
STRESSORS AFFECTING EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME PERSONNEL WITHIN A CALL CENTRE ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of a study of which the aim was to identify stressors affecting Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) personnel in a call centre that provides psycho-social services to employees of contracted companies in South Africa. The researcher implemented a qualitative approach, using a semi-structured interview schedule to interview the EAP call-centre personnel face to face to provide direct, first-hand knowledge. Twelve participants were recruited through the probability sampling technique. Three core topics will be discussed namely; the stress triggers in a call centre in South Africa, the key stressors of personnel of a call centre as identified through research and the effect of these stressors on job satisfaction, productivity and motivation of EAP personnel in a call centre environment. The data that are presented should provide management of call centres with guidelines to improve work performance of personnel.

Key words:

stressors, employee assistance programme (EAP), call centre, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of work and its simultaneous demands in the 21st century has resulted in the emergence of call centres. Some of these call centres have been providing employee assistance related services to the mining industry since 1986, but had to adjust to the changing environment of South African business; the fact that more competition entered the market and that consumers have become more discerning about the service they buy.

The call centre industry has attracted a great deal of negative comment in the media. Newspapers, radio and television features have all referred to call centres as ‘electronic sweatshops’, using the term ‘battery hens’ to characterise the suggested intensive and stressful nature of being a call agent (Sprigg, Smith and Jackson, 2003). A typical call centre consists of a set of operators called agents, who process inbound calls from clients (Anisimov, Kishinski and Miloslavski, 1998). Processing calls may involve the use of computer systems and other devices such as faxes, as well as communication with other agents. Call centres are viewed as “electronic workshops”, because of the importance of technological equipment in providing the services through computers, telephones and faxes (Anisimov et al., 1998). For more cost-effective communication in work environments, call length is measured in seconds, and overt and covert electronic monitoring systems ensure employee compliance with precise operating procedures (Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2003).

The major predictor of poor ‘call agent’s’ well-being is the pressure to complete tasks quickly, along with deliberate efforts by managers to increase utilisation by reducing the time between calls. This effort to minimise slack time has led to the charge that call centres are ‘sweat shops’ (Sprigg et al., 2003).

A study conducted by Holman (2003) counteracts the notion that all call centres are “electronic workshops” but rather indicated that managers determine the environment that will obviate stress in call centres. Call centre managers thus have a choice as to how the call centre work can be organised, and they can take steps to design work actively to obviate employee stress. These steps include designing the infrastructure and determining the landscape for communication. Research publications on call centres have been concerned mainly with, for example, forms of management control, high commitment management, industrial relations and unionism, payment systems and emotional work, as demonstrated in the research carried out by Sprigg et al. (2003).

This article reports on the results of a study of which the aim was to identify stressors affecting Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) personnel in a call centre that provides psycho-social services to employees of contracted companies in South Africa. The Employee Assistance Professionals Association of South Africa (EAPA-SA) (2005:6) defines an employee assistance programme as:

“A work-based programme designed to assist in the identification and resolution of productivity problems associated with employees impaired by personal concerns, but not limited to: health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress, or other personal concerns which may adversely affect employees’ job performance”.

Due to a confidentiality agreement with the Executive Committee of the company providing the call centre service through EAP personnel, the company will be referred to as Company X.

The focus of this article will be on the changing nature of work and the role of technology and its impact on the work environment and its employees in the 21st century.

CONCEPTUALISING A CALL CENTRE WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

“A well-structured organisation is the framework upon which an efficient organisation is built. When the divisions are clear and the alignments make sense, appropriate information flows efficiently through the company both vertically and horizontally as necessary” (Hollick, 2005:2). DuBrin (2005) elaborates further that organisation structure is the arrangement of people and tasks to accomplish organisational goals. Hollick (2005) however, indicates the importance of balancing the needs and objectives of the business with the talents and capabilities of the people in a context of external market and economic forces.

An efficient organisation also has well defined roles and responsibilities at every level. When people are clear on their responsibilities they are more confident to take risks and push for improvements, otherwise they will become paralysed, indifferent, or embark on directions that are inefficient for the organisation as a whole. It seems necessary for organisations if they want to function at their best, to be flexible and make roles and responsibilities clear and known to employees (Hollick, 2005).

