Boosting experimental innovation policy in Europe

How innovation agencies are embracing randomised experimentation

Innovation Growth Lab, March 2021

IGL Innovation Growth Lab by nesta

European Commission

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About the Innovation Growth Lab

The Innovation Growth Lab (IGL) is a global initiative that works to increase the impact of innovation and growth policy, by ensuring that it is informed by new ideas and robust evidence. IGL works at the intersection of research and policy, where it helps organisations become more experimental, test ideas, and learn from each other.

To find out more please visit www.innovationgrowthlab.org

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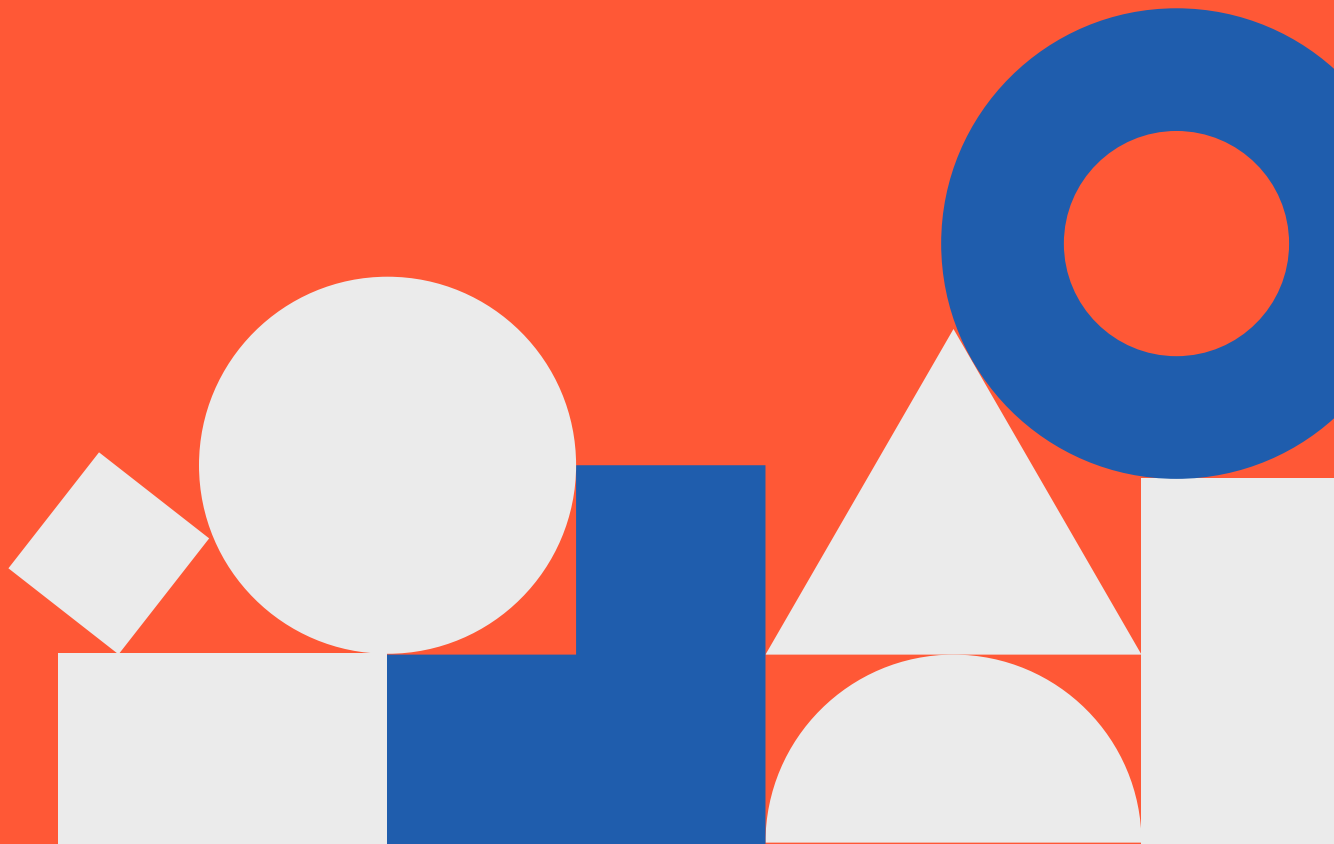
1 Make innovation policy innovative again



Innovation is about finding new ideas that work

Innovation is about finding new ideas that work. Policymakers invest billions each year supporting experiments with new technologies, products, processes and business models. This support helps businesses to learn what works and to accelerate the diffusion of proven ideas and their benefits to society.

However, paradoxically innovation policy is itself not very experimental.

Innovation systems are continuously evolving, perhaps faster than ever. Innovation policymakers are being asked to address new challenges, such as in the areas of climate change or the transformation of work. These require imaginative solutions. New tools are being developed but too rarely applied with the intention of learning what works – at least not in a structured and rigorous way.

This is a longstanding issue. In 2016, the UK foundation Nesta funded a Compendium of Evidence on the Effectiveness of Innovation Policy Interventions. The resulting reviews were full of insights but were also somewhat discouraging. Many policy areas had little evidence to direct action and when reliable proof of causality existed, it often showed effects were small or negligible. As a consequence, policymakers lack much of the evidence needed to guide policy decisions.

