

Real (Estate) Lessons from COVID-19

A Global Perspective



As the world slowed down, digital sped up...

2.6 billion

people still in some form of lockdown restriction

2.7 billion

monthly active users on Facebook (+12% Q2 2019*)

*Facebook Q2 Results 2020

Finding order in the chaos of the last few months hasn't been easy.

The effects are still very much with us, with around 2.6 billion people around the world still facing some sort of lockdown.

While we've been saddened to see the social and economic impact on the real estate industry, we've also been encouraged by the resilience and resourcefulness of our friends and colleagues in the RE community.

In this report, we compare responses around the world to shine a light on what worked and didn't work in this unprecedented situation.

We hope it will provide some insight on how to accelerate recovery, and find best practices for the future.

Thanks for joining us,

André Hegge, Adfenix CEO and Co-Founder



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Introduction: The Pandemic, Crash and Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the ebb and flow of the world, and even now, six to seven months later, it has resulted in **1 million deaths** worldwide, with **2.6 billion people** still in some form of lockdown restriction.

The necessary attempts to flatten the curve by exercising social distancing and self-quarantine have also, unfortunately, led to dramatic spikes of unemployment in the millions. According to an International Labour Organisation (ILO) report, from a regional perspective, the Americas and Europe present the largest losses in hours worked, and even though some countries have recently started relaxing workplace closure measures to enable workers to return gradually to their workplaces, the future still poses many questions. Industries grinding to a halt have tipped the global economy into a recession that is reminiscent of the global financial crisis we saw a decade ago, with IMF projection of 2020 growth at a worrying **-4.9**%.

Long-term outlook remains difficult to formulate because of the still persistent risk of new contagion spread, fragile economic systems, capital flow reversals and further trade decline as travel, consumer spending and businesses remain stunted. Even a gradual abatement of the crisis will still leave room for confusion and disruption to the status quo, as governments and industries alike will have to work hard to strike multi-faceted policy responses that actually address newfound challenges borne out of the pandemic.

How has COVID affected the Real Estate Industry?

The real estate sector has been highlighted as one of the industries that has suffered a severe economic decline as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. It falls under the category that cites COVID as having a 'High Impact on Economic Output', according to the ILO April assessment. To put that into perspective - transport and entertainment fall under 'medium-high impact', while the human health and education sectors fall under 'low impact'. This gives a stark confirmation to the fears and concerns that many an RE professional has felt in the past several months when it comes to the future of their career - and the industry as a whole.

To understand this, we have to backtrack to the unprecedented events of the year so far, and look at how so much has changed, so fast.

The Immediate Response

Practically overnight, the everyday routines of real estate professionals came to a standstill, with lockdown essentially putting a halt to open houses and limiting viewings; closing the doors of many brick-and-mortar agencies, sales centers and brokerage offices.

Buyers and sellers alike were unsettled and unsure of what to do next, and the livelihood of countless agents - the majority of whom are independent contractors and rely heavily on commission - was at risk. Multi-million dollar sales were being pulled out the night before final signings, with reasons ranging from job loss to fears over the stock market plunging to prospective clients having their international flights cancelled the day of departure.

We surveyed Adfenix employees in all of our territories to capture the mood of Real Estate around the world.

The Immediate Response



The immediate global response to the global pandemic was not uniform.

Ranging from keeping calm and following government advice in Europe, to concerned but coping in Australia/NZ, to confusion, fear and panic in the US.

The only common thread? **Definitely not business as usual.**

The First Month:

In March when global lockdown was first introduced, fears and uncertainty of the future were further enhanced because the standstill of housing sales affected even auxiliary businesses to real estate: builders' cash flow was severed as projects stalled, with a <u>March survey</u> conducted by the NHAB finding that **81%** of respondents said coronavirus had an adverse effect on homebuyer demand and construction flow suffered greatly.

Many homebuyers had suspended their searches abruptly, while sellers initially pulled their properties off listings trying to grapple with the sharp changes in the market. At the same time, a flash survey conducted by the NAR only a couple of weeks into global lockdown found that 50% of agents across the US reported an immediate drop in buyer interest, having tripled in just a week. The study stated 38% of members reported sellers delaying their sales for a few months, while 20% reported no change in sellers removing homes from the market. 68% of agents working with sellers said that no sellers had reduced prices in order to attract buyers.

