

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ON WORK ENGAGEMENT LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT HEALTHCARE INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore generational differences on work engagement levels of employees in a South African government healthcare institution. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale measured the participants' levels of work engagement and it was administered to a random sample size of government healthcare institution employees (n=289). Statistical analyses of the data were conducted and the results of ANOVA indicated that the levels of work engagement significantly differ depending on the employees' generational cohort or group for the dimensions vigour, dedication and absorption. In terms of contributions and practical implications, recommendations are made regarding proposed organisational development interventions to enhance employees' work engagement levels in a healthcare institution context as well as to conduct future research.

Key Words: Work Engagement Levels, Government Sector, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

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1. Introduction

The term work engagement first appeared in the 1990s, currently over 200 scientific publications in the literature have appeared on the subject (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012). Yet there is still a need in the South African context to build the work engagement levels of employees in government healthcare institutions due to the high rate of medical cases, claims and legal suits of malpractices or negligence against employees in the medical field. According to Walters (2014, p 717) the Gauteng provincial government which is one the provinces in the country has recently settled claims in excess of R2 billion, with about as much still pending. These litigation and legal claim processes has undoubtedly affected the engagement levels and the very nature of the healthcare provided by employees in these institutions. The healthcare profession that was once characterised by the generosity of altruism, has, with the passage of time and a multitude of litigations or legal claims of malpractice involving a few employees, become transformed into a fearful and defensive band of employees who are constantly watching their backs (Walters, 2014). Hence an increase of our academic knowledge in this context may provide insight on how government healthcare institutions can support and inspire those practitioners or employees in their organisations to improve their work engagement levels.

Studies locally and internationally on work engagement were mostly conducted on the effects of

work engagement within corporate or private sector environment; focussing on its impact on leadership, commitment, culture, workaholism, performance, burnout and career development (Werner, 2005; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Marelli, 2011; Bowen et al, 1999; Shimanzu & Schaufelli, 2009). This reflects paucity of studies investigating work engagement in government healthcare institutions, the limited research on engagement in this context creates the need to investigate the construct. Thus this study seeks to expand this line of research and fill a gap in the literature by examining differential work engagement perceptions among groups of employees, called generations; within a South African government healthcare institution. Generational characteristics derive from an individual's age group. Different age groups of individuals tend to share historical experiences among themselves based on the similarity of their age, this lead to the establishment of distinct generational perceptions and values (Park & Gursoy, 2012). This study adds to the literature on work engagement and generational differences, because it investigated the varying degrees of work engagement among employees of three generational cohorts, namely Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials.

The organisational context of this study in which work engagement generational differences was explored is relevant because government institutions are multigenerational workplaces that require engaged employees who are intrinsically motivated in order to fulfil their mandate of service delivery.

Literature indicates that work engagement denotes a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, absorption and dedication (Taris, Schaufeli & Shimazu, 2010). Work engagement was initially defined as how employees express themselves in task behaviours that promoted connections to work, as presented through their personal (physical, cognitive and emotional performance) and active performances (Kahn, 1990). Hakonen and Schaufeli (2012) indicates that one critical outcome of work engagement is employee performance because those employees who are engaged perform better.

Work engagement is important for healthcare institutions because they need employees who are engaged and are able to perform better; in order to realise their fundamental purpose of providing health care services to satisfy public needs. Marelli (2011) argued that employee engagement is associated with a high level of motivation to perform well at work, which is combined with passion for the work and a feeling of personal connection to the team and the organisation. This implies that engaged employees will put a lot effort in their work because they identify with it (Hakonen & Schaufeli, 2012). Therefore, the role of employee engagement has been a critical human resources issue in business organisations because it is closely related to work outcomes such as organizational commitment and satisfaction (Park & Gursoy, 2012). Based on the above background, it is evident that it is critical to explore work engagement generational differences of employees in a South African government healthcare institution using a sample of employees.

2. Literature Review

The construct work engagement conceptualisation, dimensions and outcomes are discussed as follows in the literature review.

2.1 Conceptualisation of work engagement

Due to the recent popularity and buzz around engagement; different definitions to conceptualise and describe the construct have evolved from academic and practical perspectives. Kahn (1990) is considered to be the initial scholar to describe the construct work engagement. According to Kahn (1990, p. 694), work engagement is defined as "...harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles: in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, emotionally, and mentally during role performances". In terms of this definition; employee engagement is a multifaceted and dynamic construct comprising of the cognitive, behavioural and emotional components.

