year three.

There are a few reasons for this. Fundamentally, the market determines associate salaries, but profits determine partner pay. The two don't always match up. Inside the City bubble, NQs can make £90,000 or £100,000 a year, often with a chunky bonus to boot. And you can't slip a cigarette paper between the salaries of senior associates and junior partners in many firms.

More immediately, you're self-employed now, which means you may have lost your benefits.

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Those pesky extras

Most major law firms in the UK will provide employees with a bonanza of benefits in addition to their basic salary—private medical cover, travel insurance, life insurance cover, and meals after a certain hour to name a few.

The transition from employed to self-employed when becoming a partner means that, for many, some or all of the employee benefits that you previously took for granted now disappear, and you are left to make your own provision. The firm may offer a separate (and often enhanced) package for partners but, whichever way you arrange your benefits, there's going to be a cost attached.

What do you need to consider?

If you are on the road to partnership, you should start to put in place plans to minimise the impact of benefits reduction on your personal position sooner rather than later. The last thing you want is to be left in the lurch with no insurance policies in place if you were unable to work due to serious illness, for example.

On the upside, you have a tremendous window of opportunity to review the level and appropriateness of the benefits as you transition to your next career and life stage. The group medical cover you enjoyed as an employee might have been adequate for a single person, but you will have very different requirements as a parent of two young children living in a home with a substantial mortgage.

Commit to a review now while you're getting your financial house in order.



Not Optimising Your Pension

Contributing into a company or personal pension is long entrenched as one of the best ways to save and invest for your retirement in a tax-efficient way. Thanks to auto-enrolment legislation, employers and employees are, in most cases, now compelled to make contributions. Governments have incentivised personal saving into pensions by providing tax relief on contributions and, for higher-rate taxpayers, this makes good financial sense.

However, where it was possible as a non-partner fee earner to have pension contributions handled through payroll at your firm, you are now self-employed with greater individual responsibility and greater wealth potential.

Is your pension somewhat forgotten and underperforming against its potential?

Ever-changing pension rules

Governments have made, and continue to make, seemingly perpetual changes to the rules for pensions, including how and to whom tax relief is available. As things currently stand, there are two main prohibitions, now that the Lifetime Allowance has recently been removed by the government.

- **Annual allowance**, which is based on your earnings and currently is capped at £60,000 per year.
- Tapered annual allowance, which reduces the capped amount that a high earner can get tax relief on as their income level rises. The rates change frequently. For the 2023-24 tax year, anyone whose threshold income exceeds £260,000 will see their annual allowance reduced by £1 of every £2 that their adjusted income rises above £260,000. Not entirely clear at first pass. The floor or extent to which this can be tapered is to just £10,000 per year.



As the rules apply to different definitions of income, both of which start with your total net income and are adjusted from there, it can be very difficult to assess how much pension savings you can make when your exact income is unknown until the end of the year. Contributions require a watchful eye to make sure you're contributing as much as possible in a tax-efficient way. Carry forward provisions allow you to make use of any unused annual allowances from the previous three tax years, effectively allowing you to catch up on past payments and still benefit from the maximum tax relief. Are you using them?

Prioritising your pension

Depending on your individual situation, you may need to load up your pension contributions in the early years of partnership. Once your earnings reach a certain level, your flexibility may become restricted as caps and tapering take effect. The important considerations are:

- Are you contributing as much as possible in a tax-efficient way?
- Are you investing the pension appropriately?
- If your capped contributions are low, how are you going to save the extra you need to fund your retirement?





Thinking Short Term

Do you have a vision for your family's future? Have you signposted the significant events in the years ahead and considered what the potential costs could be? Have you set a series of goals to ensure that you are on the path to the future you want to live?

While some people have a lifestyle and a future in mind, and strong financial plans in motion to achieve their vision, many lawyers do not. Despite their impressive analytical skills, lawyers have a reputation for being not so smart about money. "Their financial I.Q. doesn't come close to their overall smarts level," the New York Times once said. "There is a tendency to ignore things." ⁴

Are you too busy working really hard, putting in the hours and billing, billing to think about what it is you are making all the sacrifices for?

You don't get what you want unless you know what you want

While you don't need to have crystal-clear clarity about your future lifestyle, having a vision imparts a sense of direction to your finances. People 'invest' in a vision, which means it attracts a long-lasting commitment. Without it, you can easily slip into analysis paralysis or get sidetracked by investments that are not ideal for you.

Your vision will be the first building block in your custom tax optimisation and wealth strategy. So, before you do anything else, ask yourself the searching questions about your goals, aspirations and needs.

'Your vision
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wealth strategy.'

4 New York Times, Money Advice for Doctors and Lawyers and the Rest of Us



Are you doing the best for your family?