According to Wagner and Hollenbeck (2002), an organisation's structure enables the people within it to work together, thereby accomplishing things beyond the abilities of unorganised individuals. To help their employees achieve this feat in the most effective manner, managers must know how to structure their organisation in a way that will enhance employee performance, control the costs of doing business, and keep the organisation abreast of changes in the surrounding environment. Swanepoel, Erasmus, Van Wyk and Schenk (2000) note principles such as specialisation, departmentalisation, centralisation and/or decentralisation of authority, delegation of responsibilities, and so forth. Not only are these types of decisions part of work organisation and job design but the outcomes thereof (the resultant structures) can also influence the flow of information and hence communication in the organisation, which in turn can affect other Human Resource Management decisions and practices. The researchers are of the opinion that, if people and tasks are clearly aligned and arranged within their divisions, this will improve the flow of information and quality of communication, as well as enhance the accomplishments of goals and performance.

Parts of a company, as well as the whole company, can be dedicated to the activity of a call centre. Holman (2003:7) defines a call centre as:

“A work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permit customer-employee interaction to occur simultaneously with use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information”.

Sprigg et al. (2003) see a call centre as a work environment in which the main business is conducted by someone on a telephone while simultaneously using display screen equipment (DSE). The term ‘call centre’ includes parts of companies dedicated to this activity, such as internal help lines as well as whole companies.

The researchers agree that a call centre is a working environment to which clients have access 24 hours a day for assistance. The call agent conducts business by means of telephone, fax, e-mail and computer systems to assist the client in a swift and effective manner. Data are captured by the call agent and entered into a computer programme that stores client information. Holdsworth et al. (2003) explain that call centres continually introduce improved infrastructures and more advanced technology in reaction to the need for bigger, better, faster and even more cost-effective communication.

Call centres are thus an indication of the changing nature of work and its related demands in modern society.

STRESS TRIGGERS IN A CALL CENTRE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The environment (call centre) in which this research study was conducted is widely perceived as stressful. According to Schafer (2000:6), stress is “arousal of mind and body in response to demands made on them”. Workinfo (2005:4) elaborates further that stressors are “events or circumstances that lead someone feeling those physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural or inter-personal demands are about to exceed his or her ability to cope”. The researchers see a stressor as any situation, factor or demand that affects an individual to such an extent that he/she struggles to cope with his/her normal functioning. Impact will differ, depending on people’s coping mechanisms.

The call centre of Company X in South Africa provides a 24-hour confidential telephone crisis response and appointment scheduling for troubled employees and their family members of contracted companies or organisations. No face-to face contact between the call centre staff and troubled employees takes place. Benchmarks are set for handling the length of a telephone call, and the number of calls answered and/or abandoned. Incoming calls from clients to the call centre are recorded on a database, where after appointments, often urgent, are scheduled with external contracted counselors to whom the clients are referred to. It is extremely important that the EAP service provider provides a quality service as to secure the organisation or company’s renewal of a contract with the service provider.

In call centres studied, an agent’s (people on call in the centre) job, amongst others, involves resolving customer queries and problems. Agents are required to focus on what customers say and capture that information into the system (Holman, 2003). Stressors develop as agents struggle to meet the expectations of good service delivery. For good service delivery, Flanagan and Finger (2000:388) offer the following measures on providing an exceptional service in the call centre environment:

- Do a little extra each time when assisting the client.
- Address a customer’s concern immediately.
- Take no more than five seconds to answer the phone.
- Counsel staff for ideas to improve service.
- Pay attention to detail.
- Keep promises.

- Make sure your staff is ‘in the know’ (informed). Get to the customers before they get to you.

Holman (2003) agrees with the above-mentioned measures stipulated by Flanagan and Finger (2000) saying it is necessary to implement these measures because call centres have previously been criticised for limiting the agent’s choice as to whether to take a call, when to carry out particular tasks, how to perform a task and how to converse with a client.