Firstly, the cognitive aspects of work engagement focus on what an employee thinks about

the organisation, and the employee's experience of absorption and involvement. This implies that employees work employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during their role performance (Kahn, 1990). Secondly, the physical or behavioural component of work engagement focusses on the employee's involvement in the task and how employees conduct themselves in relation to the organisation. Lastly, work engagement's emotional or affective component involves employees' feelings about their organisation by showing commitment and dedication as well as being connected to their job (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gouzalet-Roma & Bakker, 2002). Based on these three aspects; it is argued that work engagement enables employees to positively associate with their jobs or roles on multiple levels (Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011).

According to Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 4) work engagement is also conceptualised as "... a desirable condition that has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy". This description is considered to be a very broad and comprehensive framework for understanding engagement (Schaufeli, 2012); because, firstly it indicate trait engagement which includes positive views of life and work such as conscientiousness, trait positive affect, proactive personality. Secondly, it highlights the state of engagement which refers to feelings of energy and absorption such as satisfaction, involvement, and empowerment. Lastly, it reflects behavioural engagement which means extra-role behaviour such as organisational citizenship behaviour, personal initiative and role expansion.

In addition to the above descriptions of work engagement, the construct is also describe by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker (2002, p. 74) as "...a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption". This definition identifies three components or dimensions of engagement, namely vigour, dedication and absorption; which are discussed in the following section as the main dimensions of work engagement in this study.

2.2 Dimensions and benefits of work engagement

In order to describe work engagement, it is important to use the cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects described in the previous section (Kahn, 1990); these engagement components relates to the dimensions, namely, vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, *et al* 2002).

The first dimension *Vigour* is the energy and enthusiasm that the employee brings to the work place; that is characterized by high levels of energy, effort, resilience, persistence, and motivation to invest in their work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Kravina,

Falco, De Carlo & Andreassen, 2014). Second dimension *Dedication* is being devoted, inspired and believing work is purposeful or meaningful; it is characterised by involvement in the work, enthusiasm, a sense of pride and inspiration (Schaufelli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008; Taris *et al*, 2010). Third dimension *Absorption* is being immersed in the work to the extent that it is difficult for an employee to leave and time becomes less relevant to the employee; this dimension is characterised by immersion in one's work and the sense of time passing quickly (Bakker *et al*, 2011; George, 2011). This implies that engaged employees work hard (vigour), they are involved (dedicated) and they feel happily engrossed (absorbed) in their work.

According to Kravina *et al* (2014) work engagement is important in today's organisations because its benefits that includes high levels of energy, willingness and passion to perform well and to deliver above and beyond what is required of an employee. It is positively associated with job satisfaction and the physical health of employees (Schaufelli *et al*, 2008). Engagement has often been associated with positive consequences in organisations because it involves employee's ability to identify with one's work and the feeling of profound personal connection to the task, team and organisation. The benefits of work engagement in organisations are also high productivity and profitability; the customers become more satisfied and loyal, the employees are inclined to experience positive emotions such as, happiness, joy, and enthusiasm (Bowles & Cooper, 2012; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Kravina *et al*, 2014). In addition, the positive organisational outcomes of work engagement also include increased job performance, organizational commitment, work motivation, high levels of self-control, high co-worker support, and staff retention (Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter, 2011; Salanova, Agut & Peiró, 2005; Schaufelli & Salanova, 2007).

Work engagement is the opposite of burnout and workaholism. According to Schaufelli and Bakker (2003) contrary to those who suffer from burnout, engaged employees have a sense of energy and effective connection with their work activities and they see themselves as being able to deal well with the demands of their job. Burnout employees display exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy in their roles (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Christian *et al*, 2011). While the workaholic employees are unable to balance between their private life and work life; they denote an uncontrollable desire to work incessantly, excessively and compulsively (Kravina *et al*, 2014; Shimazu & Schaufelli, 2009; Schaufelli *et al*, 2008). This implies that work engagement is a positive organisational outcome when compared to burnout and workaholism.

2.3 Generational differences

It is an organisational imperative to study and understand generational cohorts because they hold different perceptions of each other, which can result in conflict and misunderstandings in the workplace (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). Career psychology literature describe a generational cohort as a group of individuals or employees who share important life experiences such as starting school, entering the workforce, and retiring at similar age. Twenge (2010) argue that a generational cohort also experience memorable historical events at a similar developmental stage. Hence generational cohorts have identifiable characteristics on which they differ. Park and Gursoy (2012) indicate that a group of individuals of a similar age who share historical experiences within the same time period are described as generation. There are three generational cohorts that have been identified in the literature, which are Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials (Meriac *et al*, 2010; Twenge 2010; Smola & Sutto, 2002).

