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MARCH 2026

THE 2026 PRIVATE PRACTICE SALARY REPORT

AUSTRALIA

SPECIALIST LEGAL RECRUITMENT

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PRIVATE PRACTICE SALARY REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 Summary

06 Sydney

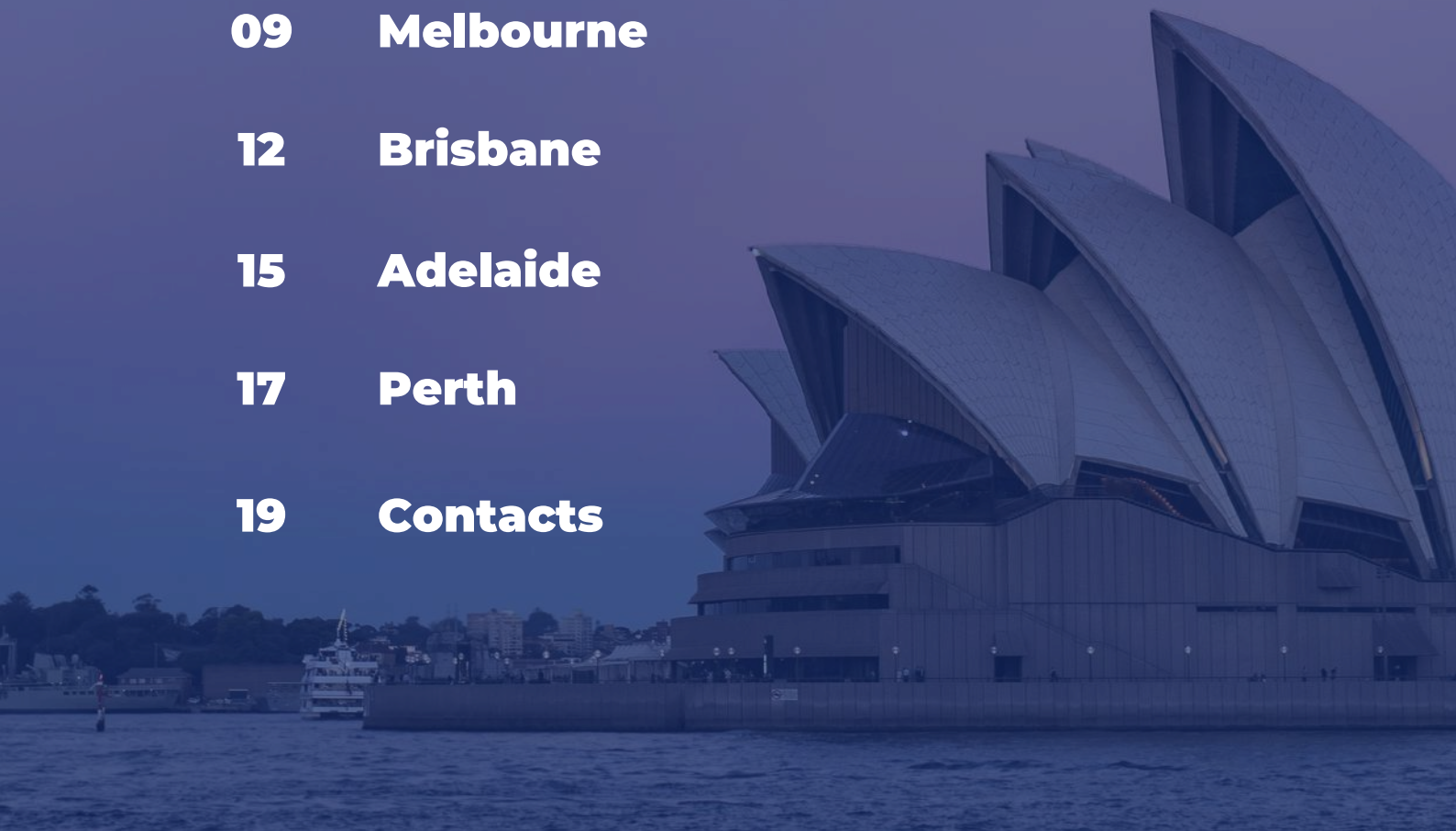
09 Melbourne

12 Brisbane

15 Adelaide

17 Perth

19 Contacts



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2026: SO FAR

Turning Point for Deal Flow

As of March 2026, Australia is moving into a more stable phase following a period of economic moderation.