This is not to say that we should aspire or expect all innovation policies to be evaluated in the same way. There are many relevant questions that counterfactual evaluation methods cannot answer and many important effects that cannot be easily quantified. Innovation systems are also complex. Actors, institutions and policies interact in multiple ways, levels of uncertainty are high and attribution often unclear. But within this, it is not hard to find questions for which causal inference would be feasible and useful.

Would other approaches have achieved more impact, or been equally successful in achieving their goals while using fewer resources? Which programme design – the devil is often in the details – would be most effective? Questions such as these are often left unanswered, as public agencies struggle to fit with political priorities in short policy cycles. Ultimately, this leads to policies that are less effective (or potentially even counter-productive), and risk wasting limited resources on programmes that do not work.[1]

In short, innovation policymakers face a complex and continuously evolving system and have limited evidence on how to most effectively influence it. This can be addressed by turning the current model of policymaking upside down.

Currently governments often fail to realise the blind spots in their knowledge. A myriad of ways to solve a problem will be considered but then all but one remain forgotten on the drawing board. The solution is to become more experimental. Exploring a range of ideas at small scale, testing to find what works, and only then scaling them up.

The Innovation Growth Lab (IGL), based at Nesta, was founded to support such experimentation within innovation and business policy. Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), a powerful and underused methodology, are a key element of this approach.[2]

Innovation policymakers face a complex and continuously evolving system and have limited evidence on how to most effectively influence it

[1] For a more detailed discussion on how an experimental approach can be applied to innovation policy, see Bravo-Biosca (2019): "Experimental Innovation Policy" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series No. 26273.

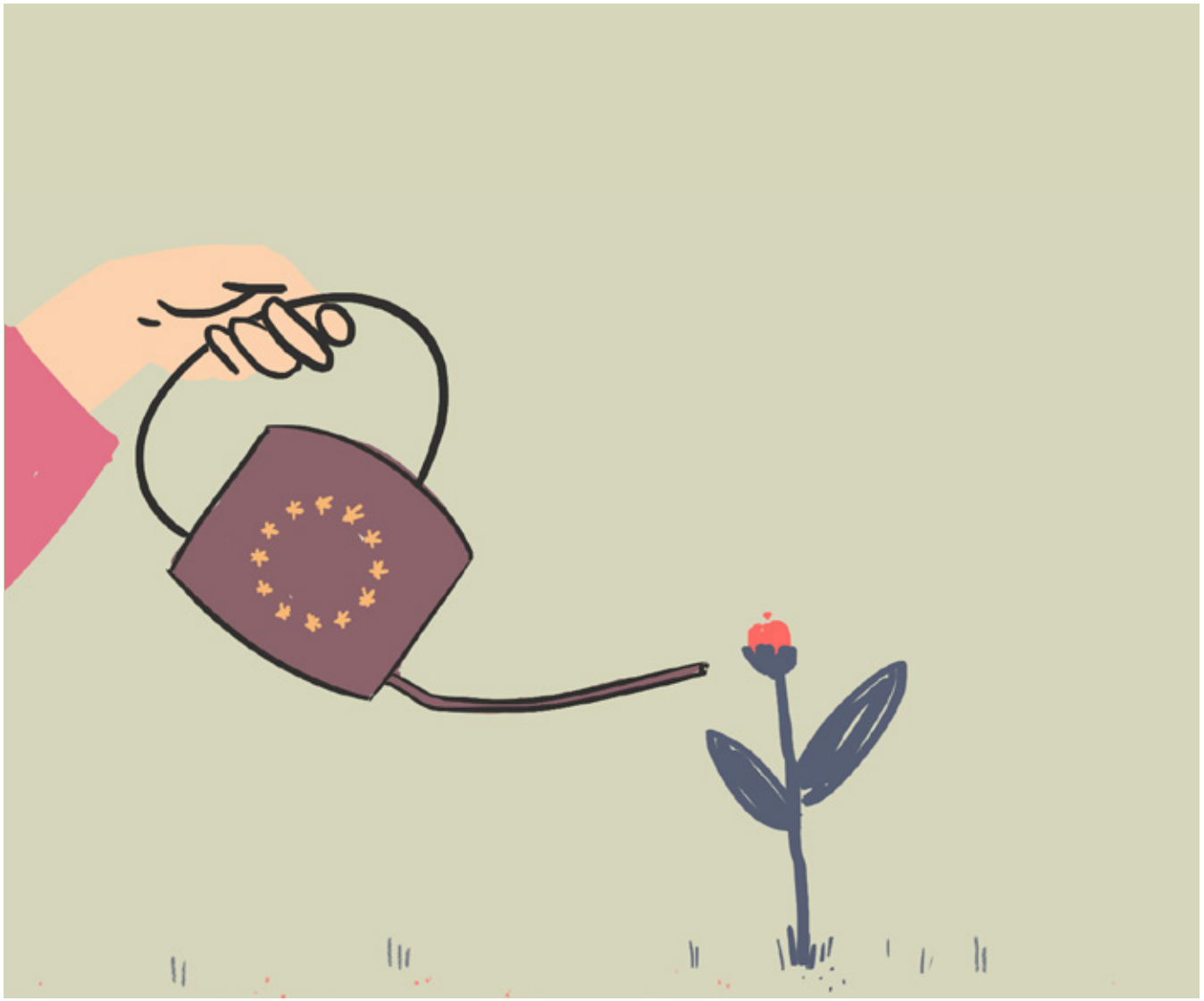
[2] RCTs can be the most powerful impact evaluation method; capable of providing an unbiased measure of how a programme affects an outcome of interest. Participants are randomly placed either in the treatment group (i.e. those who receive the programme) or the control group (those who do not). Small-scale pilots follow many of the same approaches but are more exploratory in nature. For more information click here.

