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Choosing an Involvement Strategy

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Abstract

Three different approaches to employee involvement are defined and reviewed. Suggestion involvement deviates the least from the traditional control oriented approach and tends to produce limited gains in organizational performance. Job involvement calls for redesign of the work and can improve performance significantly. High involvement calls for many changes and where appropriate produces the greatest gains. Technology, the existing management style, and the values and beliefs of the work force are seen as crucial determinants of the correct approach for an organization.

CHOOSING AN INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

The most prevalent approach to designing work organizations calls for such features as hierarchical decision making, simple repetitive jobs at the lowest level, and rewards based on carefully measured individual job performance. This "control approach," appears to be losing favor (Walton, 1985). Numerous articles and books have recently argued that work organizations need to move toward a more or commitment approach to the design and management of work organizations (see e.g., Lawler, 1986; Walton, 1985). The advantages of the involvement approach are said to include higher quality products and services, less absenteeism, less turnover, better decision making, and better problem solving; in short, greater organizational effectiveness (Dennison, 1984).

Careful examination of the suggested approaches to involvement reveals that it is not a single approach, but at least three different approaches to managing organizations all of which are designed to encourage employee participation in decision making. These three different approaches have different histories, advocates, advantages, and disadvantages. An organization interested in adopting an involvement oriented approach needs to be aware of the differences among these approaches and strategically choose the approach that is best for it.

The three approaches to involvement are:

- 1) Parallel Suggestion Involvement
- 2) Job Involvement

3) High Involvement.

They differ in the degree to which they argue that four key features of an organization should be moved to the lowest level.

Briefly the features are:

- 1) Information about the performance of the organization.
- 2) Rewards that are based on the performance of the organization.
- 3) Knowledge that enables employees to understand and contribute to organizational performance.
- 4) Power to make decisions that influence organizational direction and performance.

Information, rewards, knowledge and power are the central issues in all organizations (Galbraith, 1973). How they are positioned in an organization determines the core management style of the organization. When they are concentrated at the top, traditional control-oriented management exists; when they are moved downward some form of participative management is being practiced.

The "parallel suggestion approach" does the least to move power, knowledge, information, and rewards downward while the "high involvement approach" does the most. Because they have different strategies for positioning power, information, knowledge, and rewards, these approaches tend to fit different situations and to produce different results. It is not that one is always better than another, but that they are different and, to some degree, competing. Let us consider how each of these three approaches operates, and the results they produce. Once we have reviewed them, we can discuss when and how they are best utilized.

Parallel Suggestion Involvement

Probably the oldest approach to employee involvement is suggestion involvement. Formal suggestion programs are perhaps the original approach to establishing a problem solving relationship between lower level employees and their work. In suggestion involvement, the employees are asked--probably for the first time--to problem solve and produce ideas that will influence how the organization operates. Traditional suggestion programs often include a reward system change as well. For example, an individual who is not in a management position may be given a reward based on one year's estimated savings from the suggestions they produce. Interestingly, managers typically are not rewarded for suggestions because it is "part of their job."

Much more extensive reward system change is involved in gainsharing plans. The oldest and best known gainsharing plan is the Scanlon Plan (Graham-Moore and Ross, 1983). Other gainsharing plans include the Improshare plan and the Rucker plan. Unlike traditional suggestion programs, in gainsharing plans employees share in gains for as long as they are realized by the organization. In the typical gainsharing plan, employees are asked to suggest improvements and they share in any performance improvement the organization makes. Some gainsharing plans also move new information downward because they focus on organizational performance. In some cases, gainsharing plans go beyond suggestion involvement by creating a joint union/management committee structure that decides on the implementation of suggestions, designs and alters the plan, and makes other policy decisions.

Recently quality circles have become an extremely popular approach to suggestion involvement. At this point, quite a bit is known about

the effectiveness of quality circles and how they operate (Lawler and Mohrman, 1985). Like written suggestion programs and Scanlon Plan suggestion programs, they ask employees to recommend ways that the operations of the organization can be improved. In the traditional quality circle approach, this is done through a group or quality circle, rather than through an individual written suggestion. According to quality circle advocates, the group process typically leads to better suggestions and better developed suggestions than does the individual written process. In addition, in quality circles, considerable training is done to enable the group to function effectively and to help individuals become efficient problem solvers. In the more advanced programs, employees are trained in problem analysis and statistical quality control.

