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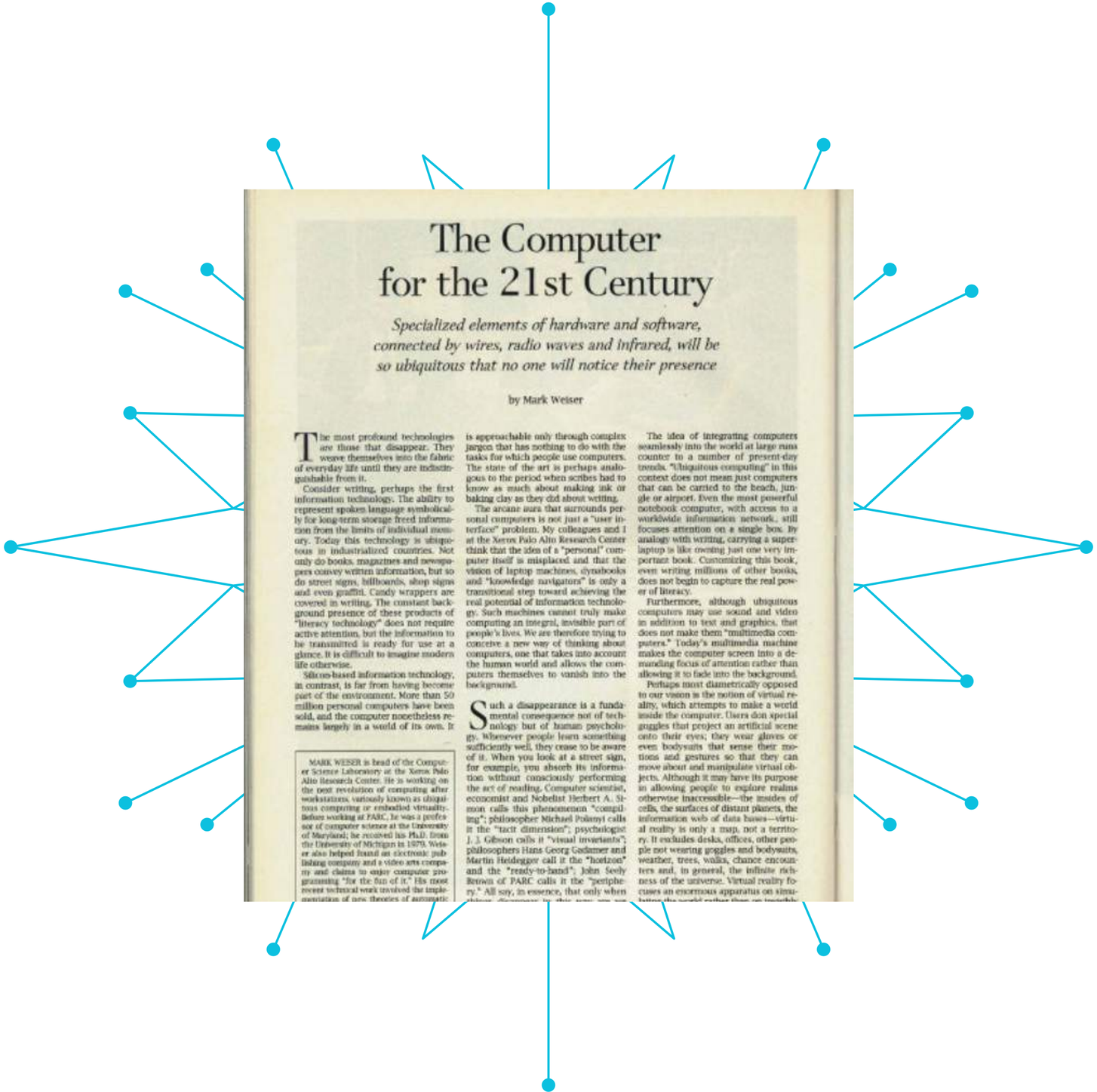

The Computer for the 21st Century

Specialized elements of hardware and software, connected by wires, radio waves and infrared, will be so ubiquitous that no one will notice their presence

by Mark Weiser

The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it.

Consider writing, perhaps the first information technology. The ability to represent spoken language symbolically for long-term storage freed information from the limits of individual memory. Today this technology is ubiquitous in industrialized countries. Not only do books, magazines and newspapers convey written information, but so do street signs, billboards, shop signs and even graffiti. Candy wrappers are covered in writing. The constant background presence of these products of "literacy technology" does not require active attention, but the information is ready for use at a glance. It is difficult to imagine modern life otherwise.

Silicon-based information technology, in contrast, is far from having become part of the environment. More than 50 million personal computers have been sold, and the computer nonetheless remains largely in a world of its own. It is approachable only through complex jargon that has nothing to do with the tasks for which people use computers. The state of the art is perhaps analogous to the period when scribes had to know as much about making ink or baking clay as they did about writing.

The arcane aura that surrounds personal computers is not just a "user interface" problem. My colleagues and I at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center think that the idea of a "personal" computer itself is misplaced and that the vision of laptop machines, dynabooks and "knowledge navigators" is only a transitional step toward achieving the real potential of information technology. Such machines cannot truly make computing an integral, invisible part of people's lives. We are therefore trying to conceive a new way of thinking about computers, one that takes into account the human world and allows the computers themselves to vanish into the background.

Such a disappearance is a fundamental consequence not of technology but of human psychology. Whenever people learn something sufficiently well, they cease to be aware of it. When you look at a street sign, for example, you absorb its information without consciously performing the act of reading. Computer scientist, economist and Nobelist Herbert A. Simon calls this phenomenon "compiling"; philosopher Michael Polanyi calls it the "tacit dimension"; psychologist J. J. Gibson calls it "visual invariants"; philosophers Hans Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger call it the "horizon" and the "ready-to-hand"; John Seely Brown of PARC calls it the "periphery." All say, in essence, that only when

The idea of integrating computers seamlessly into the world at large runs counter to a number of present-day trends. "Ubiquitous computing" in this context does not mean just computers that can be carried to the beach, jungle or airport. Even the most powerful notebook computer, with access to a worldwide information network, still focuses attention on a single box. By analogy with writing, carrying a superlaptop is like owning just one very important book. Customizing this book, even writing millions of other books, does not begin to capture the real power of literacy.

Furthermore, although ubiquitous computers may use sound and video in addition to text and graphics, that does not make them "multimedia computers." Today's multimedia machine makes the computer screen into a demanding focus of attention rather than allowing it to fade into the background.

Perhaps most diametrically opposed to our vision is the notion of virtual reality, which attempts to make a world inside the computer. Users don special goggles that project an artificial scene onto their eyes; they wear gloves or even bodysuits that sense their motions and gestures so that they can move about and manipulate virtual objects. Although it may have its purpose in allowing people to explore realms otherwise inaccessible—the insides of cells, the surfaces of distant planets, the information web of data bases—virtual reality is only a map, not a territory. It excludes desks, offices, other people not wearing goggles and bodysuits, weather, trees, walks, chance encounters and, in general, the infinite richness of the universe. Virtual reality focuses an enormous apparatus on simu-

MARK WEISER is head of the Computer Science Laboratory at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. He is working on the next revolution of computing after workstations, variously known as ubiquitous computing or embodied virtuality. Before working at PARC, he was a professor of computer science at the University of Maryland; he received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1979. Weiser also helped found an electronic publishing company and a video arts company and claims to enjoy computer programming "for the fun of it." His most recent technical work involved the implementation of new theories of automatic

