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Evolving Sounds: Exploring the Relationship Between Enterprise Social Networks and Employee Voice

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of the Enterprise Social Network as an enabler of employee voice and argues that established conceptualisations of voice have limited explanatory power in the online arena. This is because traditional concepts focus primarily on one- or two-way communication up and down the organisational hierarchy and tend to overlook the multidirectional nature of Enterprise Social Networks. These networks impact on the development and expression of individual (and collective) voice in the workplace, but the pace of technological development has outstripped academic research on its implications for employee voice. There is therefore a pressing need to re-evaluate our conceptual approach. Only by reconstructing employee voice to take into account peer-to-peer communication will we be able to advance our understanding of the role of the Enterprise Social Network as a mechanism for voice from both an academic and practitioner perspective. The Enterprise Social Network is an emergent phenomenon which has huge potential to transform workplaces by changing the way employees collaborate, communicate, organise work, and voice their opinions and expectations. Employees' increasing desire to use social media in their working lives means that over the next few years many organisations could be wholly reliant on their network, with the platforms becoming as essential as telephones and email. Yet since McAfee's seminal paper (2006) on Enterprise 2.0 there has been a lack of research in the area. This paper draws upon extant literature in both Enterprise Social Networking and Employee Voice to propose a framework which reconceptualises employee voice as a multidimensional, multidirectional concept and provides conceptual clarification on its link to Enterprise Social Networking.

Keywords: Enterprise Social Networks, Employee Voice, Enterprise 2.0, Knowledge-intensive Work

1. Introduction

In his seminal 2006 paper, McAfee introduced the term Enterprise 2.0. He made a distinction between activity which takes place in a public arena open to anyone and "platforms companies can buy or build in order to make visible the practices and outputs of their knowledge workers" (McAfee, 2006: 23). In doing so, McAfee differentiated digital platforms within organisations from those without. The key feature of the former, whether bespoke or functionally-standard, is that the conversations which take place on them are exclusively between employees – the service sits behind the firewall (Riemer et al., 2011).

A small but growing body of literature has since reported research into these internal platforms and an understanding of the nature of conversations taking place on them has emerged, along with a number of different labels for the platforms including: Organisational Social Media Platforms (Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman, 2013) Enterprise Microblogs (Riemer et al., 2011) and Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) (Riemer and Scifleet, 2012). For clarity, it is the last term which will be adopted in this paper.

While we understand web-based technologies such as ESNs are impacting on the development and expression of individual (and collective) voice in the workplace, the pace of technological development has outstripped academic research on its implications for employee voice (Balnave et al., 2014) and so this has become an important area of focus, not least because the tremendous use of social networking technologies by so many individuals seemingly supports the contention of voice researchers that it is human nature to want to engage in voice (Budd, 2014).

This paper therefore re-examines the traditional employee voice concept, an activity made necessary by the advent of an emergent phenomenon – the Enterprise Social Network. It considers what is currently known about the use of the ESN, then identifies voice concepts which may advance understanding of the relationship, before presenting a framework which reconceptualises employee voice as a multidimensional, multidirectional concept and provides conceptual clarification on its link to Enterprise Social Networking. The paper begins by considering how the adoption of Enterprise 2.0 technology has enabled voice within organisations.

2. Enterprise 2.0 and the rise of enterprise social networking

The potential for Enterprise 2.0 technologies to have major impact on transforming organisations and the ways in which people work is generally accepted (Martin, Reddington and Kneafsey, 2009). Until recently, most organisations' social media strategies have been outward-looking, focusing on customers and consumers, while neglecting employees (Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman, 2013.) Nevertheless, employees' increasing desire to use social media in their working lives is now set to change the focus to such an extent that by 2020, it is entirely possible many organisations could be wholly reliant on their internal social network (Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman, 2013).

From an organisational behaviour viewpoint, conversational practices enabled by ESNs can be seen as genuine opportunities for surfacing multiple perspectives and logics at the strategic, management and front-line levels (Reddington, 2012). Reddington (2012) contends that there is growing evidence these media have enormous potential to change the way people collaborate, communicate, organise their work and give voice to their opinions and expectations. He builds on this proposition in his 2014 paper by arguing ESNs allow the organisation to be viewed as a "conversational arena" where solutions-focused conversations can be characterised as primarily concerned with creating ideas for action and performance-focused conversations are primarily concerned with getting something done.