As is true with written suggestion programs, quality circles only have recommendation power; they do not have the power to implement and decide on the installation of their suggestions. In this sense, they are a parallel structure to the ongoing organization. They are also parallel structures because they take people out of their regular organizations and put them in a separate new structure that operates differently than the traditional organization. Quality circles and other parallel structures are often easy to install and start quickly. The problem-solving groups can be small and do not need to disrupt the organization. They can easily be installed in a single plant or even in a department of a larger organization. However, they do not change the existing organization structure and they usually affect only a small percentage of the work force.

Table 1 summarizes the general characteristic of suggestion involvement plans. As can be seen from the table, these types of plans do not represent a major shift in the way control oriented organizations deal with most issues. Instead they rely on a special parallel structure to change the relationship between individuals and their work. This structure gives people the chance to influence things that they would not normally influence and in some cases to share in the financial results of this new role. It also usually leads to some additional information being communicated, and individuals acquiring greater knowledge. However, this change in knowledge, information, and rewards often is limited to a small percentage of the work force. In addition, it is encapsulated because individuals are asked to use it only when they are operating in special suggestion type activities. During their regular work activities, it is very much work as usual.

Research on the parallel structure or suggestion involvement approach suggests that this approach can lead to improvement in organizational performance (Frost, Wakley, and Ruh, 1974; Lawler, 1986). Case after case shows that individuals and groups often come up with suggestions that save a considerable amount of money (Peters, 1987; Schuster, 1984). There also seems to be no question that employees enjoy the opportunity to participate in problem-solving. As a result, they are often more satisfied with their work situation, are absent less, and are less likely to turnover.

There are a number of well documented limitations of the parallel suggestion involvement approach. They tend to have a "program character" about them which leads to their being temporary systems in an organization. Parallel structures are expensive and difficult to

maintain. In some situations, they run out of suggestions because individuals do not have enough expertise to solve the more complex problems. They also often are resisted by the middle levels of management because parallel structures threaten their power and put them in the position of having to do extra work. Conflict can develop between those who are in parallel structures and those who are not. Nonparticipants can come to resent being left out. Sometimes parallel structures can lead to a call for systematically restructuring the organization for greater involvement. In essence, employees like the taste of involvement they have gotten and want more.

Finally, over time, suggestion involvement approaches that are not supported by reward system changes may lose their momentum and disappear. This comes about because they do not systematically change an organization's way of operating or the way the total work force relates to the organization and its performance. Gainsharing plans because they affect the way everyone is rewarded, typically do not suffer from this limitation. There are gainsharing companies like Herman Miller and Donnelley Mirrors which have maintained gainsharing plans for decades.

Job Involvement Approaches

Job involvement approaches focus on enriching work in order to motivate better job performance. One strategy, job enrichment, focuses on creating individual tasks that give people feedback, increases their influence over how the work is done, requires them to use a variety of skills, and gives them a whole piece of work (Hackman and Lawler, 1971). This approach has an extensive research history going back to the 1950s,

when behavioral scientists tried to design alternatives to traditional standardized simplified work (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Perhaps the most visible champion of this approach had been Herzberg (1969).

A second strategy for job involvement creates work groups or teams. This approach, too, has an extensive research history going back to the 1940s and the pioneering work of Trist, Emery, and Thorsrud (Cummings, 1978; Emery and Thorsrud, 1969). It differs from individual enrichment in that it takes the work group as the primary unit of involvement. It tries to create group goals, tasks, and motivation such that group members all feel responsible for the group's performance. Groups designed according to this approach are often called autonomous work groups, self-managing groups, semi-autonomous work groups, or work teams.

As is shown in Table 2, the job involvement approach does have significant implications for how an organization is structured and managed. In essence, individuals are given new skills and knowledge, new feedback, an additional set of decisions to make, and may be rewarded differently. Both the individual and the team approach have these effects, although the team approach carried to its fullest has it to a greater degree.