While much of 2024 and early 2025 was characterised by cautious decision-making, there are now clearer signs of improving business confidence and a gradual return of investment activity.

This is starting to feed into the legal market - particularly across transactional and project-led practice areas - where firms are preparing for an uptick in deal flow and positioning themselves accordingly through targeted hiring.

Foundations for a Rebound

Australia's economy is expected to strengthen through the 2025–26 financial year, with growth projected at approximately 2.25%, up from around 1.5% the previous year.

While this remains a measured recovery, the direction of travel is positive, with forecasts indicating continued, steady growth into 2026 and beyond.

A key factor underpinning this improvement has been the shift in monetary policy.

Inflation, which remained elevated throughout 2023 and much of 2024, has now eased into the Reserve Bank of Australia's target range. By mid-2025, CPI had fallen to approximately 2.1%, allowing the RBA to begin reducing interest rates.

As we move through 2026, this more accommodative rate environment is supporting increased liquidity, lower borrowing costs, and improved access to capital.

These conditions are beginning to translate into renewed activity across corporate Australia.

After a period of hesitation, businesses are showing a greater willingness to transact, invest, and progress strategic initiatives - all of which is expected to drive demand within the legal sector.

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2026: SO FAR

Reawakening of Deal Activity

As financial conditions improve, dealmaking is set to accelerate, particularly in M&A, Banking & Finance, Capital Markets, Major Projects, and Real Estate. Sectors previously held back by high debt costs and market volatility are regaining momentum, and law firms are preparing for a busier year.

M&A is especially primed for a rebound. Higher interest rates had stalled many deals, particularly in private equity, but cheaper capital is now unlocking pipelines. Firms are expanding M&A teams to meet rising demand, with increased hiring at both senior and mid-associate levels.

Legal demand in Banking & Finance is also on the rise. Access to debt markets is fuelling growth in Leveraged and Project Finance, while government-backed infrastructure and energy projects are driving further activity. Lawyers with expertise in Structured Finance, Capital Raising, and Regulatory work are likely to be in strong demand.

Real Estate and the Return of Capital

The recovery is also visible in the Property sector. Commercial Real Estate, which had been sluggish in recent years, is showing signs of renewed investor interest as inflation eases and interest rates decline. Lending to both residential and commercial buyers is on the rise, and property values are forecast to increase at a steady rate.

This rebound is driving a commensurate rise in legal demand related to Real Estate Finance, Capital Transactions, and Development Projects. As construction and acquisition activity accelerates, firms with strong Real Estate practices are looking to deepen their benches, often targeting Associates and Senior Associates with experience in structured deals, acquisitions, and property development law.

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2026: SO FAR

Legal Recruitment: A Market Poised to Tighten

The anticipated uptick in corporate activity is creating a ripple effect in the legal recruitment landscape. Firms across the board are preparing to scale, and strategic hiring is moving to the top of the agenda. Whilst this push is especially evident in transactional practice areas, where demand is strongest, recruitment in contentious areas (such as Commercial and Construction Litigation) is gaining significant momentum.

For lawyers considering a career move in 2026, the environment could hardly be more promising. The combination of increased work flow, competitive salary structures, and the opportunity to work on high-profile, complex matters is creating one of the most attractive legal job markets in recent memory.

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SYDNEY

The first half of 2026 has seen Sydney law firms continue to strengthen their teams across a range of practice areas, including Corporate, Finance, Disputes, Major Projects, Employment, Funds, and others. This activity has been driven by two key factors:

- A continued increase in pipeline activity and workflow, which has necessitated additional resourcing across multiple groups; and
- The ongoing draw of international markets which continue to attract top Australian legal talent, thereby creating domestic opportunities for those seeking to progress locally.

High Profile Moves, Mergers & Closures

Over the past 12–18 months, the Sydney legal market has seen a number of notable developments.

These include Tony Damian joining Ashurst after nearly three decades at Herbert Smith Freehills, Hogan Lovells exiting the Sydney market following a series of partner departures, and the merger of Herbert Smith Freehills with U.S. firm Kramer Levin.

These types of moves continue to shape the market in 2026, creating new opportunities for lawyers seeking a fresh challenge — particularly where partners are building out or re-establishing teams.