Recent research by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has turned the focus of the discussion towards the connection between the ESN and employee voice in this new conversational arena. Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman (2013) have explored the relationship from a number of different angles, such as encouraging employees to engage in meaningful dialogue and harnessing the wisdom of crowds. They argue ESNs allow multi-directional communication resulting in not only a richer employee voice by giving employees the opportunity to have a say in an open forum, but to enable a more authentic voice because ESNs allow people to rate each other's comments and identify those which resonate most within the community.

ESNs are now recognised as playing a vital role as enablers of employee voice. Therefore developing our understanding of their relationship will clearly benefit both academics and practitioners seeking to advance knowledge and applied understanding in this area. First, it is necessary to turn the attention to ESNs and consider key research into the use of the platforms themselves.

3. Enterprise social networking platforms

Research into Enterprise Social Networking remains in its infancy. Early studies included the analysis of bespoke platforms such as IBM's Beehive (Di Micco et al., 2008). DiMicco and her colleagues (2008) found the platform encouraged both personal and professional sharing and concluded the ESN was used to build stronger bonds and to reach out to unfamiliar employees. Motivations for use included connecting on a personal level with co-workers, advancing careers with the organisation, and campaigning for projects. This campaigning aspect is particularly relevant to a study of the relationship between ESNs and multidirectional employee voice. IBM employees described how they solicited support for their ideas and drove traffic to their project web pages on a cross-connectional basis, allowing a new-found freedom from limiting hierarchical communication channels to connect and communicate with anyone on the site.

Research then progressed onto platforms available to any organisation, most notably examining Yammer, a platform similar in appearance and functionality to Facebook. Prominent in the extant literature are Riemer and colleagues in Australia and Germany. A key study by Riemer et al. (2011) gives a deeper understanding of the use of Yammer by allowing the researchers to explore why and how employees were using the ESN. They found four major categories of communication: Opinion and Clarification, Problem Solving and Support, Updates and Notification, and Information Sharing. It is interesting to note the highest-scoring category by a huge margin was Opinion and Clarification. This suggests a key function of the ESN is to allow employees to voice their thoughts in general. Of course this finding relates specifically to the organisation under investigation (Cap Gemini Australia), but later studies on other organisations have produced similar results (see for example Riemer and Scifleet, 2012) adding further supporting evidence.

Riemer and Richter (2012) carried out a cross-case comparison of five in-depth ESN case studies to derive a comprehensive catalogue of ESN use to demonstrate the versatility of ESNs. This meta-analysis led to the development of the S.O.C.I.A.L. framework for use of ESNs: Socialising, Organising, Crowdsourcing, Information Sharing, Awareness Creation and Learning and Linkages. They describe this framework as a "use catalogue,"

not a recipe for implementation of ESN into an organisation, stating they “fundamentally believe that ESN needs to find its place in the local organisation organically,” highlighting that every use case will not be useful in every organisational context (Riemer and Richter (2012: 16).

Riemer and Scifleet’s (2012) study of Deloitte Australia found Yammer had become an information sharing channel, a space for crowdsourcing ideas, a place for finding expertise and solving problems, and a conversation medium for context and relationship building. This notion of the conversation medium – the “conversational arena” described by Reddington (2014) – is significant because it builds on Riemer and Richter (2012)’s assertion that conversations on the ESN relate directly to the nature of the organisation and to the context of use. Indeed, it is now becoming clearer that ESNs themselves are a contextual phenomenon: results are quite different in different contexts (Richter and Riemer, 2013). Richter and Riemer’s (2013) cross-comparison study found the primary use of ESNs at team-level was as a social task co-ordination tool, but at the level of the whole organisation, it was a networking and crowdsourcing space. These differing uses would suggest it is essential that the ESN should always be studied within its social or organisational context and the work practices which are embedded therein (Richter and Riemer, 2013). It follows logically, therefore, that the relationship between ESNs and employee voice should be always viewed and explored from the perspective of both the organisation and its employees.