Work-related stress can be defined as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work and work environments. It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress, and often by feelings of not coping (Stress at Work, 2004). Adjustive demands, or stressors, stem from three basic categories; frustrations, conflict, and pressures (Carson, Butcher and Mineka, 1996). Levert, Lucas and Ortlepp (2000:36) elaborate on these categories by conceptualising stress itself as a “transactional process including, firstly, the presence of a demanding environment force, for example an excessive workload, as well as the individual’s resources in dealing with such demands”. Someone may become frustrated at work on account of a number of circumstances, such as performing repetitive tasks without variation. Other causes of frustration are the lack of any opportunity to undertake greater responsibility or to learn. Not receiving adequate recognition is also a stressor. Excessive work demands may be stressful and potentially lead to emotional stress when they exceed the person’s capabilities and extend beyond the individual’s control. Where job responsibilities clash, or are unclear, work can be confusing and frustrating and may lead to excessive stress (Stress Hazards, 2004).

When overwork continues without relief, burnout becomes a distinct possibility. Burnout may also result from a feeling of powerlessness, “the sense that no matter how hard you toil or how competent you are, someone else controls your destiny” (Rubin, 1997:152).

In practice, it can be helpful to think of stress in terms of a simple ‘bucket’ model. This bucket model suggests that stress and fatigue result when a person’s reservoir of personal resilience is drained more quickly than it is replenished. Things like interesting work, supportive relationships, good health and rest fill the bucket. Difficult working conditions, conflict at work, emotionally-draining work, too much (or not enough) work and difficulties at home can drain the bucket (Workinfo, 2005).

It is thus clear that a great deal is expected of personnel who deliver EAP services to troubled employees and their managers, as well as to the client organisation. The responsibility for rendering an effective and high-quality service places staff of call centres under a great deal of pressure. Because the world around us, especially the world of work and business, has progressively become subject to swiftly-changing forces like competition, the pressure for quality, innovation and an escalation in the pace of doing business, the demands on employees have grown equally dramatically. This creates stress in employees, leading some authors to refer to it as ‘the pressure cooker’ of work (Swanepoel et al., 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Management from Company X in South Africa, where the call centre concerned is based, wanted to know what factors in the call centre were putting pressure on personnel and demotivating them. The Chief Operations Officer also stated that, because of the many changes that had taken place during the previous year (re-structuring and re-engineering), management intended to implement interventions that would benefit both the personnel and the quality of the service. A qualitative study was thus conducted using an applied research approach.

Holman (2003:1) points out that, until quite recently, “hardly any empirical research [had] been conducted on employee stress in call centres”, hence an exploratory research design was appropriate, to identify stressors affecting EAP personnel in the call centre environment of Company X in South Africa.

One of the researchers is employed in the call centre by Company X where this study was conducted. The goal of the study was the identification of stressors affecting EAP personnel in a call-centre environment. Twelve interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule, focusing on the agent’s position in the call centre, qualifications, experience in the EAP field, frustrations and stressors within the call centre and the effect thereof.

The population consisted of 23 EAP personnel who are registered counsellors and render EAP services in the call centre of Company X. Owing to the small staff numbers in Company X’s call centre, and thus limited choice of respondents, the researchers randomly selected respondents to ensure that all personnel in the call centre were fully represented and that everyone received an equal chance to be selected for the study. According to Leedy, Newby and Ertmer (1997) randomisation means selecting a sample from the whole

population in such a way that the characteristics of each unit of the sample approximate the characteristics of the total population. Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2007:184) define probability (random sampling) as “sampling techniques where the probability of each element of the population being included in the sample can be determined”. Although probability sampling is usually associated with quantitative studies, the researchers specifically opted to use probability sampling within this qualitative study to ensure that all staff members are equally represented in the study in order to guarantee that the diversity of possible participants are not lost in the study.

