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INFLUENCE OF RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES ON INTERNAL SERVICE QUALITY AMONG COUNTY EMPLOYEES IN KENYA

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Abstract

The study sought to determine the influence of relationship management competencies on internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. The study was grounded on three key theories, emotional intelligence theory, learning organization theory and quality management theory. This study adopted positivist philosophy and explanatory correlational design. The target population consisted of 9,165 county government employees drawn from public institutions across Kenya, including County Executive staff, Members of County Assemblies, Directors, Sub-County Administrators, and County Public Service employees. This study employed purposive sampling to strategically select county employees who could provide the most relevant insights into the relationship between emotional intelligence competencies and internal service quality. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula based on the refined target population of 9,165 county government employees, resulting in 383 respondents selected for the study. Data was collected using structured questionnaire from which a response rate of 85% was achieved. Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The findings indicated that relationship management competencies had a positive relationship with internal service quality. the study concludes that relationship management competencies have statistically significant influence on internal service quality among county employees. Relationship management strengthens service delivery by enabling conflict resolution, trust-building, inspiration, and professional relationships that reduce tensions and promote harmony. The study recommends that county governments should prioritize relationship management training programs emphasizing conflict management, collaboration inspiration, constructive influence, and trust-building to enhance service delivery across departments.

Key words: Competencies, County Employees, Emotional Intelligence Competencies, Internal Service Quality, Relationship Management

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Introduction

In today's highly dynamic and service-oriented global environment, organizations have come to realize how significant human capital has become for achieving optimal performance and providing services to customers (Karmilah, et al 2026). Contemporary evidence today shows that human capital which include employees' knowledge, skills and abilities is one of the most significant drivers of productivity, innovation and overall performance of organizations, and has thus become an important source of competitive advantage for organizations. The competencies to succeed within an organization include competencies related to relationship management, which form a critical component of emotional intelligence (Migdadi, 2021). These competencies help to enhance collaboration, communication and conflict resolution, leading to improved performance of individuals and organizations (Goleman, et al 2017). Research further indicates that emotional intelligence (EI) competencies, particularly with regard to relationship management, are essential in facilitating effective workplace interactions and servicing other within modern organizations (Amissah et al 2025). Relationship management competencies involve the ability to create and maintain productive relationships with others, communicate effectively, to manage conflict constructively, to inspire others, and to create a sense of teamwork (Goleman et al., 2020). Organizations that place considerable emphasis on relationship management competencies are more likely to deliver superior internal service quality than organizations that do not focus on these competencies, by enhancing the service quality within the exchange of services among employees an organization (Boon et al., 2019).

Relationship management competencies consist of the interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence necessary for the successful management of interactions, the development of productive relationships, and the influence of others in the achievement of organizational goals (Goleman, 1998). Examples of these competencies include communicating effectively, resolving conflicts, working together as a team, and building trust; thus, enabling a collaborative and coordinated effort, and positive social interaction within the workplace. In addition to enhancing employee engagement, these competencies are key to mitigating workplace conflict and facilitating effective departmental coordination. They help to improve service delivery through improved cooperation, and the maintenance of positive professional relationships between employees (Salovey et al 2019).

Internal service quality relates to the quality of the services exchanged between employees of and departments within an organization, which supports the delivery of external services to clients or citizens (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Key dimensions of internal service quality include operational efficiency, in-time responsiveness, employee satisfaction and work group cooperation, all of which determine how effectively internal units support one another in achieving organizational objectives. High internal service quality enhances coordination, reduces delays, and improves overall organizational performance by ensuring that employees receive timely and effective support from their colleagues and departments. In public sector organizations, strong internal service quality is particularly important for improving service delivery outcomes and strengthening institutional effectiveness (Al-Hawary & Al-Nady, 2021).

Background of the Study

The concept of internal service quality has over the years attracted more attention as organizations across the globe strive to achieve better results through their internal processes and increasing efficiency through better internal processes and improved employee interactions (Khan et al., 2022).

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The concept of internal service quality relates to how employees provide services to each other and the extent to which each department provides workflow and effective service delivery (Choudhury et al., 2021). Research indicates that internal service quality is determined by the ability of employees to manage their relationships with one another through skills such as teamwork, communication and conflict resolution; trusting relationships among employees facilitates effective internal service delivery (Hur et al., 2020). There is evidence to suggest that organizations in developed nations who have undertaken employee training in relationship management using the principles of emotional intelligence have achieved improvements in their internal service quality (Miao et al., 2019).

Relationship management competencies are particularly critical in African organizational contexts due to persistent challenges such as lack of resources, complex workforces and inefficient institutions that require excellent interpersonal skills together with emotional regulation skills in order to maintain collaboration and performance (Wonda, 2024). Studies conducted in Africa show that relationship management competencies have been identified as an important component in terms of service delivery within an organisation; and that interpersonal relationships between staff members working together are considered to be very important in the delivery of services within an organisation (Agyapong & Amankwah 2021). For example, low communication abilities, poor conflict management abilities and low levels of teamwork have attributed to the lack of service efficiency in most public and private organisations throughout Africa (Nguyen et al., 2020). In addition, relationship management competency has also been shown to provide value or benefit to service delivery by improving internal service quality through the enhancement of teamwork, communication and cooperation between employees (Woime & Shato, 2025).

The importance of internal service quality in Kenya has become increasingly pronounced, particularly in the public sector in relation to the promise made by the devolved governance structure to provide citizens with high-quality services (Thairu, et al 2024). But, issues of how county governments deal with their workforce such as poor communication between departments, lack of teamwork and negative conflict management have inhibited the provision of quality internal services (Mutuku & Mathooko 2022). Additionally, county employees need to develop relationship management competencies to promote teamwork and provide strong quality internal services. Many studies conducted on Kenyan public employees have shown that employees who possess strong interpersonal skills are likely to have a positive impact on their overall service delivery through their ability to promote positive interactions between departments (Kariuki & Kiiru 2021).