2 The European Commission's push for more experimentation through INNOSUP-06

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the value randomised experiments can provide to public programmes. Especially since the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economic Science was awarded to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer for leading the use of RCTs to tackle global poverty. However, adoption within innovation, entrepreneurship and business policy has remained low.

While recognising the barriers to experimentation, in order to promote more widespread adoption IGL has been calling for a European experimentation fund for innovation and growth since 2013. We were therefore thrilled when the European Commission launched the first dedicated call for randomised trials as part of the Horizon 2020 Work Programme. The call aimed to help innovation agencies overcome inertia due to a "lack of funds, time pressure to deliver new support, and the fear of a backlash against 'money wasting'".[3]

"INNOSUP-06-2018: Supporting experimentation in innovation agencies" offered funding for two levels of experiments. Small grants of up to €60,000 were available for small-scale experimental pilots of novel innovation support ideas, whilst €300,000-€500,000 was accessible for large-scale RCTs of scalable SME innovation support schemes whose feasibility had already been proven. The overall objective was to discover new or improved support schemes that could be scaled and to increase the number of innovation agencies that engage in policy experimentation.



Thirteen projects received funding, with 27 agencies involved, including national agencies such as the Lithuanian Innovation Centre, the Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN) in the UK, the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) and the Business and Cultural Development Centre (KEPA) in Greece. There are also regional agencies such as Torino Wireless Foundation from Piedmont in Italy or the Institute for Business Competitiveness (ICE) of Castilla y León in Spain.

A range of innovation interventions are being tested, including schemes to encourage and equip SME innovators by teaching innovation methods such as user-design and co-creation. Other schemes are aiming to increase levels of technology adoption amongst small businesses or test new approaches to help SME become investment ready and access external funding.[4]

The projects are still underway and results will be publicly shared once they are finalised, along with their wider experiences and lessons learnt. As a starting point, we will look at the reasons why the agencies become experimental in the next section.

13

projects involving 14 different European countries, some of which had never engaged with experimentation before.

27

innovation agencies across Europe actively involved as well as academics and evaluation experts.

€4.2m

provided for the specific purpose of getting innovation agencies to become experimental.

1400

Over 1400 businesses all over Europe are expected to benefit directly from this programme.

[3] Horizon 2020. Work Programme 2018-2020: Innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises
[4] To read about the details of all the projects and agencies involved in the programme, click here and here.

3 The process of embracing randomised experimentation

Taking the first steps into experimentation

An agency might consider using randomised experimentation for many reasons. Learning how to improve SME innovation support schemes was one of the main drivers for agencies to participate in INNOSUP-06-2018. Some had completely novel ideas, whilst others aimed to determine the effectiveness of existing programmes.

Agencies also saw the INNOSUP-06-2018 as an opportunity to adopt a more systematic approach to evaluation and to develop a transparent internal evidence base. This in turn could promote learning within the organisation, and facilitate the exchange of best practices among innovation agencies in Europe by improving the comparability and transferability of support schemes across Europe.

At the time of writing this brief, the trials are still ongoing, but many agencies said they better understood how the approach can offer a robust method to think about and ultimately measure the impact of their support schemes.

Whilst in the past, some relied on intuition or descriptive data to understand whether a scheme has worked, they are now shifting to more robust impact evaluations and are starting to carry over these methods in their day-to-day work.

However, this shift to becoming experimental has not always been easy. Some agencies reported significant barriers, including a lack of buy-in from senior leaders to run RCTs or limited expertise for design and implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic posed an additional challenge, as it forced many agencies to change their focus and quickly adjust their experimental projects.

The INNOSUP-06 programme provided the impetus to kickstart their experimentation journey, but the above mentioned barriers relate to the agency's culture and capabilities. Unaddressed, agencies risk embarking on experimentation too soon.

Enabling conditions to experiment

We spoke to the agencies to better understand the enabling conditions for experimentation. We have synthesized these lessons, also taking into account our wider work with policymakers. Based on these insights, we identified two factors that influence an agency's readiness to run RCTs: openness to experiment and capabilities to experiment.

These are broad and non-comprehensive factors, and teams inside an agency may find themselves at different levels. But we hope that they serve as a useful guideline for agencies to recognise their strengths and weaknesses and to assess their experimental readiness. We would welcome any comments and feedback as we develop this further.

We identified two factors that influence an agency's readiness to run RCTs: openness to experiment and capabilities to experiment

Openness to experiment

An agency's openness to experiment refers to its willingness to learn, being open about uncertainty and the use of randomised experimentation as a form of policy design and evaluation. Agencies with high degrees of openness have a tolerance for risk-taking, even when this may result in failure. They understand the value of experimental evidence and are not reluctant to use it to inform policy.

An agency's degree of openness is influenced by a mix of internal (e.g. senior leaders' attitudes towards experimentation or the wider organisational culture) and external forces (e.g. demand from businesses or political pressures to prove impact). Based on the interviews with innovation agencies, we identified some characteristics that organisations with high degrees of openness have in common:

- **Experimentation champions:**

  More open organisations typically have a group of champions at mid- and senior levels who internally advocate for the use of experimentation. Some even develop communities of interest for internal employees who want to learn more about how experimentation can improve programme design and evaluation.