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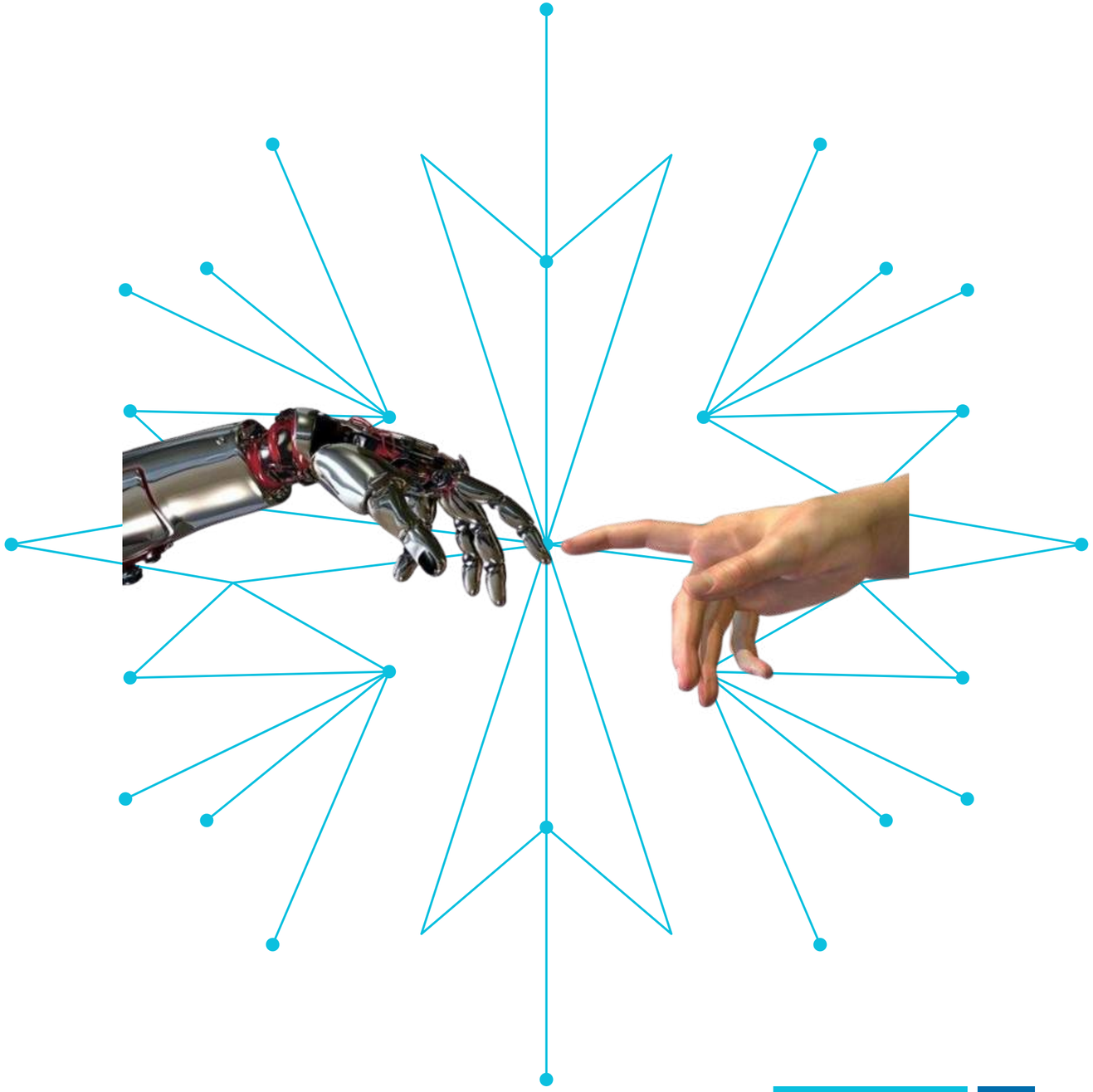

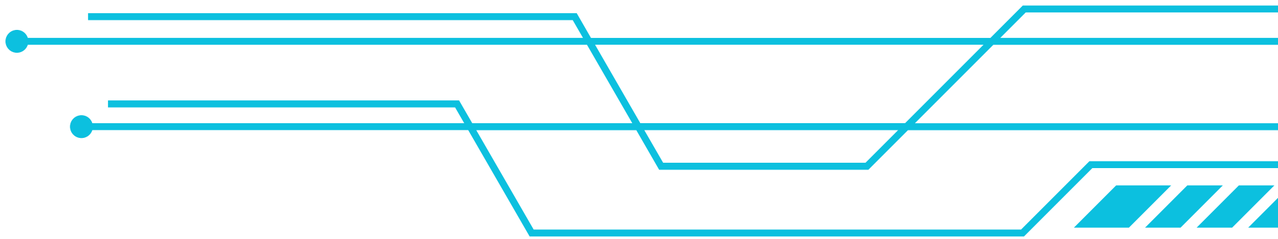

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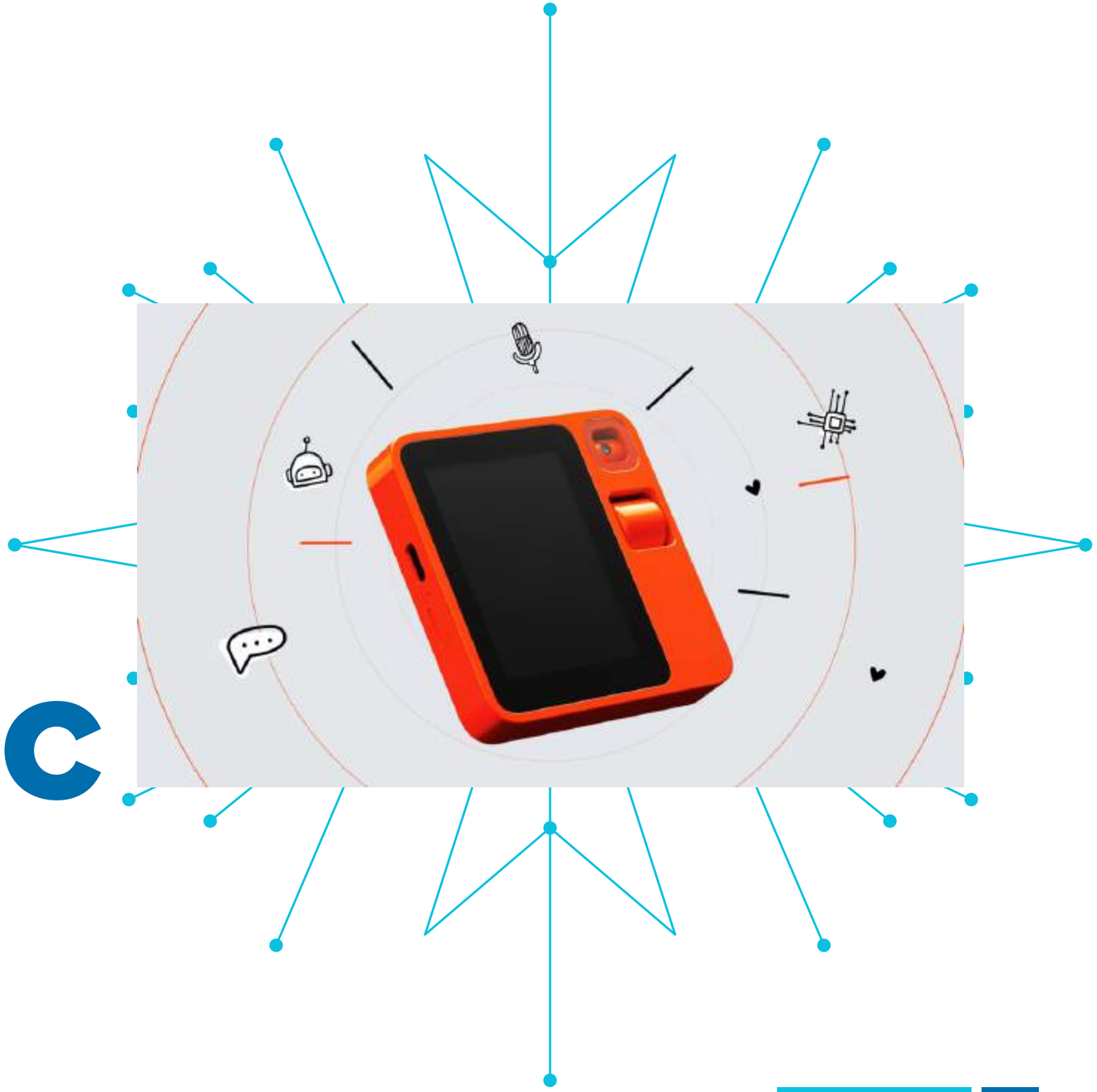