The researchers are of the opinion that a review of ethical issues was crucial while conducting the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants had the right to decline participation at any point. Respondents were known as respondent 1, 2 or 3 and so forth, and not by name. Anonymity, on the other hand, could not be guaranteed because the researcher had to arrange times for interviewing the respondents with the manager of the call centre, but confidentiality was assured because management would not know what was said by the different respondents. Greeff (2002) states that an interview may last for a considerable length of time and can become exhausting and numbing for both the researcher and the participant. This was taken into consideration in conducting the interviews, as the researcher made sure that the respondents were comfortable and at ease during their interviews. The respondents were also allowed to take a body break if they felt tired. This was a necessary precaution.

RESULTS

The researchers followed the five steps of the data analysis spiral of Creswell (1998) as described by De Vos (2002). The researchers concentrated on “identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together” (De Vos, 2002:344). This is according to De Vos (2002) the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis. The data analysis entailed that the researcher read through all the transcripts carefully to get a sense of what the interviews were all about. The transcribed tape recordings were then analysed for emerging themes and sub-themes. Where applicable the respondents’ views were voiced by means of direct quotes and literature was integrated with empirical results.

Profile of respondents

All respondents worked for the EAP call centre of Company X in South Africa and provide EAP psycho-social services. Eleven of the 12 respondents

interviewed were female and one was male. The service years of respondents in the call centre environment ranged from 6 months to 7 years. Respondents were EAP practitioners from the disciplines of Psychology, Social Work or Nursing who were all registered professionals with their respective professional bodies.

THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The following themes and sub-themes emerged from the research data as stressors for personnel in the call centre.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Job design	Repetitive work
	Job overload
	Disempowerment
Role ambiguity	
Relationship with management	
Physical health issues	
Communication	

Theme 1: Job design

Job design was identified as a stressor from which three sub-themes emerged namely, repetitive work, job overload and disempowerment.

Sub-theme 1: Repetitive work

Respondents identified repetitive work as a workplace stressor that was confirmed by the following responses:

- “Do one call after another.”
- “Immediately after speaking to a client, you switch to the next.”
- “I feel a matric pupil can do what I’m doing. I feel disempowered in a sense that, professionally I’m not growing, I’m not fulfilled, and I’m just doing it for the sake of getting my salary.”
- “I’m a glorified secretary or a glorified data capturer, because now I just take down the details and refer them.”

According to Stress Hazards (2004:2), people may become frustrated at work for a number of reasons. These include “repetitive tasks, with no opportunity

for variation or for undertaking greater responsibility and learning”. Cooper, Dewe and O’Driscoll (2001) indicate quantitative under-load has been identified as a stressor, with boredom and lack of challenge from monotonous routine work predicting anxiety, depression, and job dissatisfaction. Spiers (2002) takes it further by saying job under-load connected to repetitive routine, boring and under-stimulating work has been associated with ill health.

Sub-theme 2: Job overload

Whilst respondents were burdened by repetitive work, they at the same time experienced job overload in the call centre owing to the time limit, the benchmarks that they have to meet and the number of calls that they are required to take in a day without time to relieve stress after a call. Role overload is experienced when the employee is expected to do more than time permits (Robbins, 2001). The constant answering of calls, emergency cases, together with the benchmarks set by management, means that consultants have limited or no time between calls to relieve their stress (Faragher, Cooper and Cartwright, 2004). This view was confirmed by the responses set out below:

- “They don’t give us enough time to wrap up and go on, so, when it is very busy in the call centre, the pressure is tremendous, you finish with a call and the next one comes in.”
- “No time to relieve stress after a call.”
- “Because of the time restraints there are complaints, they demotivate you. You feel that you are not doing enough because there is complaints coming in and clients say: I’ve been waiting for your call, I am frustrated with your service.”
- “Suddenly we now have to take 48 calls, according to management. How do I control the number of incoming calls, but at the same time what type of care can I attach to just taking personal details?”