- **Flexibility to try new things:**

  Legal or institutional constraints (e.g. strong hierarchical decision-making) can make it difficult for agencies to introduce new ways to support businesses and to adopt experimental methods. An internal culture of risk aversion and fear of failure could further obstruct initiatives for experimentation. Agencies with a high degree of openness do not face such constraints, indeed the internal culture may actively encourage testing new ideas even if to show they don't work.

- **Informing decisions with evidence rather than intuition:**

  Agencies that have a track record in using evidence to make decisions are more likely to be open to experiment. They are aware of evidence gaps and seeking out new ways to address them. These agencies are aware of different forms of evidence and are able to evaluate their robustness.

- **Embracing the benefits of randomisation:**

  Some organisations may be willing to test new ideas and use evidence, but may not yet be convinced by the value of RCTs. They tend to prefer focusing on high-level missions and are less worried about more immediate questions regarding the effectiveness of specific schemes. However, other agencies have identified the benefits of randomisation and are comfortable with its application especially when resources are scarce.

Strategies to increase openness

Based on the lessons identified above, there are a number of strategies that can help agencies increase their openness to experimentation:

- **Identify and mitigate internal concerns about the experimental approach:**

  An aversion to RCTs often stems from a lack of familiarity with the method. For example, a typical concern was having to deny support to a control group. INNOSUP-06 agencies were able to overcome this concern once they learned about trials that compare different support schemes or where everyone will receive support should it prove to be effective.

- **Showcase the impact of experiments, even smaller ones:**

  Presenting examples from other agencies who have successfully run high-impact trials can help create an internal appetite for experimentation. Even small, low risk experiments can increase appreciation for the approach. Agencies that participated in the INNOSUP-06 programme told us they were able to increase their organisation's openness by creating 'quick wins' rather than starting with more substantial interventions.

- **Identify an 'experimentation champion':**

  As mentioned, champions play a key role in increasing an agency's openness to experimentation and develop an experimental culture. With the appropriate support, such as the one provided by IGL, the champion may motivate his or her colleagues into testing new ideas and becoming more comfortable with learning from failure under controlled circumstances.

- **Advocate for legal and institutional changes:**

  Politicised administrations or with strong legalistic features can hamper a champion's attempt to introduce randomised experimentation. Promoting a new internal infrastructure that allows for more flexibility and results-oriented strategies may foster more pro-innovation attitudes, such as receptiveness to new ideas, and creative solutions as well as positive attitudes towards change.

Capabilities to experiment

An agency's capabilities to experiment refer to the specific skills and resources that an agency needs to experiment. They don't only relate to quantitative evaluation aptitudes (e.g. basic knowledge of econometrics and data analysis) but also how agencies design, implement, and monitor public programmes. With experiments, those who are undertaking the analysis need to work closely with those with strong familiarity with the policy area and design process.

Capabilities can be sourced internally or externally. Agencies without prior experience in running experiments are likely to benefit from seeking external support. Some agencies that participated in the INNOSUP-06 programme did not yet have the in-house expertise to run experiments, but they found it invaluable to work with IGL and other evaluation partners to fill expertise gaps. By learning from this experience, they could start building their own internal capabilities for experimentation

Some of the key capabilities to build are:

- **Data infrastructure and availability:**

  Data is crucial to design a successful experiment. Most agencies already have monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in place, but too often they only capture process outcomes (e.g. number of businesses supported), not impact measures (e.g. number of jobs created). Other agencies are beginning to develop more sophisticated M&E systems that include impact measures, but often these remain limited to self-reported data (e.g. a business owner's perception of the programme's effectiveness). Agencies with the most developed M&E systems also measure objective outcomes (e.g. levels of investment) and use a range of data sources (i.e. business records, web scraping…).

- **Research and evaluation capabilities:**

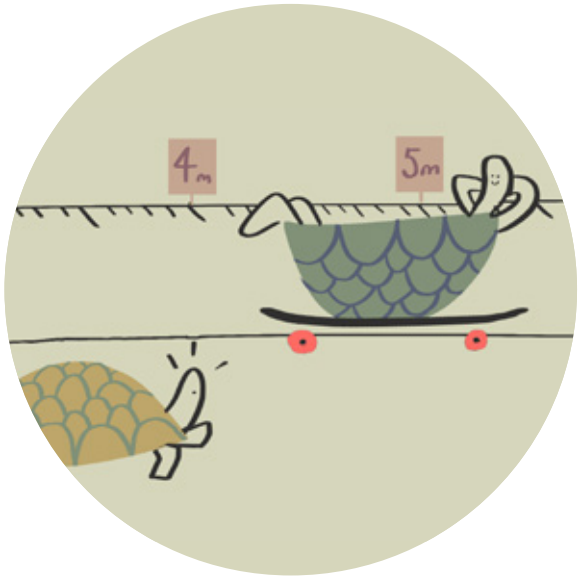
  Agencies also need the capabilities to use data to derive meaningful insights and know how to use these to improve programme design. Agencies with strong research and evaluation capabilities already routinely rely on research to improve programme design, and avoid making decisions purely based on intuition or political incentives. These capabilities may not be internal, but the agencies will be aware of what is required, able to access the external support and able to apply it to achieve a valuable outcome.

- **RCT expertise:**

  Agencies with higher levels of RCT expertise typically have an internal research team that has experience with randomised experiments. However, some smaller agencies do not have the capacity to run experiments in-house, but choose to commission them. It is important to note that even when the process is outsourced, familiarity with RCTs is still an asset to determine a realistic timeframe and allocate sufficient resources.