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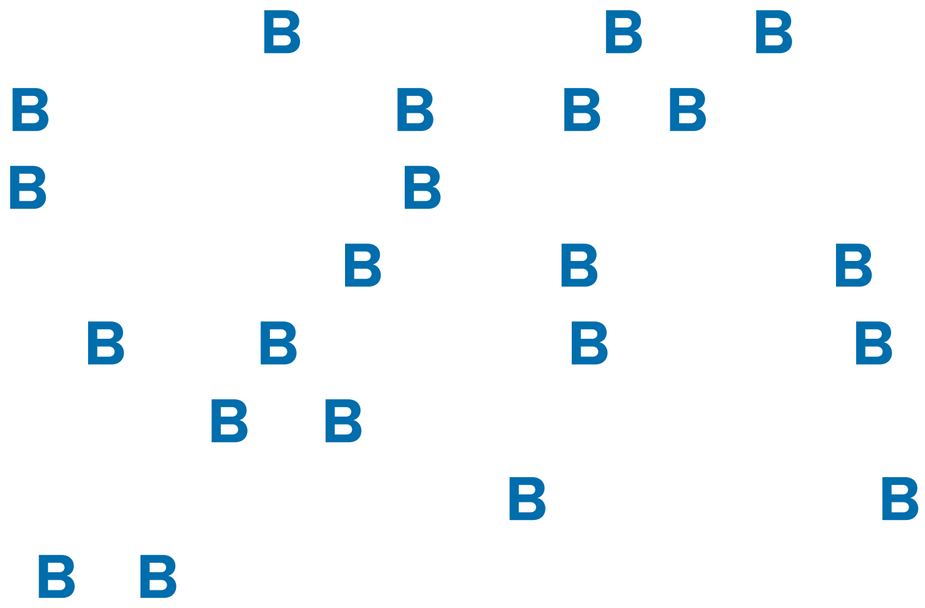

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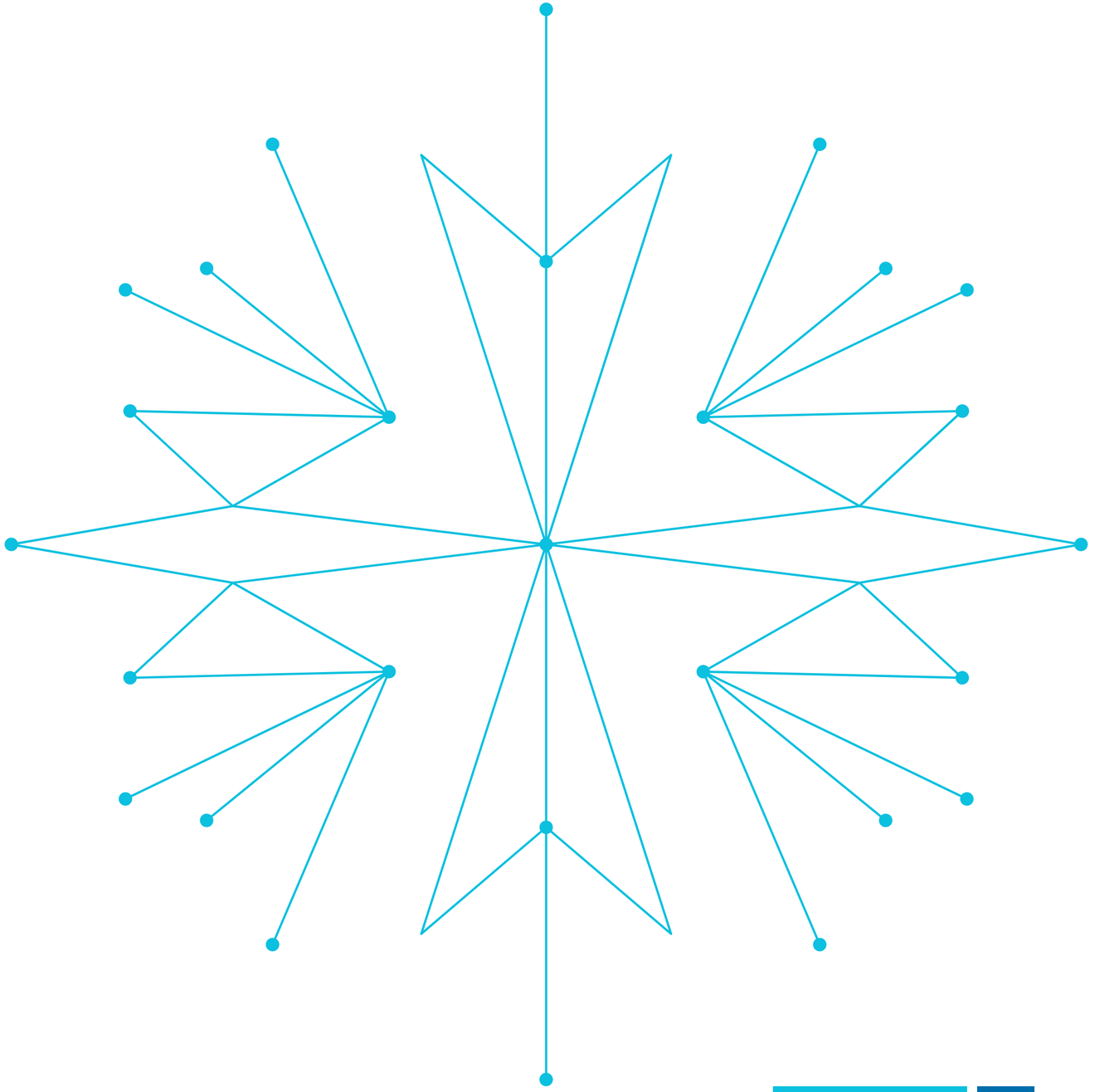

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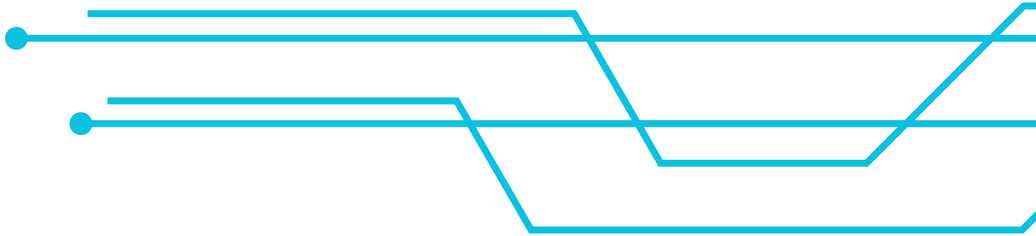