Although relationship management skills are known to be important for successful relationships, few empirical studies have been done that explore the impact of these skills on the delivery of internal services within Kenyan county governments. While some researchers have studied the role of emotional intelligence in general, little attention has been given to understanding how specific relationship management skills are related to internal service quality and outcomes in public sector settings (Munyambu, 2024).

This study aimed to bridge the identified gap by examining the influence of relationship management competencies on internal service quality among employees in county governments in Kenya. The focus is informed by the need to understand how interpersonal capabilities such as communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and trust building contribute to the effectiveness of internal service delivery within devolved public institutions. By investigating these

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competencies in the context of county governments, the study seeks to generate evidence that is context-specific and relevant to improving internal coordination, collaboration, and service processes among public employees. The general objective of the study was to determine the influence of relationship management competencies on internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. This objective is grounded in the recognition that internal service quality is a critical determinant of overall organizational performance, particularly in public sector settings where efficiency and coordination across departments are essential for effective service delivery. The study therefore seeks to provide empirical insights into how relationship management competencies shape internal service processes and outcomes within county governments in Kenya.

Problem Statement

Recent empirical studies have increasingly examined the role of emotional intelligence and relationship management competencies in enhancing service performance across organizations. However, there remains a significant lack of conceptual clarity regarding each of these factors; as well as when and how they should be used in different types of contexts; and methodological approaches to investigating them vary greatly from one organization to the next. At the global level, for example, there has been one study by Miao Chunling et al. (2020) that looked at the impact of EQ on those working in service-oriented organizations across the United States. Their research found positive correlations between EQ levels and employees' attitudes toward work and performance. However, it did not focus on relationship management competencies or examine their influence on internal service quality.

Similarly, Hur Won-Moo et al. (2020) investigated employees working in private service firms in South Korea, focusing on the effect of emotional intelligence on internal service quality and job performance. The findings confirmed that emotional intelligence improves internal service interactions. Nonetheless, the study was limited to private sector organizations and did not consider public sector institutions where service delivery dynamics differ significantly.

In another context, Agyapong Daniel and Amankwah (2021) examined inter-organizational relationships among firms in Ghana, demonstrating that effective relationship management enhances organizational performance. However, their study focused on external stakeholder relationships rather than internal service quality among employees. Likewise, Nguyen Thi Thu et al. (2020) analyzed firms across emerging African economies to assess the influence of leadership and management control systems on performance. While the study highlighted the importance of interpersonal competencies in improving managerial performance, it did not specifically address emotional intelligence competencies or internal service quality.

At the local level, Kariuki Jane and Kiiru (2021) examined the effect of emotional intelligence on employee performance among employees in Kenyan organizations and found that emotional intelligence significantly improves productivity. However, the study did not focus on relationship management competencies or their role in influencing internal service quality. Additionally, Mutuku Dennis and Mathooko (2022) investigated internal service quality within county governments in Kenya and established that

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internal processes significantly influence service delivery outcomes. Despite this, the study did not examine relationship management competencies as key predictors of internal service quality.

These studies reveal persistent conceptual gaps, where relationship management competencies are not sufficiently isolated; contextual gaps, with limited focus on public sector institutions such as county governments; and methodological gaps, where internal service quality is not directly examined as an outcome variable. This study therefore sought to address these gaps by examining the influence of relationship management competencies specifically communication, teamwork, and conflict management on internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. By focusing on devolved public sector institutions, the study provided a more context-specific and comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal competencies shape internal service delivery processes.

Literature Review

Theoretical Anchorage

This study was guided by three theories: Learning Organization, Emotional Intelligence Theory, Theory, and Quality Management Theory. These theories collectively provide a multidimensional framework linking individual competencies, organizational learning practices, and service quality outcomes within public sector institutions. In addition to the primary theories guiding this study, the Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1988) and the SERVQUAL Model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988) provide valuable complementary insights for understanding internal service quality.

Learning Organization Theory, advanced by Peter Senge (1990), posits that organizations achieve sustained success through continuous learning at individual, team, and organizational levels. The theory is anchored on five core disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning, which collectively enhance organizational adaptability and innovation (Senge, 1990). It assumes that knowledge sharing and collective learning improve problem-solving capacity and organizational performance. In research, Learning Organization Theory has been applied to examine how organizational culture and knowledge management practices enhance employee competencies, collaboration, and service delivery outcomes (Garvin et al., 2008). In this study, the theory explains how continuous learning practices within county governments can strengthen emotional intelligence competencies and improve internal service quality. However, the theory has been criticized for being overly idealistic and difficult to operationalize in bureaucratic contexts, with limited empirical clarity on measurable outcomes (Garvin et al., 2008). This study contributes to the theory by contextualizing it within Kenya's county governments, demonstrating how structured learning environments enhance the effectiveness of emotional intelligence competencies in service delivery (Uvhagen et al., 2024).

Emotional Intelligence Theory, originally developed by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) and later popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995), refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and manage emotions in oneself and others. The theory identifies key dimensions including self-awareness, relationship

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management, social awareness, and relationship management, which are critical for effective workplace interactions (Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2008). In research, Emotional Intelligence Theory has been widely used to explain employee behavior, leadership effectiveness, and service delivery outcomes, particularly in service-oriented organizations (Mayer et al., 2008). In this study, the theory provides a framework for understanding how relationship management competencies influence internal service quality among county employees. Despite its wide application, the theory has been criticized for conceptual overlap with personality traits and challenges in measurement, particularly inconsistencies between self-report and ability-based assessments (Mayer et al., 2008). This study extends the theory by applying it to internal service quality within public sector institutions, demonstrating its relevance beyond individual performance to organizational service processes.