Strategies to increase the capabilities to experiment

Based on the feedback received from our conversations with public officials, there are a number of strategies that policy makers can use to increase the capabilities described above:



- **Invest in the necessary data infrastructure and research skills:**

  Well-developed M&E systems and research skills are fundamental internal capabilities for experimentation. Whilst agencies can certainly outsource the experimentation process or rely on external support for running trials, without some level of internal capabilities, it will be hard to reap the full benefits of experimentation.

- **Find opportunities for peer learning:**

  As part of the INNOSUP-06 programme, IGL organised regular workshops where agencies could learn from each other. Agencies perceived these sessions as highly valuable, not only to discuss challenges and offer support, but also to learn about the trials and support schemes of other agencies. Joining such a platform for peer learning can therefore be an important route to building internal experimentation capabilities.

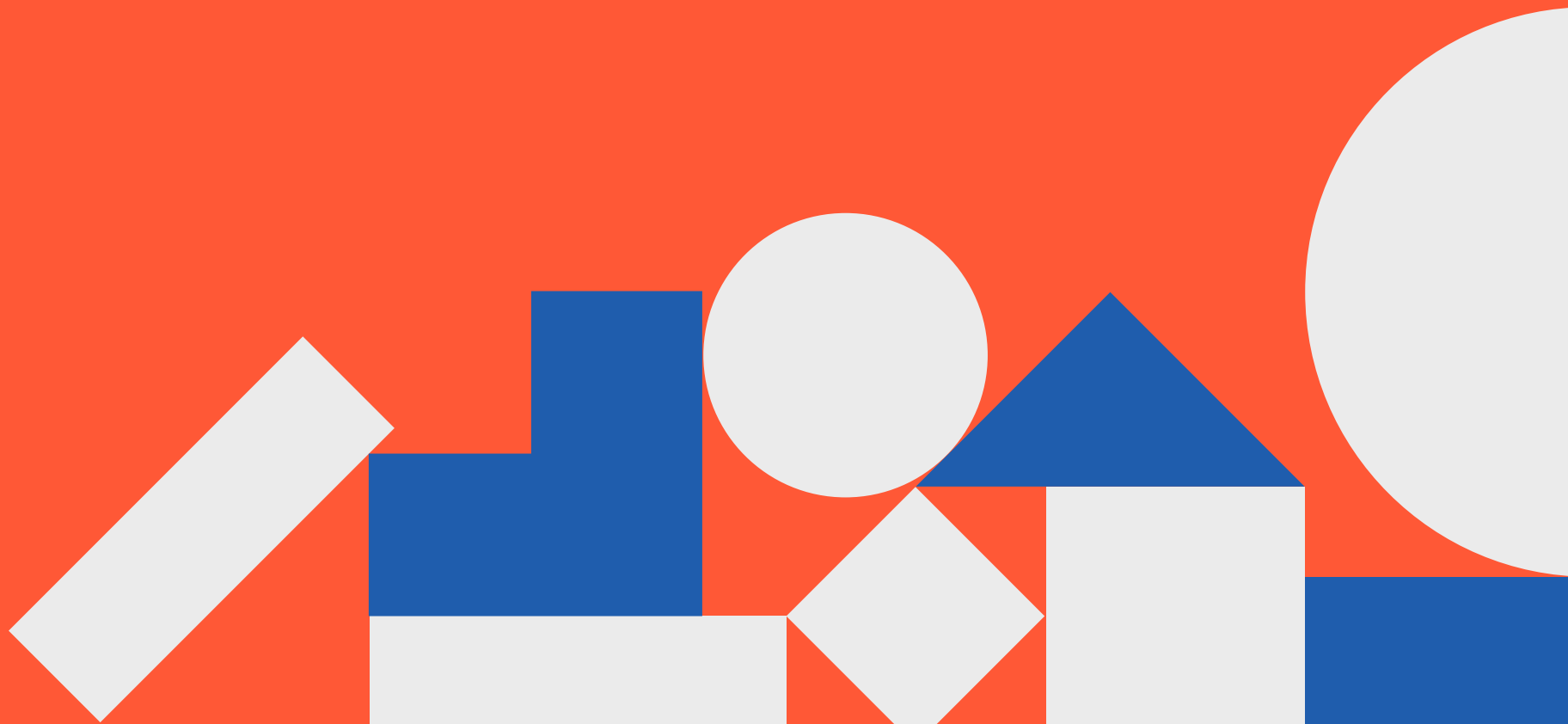
- **Work with external partners to fill expertise gaps:**

  Where expertise gaps exist, agencies can work with external partners. Some agencies told us how beneficial it is to have a direct connection with University departments. In fact, many of the academics in the IGL's research network are seeking opportunities to work with agencies. They would like to share their knowledge and expertise in exchange for opportunities to run experiments that develop and test theories around innovation policy.

- **Start small and learn by doing:**

  For an agency that is willing to experiment, but is still building its internal capabilities, starting with a small-scale, low-risk trial, such as rapid-fire messaging trials can be a useful way to gain expertise. Over time, the agency can become familiar with how randomisation can be applied and how experimental results can be reported.

4 Categories of innovation agencies according to their maturity to experiment



Levels and progression of openness and capabilities are not synchronised.

Through our work with innovation agencies we have observed different combinations of openness and capabilities to experimentation. We are developing a set of categories to reflect these differences, with the hope this will help agencies recognise a path towards becoming more experimental.