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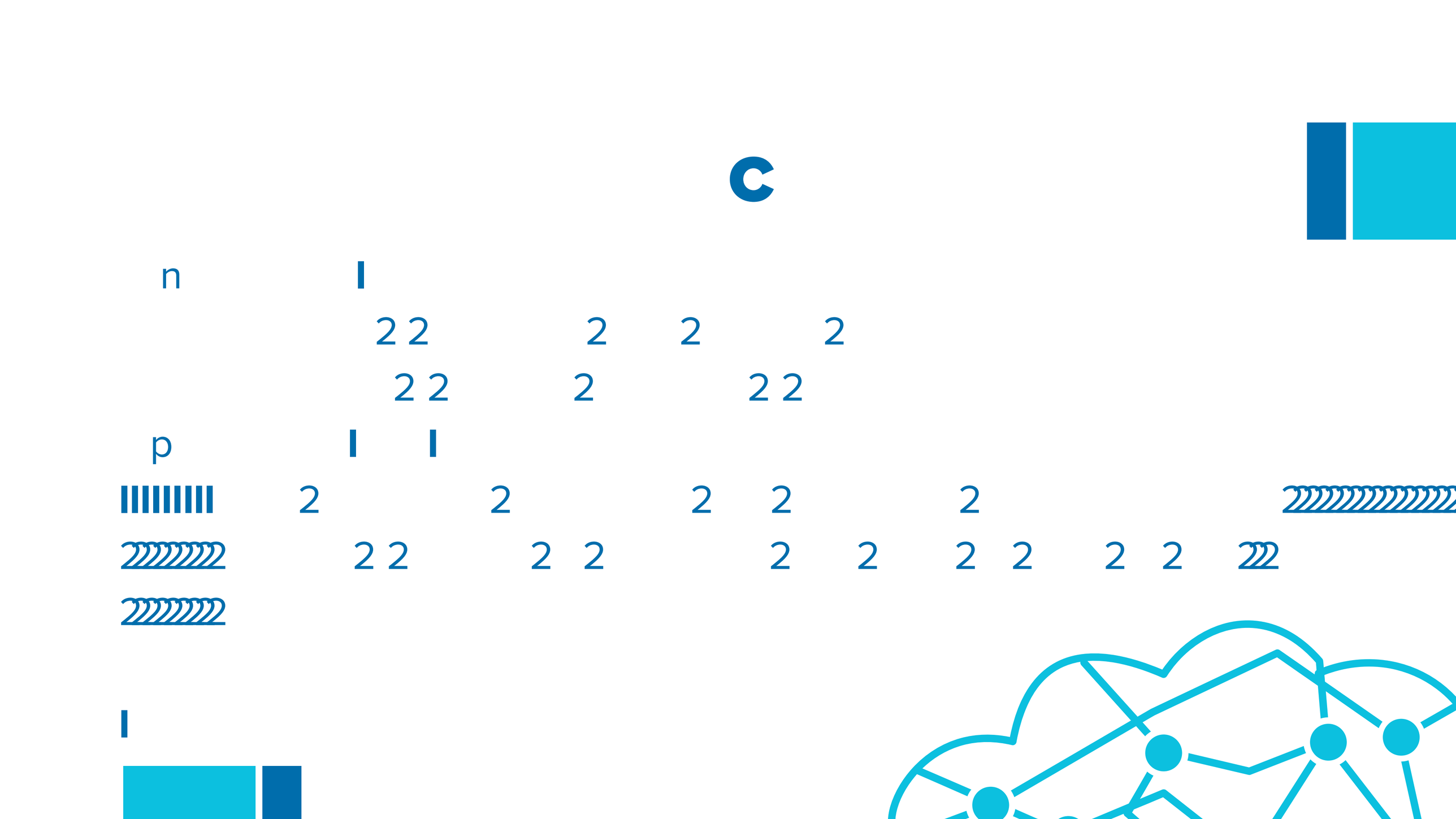

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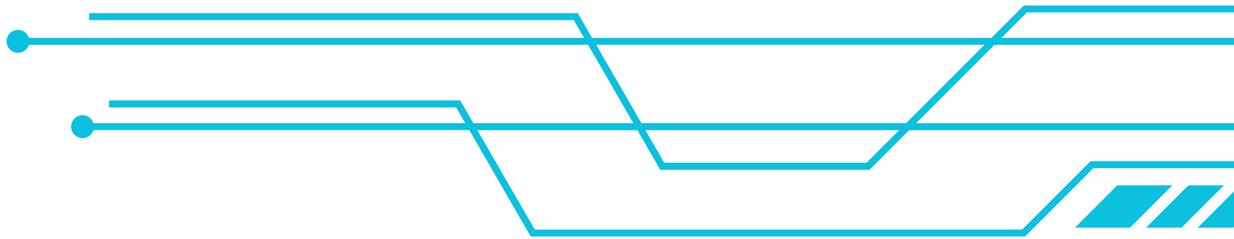