Research into ESN usage has progressed over the last few years from basic understanding of function and use towards development of more sophisticated typologies. Riemer and his colleagues have employed genre analysis to great effect to examine the type of conversations taking place, yet they themselves acknowledge this is only one side of the story (see for example Riemer and Richter, 2012, and Riemer and Scifleet, 2012). This adds further weight to the argument that there is a need to explore Enterprise Social Networking from the perspective of the employee to give a more balanced understanding of the relationship between the two. In short, how does the ESN work in practice as a mechanism for employee voice? In order to address this question, the focus turns to the nature of the relationship between ESNs and employee voice, and considers why the advent of the ESN means the concept of employee voice must be re-evaluated.

4. Reconceptualising employee voice

Established conceptualisations of voice date from the 1970s to the early 2000s (Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg, 2009: 5-7) and focus primarily on one- or two-way communication up and down the organisational hierarchy. Budd (2014) argues that these traditional categories of voice overlook the fundamental premise of social media: employee-to-employee interactions. This is hardly surprising since they predate the advent of Enterprise 2.0, and as a consequence, the concept of lateral or multidirectional voice was not part of the research agenda. Budd (2014) is therefore correct in his contention that changes in employee voice brought on by new information technologies should prompt a re-evaluation of our conceptual approaches.

Recent studies of internal organisational communication and voice have generally neglected to consider voice methods using social media and other new technologies (Balnave et al. 2014). Budd (2014) asserts empirical as well as conceptual research into voice should pay more attention to various forms of peer-to-peer or sideways voice. Without this shift in focus the multidirectional nature of ESNs will remain unexplored and traditional categories of voice will continue to have limited explanatory power in the online arena. With increasing use of ESNs it is important we do explore their relationship with voice, because voice is fundamental to the functioning of the organisation through the expression of ideas and concerns. Voice allows employees to participate and become involved in matters which affect them, and benefits the organisation through the development of a satisfied, trusting, cohesive and productive workforce (Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman (2013).

To develop an understanding of the relationship between ESNs and multidirectional voice it is necessary to re-examine the organisational behaviour literature and search for traditional voice-related concepts which could be considered to have a lateral direction (in addition to upward and downward elements). There are three key concepts from the pre-Enterprise 2.0 era with relevance:

Pro-social Voice is a concept based on the notion of Organisational Citizenship Behaviour and focuses on pro-social, work-related behaviours unspecified in formal role descriptions, unrecognised by formal reward systems and not a source of negative consequences when employees fail to perform them. These are termed extra-role behaviours (Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Van Dyne and LePine carried out an empirical study with

multiple perspectives (self, peer and supervisor) and concluded these groups not only distinguished in-role behaviour from extra-role behaviour, they were also able to differentiate between the pro-motive extra-role behaviours of helping and voice. The motive for pro-social voice is based on co-operation (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003) where employees express solutions to problems and suggest constructive ideas for change to benefit the organisation. These behaviours are indicative of positive, multidirectional voice on the ESN.

Defensive Voice is a parallel concept to the pro-social voice proposed by Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) and described is self-protective behaviour borne out of feeling afraid and personally at risk. Here, employees may express ideas which shift attention elsewhere based on fear, or propose ideas which focus on others in order to protect the self. The differentiator between the two concepts is motive. Pro-social voice is positive intent for the good of the organisation. Defensive voice does not necessarily imply engaging in voice to the detriment of the organisation, rather it is protective behaviour from an individual who feels threatened. Applying this concept to the ESN, the employee is using the technology as a multi-directional voice mechanism to satisfy his or her personal agenda.

Organisational Learning can take place on numerous levels in the organisation, including individual, group or the whole enterprise. Fundamental to this concept is the need for information and knowledge-sharing among employees (Argyris, 1977). A primary difference between individual and organisational learning lies not only in the process of learning per se, but also in the method by which knowledge is stored and communicated to others (Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg, 2009). This directly links to multidirectional voice expressed on the ESN through genre types such as Information Sharing and Problem Solving and Support. In this respect multidirectional voice expressed via the ESN is part of the organisation's knowledge management system.