The first generational cohort called Baby Boomers was born between 1946 and 1964. They grew up in the economic prosperity of the post-World War II, and lived through the most dramatic changes in history. In an organisational context Baby Boomers are considered to be loyal, committed, goal oriented, driven by rewards and they value work more than the younger generations because they see work as being more central to their lives (Smola & Sutto, 2002).

The second generational cohort called Generation Xers was born between 1965 and 1980. They are currently dominant in the workforce as Baby Boomers retire. In contrast to the first generational cohort, Generational Xers in organisations are considered to be independent and individualistic, placing more value work-life balance, increased pay, material possessions and their own careers over being loyal to their organisations (Twenge, 2010).

The third generational cohort called Millennials or Generation Y was born between 1981 and

1999. They are the youngest generation cohort replacing Baby Boomers in the workplace with shared experienced on technological advancements and the knowledge economy. In an organisational context, Millennials are described as valuing freedom, high expectation on promotions and pay increases, virtual work environment, meaningful and fulfilling work (Hill, 2002).

The above description suggests that generational cohorts experience different events in their formation of attitudes and beliefs; hence they tend to exhibit distinct group differences across cohorts. In this study, the focus was on the variable work engagement and its relation with generation cohorts since there is paucity on research that specifically explores these variables in a government healthcare institution.

Scientific information about these constructs is therefore needed in order to initiate relevant interventions to enhance employee engagement. Based on the aforementioned problem statement and literature review, the objective of this study is to explore generational differences on work engagement of employees of a South African government healthcare institution. It is against this background that it is hypothesised that:

There are significant differences between the generational cohorts regarding their work engagement levels within a government healthcare institution.

3. Research design and methodology

The study was a quantitative research design in nature. A cross-sectional survey was used which refer

to a design that collects data at one point in time from one sample representing the larger population (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2009); in order to achieve the purpose of this study. In this section, the participants and sampling strategy and measuring instruments of this study are discussed.

3.1 Participants and sampling strategy

The population consisted of permanently employed government institution or public service organisation employees situated in Gauteng. To determine the sample size, the study adopted a random sampling technique based on the guidelines of TerreBlanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006). The participants were requested to complete the questionnaire, resulting in a final sample size of 289 respondents.

Table 1. Generational cohorts of the sample ($n = 289$)

| Parameter | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------|
| Generational cohorts/Age group | | |
| Millennials born between 1978 and 2000 | 115 | 39.8 |
| Generation Xers born between 1965 and 1977 | 110 | 38.1 |
| Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 | 64 | 22.1 |

The sample of this study comprised of three generational cohorts based on table 1. Among the participants, approximately 22.1% ($n = 64$) were Baby Boomers who are born between 1946 and 1964; 38.1% ($n = 110$) were Generation Xers who are born between 1965 and 1977 while 39.8% ($n = 115$) were Millennials who are born between 1978 and 2000.

In terms of table 2, the sample size was skewed towards females whom are 59.5% ($n= 172$) and 40.5% ($n=117$) were males. With regard to the

different race groups of the participants, 78.9% ($n=228$) were African; 9.7% ($n = 28$) were white; 8% ($n= 23$) were coloured and 3.5% ($n = 10$) were Indian. Descriptive results of the participants' current position indicates that 17% ($n = 49$) are in management positions; 46.3% ($n = 134$) occupied professional and specialist position while 36.7% ($n = 106$) are employed as general workers. In addition, 56.8% ($n = 164$) of the participants have between 1 to 5 years of service with the organisation.

Table 2. Sample demographic profile ($n = 289$)

| Parameter | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 117 | 40.5 |
| Female | 172 | 59.5 |
| Race | | |
| African | 228 | 78.9 |
| Coloured | 23 | 8.0 |
| Indian | 10 | 3.5 |
| White | 28 | 9.7 |
| Years of service | | |
| 1 - 5 years | 164 | 56.8 |
| 6 - 10 years | 63 | 21.8 |
| 11 - 15 years | 41 | 14.2 |
| Over 16 years | 21 | 7.2 |
| Current position | | |
| Management | 49 | 17 |
| Professional and specialist | 134 | 46.3 |
| General workers | 106 | 36.7 |

3.2 Data collection questionnaires

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A measured the participants' biographical details which included race, age group, gender, years of service and current position.