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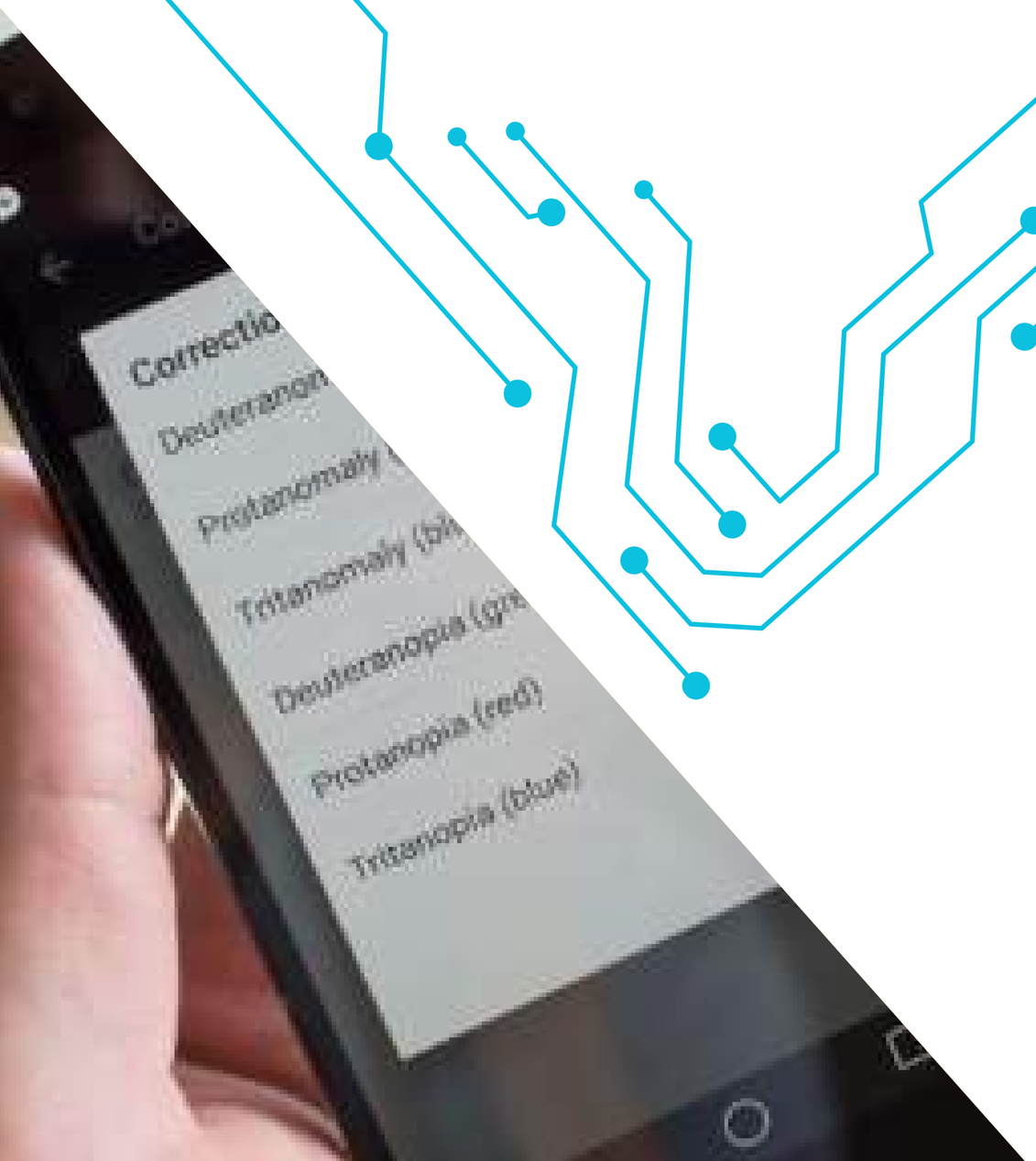
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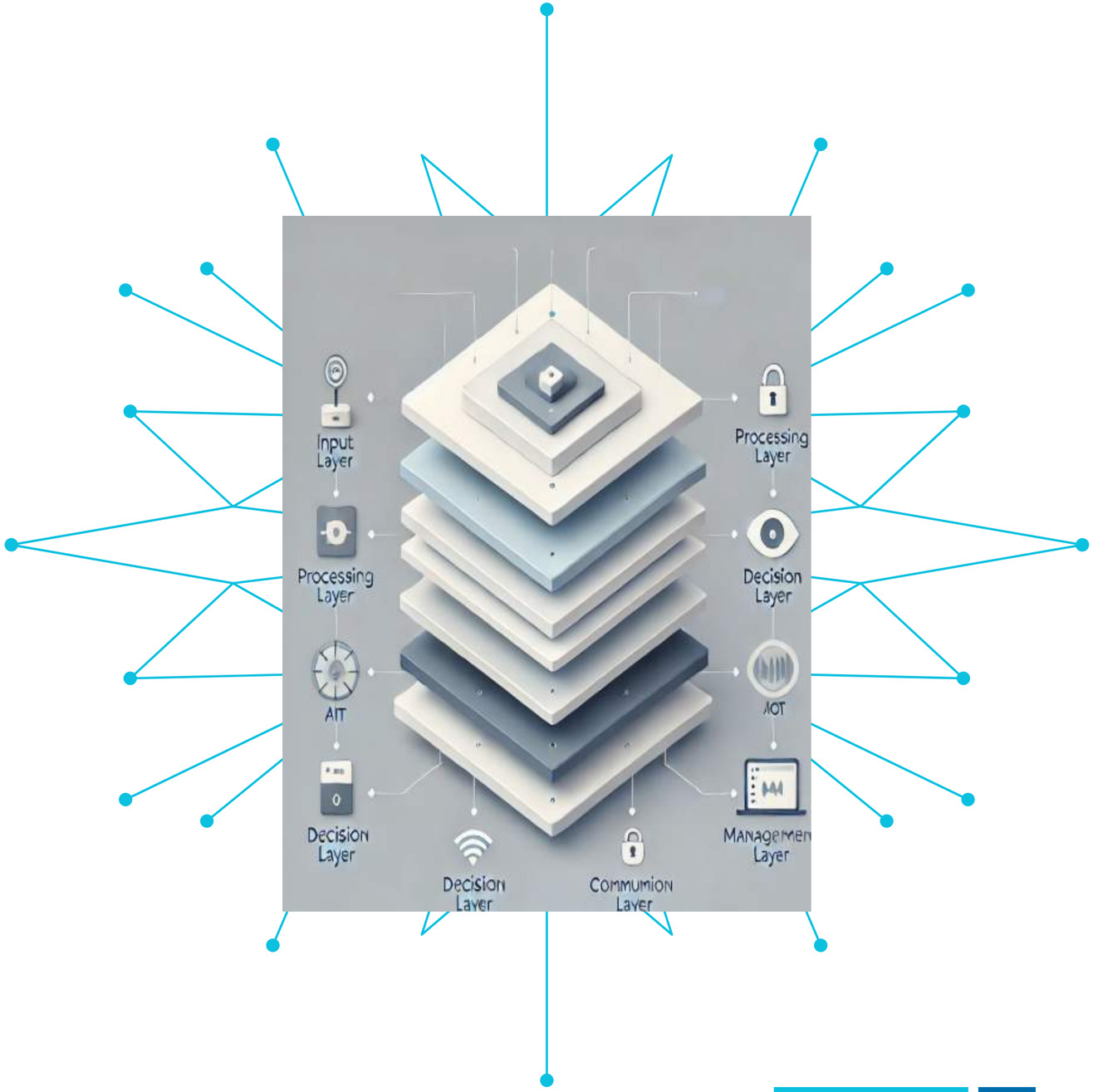
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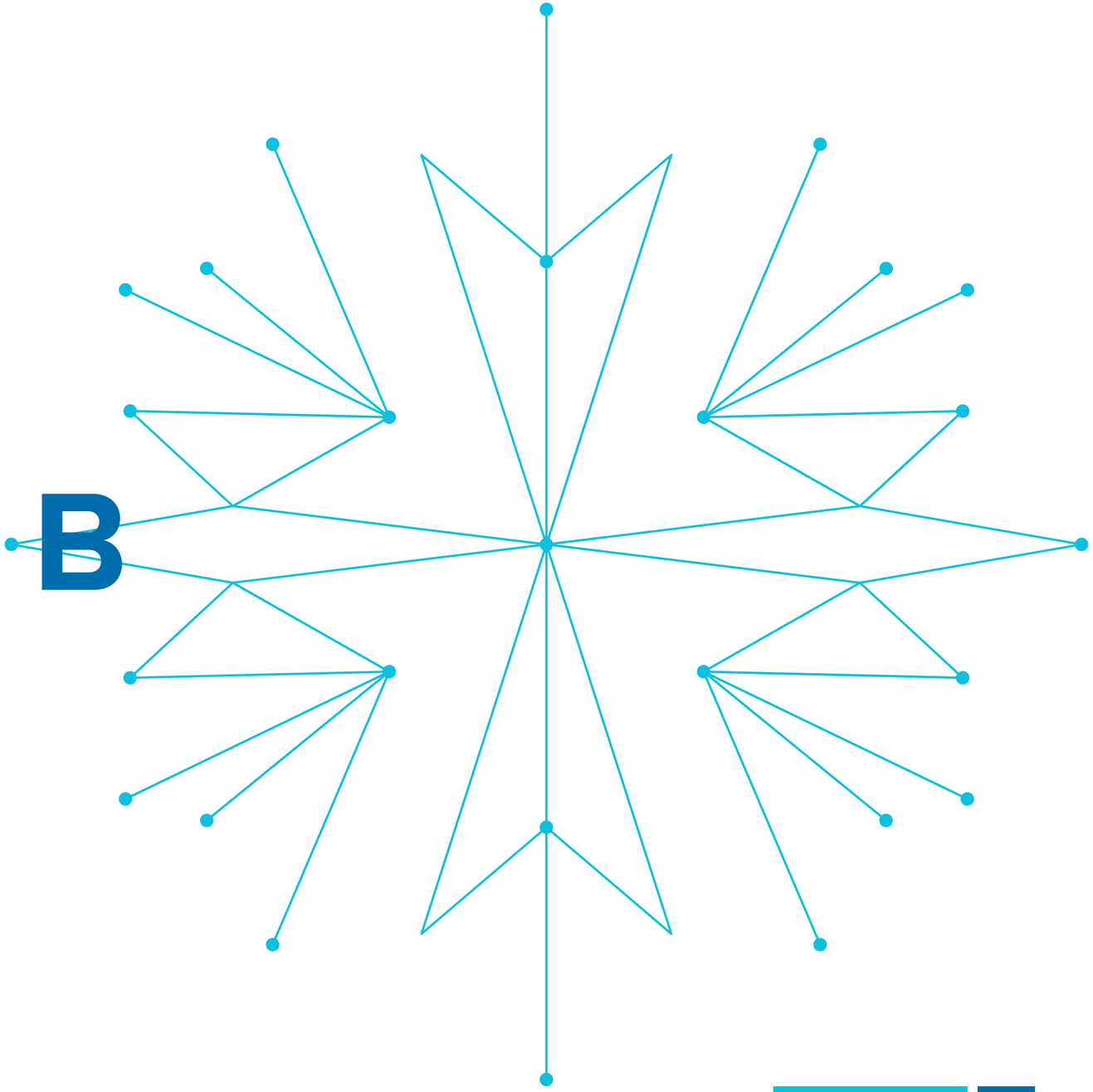