The Impact on Listings

Nevertheless, the number of inventory declined - and not just in the States either. In the last two weeks of March in the US, newly listed properties decreased by **13.1%** and **34%**, compared with the year before. The Guardian predicted **520,000** UK house sales to fall through in 2020 because of the pandemic. The property website Rightmove had reported a **40%** decrease in listing volume by the end of March, with roughly **65,000** new listings added, (almost half the volume listed in the same week in 2019). In Australia, the amount of stock for sale was about **25%** lower than the same timeframe in 2019, with residential property sales falling **40%** in April, according to <u>Corelogic</u>. In comparison, Sweden experienced small price reductions in the private residential market by April, with little to no effect on single home prices. Bucking the trend, June sales actually <u>increased by **14%**</u> compared to previous years, with more than **10,000** condominiums and apartments sold. However, it remains to be seen how Sweden will continue tackling its low listing inventory, overall surging house prices and, like many other countries, its contracting economy.

Buyers stopped searching

The Impact on Listings

Buyers stopped searching



Sellers decided not to sell



Average listing prices dropped



[chart C: Adfenix]

Less properties sold

Data based on all Adfenix customers



April sales -89% m-o-m April 2020 -60% y-o-y*

[*HMRC data]

[chart D: Adfenix: UK only]



Stale Property Fears & Other Complications

The 'stale property' conundrum, that many brokers and agents faced, was exacerbated by lagging transactions, and eventually led to the Real Estate Board of New York and Streeteasy sites <u>eliminating</u> their 'days on market' data point, at least temporarily, in order to help alleviate the stress on agents and brokers.

At Adfenix, our response was Reboost - a new digital marketing product designed to create new interest in pre-COVID listings to prevent sellers pulling their properties, and agents losing business.

Where to turn for advice

In this unprecedented situation, many clients turned to us for help

- CMOs/CEOs looking to empower agents to get digital-ready
- Office Managers asking for ways to keep business moving
- Clients requesting more campaigns to revive listings through lockdown
- Agents using our products to maintain visibility via social media
- Clients looking for new ways to acquire seller leads during lockdown
- Office Managers needing solutions to address severe budget cuts
- Concerns around stale property leading to the design of Reboost
- A clear priority switch to digital marketing strategy across the board

...and this response was pretty consistent across all of our territories.

Agents are Seeking Help

The recurring theme in the challenges faced by agents in 2020 was the sheer number of *unknowns*.

The underlying factor wasn't that agents weren't doing their job. Many of them simply don't know *what they should be doing now, and what they should do next.*

Because of such unprecedented times and trends, it is obvious that agents wanted to be better armed with information, from understanding how other markets are dealing with the pandemic, to being digitally ready. The survey respondents in the US reported their agents asking for advice regarding running more ads on existing listings (with products like the Adfenix Reboost, for example) and what to expect once the market returns to normalcy (whatever that looks like). Respondents in Australia, too, found that agents required help taking their social media to the next level, having witnessed its pivotal role in safeguarding relationships with consumers during the pandemic.

A Cautious Reopening?

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A snapshot of top concerns in our regions as lockdown started to ease, showed a top priority of **"The Economy"** for **71%**.

In joint 2nd place, "Socialising" and "Getting Back to Work" mattered for 41%.

With many RE professionals on commission-based salaries, this comes as no surprise.

Less important topics included taking holiday (14%) and the coronavirus itself (29%), with nobody prioritizing moving house (0%).

The Fall of Out-of-Home Advertising

With consumer behaviour significantly changed, the traditional media routes felt much less reliable. The impact on **Out-of-Home Advertising** was no exception.

- UK Transport for London advertising revenue plummeted 90% Apr-Jun 2020
- Aus Ooh!Media revenue down 32% Jan-Jun 2020
- US JCDecaux saw losses of 40% Apr-Jun 2020
- SWE modest single digit losses of 3-4% seen at sobi and Ocean Outdoor Apr-Jun 2020

The Fall of Out-of-Home Advertising With consumer behaviour significantly changed, **traditional media routes** felt much less reliable. Revenue suffered in 2020. # ۲ 9 Transport for London JCDecaux Ooh!Media Ocean Outdoor -90% -40% -32% -3-4% Apr-Jun 2020 Apr-Jun 2020 Apr-Jun 2020 Apr-Jun 2020

Advertisers found themselves forced to look to alternative media to reach the stay-at-home audience, rather than lock in spending on outdoor media months ahead of time.