Quality Management Theory, advanced by W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran, emphasizes continuous improvement, process optimization, and customer-focused service delivery as drivers of organizational performance (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988). The theory assumes that standardization, performance monitoring, and employee involvement in quality improvement led to enhanced service outcomes. In research, the theory has been applied to examine how structured quality practices influence service delivery, operational efficiency, and employee productivity (Oakland, 2014). In this study, it provides a framework for understanding internal service quality as an outcome of both structured processes and emotionally intelligent employee interactions. However, the theory has been criticized for its rigidity and overemphasis on standardized processes, which may limit flexibility and innovation in dynamic environments (Oakland, 2014). This study contributes by integrating emotional intelligence into the quality management framework, demonstrating that internal service quality depends not only on processes but also on employee competencies and behaviors.

Complementary Theoretical Perspectives

Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory explains how individuals evaluate service quality by comparing their expectations with actual service experiences, thereby offering a useful lens for interpreting how county employees perceive the effectiveness of internal service interactions across departments. This perspective helps to clarify variations in internal service quality by highlighting the role of expectation-performance gaps in shaping employee satisfaction and perceptions of organizational efficiency. Similarly, the SERVQUAL Model provides a structured framework for assessing service quality through dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, which can be adapted to internal organizational contexts. Within county governments, these dimensions are relevant in evaluating how well departments support one another in delivering timely, accurate, and coordinated services. Together, these frameworks enrich the theoretical foundation of the study by deepening the understanding of how internal service quality is experienced, measured, and influenced by relational dynamics within public sector institutions

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Empirical Review

This section reviews recent empirical studies on relationship management competencies and service-related outcomes. It systematically examines existing scholarly work to identify key findings, research designs, and analytical approaches that have been used in studying the relationship between interpersonal competencies and organizational service performance. The review also highlights the strengths and limitations of previous studies, particularly in terms of conceptual focus, methodological rigor, and contextual relevance across different sectors and geographical settings. In addition, it identifies gaps in the literature that justify the need for the current study, especially regarding the application of relationship management competencies within public sector institutions such as county governments.

The literature review was based on studies identified through a systematic search of reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. Only peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2025 were considered. The selection focused on studies related to relationship management competencies, emotional intelligence, and internal service quality. Articles were included based on their relevance to the study objectives, methodological rigor, and applicability to the public sector context.

Khan et al. (2022) examined the effect of customer relationship management (CRM) and firm reputation on customer loyalty in Pakistan's retail and service sectors. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), the study found that CRM practices significantly enhanced customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. While the study demonstrates the effectiveness of relationship management practices, its focus is externally oriented, emphasizing customer outcomes rather than internal service processes. Conceptually, it does not address internal service quality (ISQ) as an outcome variable. Methodologically, although SEM provides robust causal analysis, the study is limited to privately owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in competitive markets, which differ significantly from public sector institutions. The current study addresses this gap by examining relationship management as an emotional intelligence competency influencing internal service quality within county governments.

A study by Kebede (2023) examined the influence of managerial competencies particularly interpersonal skills, which closely align with relationship management competencies on internal service quality among employees in city administrations in the Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design involving 196 public employees and 12 managers, using structured questionnaires and statistical techniques including factor analysis and weighted least squares regression. The findings revealed that managerial competencies, especially technical and relational skills, had a statistically significant positive effect on internal service quality, demonstrating that interpersonal abilities such as communication, collaboration, and employee support enhance internal coordination and service delivery within public institutions. This study is particularly relevant as it directly links relational competencies to internal service processes within a government setting. However, while it captures interpersonal skills broadly, it does not explicitly isolate emotional

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intelligence-based relationship management constructs such as conflict management and influence, creating a conceptual gap. Additionally, the focus on municipal administrations in Ethiopia limits contextual generalization to other devolved governance systems such as Kenya's counties, where service structures and accountability mechanisms differ. The current study addresses this gap by explicitly conceptualizing relationship management competencies within emotional intelligence and examining their direct effect on internal service quality in a devolved public sector context.

Fitriadi et al. (2025) investigated the role of employee competence and service behavior in influencing service quality outcomes within a government setting, specifically focusing on employees in the Jember Regency government in Indonesia. The study employed a quantitative design using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) with a sample of 140 public sector employees. The findings indicated that employee competencies including interpersonal and relational capabilities significantly influenced service quality outcomes, particularly through improved coordination, responsiveness, and communication across departments. Although the study emphasizes competence broadly, its findings underscore the importance of relational interactions in shaping service quality within government systems. However, the study conceptualizes service quality mainly in relation to system satisfaction (e-government services) rather than internal service quality as an interdepartmental process, thereby presenting a conceptual limitation. Furthermore, relationship management competencies are not explicitly operationalized as a distinct construct, limiting theoretical clarity. The current study extends this work by isolating relationship management competencies for example teamwork, communication, conflict management and directly linking them to internal service quality dimensions such as responsiveness and collaboration in county governments.

Mulyawan et al. (2024) explored the role of employee competence in shaping service quality and public satisfaction within institutional service settings, particularly focusing on immigration service employees. The study applied a quantitative approach and demonstrated that employee competencies including interpersonal and relational behaviors significantly influenced service quality, which in turn affected overall service outcomes and public satisfaction. The study contributes to understanding how employee competencies drive service quality in institutional environments, reinforcing the importance of relational interactions in service delivery. However, its primary focus is on external service quality and public satisfaction, rather than internal service quality among employees, indicating a conceptual gap. Additionally, the study does not explicitly anchor its analysis in emotional intelligence or relationship management frameworks, limiting theoretical depth. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on internal service quality as an outcome variable and grounding relationship management competencies within emotional intelligence theory, thereby offering a more precise explanation of how interpersonal skills influence internal service processes in public sector organizations.