With the team approach, it is important to add interpersonal skills and group decision making skills to those that are needed for individual enrichment. The reward system also is changed more with groups or teams, since skill based pay is often added. Finally, teams can make certain decisions that individuals usually can not. Both individuals and teams can control the way the work is done. They can do quality management, inventory, and other task related activities, but teams can

also make personnel management decisions. Teams, for example, can make decisions about hiring and firing, and may select their own supervisors (Lawler, 1978). Perhaps the most successful examples of teams are found in the new plants which have been built by Procter and Gamble, Mead and a host of other manufacturing companies during the last twenty years.

Overall, job involvement represents a significant change in the fundamental operations of an organization. Individuals at the lowest levels get new information, power, skills, and may be rewarded differently. The new information, power, knowledge, and rewards relates to their particular work tasks; it typically does not have to do with structuring and operating of the whole organization nor the development of its strategic direction. Unlike parallel suggestion approaches, the day to day work activities of all individuals are affected. Involvement is not an occasional thing, it is the standard way in which business is done.

Theoretically, the choice between teams and individual job enrichment should be made based upon the technology of the workplace (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Teams are more complicated to build and to maintain, but may be necessary if the work is such that no one individual can do a whole part of it and get feedback about it. Teams are often appropriate, for example, in process production facilities such as chemical plants, oil refineries, and in complex service organizations such as banks and airlines. Where the technology allows an individual to do a whole task or offer a whole service, individual designs are preferred because they are simpler to install and give the individual more direct feedback.

Studies of job involvement approaches show improvements in productivity, quality, absenteeism, and turnover among individuals working in enriched jobs and in teams (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). The net result for the organization is usually significant performance improvement over that found with traditional job structures. Unlike suggestion programs, job involvement structures seem to have reasonably good stability, particularly in the case of teams, since they represent cohesive organizational units that are difficult to dissolve.

The limitations of the job involvement approach are primarily those of lost opportunities. Because they limit employee involvement to immediate work decisions, they often fail to capture the contributions that individuals can make to strategic decisions, and to higher level management work. This can lead to a tendency for individuals in work teams to optimize their own performance without paying a great deal of attention to overall organization performance.

Work involvement efforts do have some significant start-up costs associated with them because they require considerable training. Often overlooked is the need for training the supervisor and for dramatically changing the supervisor's job (Walton and Schlesinger, 1979). Some evidence exists that many supervisors have difficulty changing from traditional management to job involvement. In some cases, job involvement efforts call for an extensive and expensive physical reconfiguration of the work place in order to allow for team interaction and for individuals controlling a whole piece of work. Also, they are often resisted by middle managers because they feel threatened by the new power which others have.

Finally, job involvement approaches may be subject to cancellation if they do not influence higher level strategic decisions concerned with organization structure, power, and the allocation of rewards. This is particularly true with individual job enrichment. Unless major restructuring is done to support it, supervisors are often in the position of being able to unilaterally change jobs in ways that take away the decision making power that is critical to their being enriched. Job involvement efforts are particularly likely to be cancelled when they affect small parts of an organization. Like parallel structures, they can be installed only on a limited basis and, as a result, create friction between participants and non-participants (Trist and Dwyer, 1982). This friction can, in turn, lead to pressures to eliminate the job involvement program.

High Involvement Approach

The high involvement approach has also been called the "commitment approach," or perhaps more descriptively, the "business involvement approach." It is relatively new although it has its roots in the early work of Likert (1967) on System 4 management and the work of Trist and others on sociotechnical systems. In many respects, it also builds upon what has been learned from the suggestion involvement and job involvement approaches. It tends to structure an organization so that people at the lowest level will have a sense of involvement, not just in how they do their jobs or how effectively their group performs, but in the performance of the total organization. It goes considerably further than either of the other two approaches toward moving power, information, knowledge, and rewards to the lowest level. It basically

argues that if individuals are going to care about the performance of the organization, they need to know about it, be able to influence it, be rewarded for it, and have the knowledge and skills to contribute to it.

As is shown in Table 3, in order to have high involvement management, virtually every major feature of the organization needs to be designed differently than with the control approach (Walton, 1985; Lawler, 1986). The high involvement approach builds upon what is done in the job involvement and the suggestion involvement approaches. Parallel structures are used for certain kinds of problem solving and policy setting, and work is designed according to the principles of individual enrichment and work teams. High involvement is different, however, in the kind of information it argues should be shared, and in the decision power and reward systems areas. In the case of decision power, employees are not only asked to make decisions about their work activities, they are asked to play a role in organizational level decisions having to do with strategy, investment, and other major organization decisions. Rewards are based upon the performance of the organization; hence, profit-sharing, gain-sharing, and some type of employee ownership are appropriate.