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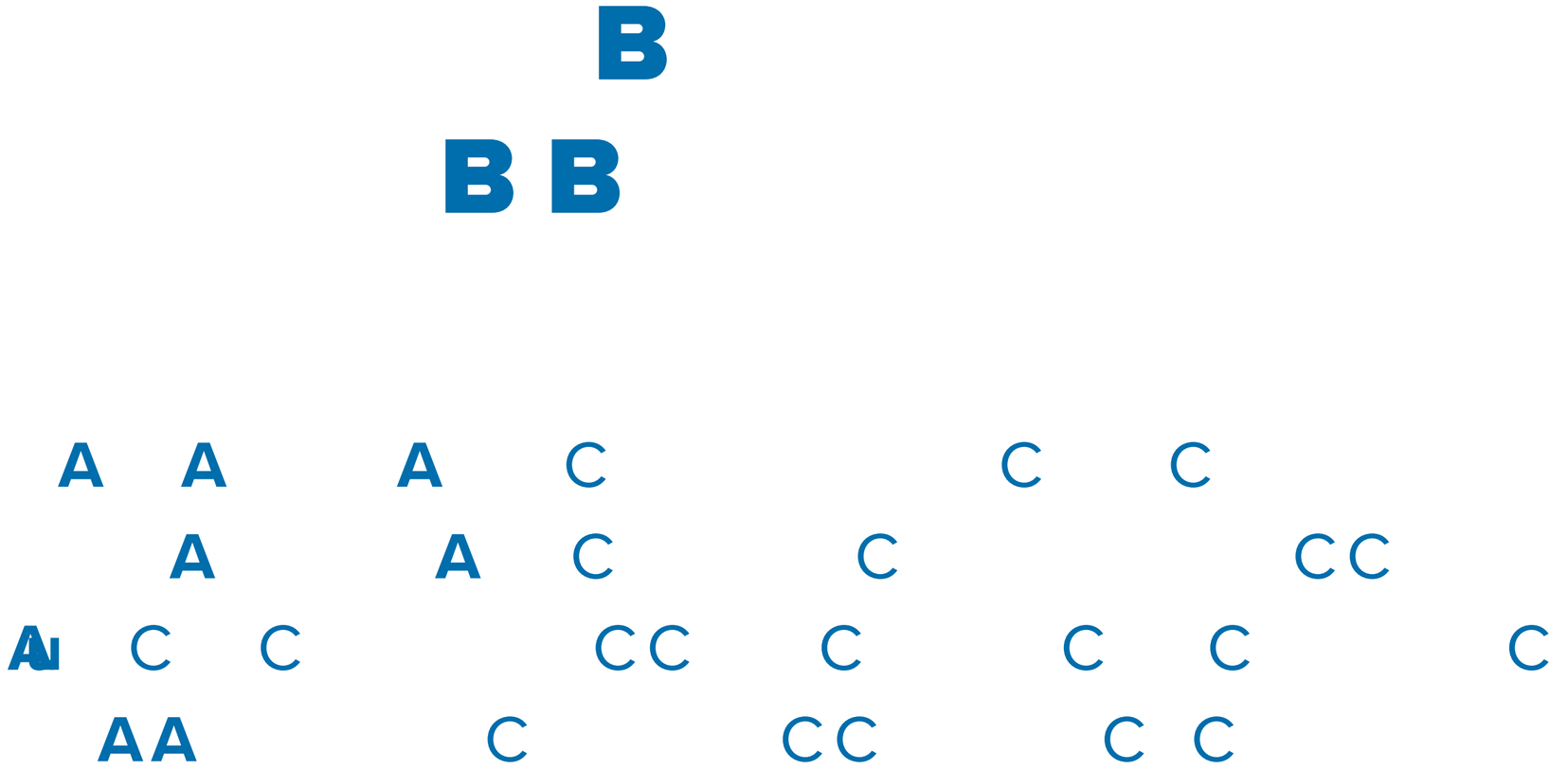
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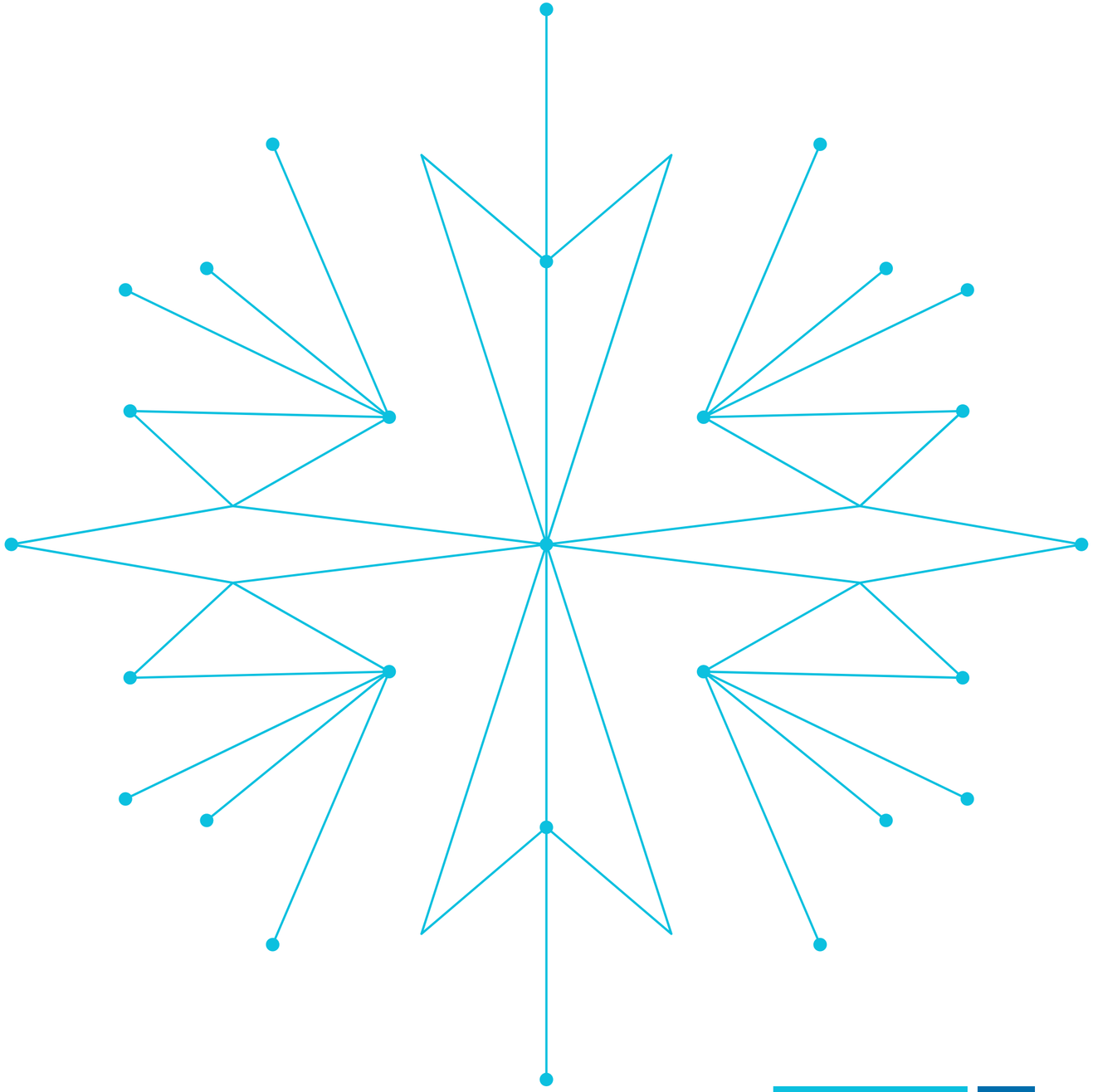