Section B consisted of the measuring instrument, the Utrecht Work Engagement Survey (UWES) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The UWES was used to measure work engagement. UWES comprises of 21 item and three subscales or dimensions; namely,

vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 as never and 7 as always. In the present study, the Cronbach alphas of the dimensions were also considered to be satisfactory. Overall the reliability of the UWES is 0.937; while the dimensions vary from 0.837 (vigour); 0.855 (dedication) and 0.799 (absorption). These results of the dimension reliabilities are depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Number of items and reliabilities for the UWES dimensions

| Work engagement dimensions (UWES) Dimensions | Number of items | Reliability |
|--|-----------------|--------------|
| Vigour | 7 | 0.837 |
| Dedication | 7 | 0.855 |
| Absorption | 7 | 0.799 |
| Overall | 21 | 0.937 |

3.3 Research procedure

A cross-sectional quantitative survey research design was used for this study because it allows for the collection of data from respondents about their perception (Welmann *et al*, 2009; Terreblanch *et al*, 2006). The ethical clearance to conduct the research in the organisation was granted by the management and the Ethics Committee of the department and research institution. The invitation to participate voluntarily in the study was sent to the employees. The questionnaire was completed during a group administration process facilitated by the researchers and it included a covering letter.

The covering letter explained the purpose of the study and it explained ethical concerns such as anonymity, confidentiality, feedback and freedom of choice to participate in the study. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately by the researchers and were kept in a secure place.

3.4 Statistical analyses

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 20) was used to analyse the data of the empirical study. In order to determine the internal consistency reliability of the two measuring instruments; the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were conducted. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine the differences between the three generational cohorts.

4. RESULTS

In addition to the Cronbach alpha results presented above in table 3; the means and standard deviations as the descriptive statistics were also conducted for the variable work engagement.

Table 4. Generational cohorts means and standard deviations for Work Engagement (UWES) dimensions

| Generational cohorts and Dimensions | Mean | Sample (n) | Std. Deviation | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|----------------|-------|
| Millennials (1978 and 2000) | Vigour | 4.43 | 115 | 1.104 |
| | Dedication | 4.58 | 115 | 1.080 |
| | Absorption | 4.26 | 115 | 1.042 |
| | WE | 4.42 | 115 | 1.012 |
| Generation Xers (1965 and 1977) | Vigour | 4.05 | 110 | 1.198 |
| | Dedication | 4.18 | 110 | 1.227 |
| | Absorption | 4.02 | 110 | 1.122 |
| | WE | 4.08 | 110 | 1.129 |
| Baby Boomers (1946 and 1964) | Vigour | 4.06 | 64 | 1.267 |
| | Dedication | 4.24 | 64 | 1.202 |
| | Absorption | 4.01 | 64 | 1.117 |
| | WE | 4.10 | 64 | 1.146 |
| Overall | Vigour | 4.20 | 289 | 1.187 |
| | Dedication | 4.35 | 289 | 1.175 |
| | Absorption | 4.11 | 289 | 1.093 |
| | WE | 4.30 | 289 | 1.096 |

The above table presents the mean scores and standard deviations of the measure used in this study. With regard to the variable work engagement dimensions, the sample of the participants reflected positive work engagement perceptions and the three generational cohorts obtained the mean scores of above 4.00. They obtained the highest mean score on the dimensions dedication (m=4.35); followed by the dimension vigour (m=4.20) and the lowest mean was on the dimension absorption (m=4.11). The mean scores for all the three dimensions and the overall mean score of UWES (m=4.30) are also between the

“agree” and “strongly agree” ratings on the Likert scale; indicating the employees have high levels of work engagement.

Table 5 presents the intercorrelations between the work engagement dimensions measured by UWES. The results indicate that the three dimensions of the UWES intercorrelate significantly. The correlation between vigour and dedication is equal to 0.878; that between absorption and vigour is equal to 0.861; and between dedication and absorption is 0.834.

Table 5. Intercorrelations of the UWES dimensions

| Dimensions | Vigour | Dedication | Absorption |
|------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Vigour | 1 (0.837) | .878** | .861** |
| Dedication | .878** | 1 (0.855) | .834** |
| Absorption | .861** | .834** | 1 (0.799) |

n = 289; Alpha coefficients are presented in bold values. * * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed): p<=0.01

The results of the analysis of variance to determine significant differences in mean scores for generational cohorts are depicted in table 6. Although the results shows that the generational cohorts differ in terms of the overall Work Engagement mean score (p≤0.05), the cohorts differ only in the dimensions Vigour (p≤0.05) and Dedication (p≤0.05). Table 7 also indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean score of the Millennials and the Generations Xers in the dimension Vigour (0.378*),

which implies that Millennials scored high with the mean score of 4.43 when compared to the Generation Xers mean score of 4.05 in this dimensions. In addition, table 7 indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean score of the Millennials and the Generations Xers in the dimension Dedication (0.393*); this suggests that Millennials scored high with the mean score of 4.58 when compared to the Generation Xers mean score of 4.18 in these dimensions.