How do you know if you are doing the best for your family unless you have a vision of their future in mind? Partnerships tend to be offered to employees in their late thirties or early 40s, at a time when they have a young family or are planning to start one. This comes with a number of costs both now and in the future—childcare, school fees, university fees and, more immediately, moving into a forever home.

Notably for new partners, the change in employment status may make it difficult to get a cheap fixed-rate mortgage or increase the size of your home loan when you buy a new property. You are now a self-employed taxpayer, and banks generally look for three years' worth of self-employed tax returns before they will make a mortgage offer.

When you have a vision in place, you can build a financial strategy that meets all of your milestones while accounting for the hurdles - like a self-employed mortgage - that may unexpectedly stand in your way.

The impact of lock ins

Being a partner makes you highly marketable as an individual. But notice periods to leave a partnership tend to be longer than those you may have had as an employee; one to two years is not untypical⁵. That extended notice period may mean that it is more difficult to move firms or switch careers in the future.

In addition, some LLP deeds also seek to restrict the number of capital contributions that can be repaid in any year. This should not prevent you from leaving the firm, but may delay getting your capital contribution back by as much as 12 months.

Limitations like these mean it is especially important for partners to have a vision for the future. Only then can they put in place the dynamic cash management and insurance plans that will deliver the outcomes you want to achieve.

6 Law.com Why GCs Don't Like It When Firms Impose Lengthy Partner Notice Periods



Not Knowing What Type of Investor You Are

Lawyers are clever and your intelligence sets you apart from other professionals. This can be a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, you can quickly get to grips with NPVs and IRRs and the risk profiles of assets in your portfolio. On the other hand, you may overlook influences such as your personality type, investment goals, and ability to weather losses when determining what investments are right for you.

Without exploring this correctly, you could end up carrying excess risk or missing opportunities to grow and protect your wealth.

Do you know what type of investor you are?



Even if your sole financial asset, other than the cash in your bank account, is your pension, you are explicitly or implicitly choosing between being an **active** or **passive** investor.

An active investor is one who regularly makes investment decisions and commits time and resources to researching and executing transactions in various assets, because she believes she can consistently beat the market. A passive investor, by contrast, is generally comfortable with the average return of the market and will simply buy and hold. The proliferation of index funds and exchange traded funds makes it very easy, and cheap, for all levels and types of market participants to passively invest.

While the debate still rages about the case for active fund management and active investing, for those who think they can consistently beat the market, we have a stark warning: you can't. It's too risky, too complicated, and too much trouble to try and select winning investments all of the time.



continued

Take a wise old billionaire's advice. Warren Buffet won a \$1 million bet⁷ that he could do better than a portfolio of hedge funds just by staying put in a boring, low-cost stock index fund (his winnings went to charity). Research proves that simply riding the tide of the stock market achieves better returns than proactively deciding when to jump in and out most of the time.

Passive returns are usually sufficient

Some people enjoy managing their portfolio. If that's you, then retain a portion of your funds, track those price movements, and enjoy trying to 'win the game.' If that's not you, then be assured that as a partner in a law firm, making market returns over the long term should compound your portfolio to significantly more than is needed to meet your financial goals.

Seek good advice. Passive investing is not a case of constructing a portfolio and letting things take care of themselves. Intelligent passive investing requires proper discipline, decades of experience, and regular review to ensure that the portfolio is performing to your individual needs.



7 Entrepreneur, Warren Buffett Won a \$1 Million Bet, and It's Helping a Good Cause, Jan 2 2018



Failing to properly understand risk in your finances and your life

It is said (by Lawyers) that Lawyers are naturally risk averse. This is actually true of the majority of the population, particularly once you get outside your comfort zone.

When it comes to financial planning and investment you have to delve deeper, to consider many risks, some you will have thought of, others you may not.

What's your attitude to risk?

When thinking about your finances holistically, some introspection is in order. There are a number of Psychometric tests available to assess one's attitude to risk, usually boiling down to around twenty questions about how would you feel if you had a big financial win; how would you feel if your investment dropped 25% and the like. These are crude by nature and the output will be something like a score of 1 - 5 which follows a normal distribution, so most people fall in the middle. But is that really insightful?

Should you think about risk in the same way for every investment? For example:

- If you wisely have a cash emergency fund, you are thinking about counter-party risk (is the money super safe?) and liquidity risk (will the funds be available when I really need them?);
- If you are saving to buy a home, you may be building a substantial pot of cash that you will need in the next 12 18 months. Do you want all that cash in one place? What is the impact of inflation on your savings?
- If you are considering investments for your pension in retirement say 20+ years away, how much will you risk running out? Have you considered the sequencing risk of certain investments as that retirement approaches?