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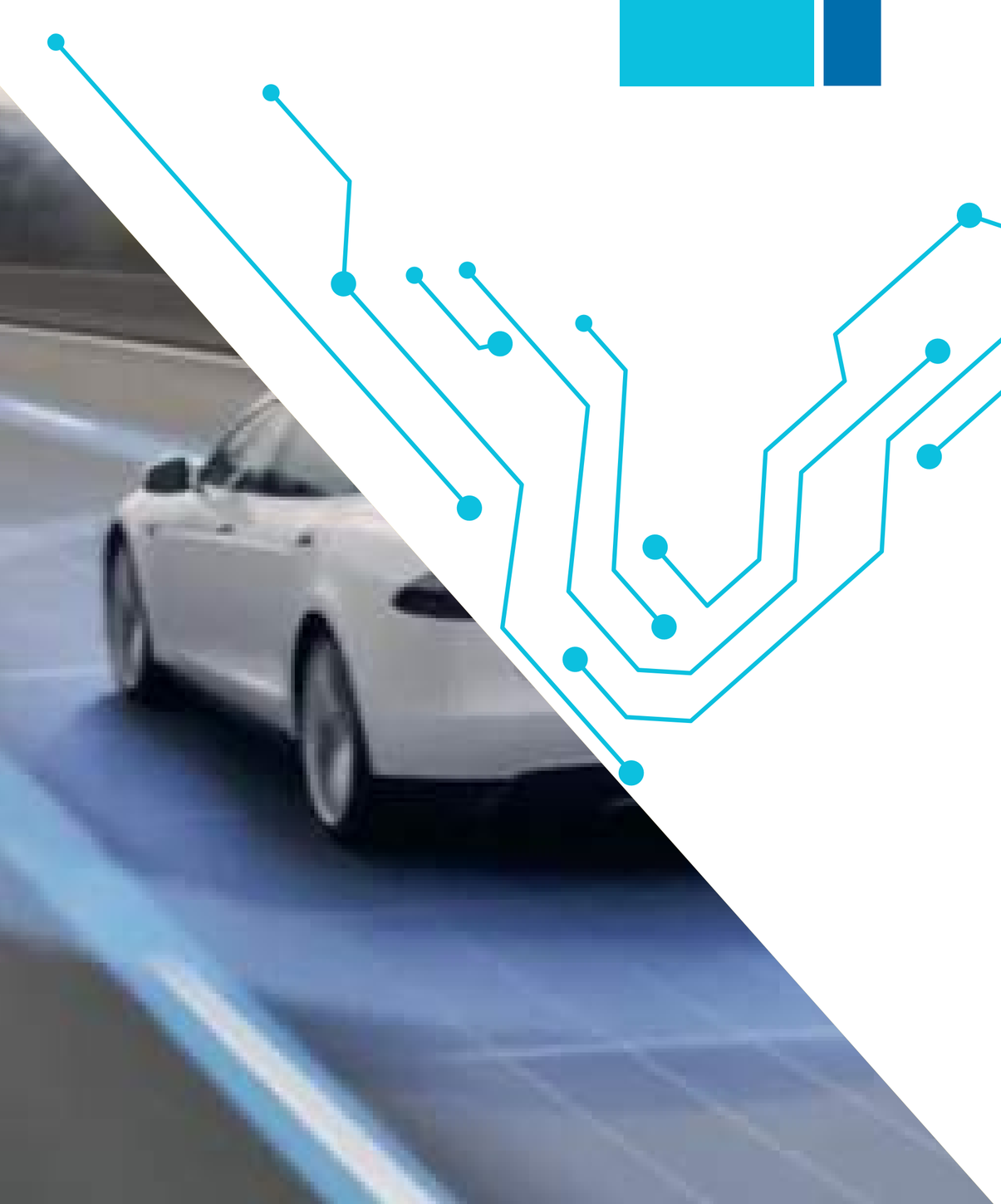

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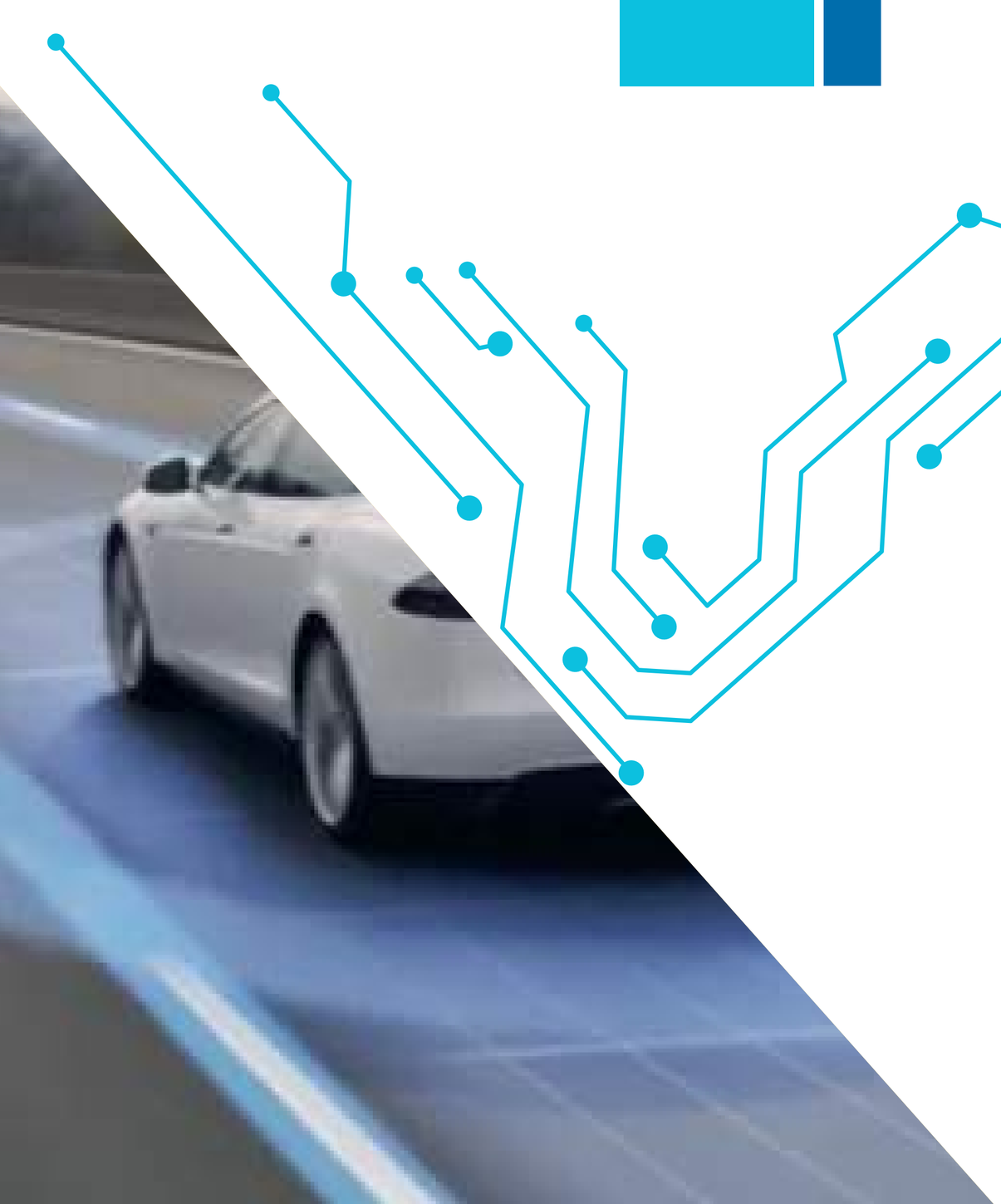

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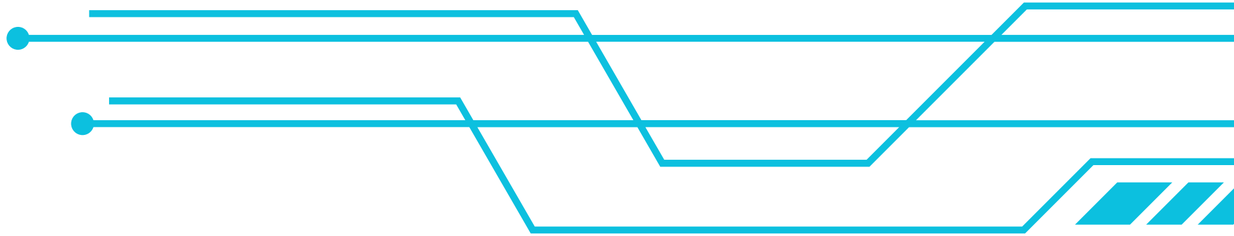