Modern Family's fictional realtor Phil Dumphy invests in OOH advertising

Modern Family's fictional realtor Phil Dumphy invests in OOH advertising

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With 57% of territories surveyed "keeping calm and following government guidelines," what were their governments saying?

The Government Response

Adfenix conducted its own survey of key stakeholders in these 4 territories regarding their experiences, and the trends they'd seen in their respective markets.

Many governments rallied to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 by taking multiple measures, some of which directly affected the CRE industry.

Lockdown

- Border closures UK, US, AUS, SWE
- Suggested SWE, US
- Mandatory UK, AUS

The Government Response

With 57% of territories surveyed "keeping calm and following government guidelines," what were their governments saying?

Lockdown
Foreclosures halted

Border closures
Image: Consume their government saying?

Suggested
Image: Consume their government saying?

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The rigid lockdown measures of the UK and Australia/ New Zealand - both currently experiencing a 2nd wave of the virus - contrast sharply with the more advisory strategies of Sweden and the United States.

That being said, the present situations in Sweden and the US are like day and night, with the US still gripped by a 1st wave, while Sweden seems to be through the initial phase, with recovery underway and an optimistic forecast.

Mortgage/ rental relief for homeowners
 UK, US, AUS, SWE

UK - Stamp Duty holiday

- Foreclosures halted UK, US, AUS, SWE
- Furlough schemes UK, AUS, SWE Sweden - not suited to commission-based salaries US - no furlough, soaring unemployment

UK - Early easing of lockdown restrictions

RE-specific



The Swedish government has launched tremendous programmes in order to support the businesses and the economy. The furlough programme has been a key point to lower unemployment.

> **Rikard Jonsson**, Marketing Manager, Nordics



Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

For a more in-depth look at the government initiatives, we asked London property barrister, Vanessa Babington-Monegard for her take on the differing approaches around the world, and what it might mean for the industry.

[Read article]

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...And Its Effect

• UK

£37 billion of agreed property sales in July +38% in monthly sales y-o-y +20% on the previous monthly record (set March 2017)* *According to Property Industry Eye [chart D: Adfenix: UK only]

Data based on all Adfenix customers

Sold properties (subset of UK customers)



With £82b of property sales 'on hold' by late April,* restrictions for viewings and house moves were lifted May 13th *BBC News

• Aus

New Home Sales jumped 87% in June m-o-m amidst the government's HomeBuilder program and state incentives for building [Australia's Housing Industry Association]



• US

Existing home sales soared 24.7% in July m-o-m, the strongest monthly gain ever recorded, up 8.7% y-o-y [National Association of Realtors]

Sweden

Sales of Bostadsrätter (condominiums) +14% in June y-o-y [<u>THE LOCAL se</u>] Holiday homes sales are up 13% y-o-y [<u>maklarstatistik.se</u>]

Lockdown and the Shift to WFH (Working from Home)

While furloughs were predominant across the board, one of the most significant shifts that directly and profoundly affected millions of professionals was the migration from the office to the home. Although a few places like the UK encouraged those who could not work from home to return back to the workplace if possible (as early as May), the vast majority of workers found themselves conducting business via online means - many, for the first time.

For the real estate industry, notorious for being resistant to change, the pandemic actually marked a new era in which agencies and agents alike would either sink or swim, all depending on their immediate response to the crisis. In our survey, the responses from Sweden mentioned the flexibility and convenience that various digital platforms were able to provide clients working from home, (with 33% now working exclusively from home as a result of the pandemic). More and more professionals see the perks of being able to avoid unnecessary travel, and this, coupled with the capabilities of being able to interact with customers online, have driven many agents across the regions to reconsider their overall modus operandi.





The housing market for summer houses in Sweden has exploded - the market hasn't been this good for decades.