Two concepts originally from the psychology literature have helped to raise awareness of voice behaviours in organisations (Brinsfield, 2014.)

Complaining has been investigated by Kowalski (1996), who defined it as an "expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, or both." (Kowalski, 1996: 179). She also contends not all complainants are expressing dissatisfaction and that people may also complain to achieve intrapersonal goals, such as receiving sympathy or seeking attention. Whether or not complaining is positive or negative for the complainer or the organisation, certainly depends on the nature of the complaint and the situation (Brinsfield, 2014) but the link here to multidirectional voice is obvious. By complaining on the ESN, the employee is consciously maximising his or her audience while engaging in both Socialising and Discussion and Opinion behaviours.

Impression Management stems from Kowalski's research into potential benefits of complaining. She suggests complaining may represent an important mechanism for impression management, because people have a vested interest in controlling the impressions others form of them. Thus much of what people do, including choosing to complain, they do in the service of self-presentational goals (Kowalski, 2002). Impression management allows them to convey something about their personal attributes or is a means of saving face. So in a similar way to defensive voice, the employee may be actively using the ESN as a multi-directional voice mechanism, only now it is for self-promotion rather than self-protection.

A further review of the literature reveals two key voice-related concepts which have recently emerged, and which may also enhance our understanding how the ESN enables multidirectional voice.

Group Voice Climate extends Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) conceptualisation of employee voice by considering it from a group-level perspective. Prior to this investigation (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar, 2011), the effects of shared or collective-level cognitions had received scant attention, along with relatively little research on voice within work groups. Clearly to advance understanding of the relationship of ESNs and voice, such a study would be particularly important, as this is precisely the online conversational arena where these group-level interactions occur, so it is therefore logical to assume the off-line dynamics of a group may impact on those in the online world. Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar (2011) carried out a cross-level exploration and found group voice climate was highly predictive of voice, and that voice is shaped not only by individual attitudes and perceptions of the work context but also by group-level beliefs.

Significantly, Morrison and her colleagues also highlighted the importance of broadening conceptual models of voice to include shared cognitions, and the importance of conducting cross-level research on voice, opinions later expressed by Budd (2014). The need to include this group-level analysis within conceptualisations of voice was previously highlighted by Greenberg and Edwards (2009: 282) as an important area for future exploration, “especially considering that employees’ decisions about speaking up... are influenced by factors inherent in the social dynamics of the workplace.” This provides further evidence that consideration of group voice climate in an organisation would help to explain how the ESN might enable multidirectional voice.

Employee Voice Engagement (Gruman and Saks, 2014) introduces the notion that there are similarities between employee voice and employee engagement, and proposes employee voice engagement – the degree to which an employee is psychologically present when expressing voice – determines its quality. Building on Kahn’s seminal 1990 ethnographic study of personal engagement which highlighted the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability, Gruman and Saks contend these psychological conditions also reflect the conditions necessary for promoting employee voice engagement: “To be fully engaged when speaking up in organisations, employees need to feel safe (psychological safety), speaking up will be worthwhile (psychological meaningfulness) and they have the organisational and/or personal resources necessary to speak up (psychological availability)” (Gruman and Saks, 2014: 465). The ESN platform is exactly that – an organisational resource for facilitating employee voice engagement, and consequently employee voice. Given Gruman and Saks (2014) also contend promoting and facilitating high levels of employee voice engagement is likely to have substantial benefits for employees, work groups and organisations, this is an important factor to consider in a study of the relationship between ESNs and employee voice, because there are clearly implications for practice to be explored and understood.

Key extant literature in Enterprise Social Networking and Employee Voice has been reviewed to develop an understanding of the use of the ESN platform, and of voice concepts which may help explain how the ESN acts as an enabler of multidirectional voice. To create a conceptual framework which describes the relationship between the two, key concepts from both areas must be combined. How this was achieved is explained in the next section.