Migdadi (2021) investigated the relationship between knowledge management, CRM success,

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and innovation capabilities among management employees in Egypt. Using confirmatory factor analysis and SEM via Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS), the study found that knowledge management significantly enhances CRM effectiveness. However, the study prioritizes structural and informational systems over individual competencies, overlooking the role of emotional intelligence in shaping relationship management behaviors. Methodologically, the use of SEM provides strong analytical rigor but focuses on organizational-level constructs rather than employee-level interactions. The present study addresses this conceptual limitation by examining relationship management competencies as behavioral constructs influencing internal service quality in public sector organizations.

Chen and Lee (2021) explored the effect of relationship management competencies such as teamwork, influence, and conflict resolution on internal service quality among service employees in Taiwan and mainland China. Using a quantitative design and PLS-SEM analysis with samples of 206 and 250 respondents respectively, the study found that relationship management significantly improved internal service quality through service recovery mechanisms. While this study aligns conceptually with the current research, it is situated in developed economies with advanced organizational systems and customer-driven service environments. This creates contextual limitations when applying the findings to developing countries. The current study addresses this gap by examining similar relationships within Kenya's devolved county governments, where institutional constraints and service delivery structures differ significantly.

Appiah Kubi and Koranteng (2025) examined the influence of emotional intelligence, including relationship management competencies such as empathy and conflict resolution, on leadership effectiveness in public sector organizations in Ghana. The findings indicated that emotional intelligence significantly enhances leadership behaviors and employee performance outcomes. However, the study focuses on leadership effectiveness as the dependent variable rather than internal service quality. Conceptually, this limit understanding of how relationship management competencies directly influence service processes among employees. The current study extends this line of inquiry by focusing specifically on internal service quality as an outcome variable.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that relationship management competencies positively influence organizational outcomes such as customer loyalty, competitive advantage, leadership effectiveness, and service quality. However, several critical gaps emerge. First, there is a conceptual gap, as most studies focus on external outcomes for example customer loyalty, marketing performance) or leadership effectiveness rather than internal service quality as a distinct construct. Second, a methodological gap exists, with heavy reliance on advanced techniques such as SEM and PLS-SEM, often emphasizing structural relationships while overlooking employee-level behavioral dynamics relevant to public sector contexts. Third, although contextual differences are acknowledged, there has been an overemphasis on private sector and hospitality settings, with limited focus on public sector institutions, particularly devolved governance systems. Furthermore, few studies integrate emotional intelligence competencies as

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behavioral drivers of internal service quality, leaving a theoretical gap in linking human relational skills to organizational service processes.

This study addressed the identified gaps by examining relationship management competencies as emotional intelligence constructs that influence internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. It specifically focuses on how interpersonal capabilities such as communication, conflict management, teamwork, and trust building shape the quality of internal service interactions within public sector organizations. By situating the analysis within county governments, the study provides context-specific evidence on how relational behaviors among employees contribute to improved coordination, responsiveness, and service efficiency. In doing so, it contributes to existing literature by offering a behavioral, service-oriented, and public sector-specific perspective that extends understanding of how emotional intelligence competencies influence internal service delivery within devolved governance systems.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study presents the hypothesized relationship between relationship management competencies as the independent variable and internal service quality as the dependent variable. It illustrates how interpersonal skills, including communication, conflict resolution, teamwork efforts, and trust building, are expected to influence key dimensions of internal service quality such as operational efficiency, timely responsiveness, employee satisfaction, and work collaboration. The framework is anchored in Emotional Intelligence Theory, which argues that individuals with strong emotional awareness and interpersonal regulation skills are better positioned to manage relationships effectively, navigate workplace tensions, and promote cooperation among colleagues (Goleman, 1998). Accordingly, the framework proposes that higher levels of relationship management competencies among county employees are likely to enhance internal service processes and improve overall service quality within public sector organizations.

In this study, relationship management competencies are operationalized through four key dimensions: communication skills, conflict resolution, teamwork efforts, and trust building. These competencies are expected to enhance how employees interact, coordinate tasks, and support one another within the organization. Effective communication facilitates information flow, conflict resolution minimizes workplace disruptions, teamwork promotes collective problem-solving, and trust building strengthens cooperation among employees (Goleman, 1998). Internal service quality is conceptualized as the outcome variable and is measured through operational efficiency, in-time responsiveness, employee satisfaction, and work collaboration. These dimensions reflect the effectiveness of internal processes and the quality-of-service exchanges among employees (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). According to internal marketing theory, organizations that promote strong internal relationships and employee support systems are more likely to achieve higher service quality outcomes (Hallowell et al., 1996).

The framework therefore assumes that improved relationship management competencies among county employees will lead to enhanced internal

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service quality by fostering efficient workflows, timely service delivery, higher employee engagement, and stronger collaborative work environments. This is because employees who possess strong interpersonal skills are better able to communicate effectively, resolve workplace conflicts constructively, build trust among colleagues, and work cohesively across different departments. In public sector organizations such as county governments, where service delivery is largely dependent on interdepartmental coordination and collective effort, these competencies play a critical role in ensuring that internal processes function smoothly and efficiently. As a result, strengthened relationship management competencies are expected to translate into improved internal service interactions, reduced operational delays, and more responsive service delivery systems within county administrations. This relationship is illustrated in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, which shows the link between relationship management competencies and internal service quality among county employees in Kenya.