Creating a high involvement organization is clearly a much different and more complex task than is implementing job involvement or parallel suggestion involvement. Virtually every feature of a control oriented organization has to be redesigned, and in some cases, innovation in design is necessary. Many of the methodologies and approaches for such practices as pay, selection, and training are readily available and well developed for control oriented management.

Installing them is simply a matter of taking established systems "off the shelf" and making them operational.

On the other hand, there is a relative paucity of technology to support the development of high involvement organizations. This is largely due to the fact that this approach to management is new and the technology has not had time to develop. Therefore, those organizations which adopt it are forced into somewhat of a research and development mode with respect to the technology of management. This point is well illustrated by the case of a no longer existing airline, People Express. It had to invent new work scheduling approaches, pay structures, training programs and a new organization design in order to operate in a high involvement mode. Because no airline has ever operated as a high involvement organization there simply were not examples around. Not surprisingly, the need for so much "invention" and system "debugging" contributed to some of their operating problems.

There is relatively little data on the effectiveness of high involvement organizations. Indeed, there are few examples to study. The closest organizations to this approach would appear to be the many team based new plants which have been started around the world (Walton, 1985; Lawler, 1978). The data on the plants are largely favorable, but limited. In addition, there are some new organizations which have started with this approach and some employee owned companies which are moving toward operating in a high involvement mode (Rosen, Klein and Young, 1986).

It is hardly surprising that the best examples of high involvement organizations are new startups. The high involvement approach represents such an extensive change from the control approach to

management, that the difficulties in making a conversion are enormous. It is much easier to start with a clean sheet of paper and design the organization from the ground up (Perkins, Nieva, and Lawler, 1983). This is in notable contrast to job involvement and suggestion involvement approaches which are often put in place in existing organizations.

The admittedly sketchy, testimonial type evidence that does exist on high involvement organizations generally shows superior operating results (see for example, Fortune, 1982; Walton, 1985; Peters, 1987). They tend to be low-cost, relatively flexible, adaptive organizations which are very quality and customer oriented (Lawler, 1986). They are, however, not cheap to start, since they require a large investment in selection, training, and system development. In addition, as will be discussed next, they do not fit every person, situation, or business.

THE STRATEGIC CHOICE

Decisions about which approach an organization should adopt ought to be guided by a number of factors. The different approaches to involvement fit different types of businesses, situations, and individuals. The key to effective utilization of any of them is installing them in conditions where they are congruent. Three major factors need to be examined in deciding which approach to pick:

- (1) Nature of the work and technology.
- (2) Values of the key participants
- (3) Present management approach of the organization

Work and Technology

Perhaps the overriding determinant of how an organization should approach involvement is the kind of work it does and the technology it uses. Managers' values and attitudes can be changed over time, and older control oriented organizations can evolve their practices from traditional to high involvement, but organizations cannot necessarily change the kind of technology they use or the kind of jobs that the technology dictates (Thompson, 1967; Woodward, 1958).

Admittedly, technology is only partly driven by the products and services the organization offers (Galbraith, 1973). As many advocates of the sociotechnical approach have pointed out, there is some flexibility in the technology an organization chooses to use. In addition, the technology does not completely dictate the nature of the jobs an organization has. Some technologies can be modified to produce the type of jobs that are congruent with the desired form of involvement. A heroic example of this is the way Volvo has worked to alter auto assembly technology to make it congruent with work teams. But in many cases the control of a single organization is limited. There is, for example, little flexibility when it comes to refining oil and generating electricity. It is very difficult to change the telephone operators job given the way telephone equipment has been designed. As a result, there are some situations in which the technology is not amenable to any of the involvement approaches, with the possible exception of suggestion involvement.