> **Rikard Jonsson,** Marketing Manager, Nordics



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Digital To The Rescue



"Life in the time of coronavirus is increasingly a life lived online which has led to an acceleration of digital adoption and e-commerce.

Time spent with certain media channels has increased during lockdown, so we are adapting to these changes, shifting to a greater focus on in-home channels versus out-of-home."

Conny Braams,

Chief Digital and Marketing Officer at Unilever, one of the world's largest advertising buyers (speaking to the World Economic Forum in June)

Around the world, our clients embraced digital solutions to weather the COVID storm.



Companies that were quick to provide employees with the necessary tools and equipment were sooner able to fortify or tap into new customer and business opportunities. Video-conferencing is now a staple in many a professional's life, and the closure of house viewings forced many to get creative by providing virtual walk-throughs and viewings, whether it be via Zoom, Life Tours, Facebook Advertising, website viewings, e-appointments etc. In fact, a few brands had already started implementing such technology to provide viewings sight-unseen just prior to the lockdowns. The initial lack of open homes and live auctions had resulted in fewer sellers and decreasing interest to sell in the first quarters of the year but many agents are turning to online auctions - digitizing homes and apartment layouts and holding 15 to 45 minute online viewings. After that, registrants are then able to attend online biddings, with promising success as we've seen in <u>Australia</u> and <u>Sweden</u>.

3D property tools developed by tech startups have risen in popularity amongst real estate professionals, going from virtual to vital as it allows prospective buyers from any place in the world to have a detailed look around a property, from any device, at any time. This capability made possible by the marriage between 3D capture and AI was simply not available through traditional routes, and is a perfect example of how necessity drives much needed innovation in real estate, (albeit such technology has existed prior and been applied to several other industries).

The Financial Times <u>reported</u> an incredible jump of 630% of 3D tech startup Matterport sales, with the property industry continuing to show new interest in investing in such technology. This comes as no surprise as Zoopla had also recorded a 215% increase in visitors who viewed new homes virtually - in March alone.

Drone technology and video has developed rapidly and also become more affordable for agents, but this type of content creation has never been easier, as the lockdown experience has proven that any agent with a smartphone can also tap into a slew of video editing apps in order to provide clients with as detailed or varied a video as they want. A <u>simple Facebook video</u> created engagement among 2,200 people for one house viewing, which is far more than what the average in-person open house could expect.



Here to stay

Videoconferencing has become a core feature of our lock-down lives and I expect that will persist into a post-Covid world.

Pierre Robert, Regional Manager, UK, US & PAC

We responded to stale property fear with new product Reboost -- reviving over 4000 property listings in the UK alone.

The Crucial Role of Proptech

Such startups as mentioned above are just the tip of the iceberg. Just like fintech emerged out of the 2007 economic recession, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up the real estate sector just enough for professionals and investors alike to understand the array of digital solutions that proptech is able to provide in the face of such new, (and modern) problems.

Proptech is not entirely new, nor will its application in each vertical be the same, but it offers a number of capabilities that in a way previous systems and methods in real estate can no longer sufficiently provide. Just to list a few:

Automation of processes - automating a lot of routine activities, freeing up more of agents' time and energy for more important tasks

Consolidating remote working - whether it be solo or in teams; this also opens up huge opportunities that may otherwise be constricted due to geography

Increased need for **accuracy in an increasingly digitised world**, and also to eliminate or reduce human error (<u>95% of security issues</u> online are due to human error).

Generation and storage of **reliable**, **exact data** - while real estate data silos can be cumbersome and difficult to sort out, automating and digitizing such data can extract much more value from them

Personalization and tracking of **consumer preferences** - equipping agents with the platforms to keep up with entire client database and cater to their changing preferences

Leading the way in **never-before-seen tech** - Gesture and face-recognition based building controls, platforms that digitize authenticated paperwork, integrated platforms that allow online transactions etc - the tech just keeps coming.

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We will probably see less unnecessary travelling, more customer meetings online through various digital platforms.

> **Rikard Jonsson,** Marketing Manager, Nordics



There'll be more virtual tours and more online auctions.

Emily Daly, Key Account Manager, PAC



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Brokerages are willing to invest on digital even though they are cutting their total expenses.