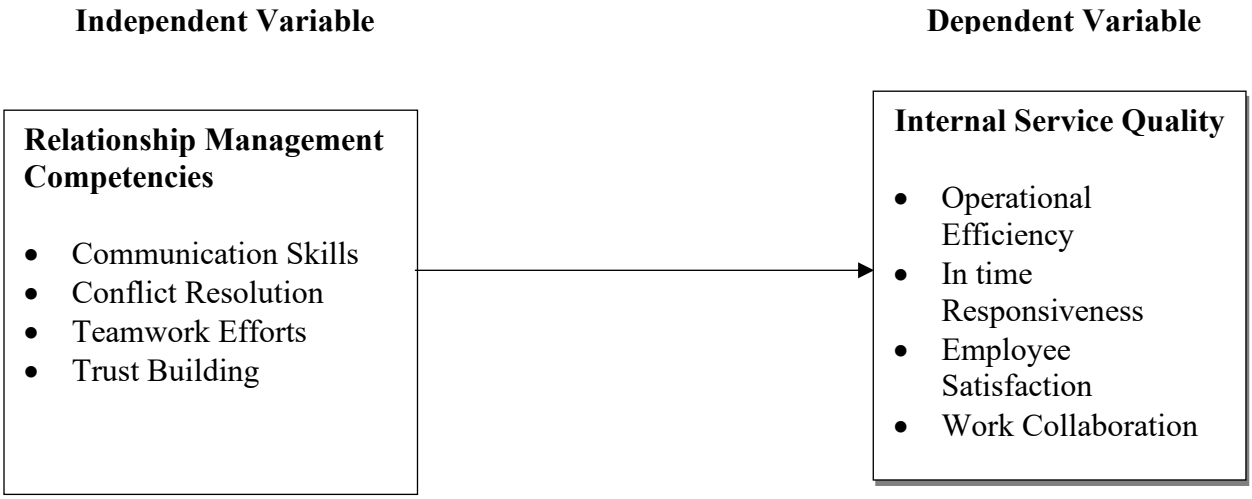


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Research Hypothesis

This study formulated a null hypothesis to statistically test the relationship between relationship management competencies and internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. The hypothesis was developed to guide the inferential analysis and determine whether a significant relationship exists between the study variables.

H_{01}: Relationship management competencies have no statistically significant influence on internal service quality among county employees in Kenya.

Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, including the target study population, research design, sampling procedures and data collection methods.

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Target Study Population

The target population consisted of 9,165 county government employees drawn from selected functional departments across the 47 counties in Kenya. These employees were working in key operational and administrative units, including executive offices, administrative departments, sub-county offices, and service delivery sections that are directly involved in internal coordination and public service provision. This population was considered appropriate because county government employees play a central role in devolved governance systems, where effective internal coordination and interpersonal collaboration are essential for service delivery efficiency (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The inclusion of these categories ensured that respondents had firsthand experience with internal organizational processes, making them well-positioned to provide reliable information on relationship management competencies and internal service quality. In addition, focusing on employees engaged in daily service operations aligns with public sector human resource frameworks that emphasize competency-based performance and collaborative service delivery within devolved units (World Bank, 2020).

Research Design

The study employed an explanatory correlational research design to assess the relationship between relationship management competencies and internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. This design was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to examine both the direction and strength of the relationship between variables without manipulating them (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). A quantitative approach was adopted to allow for objective measurement and statistical analysis of the study variables. Notably, the final conceptual model did not include any moderating variables; therefore, moderation analysis was not undertaken.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify and select respondents with relevant experience in service delivery and interdepartmental coordination. This technique allowed the researcher to focus on participants who possess adequate knowledge and exposure to the phenomena under investigation, thereby enhancing the relevance and quality of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2017). By concentrating on employees involved in core service functions, the study ensured that the findings would be both meaningful and contextually grounded. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) method for known populations at a 95% confidence level, yielding a sample of 383 respondents from a population of 9,165 employees. This sample size was considered sufficient to ensure representativeness and to enhance the reliability and generalizability of the study results.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires designed to capture respondents' perceptions of relationship management competencies and internal service quality. The questionnaires were carefully developed based on validated measurement scales from established literature, with items adapted and refined to suit the public sector context of Kenyan county governments. The instrument was constructed using a five-point Likert scale to ensure consistency in responses and to allow for

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quantifiable measurement of attitudes and perceptions. This approach is consistent with best practices in survey research, which emphasize the use of structured instruments to enhance reliability and comparability of data (Fowler, 2020).

The questionnaires were administered both electronically using Google Forms and in printed form for respondents in areas with limited internet connectivity, ensuring broad accessibility and improved response coverage. A pilot study involving 38 respondents approximately 10% of the total sample was conducted to test the clarity, reliability, and validity of the instrument. Findings from the pilot test informed minor revisions to improve wording, item sequencing, and overall consistency of the questionnaire items. Reliability testing further confirmed the internal consistency of the instrument prior to full data collection, in line with methodological standards for quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the data collection process to uphold research integrity and protect respondents' rights.

Data Analysis And Results

Reliability Assessment

Researchers conducted a reliability analysis with the Cronbach's Alpha statistic to evaluate the internal consistency of measurement items (Sekaran and Bougie, 2022). A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.70 or greater is generally considered acceptable for social science research. The reliability testing conducted evidenced the constructs with Cronbach's Alpha values that ranged from 0.713 to 0.84 and indicated that all items exceeded the required threshold for internal consistency. Therefore, this study's research instrument is considered reliable and suitable for conducting further statistical analyses.

Data Analysis Techniques

To analyze the data collected from the research questionnaires the data was coded and cleaned, and .Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, and standard deviations were used to report and summarize the data collected. Inferential statistics such as correlation and regression analyses were utilized to determine the relationship between relationship management competencies and internal service quality. The results were reported in a tabular format to enhance ease of interpretation and facilitate discussion.