There are two aspects of technology which are particularly critical in influencing the appropriateness of different involvement approaches:

(1) degree of interdependence, and (2) the degree of complexity. Interdependence refers to how much individuals need to coordinate, cooperate, and relate to others in order to produce the product or services the organization offers. Organizations vary on this dimension from very high interdependence to low interdependence. For example, university professors and insurance salespersons are typically in a low interdependence situation while chemical plant operators and computer design engineers are in high interdependence situations.

High interdependence argues for teams and against individual approaches to work design. Low interdependence favors maximizing individual performance through job enrichment or well structured individual tasks with large amounts of incentive pay. A crucial issue in determining which way to go with low interdependence jobs is the complexity of the work involved; high complexity calls for job enrichment while low complexity calls for simple jobs and incentive pay.

Technology, to a substantial degree, tends to influence the complexity of the work. Complexity can vary all the way from the highly repetitive jobs associated with assembly lines, to the highly complex knowledge work represented by professional jobs and jobs in state of the art manufacturing facilities. Where the work is simple and repetitive by necessity, it is hard to put in place a high involvement or even a job involvement approach; unless the technology can be changed. These situations are often limited to parallel suggestion involvement approaches because they can operate with most approaches to work design and most types of technology.

With complex knowledge work, the clear choice is one of the involvement approaches. At the very least, job involvement is called

for, job enrichment in the case of independent work, and teams in the case of interdependent work. If other conditions are right, high involvement would seem to be the best choice. High involvement flourishes where complex knowledge work exists because individuals who do this kind of work possess the ability to participate in a wide range of decisions, and often expect and want this approach to management.

Values and Beliefs

The values and beliefs which the key participants in an organization need to have vary widely among the involvement approaches. If the values do not match the chosen approach, the approach is unlikely to be fully implemented and operated effectively (McGregor, 1960).

In the case of the suggestion approach, key managers do not have to have a profound belief that employees can and will exercise self-control, manage themselves, and be able to contribute to major organizational decisions. They simply need to believe that employees have useful ideas about how things can be improved.

The high involvement approach, on the other hand, requires that managers believe in the capabilities, sense of responsibility, and commitment of people throughout the organization. In short, they need to believe that people not only are a key resource organization, but that people can and will behave responsibly if given the opportunity.

The beliefs of management are often captured in the philosophical statements they endorse and write. High involvement organizations typically have clearly stated, widely circulated management philosophy statements which highlight their commitment to employee involvement and pushing decision making and information to the lowest levels of the

organization. On the other hand, managers who feel most comfortable with suggestion involvement usually make no such statements. If they say anything, it is that employees are an important asset of the organization and know how to do their jobs best.

The values of the employees are also important to consider. For any form of involvement to work, most employees have to want to learn, grow, develop, contribute, and take on new responsibilities. Most researchers have argued that the vast majority of the American work force does want to be involved in their work, but few argue it is universally true (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Particularly where there has been a long history of autocratic management, the majority of the workforce may not want to be more involved. They may have become conditioned to the control oriented approach and appreciate the fact that they can just put in their eight hours and not have to take the job home with them. In addition, self selection may have taken place so that those who most value involvement quit long ago leaving behind those who are less attracted to it.

Societal values can also come into play in determining the appropriate approach to involvement. Democratic societies provide much more supportive environments for the high involvement approach than do traditional autocratic societies. The United States, with its long democratic tradition and commitment to individual rights, appears to provide the ideal setting for involvement oriented management. Historically, the society has exempted the work place from the societal commitment to democracy and individual rights, but there are many signs of this breaking down in the area of individual rights and it seems

inevitable that it will also disappear as far as participation and involvement are concerned (Ewing, 1977; Sashkin, 1984).

Organizational Starting Point

In considering employee involvement strategies, organizations need to assess their current operating approach. As was noted earlier, it is hardly surprising that many job involvement and high involvement organizations start as "green field" operations. Without question, it is easiest to install involvement oriented management where no management system presently exists. Not only is it possible to select managers who have values that are supportive of involvement, it is not necessary to overcome all the traditions, practices, and policies which are incongruent with it. This is not to say that it is impossible to evolve an organization toward high involvement. If it seems to be called for because of the kind of work and technology the organization has, and if the values of managers support it, it certainly is possible (Lawler, 1987). However, it may not be feasible to start immediately with a high involvement approach.