> Philip Hegge, US Director

A 2018 KPMG study found that 93% of real estate executives surveyed said they needed to engage with Proptech, with 90% believing it would help business. However, at the time, 66% said they did not have a strategy for how to engage with proptech and digital innovation in general. Fast forward to a time where COVID has enveloped the world, and those stats look very different.

Top Proptech trends in 2020 include <u>AR/VR components</u> to online property platforms, multi-level biometric security, generative design, smart buildings, building information modelling, mobilising Big Data, to name a few.

A more recent <u>KPMG study</u> now finds that 58% of real estate companies have a digital strategy and 95% have a senior employee overseeing its implementation. What is key to note here, however, is the study identified a gap in skill set, with respondents admitting that RE companies need to be educated on real benefits and usage of tech; that they should invest in (external) experts to help with digital innovation. The survey revealed that 65% of people currently leading digital transformation at real estate companies do not have a background in digital tech outside the industry. Why is this important?

There will definitely be some permanent changes, and these will revolve around technology.

George Okoronkwo, Sr Customer Success Manager, US & UK



A Customer Shift

For agents, connecting with the needs of the modern consumer has never been more important. Consumer behavior trends have shifted significantly over the duration of the pandemic playing out - with little reason to believe that those trends will ever revert back.

Being in lockdown and having to work from home has already caused many homebuyers and sellers to re-evaluate priorities, such as:

Rural vs. Urban

The health crisis has motivated many, many homebuyers to now prefer suburban properties that are either larger or equipped with more bedrooms, with demand for garden/outside space spiking up considerably. Even in the UK, the WFH system has emboldened many workers to consider leaving the London hub of activity **in favour of more rural, greener areas,** (52% of London property hunters now are looking outside the capital) or upgrading current homes - options that have opened up simply because of their new-found flexibility due to remote working.

"Usually home-movers tell us the kitchen photographs are the most important [...] but now agents should consider giving greater prominence to pictures of gardens and outdoor spaces."

Rightmove, UK

People are opening their eyes and seeing new opportunities since they don't have to live as close to their workplace as before.

"

Rikard Jonsson, Marketing Manager, Nordics



<u>52% of London property hunters</u> are looking outside the capital in favour of rural areas

- One real estate agency in Daylesford (rural Australia) saw sales increase 15% in March - July y-o-y, with 85% of the buyers out-of-towners.
- In RE we will probably see a high demand for summer houses for quite some time.

"Anecdotally there does seem some desire for people to move away from London and settle in a more rural location."

Pierre Robert, Regional Manager, UK, US & PAC

71% of under-40s said gardens and outdoor space had become more important <u>Savills, UK</u>



Tech-Savvy Consumers

Millennials now make up the largest share of homebuyers at 35%, <u>according to</u> <u>the NAR</u>. They are the most educated and technologically-advanced generation in history, quick to Google search and prone to buy at the press of a button on their devices. However, 60% still value working with an agent, and 84% of Gen Z say they want to work with an agent with strong negotiation skills, making it vital for agents to best position themselves in a way where the needs of this important demographic can be met.

"Teleworking has become a viable, economical response to the pandemic that may stick around for a while, which makes it unsurprising that home offices are one of the topmost priorities now."

"Some people may feel the urge to move and find more space or consider the potential for remote working"

says **Richard Donnell,** Director of Research and Insight at Zoopla, UK

Out of 760 agents polled in Virginia, US:

- 86% said home offices were now top of the amenities list
- 35-40% prioritized technology-enhanced homes
- around 30% wanted to see a finished basement/workout room
- Home offices top amenities list, with 35-40% also seeking technologyenhanced homes said <u>agents in Virginia, US</u>

The real estate agent who is able to roll with the punches with these or any other criteria is one who is becoming digitally-fluid, aligning themselves with tech platfor

ms that enhances and solidifies their relationships with their customer base and, importantly, gives them data-powered solutions that they can match to each client. This is important because in everything discussed, and despite markets taking a serious hit through the pandemic, the sector remains a highly emotional one, with consumers sensitive and serious about their decisions in this area. Most homebuyers can Google search, but few can negotiate. More than ever, homebuyers need agents who are confident and knowledgeable in their field, perceptive to global trends today, able to extract the most valuable and relevant data from so much information, and cater it to their needs and priorities.