Competition among firms for leading candidates remains strong. In response, many firms offer remuneration packages above market norms, including:

- Sign-on bonuses
- Generous performance-based incentives
- Opportunities for promotion, and
- International secondments aimed at attracting and retaining top talent

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Global Impact on the Sydney Market

Global economic conditions remain mixed, with capital deployment varying across jurisdictions. That said, the outlook for the coming financial year is optimistic, with an expected uplift in workflow across most markets. There are key exceptions to the current circumstance, with particularly strong demand for lawyers specialising in Finance (including Leveraged, Structured, Project and Acquisition Finance), Major Projects, Corporate & Corporate E+R, and Funds across global hubs. We are currently seeing the highest level of international recruitment activity in New York, Texas, California, London, Singapore, and Dubai, with those securing international roles having generally built their experience within Tier 1 firms.

For Australian lawyers not yet positioned to move internationally, we are seeing a trend toward strategic domestic moves into international or top-tier practices. These moves enable candidates to gain exposure to more complex matters and high-profile clients, thereby strengthening their CVs and improving their future prospects for an international transition.

In previous years, firms have tended to balance talent acquisition with the need to manage internal salary relativities. However, as was evident last year and continues into 2026, many firms are now departing from this more conservative approach. There is a growing willingness to offer remuneration significantly above prevailing market levels, reflecting a strategic shift in favour of securing top talent.

Some of the standout salary offers we have observed include:

- **2 PAE: $165k + 5k sign-on bonus – Top 8 Firm**
- **3 PAE: $180k + 10k sign-on bonus – International Firm**
- **4 PAE: $190k + 5k sign-on bonus – International Firm**
- **SA1: $220k + 20k sign-on bonus – Top 8 Firm**
- **SA2: $260k – Top 8 Firm**
- **SA3: $280k + 20k sign-on bonus – International Firm**
- **Counsel: $360k – International Firm**

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SYDNEY TOP TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	125,000 - 135,000	135,000
2	140,000 - 165,000	150,000
3	155,000 - 180,000	165,000
4	165,000 - 190,000	175,000
5	175,000 - 200,000	185,000
SA 1	200,000 - 220,000	210,000
SA 2	220,000 - 260,000	235,000
SA 3	240,000 - 280,000	260,000
SA 4	260,000 - 300,000	290,000
COUNSEL	300,000+	315,000

MID TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	100,000 - 120,000	110,000
2	120,000 - 140,000	130,000
3	130,000 - 150,000	140,000
4	140,000 - 160,000	150,000
5	150,000 - 175,000	165,000
SA 1	160,000 - 190,000	180,000
SA 2	190,000 - 215,000	210,000
SA 3	215,000 - 240,000	225,000
SA 4	235,000 - 260,000	245,000
COUNSEL	250,000+	250,000

*All salaries are inclusive of super

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MELBOURNE

Melbourne: Evolving Hiring Conditions

Melbourne has entered 2026 with more consistent hiring activity across firms at all levels.

Following a period of leaner teams and cautious headcount, firms have been responding more actively to client demand, building out teams where workflow has strengthened.

This has been most evident across Employment, Projects & Energy, Real Estate, Corporate Transactions and Finance.

At the same time, areas such as Litigation, Competition, IP, Funds and Tax have also seen increased activity, with firms willing to offer competitive packages - including sign-on incentives - to secure the right talent.

International Influence on the Melbourne Market

International movement continues to play a significant role in shaping the Melbourne legal market in 2026.

Ongoing demand from overseas markets, particularly the US, has led to a steady flow of Corporate, Projects and Finance lawyers relocating abroad. This has created gaps within domestic teams, particularly at top-tier firms, and driven the need for backfill hiring.

At the same time, returning lawyers with international experience remain highly sought after.

Experience gained in larger global markets continues to command a premium, with many returnees securing higher salaries and accelerated progression upon re-entering the Melbourne market.

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Salary Trends

While the Top 8 and some international firms continue to lead the line on salaries, opportunities at leading national firms have become attractive options to maximise salary potential. Some firms have signalled a potential move away from traditional bandings at the senior level with salary reviews becoming negotiations based on individual performance without team or firm-wide considerations. Bonus structures have also become, broadly speaking, more transparent and achievable.

For FY/26, we anticipate that Employment, Projects & Energy, Real Estate, Corporate M&A and Finance will remain the busiest practice areas with an uptick in Regulatory and Commercial Litigation.