Response Rate

The primary data collection method employed in the study was a self-administered questionnaire. Of the 383 questionnaires sent out, 327 belonged to completed and returned questionnaires, with an 85.4% response rate (327 out of 383). According to Mugenda & Mugenda (2003), a response rate of more than 70% is considered very good for analysis; thus, the study's response rate was evaluated as very satisfactory and sufficient for both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

Descriptive Analysis for Internal Service Quality

Descriptive statistics for internal service quality was measured across four dimensions: operational efficiency, responsiveness, employee satisfaction, and work collaboration, using a five-point Likert scale. The findings of internal service quality recorded a mean score (M = 3.42, SD = 1.27),

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suggesting that respondents generally had a positive perception regarding internal service processes within county departments, although variability in responses indicates inconsistencies across units.

Operational efficiency yielded a mean of 3.47 (SD = 1.26), indicating a high level of agreement that service delivery processes are structured to minimize delays and inefficiencies. Specifically, respondents agreed that processes reduce delays (M = 3.57, SD = 1.30) and that adequate tools and resources are available (M = 3.52, SD = 1.23), although perceptions of workflow optimization were slightly lower (M = 3.39, SD = 1.29). Respondents indicated that departments respond to service requests in a timely manner (M = 3.47, SD = 1.36) and prioritize urgent tasks (M = 3.65, SD = 0.90). However, proactive responsiveness was comparatively lower (M = 3.27, SD = 1.42), suggesting variability in how quickly employees initiate action across departments.

Respondents indicated that employee satisfaction was reflected in the mean scores, suggesting generally positive perceptions of motivation and workplace support. Respondents reported that they feel valued (M = 3.31, SD = 1.31) and work in inclusive environments (M = 3.28, SD = 1.40), although perceptions of professional development support were relatively lower (M = 3.24, SD = 1.43). Work collaboration recorded the highest mean among the dimensions, suggesting relatively stronger agreement regarding teamwork and cooperation. Respondents indicated that teamwork is supported through communication and shared responsibilities (M = 3.44, SD = 1.35), and that colleagues provide mutual support (M = 3.50, SD = 1.26). Interdepartmental collaboration was also positively rated (M = 3.52, SD = 1.28).

The general findings indicate that internal service quality within county governments reflects a fair level of performance, with relatively stronger outcomes in collaboration and operational efficiency. However, variability in responses highlights the need for improvements in responsiveness and employee satisfaction to enhance consistency in internal service delivery. The descriptive statistics for internal service quality, including the mean scores and standard deviations for its four dimensions operational efficiency, responsiveness, employee satisfaction, and work collaboration are presented in Table 1.

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Table 1: ***Descriptive Statistics for Internal Service Quality***

Internal Service Quality Statements	Mean	Std Dev
Operational Efficiency	3.47	1.26
My department ensures that service delivery processes are well-structured, reducing delays and inefficiencies.	3.57	1.30
Internal workflows in my organization are optimized to ensure that tasks are completed efficiently and with minimal errors.	3.39	1.29
I have access to the necessary tools, resources, and support required to perform my duties effectively.	3.52	1.23
My organization continuously evaluates and improves operational efficiency by implementing better processes and technological advancements.	3.41	1.23
Responsiveness	3.46	1.25
My department addresses service requests and inquiries in a timely manner to ensure a seamless workflow.	3.47	1.36
My organization prioritizes urgent matters and actively resolves service-related challenges to maintain high efficiency.	3.65	0.89
Employees are encouraged to act swiftly and proactively when responding to internal and external service needs.	3.27	1.42
I take necessary measures to ensure that my work output aligns with the organization's responsive standards.	3.43	1.31
Employee Satisfaction	3.29	1.29
I feel valued and appreciated in my workplace, which enhances my job satisfaction and motivation.	3.31	1.31
My organization fosters an inclusive and engaging work environment that prioritizes employee well-being.	3.28	1.39
I receive adequate support in terms of resources, professional development, and leadership guidance to ensure job satisfaction.	3.24	1.43
My workplace culture promotes employee engagement, leading to a high level of commitment and enthusiasm for my work.	3.31	1.03

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Internal Service Quality Statements	Mean	Std Dev
Operational Efficiency	3.47	1.26
Work Collaboration	3.48	1.29
My department encourages teamwork by fostering open communication and shared responsibilities.	3.44	1.35
Colleagues in my workplace support each other, ensuring that tasks are completed efficiently and with cooperation.	3.5	1.26
Interdepartmental collaboration is highly encouraged in my organization, ensuring that work processes are integrated and effective.	3.52	1.28
My team engages in joint decision-making and cooperative efforts to achieve our shared goals.	3.46	1.29
Aggregate	**3.42**	**1.27**

Descriptive Analysis for Relationship Management Competencies

Descriptive statistics for relationship management competencies construct was measured using four dimensions: communication skills, conflict resolution, teamwork efforts, and trust building, based on a five-point Likert scale. The relationship management competencies recorded a relatively high mean score (M = 3.65, SD = 1.16), indicating that respondents generally reported strong interpersonal and collaborative abilities, although the dispersion suggests some variability across departments. Communication skills yielded a mean of 3.51 (SD = 1.22), indicating a generally positive level of effective communication among employees. Respondents indicated that they clearly express ideas (M = 3.52, SD = 1.37), actively listen and contribute in discussions (M = 3.53, SD = 0.97), use respectful language (M = 3.44, SD = 1.29), and adapt communication to different audiences (M = 3.55, SD = 1.25). Conflict resolution recorded the highest mean among the dimensions (M = 4.01, SD = 1.04), suggesting strong agreement regarding employees' ability to manage workplace disagreements. Respondents reported managing conflicts calmly (M = 4.14, SD = 1.00), encouraging open dialogue (M = 4.21, SD = 0.96), and seeking fair solutions (M = 3.87, SD = 1.03).