Table 6. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

| Dimensions | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|--------|
| Vigour | Between Groups | 9.673 | 2 | 4.837 | 3.486 | 0.032* |
| | Within Groups | 396.772 | 286 | 1.387 | | |
| | Total | 406.445 | 288 | | | |
| Dedication | Between Groups | 9.747 | 2 | 4.873 | 3.589 | 0.029* |
| | Within Groups | 388.381 | 286 | 1.358 | | |
| | Total | 398.128 | 288 | | | |
| Absorption | Between Groups | 4.157 | 2 | 2.079 | 1.749 | 0.176 |
| | Within Groups | 339.911 | 286 | 1.189 | | |
| | Total | 344.068 | 288 | | | |
| UWE | Between Groups | 7.576 | 2 | 3.788 | 3.199 | 0.042* |
| | Within Groups | 338.716 | 286 | 1.184 | | |
| | Total | 346.292 | 288 | | | |

Note: ***p≤0.000; **p≤0.01; *p≤0.05

Table 7. Multiple comparison results

| Work Engagement | Generational | (J) Cohorts | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. |
|-------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|------------|-------|
| <i>Vigour</i> | Born between 1978 and 2000 | Born between 1965 and 1977 | 0.378* | 0.157 | 0.049 |
| | | Born between 1946 and 1964 | 0.364 | 0.183 | 0.145 |
| <i>Dedication</i> | Born between 1978 and 2000 | Born between 1965 and 1977 | 0.393* | 0.155 | 0.036 |
| | | Born between 1946 and 1964 | 0.338 | 0.181 | 0.192 |
| <i>WE</i> | Born between 1978 and 2000 | Born between 1965 and 1977 | 0.337 | 0.145 | 0.062 |
| | | Born between 1946 and 1964 | 0.317 | 0.169 | 0.186 |

Note: *** $p \leq 0.000$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$

5. Discussion

To date, there has been little research on work engagement within the context of a government health care institution focussing on generational differences. The reason for this may lie in the fact that the variable work engagement was studied to explain its relationships with other organisational outcomes and factors; rather than individual factors such as generational cohorts. An examination of the literature review indicates work engagement is positively associated to work performance, commitment, trust, retention, job satisfaction and employee wellness. The aim of this study was to explore the generational differences in work engagement of government healthcare institution employees.

The results indicate that the Utrecht UWES have acceptable levels of internal consistency within the multicultural context of the South African government healthcare institution. The results of the mean as the descriptive statistic indicate that employees of this institution seem to have positive perceptions or have high levels in the three work engagement dimensions, namely vigour, dedication, and absorption. The employee demonstrated generational differences in the dimensions vigour and dedication where Millennials cohort in this institution seem to be more engaged in terms of vigour and dedication when compared to the Generation Xers cohorts. Baby Boomers cohorts did not demonstrate any differences in terms of their work engagement when compared with other generational cohorts.

The high level of vigour and dedication displayed by Millennials cohorts in this institution suggests that this generation of employees will demonstrate high levels of involvement in their work and they are likely to experience high levels of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge in their roles (Halbesleben, 2011; Schaufelli *et al*, 2008). Another perspective on these

differences is that one's career stage might impact their level of work engagement.

In addition, the high levels of absorption in all three generational cohorts suggest that a positive perception of this dimension is likely to influence employees' high levels of absorption at work. This indicates that the employees will show significant levels of concentration and they will be happily engrossed in their role (May *et al*, 2004; Bakker *et al*, 2011; Taris *et al*, 2010).

This study has several practical implications for employees and organisations. Firstly, these findings are noteworthy because it gives organisations inexpensive means of promoting their employees' work engagement levels. Secondly, practitioners and managers in public service organisations need to develop insight of the generational differences of their employees with regard to their work engagement levels. Lastly, organisations are able to develop relevant interventions; ultimately, this may help to create a more engaged workforce in government institutions.

6. Conclusions, Limitations And Recommendations

This study aimed to provide insight into the generational differences of employees in a government healthcare institution regarding their work engagement levels. The purpose of this study was achieved because the results explain the generational differences between the Millennials and Generation Xers cohorts' levels work engagement.

In terms of limitations, this study cannot be generalised to other organisational context other than the one from which data were gathered. The respondents of this study sample are from a single organisation in a specific government institution; namely healthcare. Although, this approach reinforces

the internal validity of this study; it nonetheless limits its external validity.

It is therefore recommended that future research should be conducted in a variety of organisational context in order to allow the results to be extrapolated to other context. In addition, future research using longitudinal studies would assist in creating more knowledge of the variable.

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