Below are some of the top salary offers we received from 2025:

- **2 PAE: $160k – Top 8 Firm**
- **3 PAE: $180k – International Firm**
- **4 PAE: $190k + 10k sign-on bonus – International Firm**
- **SA1: $220k – Top 8 Firm**
- **SA2: $275K – International Firm**
- **SA4: $300K – International Firm**
- **Counsel: $360K – International Firm**

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MELBOURNE

TOP TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	120,000 - 130,000	125,000
2	135,000 - 155,000	145,000
3	150,000 - 180,000	150,000
4	155,000 - 190,000	160,000
5	160,000 - 200,000	175,000
SA 1	190,000 - 230,000	210,000
SA 2	230,000 - 260,000	230,000
SA 3	230,000 - 275,000	240,000
SA 4	250,000 - 300,000	250,000
COUNSEL	275,000 - 360,000	310,000

MID TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	110,000 - 125,000	120,000
2	110,000 - 135,000	125,000
3	125,000 - 155,000	135,000
4	145,000 - 160,000	150,000
5	150,000 - 170,000	160,000
SA 1	170,000 - 185,000	180,000
SA 2	185,000 - 200,000	190,000
SA 3	200,000 - 220,000	210,000
SA 4	220,000 - 230,000	220,000
COUNSEL	240,000 - 260,000	250,000

*All salaries are inclusive of super

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BRISBANE

Brisbane's legal market is continuing to grow steadily as are in FY26. Major infrastructure investment, a strong pipeline of development and energy projects, and increasing national interest in Queensland are all playing a part in strengthening the city's position as a leading legal hub.

Key Practice Areas in Demand

We have seen a sharp uptick in demand across front-end practice areas, particularly Energy & Resources, Major Projects, and Real Estate. What's clear is that this growth isn't just about replacing departing lawyers, firms are actively growing their teams to handle new work that's already landing or just around the corner ahead of the 2032 Olympic Games.

The mix of high-quality work, growing market share, and a more balanced lifestyle is attracting both junior and senior talent alike, with Brisbane proving a popular choice for lawyers relocating both domestically and from overseas jurisdictions.

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Salaries are on the Rise

We are continuing to see salaries move upwards, particularly at the mid to senior level. Most leading firms are adjusting Brisbane remuneration to better reflect the level of work on offer and the increasing sophistication of the market. It's not uncommon now to see offers that rival or even exceed those in other capital cities, especially where specific experience is in short supply.

That said, it's not just about salary. Flexibility, sensible hours, and a strong team culture are now playing just as big a role in how lawyers assess opportunities, and many Brisbane firms are delivering on all three.

Private Practice Making a Comeback

Interestingly, we are now seeing a number of in-house lawyers considering a move back to private practice, a shift we would not have expected a few years ago. With firms now offering better work-life balance, genuine flexibility, and clearer paths to progression, the line between in-house and private practice benefits is blurring. For many, the promise of broader work, strong team environments, and competitive packages, often with hybrid working and better career progression prospects, is enough to put private practice back on the radar. It is a trend that reflects how far many firms have come in reshaping their cultures to attract and retain top talent.

Long Term Outlook

The lead-up to the 2032 Olympic Games continues to create long-term opportunities across Queensland. Infrastructure, transport, planning and development activity are all on the rise and that is translating into sustained demand for legal expertise. This is unlikely to be a short-term boom – we are expecting strong hiring activity well beyond FY26, with firms continuing to invest in practice areas tied to growth, government-backed projects, and population expansion.

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BRISBANE

TOP TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	105,000 - 117,000	115,000
2	125,000 - 140,000	130,000
3	130,000 - 145,000	135,000
4	135,000 - 150,000	150,000
5	150,000 - 160,000	155,000
SA 1	170,000 - 190,000	180,000
SA 2	185,000 - 210,000	205,000
SA 3	200,000 - 215,000	215,000
SA 4+	220,000 - 290,000	255,000
COUNSEL	290,000 - 320,000	300,000

MID TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	95,000 - 110,000	100,000
2	110,000 - 130,000	120,000
3	120,000 - 135,000	125,000
4	135,000 - 145,000	140,000
5	140,000 - 150,000	145,000
SA 1	155,000 - 185,000	165,000
SA 2	170,000 - 190,000	185,000
SA 3	180,000 - 200,000	190,000
SA 4+	195,000 - 230,000	210,000
COUNSEL	230,000 - 280,000	260,000

*All salaries are inclusive of super

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ADELAIDE

Adelaide Legal Market – 2025 Snapshot

Remuneration was the key factor for lawyers at all levels when approaching reviews and/or testing the market during Y24/25. Adelaide's increasing cost of living and increases in daily billables have had an impact and although the second half of FY24/25 saw a number of high offers, the general sentiment is that strong financial performance and promotions do not guarantee solid salary increases.