Of course, these categories are not intended to capture the full complexity of how agencies approach experimentation, merely a starting point for reflection. As we continue to work with innovation agencies, the categories will be updated to reflect any changes that we may observe. We're happy to receive any additional feedback.

Categories of innovation agencies according to their maturity to experiment

Low openness organisations

Intuition-driven organisations typically are small agencies that are not considering experimentation as a way of managing programme design. They do not routinely measure a range of outcomes, just some basic outputs, and make decisions based on intuition rather than evidence. Impact evaluations are ad hoc and considered as an afterthought. Legal constraints, political motivations or fear of failure inhibit change within these agencies, which results in low receptiveness to new and creative solutions.

M&E traditionalists tend to be larger organisations. An established M&E system is in place but mostly captures process rather than impact outcomes; and if they do measure impacts are only based on self-reported data. Managers in these agencies might be familiar with the concept of experimentation, but not its value and prefer to maintain the status quo. These organisations are not concerned with the shortcomings of non-experimental methods and may not be aware that they are missing opportunities to maximise the impact of their programmes.

Equipped rejectionists rarely occur. These agencies have the required capabilities to experiment, but actively resist adopting randomised experimentation. Some may be focused on shaping overall systems, and prioritise measuring their evolution rather than the effectiveness of individual schemes. They may consider alternative ways to measure impact or experiment with new ideas, but it is unlikely that they would adopt random assignment.

High openness organisations

Overoptimistic experimenters are agencies that are led by motivated advocates for change, who are open to new ideas and approaches. However, in their enthusiasm, these agencies sometimes bypass crucial steps for running randomised experiments, such as implementing rigorous data collection processes. These agencies tend to be small and often struggle to get the required sample size to run an RCT. They may therefore need to restrict experimentation to smaller pilots or run several cohorts to build a large enough sample over time.

Emerging experimenters are successfully running pilots, for example in the form of simple rapid fire experiments, and are on track to increase the use of randomised experimentation in the agency. However, they are likely to need external support to run more robust experiments. Emerging experimenters are a common category among innovation agencies that are starting to think about measuring impact and becoming more familiar with randomisation through the process of learning by doing.

Established experimental agencies are capable of running robust experiments and use the results to inform policy effectively. They only run randomised experiments when it's appropriate, whether they are big and ambitious or small and simple, and use the results to improve programme design. They have sophisticated M&E systems and face little legal and political constraints to carry out randomised experiments.

5 What steps should innovation agencies take to carry out experimental projects?

Even with the necessary willingness and infrastructure, running RCTs can be challenging as agencies need both the intervention and evaluation to work in tandem.

Achieving this requires significant planning – it is not simply a case of randomising two groups and waiting to see what happens.

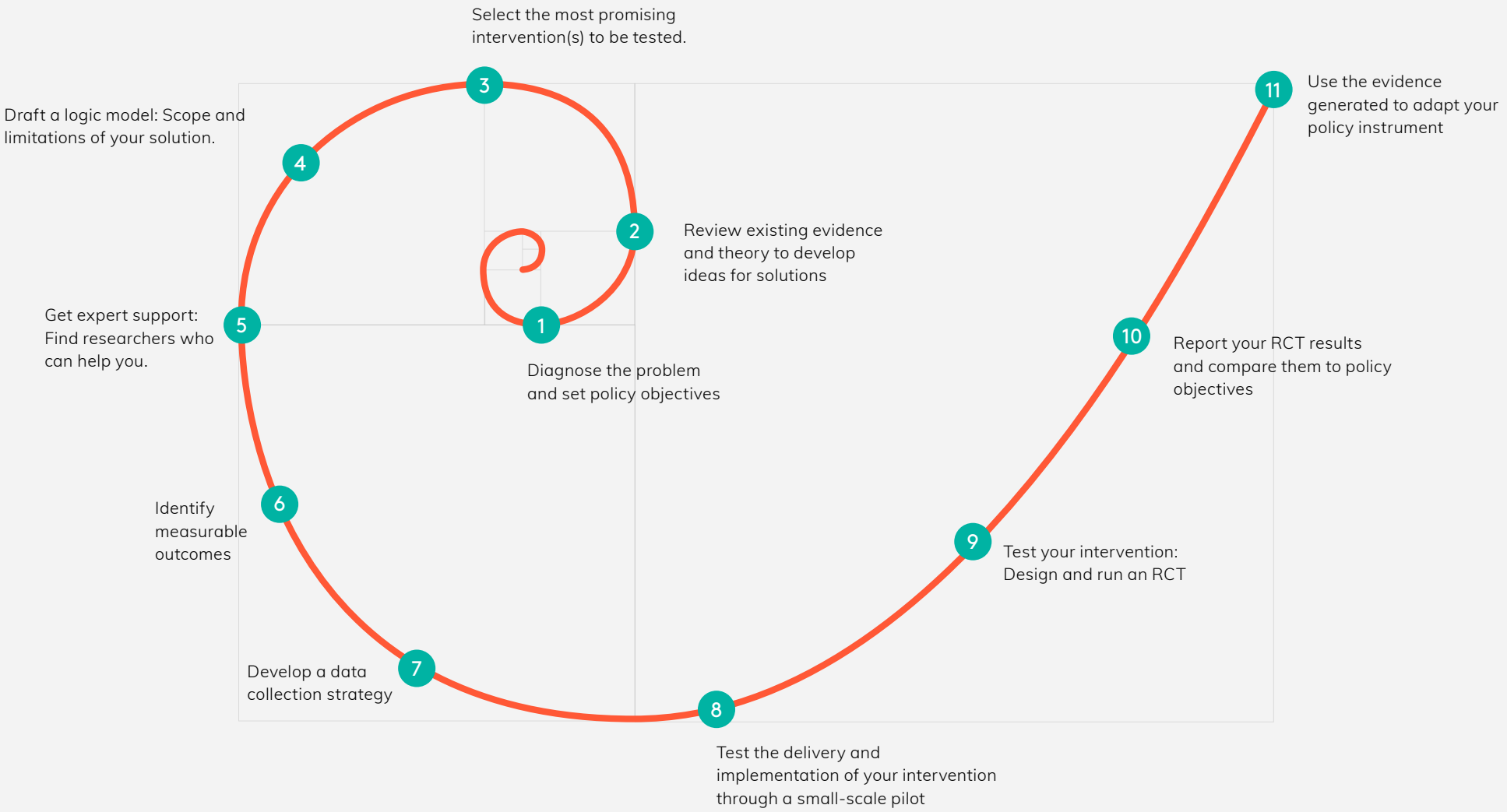
The need to recognise and account for this upfront demand was one of the key learning points for the INNOSUP-06 projects. Public officials told us that they missed a clear pathway that they could follow to successfully set up their first experiment, which could potentially affect their openness and capabilities to experiment. Sometimes, they acknowledged important steps that would have improved the quality of the experiment when it was too late.