In starting a change process toward high involvement, it is critical to see where the organization is and then map out a long term strategy which will lead it to high involvement management. If the organization is currently operating in an extremely traditional way, then the best first step may be to move to quality circles or another suggestion involvement approach. This approach should be structured in ways that make movement to job involvement relatively easy. Quality circles, for example, can be structured to lead to the development of work teams (Lawler and Mohrman, 1987). If they are led by a supervisor

and organized around natural work units, they can be converted into teams. As has been noted, work teams are an important part of the high involvement approach. Getting them in place is an important step toward high involvement management; thus, there can be a natural transition from the parallel structure approach to job involvement and finally to high involvement.

If an organization is already relatively participative in a number of its personnel policies, its work structure, and managerial behaviors, it may not be necessary to start with a suggestion involvement program. The organization can immediately start with the job involvement approach. On the other hand, if an organization is very traditional in the way it operates, and managers are very hesitant to give up decision making power, then often the only place to start involvement is with a parallel suggestion approach. Quality circles or Scanlon written suggestion programs are particularly good, since they present a minimal threat to existing management prerogatives and power. Sometimes their success can convince management to move ahead to other forms of involvement. As was pointed out earlier, however, suggestion program are limited in what they can accomplish because they do little to share power, knowledge, rewards, and information.

The presence of a union organization can make a significant difference in which approach to involvement is most appropriate. Many unions have been willing to jointly create parallel structure approaches to involvement. Scanlon plans, for example, have been widely used in unionized work places as have quality of work life programs. The latter usually create a hierarchical structure of joint union management committees (Lawler and Ozley, 1979). These committees are involvement

devices in their own right and they typically sponsor problem solving groups and other participative activities for rank and file union members (Lawler, 1986). A common problem with quality of work life programs is that they end up dealing with a very limited set of issues, primarily these concerned with work place hygiene. In a few instances, this type of parallel structure involvement has led to the creation of high involvement efforts. A good example of this is the General Motors Saturn project. General Motors had quality of work life projects for years before they decided to ask the U.A.W. to jointly create a new company called Saturn which is to be developed and run in a high involvement manner.

Conclusion

The argument so far suggests that there is no one right approach to involvement. It needs to be dictated by a number of situational factors. At the extreme, an organization may only be able to progress from control to suggestion involvement. If all an organization's systems are traditional, well developed, and firmly in place, its technology leads to relatively independent, simple repetitive tasks, then suggestion involvement is appropriate. However, if the organization is new, has complex knowledge work, interdependent tasks, and managers who value employee involvement, it is possible to move to high involvement management and reap the rewards it has to offer.

Because involvement is not a universal good for all organizations, it is important to take a differentiated view toward it. If organizations carefully analyze where they are and where they want to be, they can lay out a series of steps which will lead to the type of

involvement which fits their situation. In the absence of this kind of process, they run the risk of managing in a way that suboptimizes the potential effectiveness of the organization.

Table 1

Suggestion Involvement

Job Design:	Traditional simple, specialized, focus on individual
Organizational Structure:	Functional organization
Parallel Structures:	Quality circles; written suggestions; screening or review committees
Performance Information:	Value of savings from suggestions
Knowledge:	Group skills and problem solving
Decision Power:	Traditional topdown; suggestions decided upon by hierarchy
Rewards	Traditional job based with merit pay; possible awards for value of suggestion
Personnel Policies:	Traditional

Table 2

Job Involvement

Job Design:	Job enrichment or teams
Organization Structure:	Traditional functional
Parallel Structures:	None
Performance Information:	Focused on job and/or team performance
Knowledge:	Job specific, team skills
Decision Power:	Control over how job or team does work and functions
Rewards:	Traditional for job enrichment; skill-based pay possible for teams
Personnel Policies:	Traditional; some team-based decision making

Table 3

High Involvement

Job Design:	Work teams and job enrichment
Organization Structure:	Business or customer focused
Parallel Structures:	Task forces for major business issues
Performance Information:	Focus on business performance
Knowledge:	Team skills; business economics; problem solving
Decision Power:	Employees make work method and work unit management decisions, have input to strategic decisions
Rewards:	Egalitarian; skill-based pay; gainsharing and/or profit sharing; employee ownership
Personnel Policies:	Employment stability, equality of treatment, participatively developed and administered policies

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