Market Trends & Hiring Activity

Activity was up across Commercial Litigation, Corporate/Commercial, Tax, Real Estate, Projects & Construction and Employment which saw some firms more open to above market salary expectations and offers as the focus shifted to FY26 and resourcing long to medium term vacancies in an historically tight market.

Adelaide firms saw a steady exodus of domestic and international movers at the 3-6 PAE level - the most sought-after experience range across all major capitals. Sydney and Melbourne continued to attract the most interest as Corporate Transactions, Finance/Financial Services, Employment, Major Projects and Commercial Litigation picked up in those markets.

Notably, Brisbane and Perth started attracting interest from predominantly energy & resources lawyers with the depth of the energy sectors in those jurisdictions, the presence of international and top tier firms and commensurate salaries representing genuine career progression and high salary potential.

Interstate opportunities will present a greater challenge for Adelaide firms in FY25/26 as the local demands at the 3-6 PAE level across Commercial Litigation, Corporate/Commercial, Real Estate, Projects & Construction, and Employment continue to mirror interstate demands in those areas and experience levels.

These are some of the top salary offers we have helped candidates obtain from July to December 2024:

- **2 PAE: $130k**
- **4 PAE: $155k**
- **SA1: $170k**
- **SA2: $180k**

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ADELAIDE LEADING FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	85,000 - 100,000	90,000
2	100,000 - 125,000	110,000
3	125,000 - 140,000	130,000
4	125,000 - 150,000	140,000
5	150,000 - 160,000	150,000
SA 1	160,000 - 175,000	165,000
SA 2	170,000 - 185,000	175,000
SA 3	180,000 - 190,000	185,000
SA 4	185,000 - 200,000	190,000
COUNSEL	190,000 - 240,000	250,000

*All salaries are inclusive of super

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PERTH

The Perth market continues to see strong demand for Energy & Resources lawyers. Government policy supporting the transition towards renewables, combined with the sector's ongoing reliance on gas, has driven sustained investment and infrastructure development. This has underpinned hiring activity across Perth, with consistent demand across Major Projects (front-end and back-end), Finance and Commercial Litigation, alongside increased activity in Real Estate, Corporate and Restructuring.

Salary Trends

Remuneration across Perth has continued to strengthen.
Top-tier and leading international firms are now offering salaries aligned with Sydney, while national and local firms are broadly in line with Melbourne - particularly at Senior Associate level. With this gap now largely closed, Perth is increasingly seen as a genuine destination for domestic movers, particularly those with Energy & Resources experience seeking both high-quality work and competitive remuneration. Areas such as Major Projects, Finance, Corporate (including E&R) and Environment are expected to see continued demand throughout 2026.

Talent Movement

International movement continues to influence the Perth legal market.
Lawyers are showing ongoing interest in opportunities across the US, UK and Middle East, with Europe also attracting attention — particularly for more junior lawyers looking to access international experience earlier in their careers.
As global markets continue to hire, overseas opportunities for lawyers in Finance, Major Projects and Corporate (including E&R) are expected to remain strong throughout 2026.

Top offers we have seen this year so far:

- **2 PAE: $155K – Top 8 Firm**
- **4 PAE: $170K – Leading National Firm**
- **SA1: $210K – Top 8 Firm**
- **SA2: $230K – Top 8 Firm**
- **SA5: $290K – International Firm**

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PERTH

TOP TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	125,000 - 135,000	135,000
2	140,000 - 165,000	150,000
3	155,000 - 180,000	165,000
4	165,000 - 190,000	175,000
5	175,000 - 200,000	185,000
SA 1	200,000 - 220,000	210,000
SA 2	220,000 - 260,000	235,000
SA 3	240,000 - 280,000	260,000
SA 4	260,000 - 300,000	290,000
COUNSEL	300,000+	315,000

MID TIER FIRMS

PAE LEVEL	$AUD RANGE	$AUD AVERAGE
1	95,000 - 125,000	120,000
2	100,000 - 135,000	125,000
3	125,000 - 155,000	135,000
4	145,000 - 160,000	150,000
5	150,000 - 170,000	160,000
SA 1	170,000 - 185,000	175,000
SA 2	185,000 - 200,000	190,000
SA 3	200,000 - 220,000	210,000
SA 4	220,000 - 230,000	220,000
COUNSEL	240,000 - 260,000	250,000

*All salaries are inclusive of super

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If you have questions or are interested in a new role in the Private Practice space, please reach out.

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