In order to help innovation agencies avoid similar problems in the future, we present a spiral that seeks to describe the experimentation process, showing how to develop a policy experiment and avoid the risk of moving too soon.

Reality is often more complex and not a linear path as shown in the spiral. A project team may find themselves going back and forth between different stages of the spiral. This is an expected part of the innovation process – not all new ideas will work first time but all the steps bring benefits by themselves, introducing more quality in the programme design and delivery.

Public officials told us that they missed a clear pathway they could follow to successfully set up their first experiment

The virtuous spiral of experimentation



1. Diagnose the problem and set policy objectives

The first step is to identify a policy challenge and diagnose the root causes of the problem to be addressed. Problem formulation can be supported by theory, qualitative evidence or design thinking. At this stage, it's crucial to form an initial understanding of the target group and policy goals (magnitude and nature of the intended change).

2. Review existing evidence and theory to develop ideas for solutions

Before presenting a specific solution, it would be useful to review the literature for existing evidence, particularly from rigorous studies in different contexts. Other approaches can provide new insights to identify potential solutions, including design thinking, behavioural insights and participatory approaches.

3. Select most promising intervention(s) to be tested

Once various solutions have been identified, the interventions that are politically and financially feasible can be selected. In order to identify the intervention with the highest potential for impact given the available time and resources, ex-ante cost-effectiveness assessments can be used.

4. Draft a logic model: Scope and limitations of your solution

Drafting a logic model is important to clarify the theory of change and identify the causal pathway from actions to impact. The logic model outlines the overall programme aims and how they will be achieved through a set of activities. It is essential that it openly states the limitations and assumptions of the model, which will be key to interpreting the results.

5. Get expert support: Find researchers that can help you

Researchers and evaluation partners can help transform proposed solutions into feasible and testable interventions. Engaging with experimentation experts early on is advised to get a clear understanding of the costs and benefits of committing to the experiment and to develop a robust experimental protocol.

6. Identify measurable outcomes

The logic model will provide the basis for selecting measurable outcomes. Outcome indicators need to be comprehensive and should realistically capture the impact of an intervention within the timeframe of the experiment. This can be challenging given that it can take a long time to observe certain outcomes (e.g. a change in culture, business survival rates). Therefore, it is important to think about impact outcomes early on and specify realistic measures. Outcome measures will be tested and refined in the following steps, but should be finalised by the end of step 9.

7. Develop a data collection strategy

Before running an experiment, it is crucial to decide how the outcome data will be collected. Most commonly, surveys are used to collect data prior to ('baseline') and after the intervention. If possible, it is advised to complement this with other data sources (e.g., administrative data such as business records, and qualitative data from interviews with participants). During this step, it is also important to develop strategies to avoid losing participants (attrition), which is a key challenge of running RCTs.

8. Test the delivery and implementation of your intervention through a small-scale pilot

It is recommended to start with a Proof of Concept (PoC) to prove the feasibility of the intervention and identify potential implementation challenges. Running a pilot can also help test assumptions made in the logic model about the potential effects of the intervention and how outcomes will be measured. Depending on the results of the pilot, the intervention may need to be tweaked or completely reformulated.

9. Test your intervention: Design and run an RCT

Once the intervention is finalised and data collection systems are in place, it is time to run a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to measure the impact of the intervention. It's vital to set all experimental parameters in advance, including when and how to randomise or the expected sample size to ensure sufficient statistical power. A trial protocol including all those items should be developed and followed during the implementation of the RCT.

For more information about how to run an RCT, see IGL's trial guide.