5. Employee voice: A new symphony

The starting point for the development of the framework was the work of Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg (2009: 284) who argue greater validity of voice concepts and relevancy to understanding voice in organisations needs to be established. They also advise researchers to consider whether concepts are suitably developed to allow them to be differentiated from other similar concepts. The first challenge in developing the framework was therefore to define multidirectional voice as a concept distinct from one- or two-directional voice. Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg’s (2009) categorisation scheme for voice concept clarification was therefore adopted. It illustrates voice concepts according to three perspectives in the literature which help distinguish between behaviours of individuals when engaging in voice: Motive (What is the intent of the behaviour?) Target (To whom is the message being said?) and Content (What is being said?) (Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg (2009: 22-26)

The second challenge in the development of the framework was to consider exactly how Enterprise Social Networking could link to multi-directional voice. To address this point, Riemer and Richter’s (2012) S.O.C.I.A.L. framework for use of ESNs was adopted as a use catalogue which could explain the variety of outputs that may occur after employees engage in multidirectional voice on the ESN. As the S.O.C.I.A.L. framework was developed from a cross-case comparison study, it provides a much more refined understanding of the ESN as a broad and contextual phenomenon than using categorisations from single-organisation case studies.

The conceptual framework is shown in figure 1.

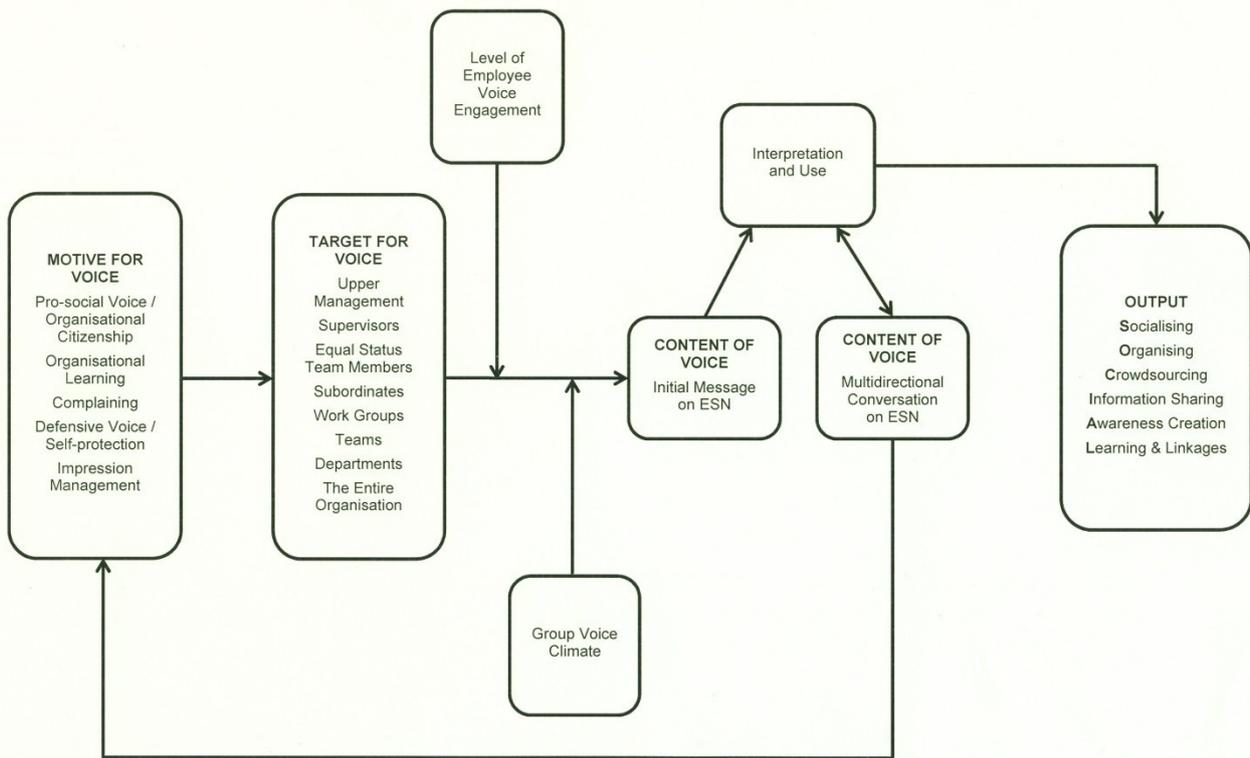


Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of the relationship between the Enterprise Social Network and Employee Voice