Teamwork efforts showed a mean of 3.62 (SD = 1.25), indicating generally positive perceptions of collaboration. Respondents reported active participation in team activities (M = 4.27, SD = 0.90), respect for colleagues' contributions (M = 3.47, SD = 1.39), and the ability to work with diverse viewpoints (M = 3.45, SD = 1.36). Trust building recorded a mean of 3.44 (SD = 1.15), reflecting a generally positive level of perceived trustworthiness and reliability among employees. Respondents indicated that they act with integrity (M = 3.34, SD = 1.28), maintain confidentiality

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(M = 3.44, SD = 1.04), and fulfill commitments (M = 3.48, SD = 1.00).

The general findings indicate that relationship management competencies among county employees are generally strong, with conflict resolution emerging as the most developed dimension, while trust building reflects comparatively lower but still positive levels. Overall, the results suggest that employees possess well-established interpersonal capabilities that support effective collaboration, communication, and coordination within county government structures. However, differences across the dimensions indicate that some relational skills are more developed than others, pointing to areas where targeted capacity strengthening may further enhance workplace relationships and service delivery outcomes. Descriptive statistics for relationship management competencies are shown in Table 2, which presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the key dimensions of communication skills, conflict resolution, teamwork efforts, and trust building. These results are based on respondents' ratings using a five-point Likert scale, allowing for a systematic assessment of the extent to which employees demonstrate relationship management competencies in their day-to-day work interactions.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Management Competencies

Relationship Management Competencies Statements	Mean	Std Dev
Communication Skills	3.51	1.22
I express my thoughts, ideas, and instructions clearly to ensure effective understanding in workplace interactions.	3.52	1.37
I actively listen to colleagues and provide meaningful responses that contribute to constructive workplace discussions.	3.53	0.97
I use professional and respectful language when giving feedback or addressing conflicts to maintain a positive work environment.	3.44	1.29
I tailor my communication approach based on the audience, ensuring that my message is understood across different levels of the organization.	3.55	1.25
Conflict Resolution	4.01	1.04
I approach workplace conflicts calmly and objectively, ensuring that disputes are resolved fairly and professionally.	4.14	0.99
I encourage open discussions and mutual understanding to prevent conflicts from escalating into serious workplace issues.	4.21	0.96
I focus on finding practical and mutually beneficial solutions when addressing disagreements with colleagues.	3.87	1.03
I handle conflicts in a way that fosters teamwork, collaboration, and a positive workplace atmosphere.	3.81	1.18

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Relationship Management Competencies Statements	Mean	Std Dev
Teamwork Efforts	3.62	1.25
I take an active role in team projects by sharing responsibilities, ideas, and insights that contribute to successful outcomes.	4.27	0.9
I respect and value the contributions of my team members, ensuring that everyone feels included and appreciated.	3.47	1.39
I work well with colleagues regardless of differences in opinions or work styles, ensuring that team objectives are met efficiently.	3.45	1.36
I support and encourage my colleagues, helping to create a positive and motivated team environment.	3.28	1.35
Trust Building	3.44	1.15
I act with honesty and integrity in all my workplace interactions, ensuring that I earn the trust of my colleagues and supervisors.	3.34	1.28
I maintain confidentiality when handling sensitive workplace matters, ensuring that my colleagues feel safe sharing information with me.	3.44	1.04
I consistently follow through on my commitments, making me a reliable and dependable member of my team.	3.48	0.99
I foster a workplace environment where colleagues feel comfortable expressing their concerns and seeking guidance without fear of judgment.	3.49	1.29
Aggregate	**3.65**	**1.16**

Regression between Relationship Management Competencies and Internal Service Quality

Relationship management competencies and their impact on internal service quality among employees of Kenyan counties were evaluated using simple linear regression analysis. As indicated in Table 3, it was found that there was a positive relationship between relationship management competencies and internal service quality ($R = 0.47$). The coefficient of determination indicated that 22.1% ($R^2 = 0.221$) of the variation in internal service quality was explained by relationship management competencies, with the remaining 77.9% being accounted for by factors outside this model.

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Table 3: Model Summary for Relationship Management Competencies on Internal Service Quality

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.470	.221	.218	.53425

a. Predictors: (Constant), Relationship Management Competencies

b. Dependent Variable: Internal service quality

ANOVA for Relationship Management Competencies and Internal Service Quality

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to evaluate the overall significance of the regression model as indicated in Table 4. The results indicated a statistically significant relationship between the independent variable of relationship management competencies and dependent variable of internal service quality of county employees in Kenya, with F (1, 325) = 92.07, p < .001 confirming that the model provides a good fit for the data.

Table 4: ANOVA for Relationship Management Competencies and Internal Service Quality

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	26.278	1	26.278	92.065	<.001[b]
	Residual	92.764	325	.285		
Total		119.042	326			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Relationship Management Competencies

b. Dependent Variable: Internal Service Quality

Regression Coefficients for Relationship Management Competencies and Internal Service Quality

The regression coefficients presented in Table 5 further confirm the nature of the relationship between the variables. Relationship management competencies had a positive and statistically significant effect on internal service quality (β = .527, SE = .055, t (325) = 9.60, p < .001). This indicates that an increase in relationship management competencies is associated with an increase in internal service quality. The regression equation is expressed as: Internal Service Quality = 1.505 + 0.527 (Relationship Management Competencies).

Based on these findings, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results therefore confirm that relationship management competencies have a statistically significant and positive influence on internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. This implies that employees who demonstrate strong communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and trust-building skills are more likely to enhance coordination, collaboration, and responsiveness in internal service delivery within county governments.