Sub-theme 3: Disempowerment

Respondents indicated that the call centre does not facilitate independent or innovative decision-making and actions, because they feel they are working in a climate where their opinions do not count or have an influence on anything and that makes them feel redundant. Robbins (2001:447) singles out one area of concern regarding call centres, as the extent to which the job provided “substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in

carrying it out”. Lack of consultation, and feelings of being unable to make changes in one’s job are commonly reported stressors (Cooper et al., 2001). The following statements indicate the responses of research participants:

- “We get the idea we have to sit with whatever they decide. They don’t know what we are doing; they decide stuff we just have to implement whether it is practical or not.”
- “People are desperately unhappy, because their voices are not heard, because they’ve had choices made for them, without their input.”
- “Every day you see things that could be different, you verbalise how things could be and it’s ignored and you are just told what to do.”
- “Top of the pile frustration for me is working in a climate where my opinion doesn’t count, or doesn’t seem to have an influence, and it doesn’t feel like what I am saying matters at all, or I can’t influence anything and that makes me feel redundant.”
- “It’s the climate where you are told what to do, and it’s not negotiable, and that’s part of my frustration, because I can’t negotiate, so I have no influence.”
- “Sometimes we feel that there is no transparency, that you are left out in the dark and that things have been decided upon or put in place that you sometimes are not aware of.”
- “I made lots of recommendations to management on how to improve the system and what can be done to make things flow better and they completely ignored my suggestions.”

Holman and Fernie (2000) indicated that call centre agents would experience higher anxiety and depression, lower job satisfaction and lower general mental health in circumstances where they have less control over their work. Acas (2005) takes it further indicating that a lack of control over their working life is one of the most common causes of stress for employees and can lead to dissatisfaction, alienation and poor performance.

Theme 2: Role ambiguity

Role ambiguity is created when role expectations are not clearly understood and the employee is not sure what he/she is supposed to do (Robbins, 2001). Role ambiguity was the second stressor impacting on respondents’ productivity and motivation. The role ambiguity included lack of job satisfaction, lack of consistency and management style. This was confirmed by the following participant responses:

- “I think it is the basic management style that’s problematic; they don’t have a clear defined idea of what they want to use staff for. Maybe my idea of what I need to do is not management’s idea. I am not sure, it would be nice to have that clarified.”
- “You’re usually hopping from the one thing to the next, or you get different requests from management.”
- “Lack of a clinical model and lack of a business model, or not lack but inconsistency”.
- “Goalposts keep on changing.”

The major cause of role stress is role ambiguity, which is often the result of an inadequate job description. The agents need to receive clarification concerning their job and the incumbent responsibilities (Edworthy, 2000).

Theme 3: Relationship with management

Inconsiderate or non-supportive behaviour from a supervisor appears to contribute significantly to feelings of job pressure. Autocratic and authoritarian leadership styles have generally been observed to induce strain among subordinates (Cooper et al., 2001). Respondents identified their relationship with management as another stressor during the interviews as they experienced a lack of communication between them and management, an unacceptable leadership style and lack of support or recognition. This was confirmed by the responses quoted below:

- “The relationship with management is non-existent. It is a very old-school pyramid system, where people sit at the top and there is nothing you can rely on from the company’s side that they would be able or would try to help or alleviate the problems.”
- ”You know, I am very careful not just to blame. I’ve worked in many places before, and have seen horrible management relationships, but basically for me, from the day I walked in here, I have not been managed, period!”
- “I don’t want to come to work any more because no matter how hard you try you don’t get the necessary recognition. There is always something wrong with what you do. It also influences my productivity greatly because no matter how hard you try, you are not right, you are not doing it correctly, you have to do it another way.”
- “In a way, we can’t talk to management, we do not trust them, and they make us feel that we don’t know anything. We are just people whom they got to work here, who do not have any brains. We just sit and do whatever they ask us to do.”

- “I don’t understand the lack of input into staff. They don’t build them up, don’t train them, don’t assist them in any way, except to demand.”

According to Cooper et al. (2001) a lack of consideration of employee needs, attitudes, and motivation, has been shown to create strain for many employees. These authors continue saying autocratic and authoritarian leadership styles have generally been observed to induce strain among subordinates.