In this framework, “Motive for Voice” is distilled from the five concepts of voice which have a multidirectional element (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998; Argyris, 1977; Kowalski, 1996, 2002). This is the starting point for an employee wishing to communicate on the ESN – what is the motive for wanting to express voice? There could be a single driver for typing a message or it is entirely possible that the employee could be motivated by some combination of these factors. “Target for Voice” (Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg, 2000:24-25) represents the wide range of individuals and groups within the organisation, as well as the whole organisation itself. The employee may be motivated to express voice to any or all of these groups. This incorporates Brinsfield, Edwards and Greenberg’s (2009:24) contention that “it is important to extend conceptualisations of employee voice beyond the traditional confines of high-level employees who are capable of effecting change.”

“Level of Employee Voice Engagement” takes into account the degree to which an individual is psychologically present and therefore represents the element of voice quality described by Gruman and Saks (2014). This element captures the amount and substance of the employee’s contribution on the ESN – employees who provide more information and more substantive information are more fully expressing their true beliefs and feelings and are therefore more engaged in voice behaviour. “Group Voice Climate” draws upon cognitions and beliefs of employees using the ESN, acknowledging voice is shaped not only by individual attitudes and perceptions of the work context but also by beliefs held at group-level (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar, 2011). Given the many group-level voice targets in the model, this is an important dimension to include because group voice climate is likely to have a direct impact on quantity and quality of conversations on the ESN platform.

“Content of Voice” is expressed as the initial message an employee may post, which is then interpreted and used, and results in a multidirectional conversation (also Content) with a specific Output defined by the S.O.C.I.A.L. model (Riemer and Richter, 2012). It should be noted that some elements of Output, such as Organising and Awareness Creation, may potentially be achieved from a single message post, but a

conversation (i.e. a thread involving two or more employees) is necessary to observe some specific Outputs, most notably Socialising (at least two employees) and Crowdsourcing (multiple employees).

The lack of research regarding interpretation and use of ESN messages has been highlighted by Riemer and Richter (2012: 16) who state, “*Our genre analysis approach can only capture one side of the practice, the writing of messages on the platform, but not how they are read and used. Whereas to the best of our knowledge no study has investigated this side, it would be useful for gaining a more balanced understanding.*” Research to address this gap in knowledge is outlined in the final section, along with concluding remarks.

6. Conclusion and next steps

This paper has re-examined the traditional employee voice concept in light of an emergent phenomenon – the Enterprise Social Network. It has outlined what is currently known about the use of the ESN and identified voice concepts which may advance understanding of the relationships between ESN and voice. It then presented a framework which redefines employee voice as a multidimensional, multidirectional concept (Figure 1) and provides conceptual clarification on its link to Enterprise Social Networking.

To address the stated gap in knowledge, the author is carrying out an exploratory case-study investigation in a knowledge-intensive organisation – the context most studied thus far. The research gathers primary data from two sources – ESN messages and semi-structured interviews. Genre analysis will be carried out on ESN messages using Riemer and Scifleet’s (2012) methodological approach. This should lead to two useful outcomes. Firstly, it will provide another case study to add variety to future meta-analyses. Secondly, it will produce evidence of the nature of the conversations in the organisation under investigation, which can then be explored further with the employees themselves. In addition, the research will use semi-structured interviews in a new field of study to provide rich and meaningful perspectives on Enterprise Social Networking by allowing active users to voice opinions and provide explanations in a safe environment. Using this approach allows the social dynamics, organisational context, and group work practices to be acknowledged and explored. These factors are already identified in the literature as being an important consideration in both voice research (Greenberg and Edwards, 2009; Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar, 2011) and ESN research (Richter and Riemer, 2013) and consequently they are important in developing our understandings of the how the ESN platform functions in practice as an enabler of employee voice.

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