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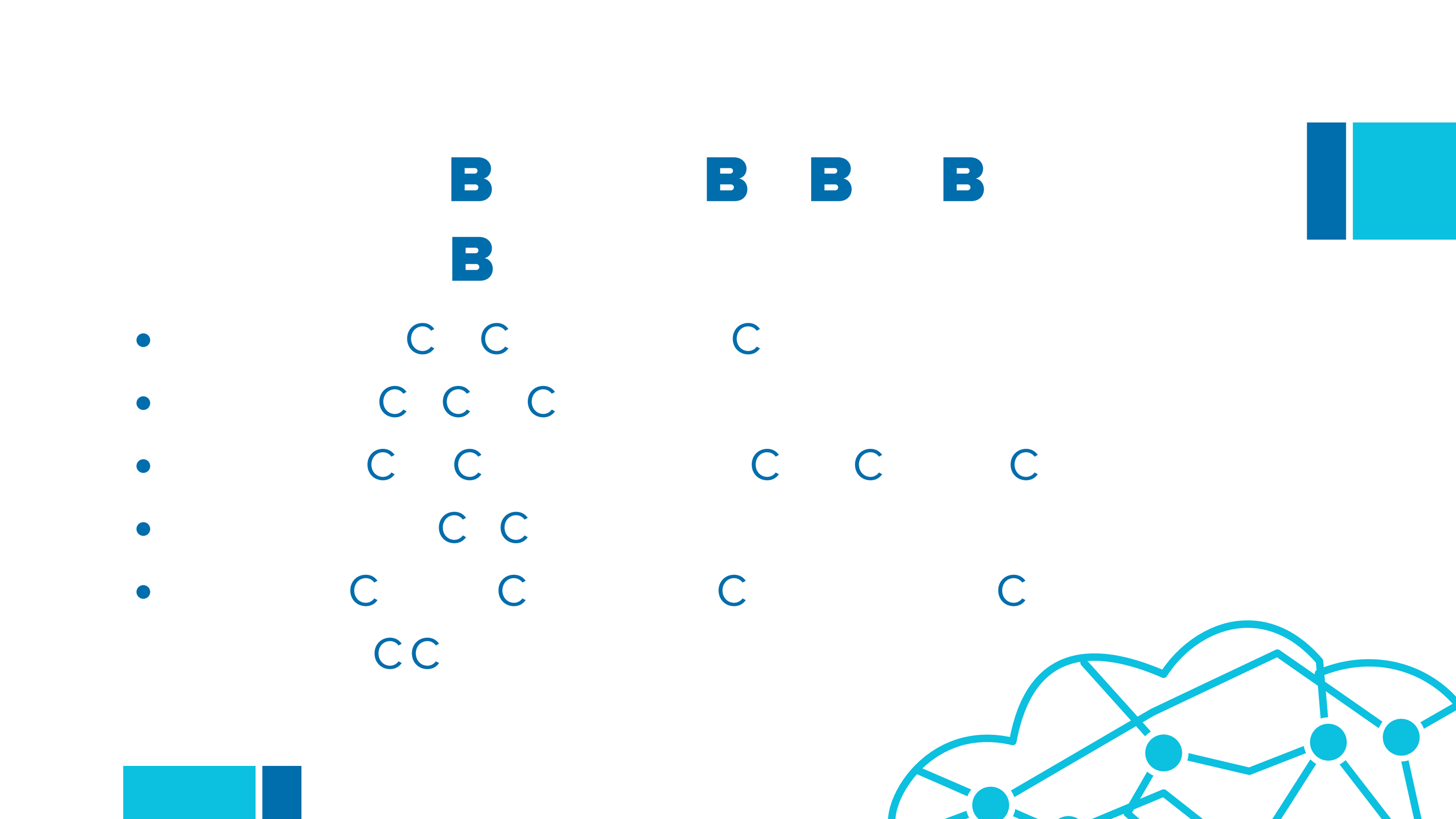
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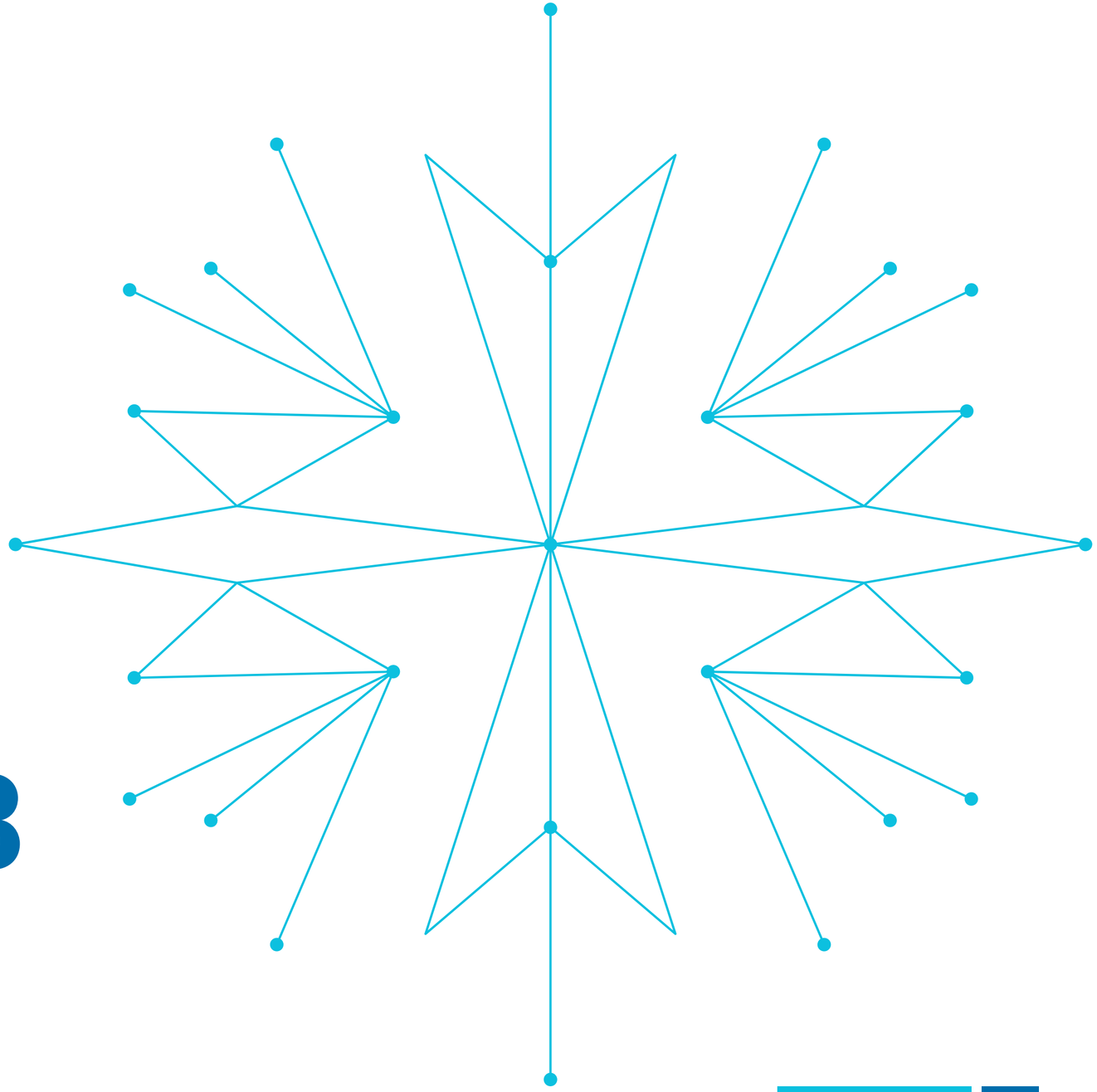

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