Theme 4: Physical health issues

A major contributor to job stress is the physical work environment itself (Zwikel, 1994). Physical health issues identified as stressors included small spaces, lack of fresh air, noise and extreme temperatures. This was confirmed by the respondents’ responses on the topic:

- “I feel we work in very small spaces and there are too many people working in a specific area or in an open plan area. There is not enough oxygen, windows, and the air conditioning isn’t to my satisfaction.”
- “If I am talking to a client I can hear my colleagues in the background, so I find that I tend to sit, pressing my earphones against my head, which is very uncomfortable.”
- “The call centre is very hot and noisy; you can also hear the outside noises where we are sitting.”
- “My concentration is okay, but when it is hot and stuffy, then my head is not clear.”
- “My headset is used by anybody at any time; I think you have a lot better opportunity to pick up germs.”

Edworthy (2000:26) indicates that “high levels of background noise at work can not only impair your concentration but can be responsible for irritability, tension and headaches”. Working in a noisy, dirty, uncomfortable environment can thus add significantly to peoples’ stress level. (Cooper et al., 2001) take it further by stating that extreme temperatures (hot or cold) can induce physiological responses that might have undesirable effects on both work performance and individual health and well-being.

Theme 5: Communication

Communication was identified as a stressor during the interviews because support form Information Technology (IT) is lacking, linkages do not take

place and transparency is absent. This was confirmed by the responses on communication:

- “I would say communication is a very big frustration because it is not really a big priority in the company, a lot of information doesn’t get through to us. As we are frontline we need the information.”
- “There is not a good communication channel! Everyone is doing what he/she thinks is the best way of approaching problems. Cases fall between the cracks, and we have to resolve it in the end and give an answer and it is not really our fault.”
- “Communication between the team members themselves and between the team and management as a whole isn’t what it should be or as transparent as it should be.”
- “Then also the support of the IT system, the computer system - sometimes it’s slow and sometimes it’s not working. We are a very computerised company and if the computer is not working, or the electricity is off, or if a fax machine is not working, then everything comes to a standstill and that is very frustrating.”
- “I perceive that there is no acknowledgement or support from management; I think it actually breaks down the communication even further. I think it actually limits me in being able to share information or share expectations. You don’t do that because I know from experience that you hit your head against a brick wall.”

Communication is vital, for instance, to enable employees to do their work and to help them to work harmoniously together towards the achievement of the organisation’s goals. “Without communication people will not know what work to do, how to do it, [or] how well they are doing” (Swanepoel et al., 2000:692).

CONCLUSIONS

When personnel perform repetitive, boring, annoying and under-stimulating work, they cannot experience any professional growth. The tasks personnel perform, how they perform them, and the authority attached to their tasks play a critical role in job satisfaction.

The high volume of calls, the lack of time to relieve stress between calls and the struggle to organise time owing to the fast pace and benchmarks, all engender stress in the call centre work environment. When personnel have limited control and autonomy over their work, it results in rising stress levels,

burnout and low job satisfaction, which can be detrimental to service delivery.

Although personnel bring professional expertise to their jobs, they are unable to utilise their expertise and skills, which results in low job satisfaction and poor motivation. Personnel feel disempowered as they do not have the authority to make decisions concerning their work procedures.

There are inconsistencies in communication and procedures in the call centre, because personnel are not sure what course of action to follow and what the goals are. Personnel develop a negative attitude towards management, perceive the latter to be uncaring and eventually do not trust management if they do not receive feedback or input from them.

Personnel need a comfortable space when they do have time to relax. The limited office space and the noise in the call centre affect the personnel's concentration and prevent them from listening effectively to what the client is saying. Holistic interventions thus, need to be put in place to address the variety of problems for the personnel of the call centre.

As the company is currently engaged in a re-structuring and re-engineering process, this study contributes to increased management awareness of stressors in the call centre so that interventions can ultimately be implemented to improve the well-being of the personnel and the quality of service for its clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following can be recommended to alleviate the stressors in the call centre of Company X:

- Provide personnel with the opportunity to participate in job design and implementation, by allowing them to develop procedures and be part of the decision-making process.
- A system should be put in place to monitor the input and update of the resources data base, on a more regulated basis.
- An effective communication channel for personnel to air their views, recommendations and complaints must be established.
- Reconsider the physical layout of the call centre and invite suggestions from personnel on how they would like the office to be arranged to enable efficient operation.

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