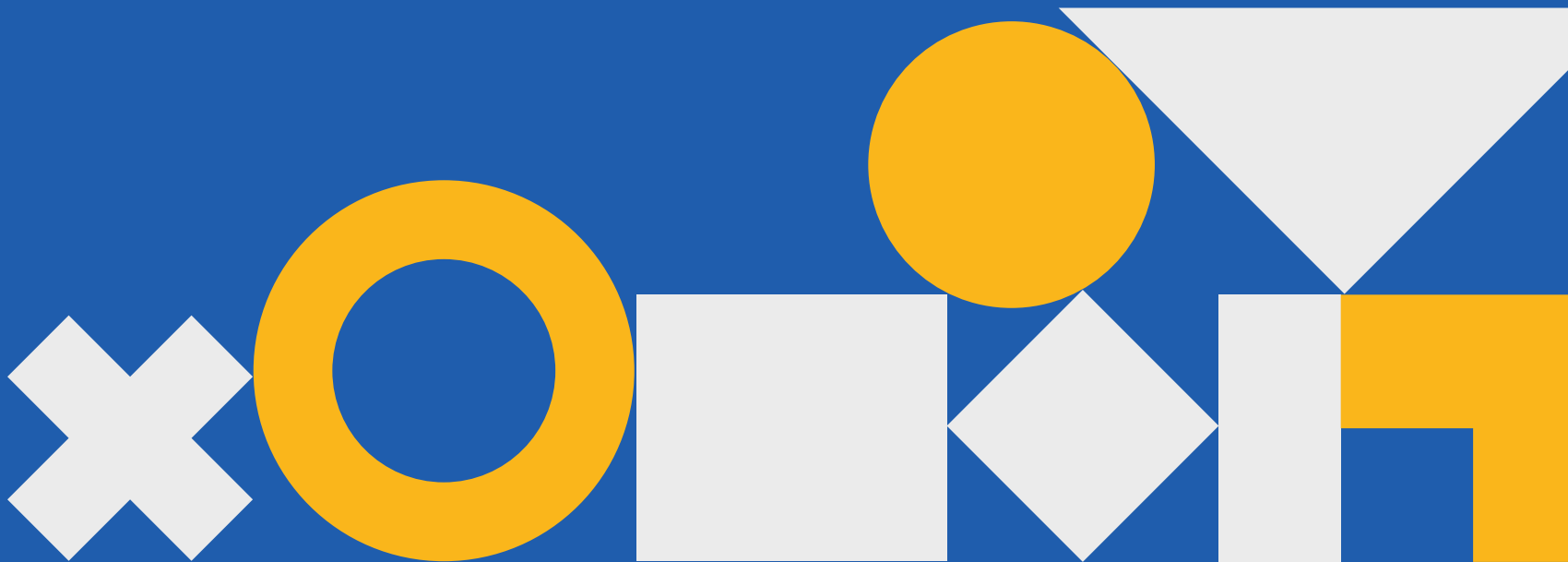
10. Report your RCT results and compare them to policy objectives

Once the data from the RCT are analysed, the results need to be reported in a transparent way so that it is clear whether the intervention had the desired impact and has met the policy objectives. This should include a cost-effectiveness analysis of the intervention. To help others replicate or adjust the intervention, it is advised to report any lessons learned about recruiting and retaining participants as well. To get a broader understanding of the results, especially if they are unexpected, it can be useful to return to the logic model, revisit the assumptions and collect additional qualitative data to explore the reasons behind the results.

11. Use the evidence generated to adapt your policy instrument

The results should be used to inform the design and delivery of current and future programmes. It is typically recommended that policy initiatives are only scaled once a succession of trials has generated rigorous evidence of their effectiveness in different contexts. Organisations can build a culture of continuous improvement and learning by continuing to test improvements and evaluate impacts on interventions that are scaled.

6 Conclusion: Supporting agencies to experiment at the right moment



Becoming an experimental agency does not happen overnight

This brief describes how innovation agencies can embrace randomised experimentation as a key part of their policy design and evaluation process. The experience of agencies that participated in this novel EU-funded programme provides useful lessons to other governments interested in becoming more experimental.

One of the aims of the INNOSUP-06 programme has been to promote experimentation across innovation agencies in Europe. As a result, several agencies are now running policy experiments for the first time and helping to break the misconception that the approach is only useful for large organisations with sophisticated evaluations practices.

However, embracing experimentation successfully is easier if both openness and capabilities develop together, as these reinforce each other. Otherwise, agencies may encounter the risks of advancing too soon:

- **If experimenting ahead of openness**, the results of the first trials are likely to determine whether the agency continues experimenting in the future. If they are perceived to be a failure (either because the intervention doesn't prove to be effective or the trial does not yield useful information), the agency may take a step backward and become more closed to experimentation. As running successful trials often requires collaboration from different areas of the organisation, experimenting ahead of openness may hamper the ability to conduct trials well, increasing the likelihood of failure.
- **Experimenting in advance of capabilities** is also risky. Some participating agencies have found that the demands of an experimental approach are greater than they had anticipated. While agencies may be able to access external support as they become aware of insufficient internal capabilities, it can be too late to avoid issues with a trial – where early development is often key. When experiments fail to provide value, it jeopardises agencies' willingness to run more experiments in the future.

Becoming an experimental agency does not happen overnight; it may take time, but just beginning the journey can provide valuable lessons to make visible improvements. The spiral presented previously is aiming to guide policymakers interested in taking their first steps towards experimentation successfully. We would welcome any comments and feedback as we develop this further. Further iterations will be shared along with the outcomes and insights gathered through INNOSUP-06.

New programmes often fail to achieve the expected outcomes, so learning what works early saves public money and maximises the impact of the support provided. With more innovation agencies willing to engage in policy experimentation, it is vital to have the resources and capabilities to do it in the right way. If successful, the support provided will become more effective, helping European SMEs to overcome the challenges of the 21st Century.

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