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The market has bounced back in a major way and people are either moving outside of the city or "leveling up" and upgrading their homes

> George Okoronkwo, Sr Customer Success Manager, US & UK

What Now?

Our clients around the world are asking questions like:

- How are other markets responding?
- Am I digitally ready?

- How can I revive pre-COVID listings?
- What is the new role of social media?
- What will normality look like?
- How do we bounce back after lockdown?

Respondents to our survey also noted the following:

Clients with a strong digital-first strategy were able to adjust quicker to the changing market conditions.

> Carl-Frederik Olsson, Head of Professional Services, Global

There have been permanent changes for sure. The way properties are advertised, is a major one, the digital first approach is being adopted across the board.

> George Okoronkwo, Sr Customer Success Manager, US & UK

The lockdown has certainly highlighted the need for the RE industry to become more digitally mature and make better use of non-traditional advertising and customer communications, such as social media.

> Pierre Robert, Regional Manager, UK, US & PAC



The Future

New Realities, New Opportunities - New Normal

The measures that the industry has had to turn to in grappling with COVID-19 repercussions have resulted in a lot of unexpected trends. Working from home has proven to be a sustainable business model, and the interest level of investors is rising at the promising future of other 'contactless' business models. These technologies save time and effort - and promote innovation, convenience, and safety.

The industry is on a road where potholes are being covered as they are encountered. For example, two of the most pressing issues center on closing, i.e. transaction/post-transaction services and data security vulnerabilities. Deloitte has <u>highlighted</u> how, with increased adoption of AI, IoT, cloud and mobile apps, the complexities of cybersecurity are increasing too. The recommendation to CRE organizations is to "prioritize strengthening leadership involvement, address talent and vendor issues and incorporate privacy by design". There is a wide berth for new proptech startups to tap into this largely unexploited territory, and many are starting to. For example, London startup <u>Goodlord</u> (though geared towards renters/landlords) specializes in digitizing eSignatures, online transactions and transparent dashboard, and even a virtual banking component.

COVID-19 has bred uncertainty and fears regarding the future; conditions are still unstable and the ability to price risks accurately is still greatly hindered. But over the long term, real estate remains an attractive asset class, and, like the past, it seems likely that investment into the sector will soon return to its higher allocations, especially as the pandemic has only encouraged e-commerce and innovation.

One thing remains certain: when conditions improve and the pandemic is sufficiently dealt with, it is doubtful that things will truly revert back to how they were. While traditional business models and systems ground to a halt, tech was the catalyst to keep things running and provide flexibility, saving many businesses and consumer interests simultaneously. It has become clear that while the world went into quarantine and slowed down, digital only sped up.

Adopt these 5 tools to fortify your business for a strong recovery and a brighter 2021.

Arm yourself with global insight

- Learn from other markets
- Cherry pick valuable information

Be digitally ready

- Have a digital strategy
- Be aware of your customer's digital touchpoints
- Include online in all your campaigns
- Connect with your customers digitally

Reinvigorate pre-COVID listings

- Use new technologies and products including:
 - Video tours
 - Adfenix Reboost
 - Virtual tours
- Share your strategy to reassure your seller

Appreciate the new role of social media

- Social media use surged during lockdown
- Millennials (35% of buyers) are here
- Build your local brand

Be ready to adopt a new BAU

- More digital meetings
- Less face-to-face interactions
- Seize opportunity as technology brings new customers from further afield
- More working from home
- More tech-ready customers

Whatever the post-COVID world holds, digital doesn't go into lockdown. For more on intelligent digital solutions for Real Estate, ask your Adfenix representative how **Marketing Automation** can help your business.

This is an exciting time to be in Real Estate!



www.adfenix.com

Credits

Contributors

Becky Poynton Eric Härstedt Munyaradzi Hoto Lara Scott Leonardo Cipriano George Okoronkwo Pierre-Yves Robert Rikard Jonsson Kasha Nejad Emily Daly Philip Hegge Carl-Fredrik Olsson Dini M. Ralte Vanessa Babington-Monegard Antony Ruggiero

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