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Table 5: Regression Coefficients for Relationship Management Competencies and Internal Service Quality

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.505	.202		7.449	.000
	Relationship Management	.527	.055	.470	9.595	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Internal Service Quality

Discussion Of Findings

The current study established that relationship management competencies significantly influence internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $r = 0.538$, $p < 0.05$, and the simple linear regression model showed that relationship management accounted for 29.0% of the variance in internal service quality ($R^2 = 0.290$). The regression coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.538$, $t = 11.700$, $F = 136.910$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that the ability to manage conflict, inspire collaboration, influence others constructively, and build trust plays a critical role in enhancing service delivery across internal departments. These findings reinforce that public service performance hinges on employees' capacity to cultivate professional relationships, fostering responsiveness, empathy, and departmental cohesion in devolved governance.

These results align with Khan et al. (2022), who surveyed 345 SME owners in Pakistan's Islamabad and Rawalpindi and found customer relationship management positively and significantly impacted loyalty via satisfaction mediation. Moreover, their recommendation for deep stakeholder ties mirrors the current emphasis on internal collaboration, though the study shifts external CRM-loyalty focus to Kenyan county internal service quality, addressing micro-enterprise contextual gaps. Furthermore, Ofori and Appiah-Nimo (2022) revealed customer relationship management's significant positive effect on hotel competitive advantage in Nigeria via PLS-SEM on one-star managers, despite no direct operational performance link. Echoing this relational potency ($r=0.538$), the present public sector extension adapts hospitality dynamics to county efficiency, thereby filling industry-specific voids.

In addition, Al-Gazawneh et al. (2022) confirmed service quality mediated CRM-marketing performance in Jordanian hotels, urging integrated focus. Consequently, the current direct effect ($R^2=0.290$) parallels this mediation logic, applying to internal public services beyond hospitality. Similarly, Migdadi (2021) established knowledge management's positive significant

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association with CRM success and innovation in Egyptian manufacturing. Aligning relationally, Kenyan results extend to employee service quality, thus bridging methodological/theoretical gaps with descriptive-correlational emotional intelligence grounding.

Additionally, Salah and Abou-Shouk (2019) showed CRM practices (shared values, bonding) positively affected airline loyalty/satisfaction in Egypt. This supports the current β=0.538 for influence/teamwork, shifting customer-external to internal county dynamics. Moreover, Boadu and Achiaa (2019) found a positive significant CRM-retention relationship in Ghanaian insurance via descriptive/correlation. Therefore, the present F=136.910 affirms this for public retention-like cohesion, adapting via emotional intelligence theory.

In the same vein, Chen and Lee (2021) demonstrated relationship management skills (influence, conflict resolution via LMX) improved internal service quality by 32% through recovery in Taiwan/China service workers. Directly comparable (29% variance), Kenyan devolved public application addresses developed economy disparities. Likewise, Nazeer et al. (2018) revealed relationship management skills boosted university internal service quality by 28% in Pakistan, enhancing teamwork/assurance. This aligns quantitatively, extending private academia to Kenyan counties.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings align with the Emotional Intelligence Theory, which emphasizes the role of relational competencies in managing workplace emotions and enhancing interpersonal effectiveness. They also support the Learning Organization Theory, as cohesive relationships promote knowledge sharing, collaboration, and continuous learning across county departments. In addition, the results are consistent with Quality Management Theory, which highlights those effective internal processes depend on human collaboration and continuous improvement systems. Collectively, these theories reinforce the conclusion that relationship management competencies are central not only to internal service quality but also to sustaining institutional cohesion in public sector organizations.

Conclusion

The study concludes that relationship management competencies significantly influence internal service quality among county employees in Kenya. Employees who demonstrate strong abilities in communication, conflict management, teamwork, and trust building contribute to improved coordination, smoother communication, and more effective internal service delivery. More importantly, these competencies play a critical role in strengthening institutional cohesion, as they foster cooperation, reduce interdepartmental conflicts, and enhance alignment of work processes across different units. As a result, county governments with employees who possess strong relationship management skills are better positioned to achieve a more unified, collaborative, and stable working environment that supports effective service delivery.

Implication

The study has several important implications for practice, policy, and academia. For county governments, the findings highlight the need to strengthen institutional cohesion through targeted development of relationship management

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competencies, including communication, teamwork, and conflict management skills. Human resource managers can use these findings to design structured training and capacity-building programs aimed at improving interpersonal collaboration and reducing internal service inefficiencies. Policymakers may also use the evidence to develop frameworks that promote stronger employee relations and coordinated service delivery systems within devolved governance structures. Academically, the study contributes to literature by establishing a clear link between relationship management competencies and internal service quality, while also demonstrating their role in enhancing institutional cohesion in public sector organizations. It further extends understanding of emotional intelligence in a developing country context, particularly within devolved government systems.

Recommendations

The study recommends that county governments should prioritize relationship management training programs emphasizing conflict management, collaboration inspiration, constructive influence, and trust-building to enhance service delivery across departments. Implement mandatory workshops with role-playing and team-building exercises tailored to devolved governance, targeting frontline employees during onboarding and biannually. Integrate relationship competency assessments into recruitment, performance evaluations, and promotions to select and reward skilled relational performers. Foster departmental cohesion through cross-functional initiatives like joint projects and feedback forums, with leadership modelling these skills to cultivate empathy and responsiveness. Monitor via 360-degree reviews linking gains to internal service metrics, allocating HR budgets for sustained delivery. These actions will strengthen professional relationships, reduce silos, and boost public service performance amid dynamic pressures.

Ethical Approval

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known competing interests or conflicts of interest associated with this study.

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