What about non-investment risks?

continued

Comfort levels with various risks are driven by emotions and highly individualised. As humans, we tend to be bad at correctly identifying and managing each individual risk; as a lawyer, you may take a strong cautionary approach when identifying the risk running through your clients' organisations because that is what they pay you to do. This can blur the lines between your personal risk tolerance and your professional risk tolerance, which are not nearly the same thing.

Achieving self-awareness in this area could involve introspection, or it could involve the guiding hand of an experienced finance professional. Be sure to work with an adviser who unpacks risk and discusses all of the risks that your family faces to help you gain absolute clarity around the risks you have thought of and those you may not have.

What assets or asset classes should you invest in?

This is really a case of "it depends".

- **1.** What goal or objective is an investment addressing and over what time frame?
- 2. When considering your whole financial plan, are all of the basics covered off?
- **3.** What risks do we see for this investment and are we mitigating them, protecting against a bad outcome or embracing them?

Given your career success, you inevitably will be tempted by investment opportunities that do not stack up against one or more of the above criteria. As enticing as a GameStop-style public short may be, you'll get better results if you stick to your plan.

'Be sure to work
with an adviser
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your family
faces to help
you gain
absolute clarity...'



Poor Tax Management

Tax is law - it's the rules. And tax allowances are as much a part of the rules as tax obligations. Do you know and use all that are available to you?

Besides pensions, there are many incentives and reliefs within the UK tax code to incentivise saving and investment. Given your tax bracket, you want every penny to be growing in a tax-advantaged manner, so it's important to make use of every legal opportunity to ensure you are not paying more tax than necessary.



continued

A few boxes to check

We can't give specific advice as everyone's situation is different. For now, here's a quick rundown of some tax-efficient investment vehicles that you might wish to consider.

Investment Savings Accounts ("ISAs") in the various forms are very efficient tax wrappers, with dividends and savings income being free from income tax. You don't pay capital gains tax on investments held in an ISA; for investment outside an ISA, there's currently a £6,000 allowance after which gains are taxed at 20% (28% for residential property).

Venture Capital Trusts ("VCTs") let you access attractive tax reliefs as an incentive to take on the risk of backing early-stage businesses. Investors can claim upfront tax relief equal to 30% of their investment on the first £200,000 invested each year. Dividends and capital gains are also tax-free after the required holding period.

Enterprise Investment Schemes ("EIS") are tax-optimised and attractive investments for investors who are comfortable with higher risk. Here, you can back early-stage companies and access a number of valuable tax reliefs including upfront income tax relief, tax-free capital gains, capital gains tax deferral, and inheritance tax relief.

Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme ("SEIS") structures are similar and offer substantial tax benefits for investors who are prepared to take some risk investing into small unquoted trading companies, all of which can be considered in the optimised portfolio.



Attempting to Go It Alone

Deciding where, when and how to invest your money takes a huge set of skills, including:

- Understanding your current financial situation and tax commitments
- Exploring your financial vision, goals and objectives
- Knowing the style of investor you are
- Understanding the various risks around your family and your finances
- Assessing your attitude to investment risk
- Looking for opportunities to build structural safety around your finances
- Building a dynamic financial model that allows you to forecast what you future finances could look like, and examining alternative scenarios
- Formulating your bespoke financial plan
- Opening and managing accounts, policies and funds
- Liaising with professional advisers
- Regularly reviewing performance against goals and objectives adjusting your plan

To do all this on top of your increased partner commitments will mean working evenings and weekends just to keep up!

That's why many new law partners choose a different path: they seek out a professional financial advisor with all the skills, experience and time required to construct a bespoke financial plan that meets their needs.





For best results, hire a pro

Like all modern professionals you are working very hard, putting in long hours. You then carve out as much time as possible with your loved ones—friends, spouse and children. Occasionally, you get some exercise in. Be honest: when do you have time to consider all the issues and challenges relating to your family's finances? And even if you did decide to 'DIY' the research and decision making around portfolio construction, is that really the best use of your time?

Obviously we're biased on this subject. But we see everyday how a professional financial advisor can dedicate the time to making sure that you achieve your goals without sacrificing other commitments or burning out when you should be directing all that energy into your new role.

Just as clients come to you for assistance where they do not have the domain knowledge, experience and skills necessary to get a good outcome, you should seek the same outstanding care for yourself.

A financial professional has done this many times before and can get the results you need.

That's just good sense.





Permanent Wealth Partners Ltd is a firm of independent Financial Advisers, regulated by the FCA. We specialise in Financial Planning and Advice for mid-career professionals in the United Kingdom. Typically our clients come to us when their lives are busy, their finances are suddenly getting complex and they need expert advice to regain control of their financial destiny.

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