A LONGITUDINAL COMPARISON OF ASPECTS OF DIVERSITY IN TWO COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Recognising and addressing diversity and equal employment opportunity are common issues in commonwealth countries. This study focuses on pointers based on four empirical research projects conducted over 10 years in New Zealand and South Africa. The overall results show a heightened awareness of diversity and equal opportunities, which highlights an increased role for HR practitioners in both New Zealand and South Africa. This should enable the harnessing of opportunities for businesses and their leaders, to take note of the commonality between New Zealand and South Africa, which could lead to enhanced inter-country business activities and improved returns.

Keywords: Diversity, culture, equal opportunity, work-life balance.

INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth countries, in particular, are experiencing a great increase in population and population mobility, which measurably increases the necessity to manage diversity, amongst others. In these countries organisations are generally under greater pressures than developed countries to be able to attract a sufficient number of job candidates who have the abilities and aptitudes needed to harness future business opportunities. It is also common knowledge that the workforce is the lifeblood of organisations and they represent one of its most potent and valuable resources (Rudman 2010; Ulrich & Smallwood 2003; Dowling, Festing & Engle 2013). However, the effect of being able to attract and manage diverse staff presents organisations with enormous challenges to be successful, in multicultural countries, for example, South Africa (SA) and New Zealand (NZ). The emergence of globalisation, development in technology and telecommunications; and the shift towards a knowledge-

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based workforce, labour legislation and intensifying competition for skilled labour, also create new competitive realities for organisations.

Organisations are keen for the human resources (HR) function to go beyond the delivery of cost effective administrative services and progress to providing expertise on how to leverage human capital. Simultaneously, the role of HR practitioners as strategic business partners and leaders of change has also received considerable attention (Haggerty & Wright 2009). The previous decade also saw the HR profession faced with criticism and questions regarding its validity, which subsequently resulted in a significant body of research that linked HR practices to organisational performance (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich 2012). Ultimately, the competitive forces that organisations face today create a new mandate for HR, and this necessitates changes to the structure and role of the HR function (Bryson & Ryan 2012).

The general roles expected of HR managers and functional line managers are not dissimilar in most economies and cultural environments around the world (Compton 2009; Dessler 2011; Galang 2008; Nel, Werner, Poisat, Sono, Du Plessis & Ngalo 2011; Pare 2007; Pretorius 2010; Rudman 2010; Wright 2008). The role of HR managers in particular is also interdependent with line management's activities because attempts to either be practising HR or only line management would result in organisations being in danger of becoming dysfunctional or even perishing. HR practitioners, particularly HR managers, and other levels of line management should, therefore, cooperate closely to utilise their expertise through mutual support to remain competitive in the current and future business world to avoid the risk of failure. Ignoring the particular relationships between these functions can result in serious negative consequences for an organisation or even a country.

According to Paine (2008), HR manager interaction should occur constantly with all line managers in organisations and should cover various facets of a business's activities. It should focus on the aspects of change, diversity and intercultural management in organisations which affect all areas of its functioning. A business focus and approach is required of all categories of management in organisations. This includes HR staff, who should be au fait with management in general, as it is influenced by HR. The competencies of HR staff, which should be at a high level to meet the challenges of businesses in terms of their core functions, are also important. These aspects, as they relate to the role of HR management in organisations, are discussed in the next sections.

Furthermore, talent management as a HR capability is also high on the list according to various prominent scholars (Collings & Mellahi 2009; Dijk 2008; Lawler 2008; Ulrich 2007). HR professionals should also take a strategic lead in combining their capabilities and competencies to enhance culture change, taking on high level line management responsibility and providing direct support to management, according to Kouzes and Posner (2009). Although the competencies of HR staff are often reviewed and researched at the international level, multi-nationals and global organisations still need to observe their regional context to accommodate the local culture and customs of employees who are employed in those organisations. This is essential because the practice of HR at the local level and within a particular local context is often vastly different from the international context, such as the ability to speak various relevant languages. Research sometimes does not adequately reflect

the fault of making general deductions based on international studies, which are then presumed to be applicable at the regional level. In practise this may not be the case at all.

In today's global economy HR practitioners must, therefore, be prepared to meet the considerable challenges and expectations posed by the continuing evolution of their role and show how their function is creating and adding value to the organisation. As recognised by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), HR should not be defined by 'what it does' but by 'it's contribution to achieve organisational excellence' (p.134).

Human Resource (HR) practitioners therefore play a vital role in maximising the efficiency of the organisation's human resources since HR practices support the employee behaviour that is critical for accomplishing key organisational processes, thus advancing organisational success (McDonnell, Stanton & Burgess 2011; Stone 2010). The characteristics of organisations would, therefore, include: a competent workforce who are adequately trained and fairly remunerated; equal treatment of the sexes; all workers being treated with dignity; and observing the diversity inherent in modern day countries' workforce due to globalisation. Not observing diversity and having to suffer the consequences is also exacerbated by multinational organisations functioning at any place and in any country in the world at any time. These aspects are discussed in more detail in the literature survey in the next section. The analysis of the results of the SA and NZ surveys are presented in the following sections, after the research methodology is discussed.

The research proposition is to identify components of diversity and related aspects in two relatively similar commonwealth countries, yet being distinctive in its population composition (Nel et al. 2011). Identifying components applicable to the role of the HR functionaries in organisations are explored in order to guide and support management to do business more effectively and thereby creating and enhancing business opportunity is undertaken. The research entails identifying particular elements of diversity, equal opportunity and Work life balance which is of importance in both countries to perhaps enable improved inter-country business activities as well.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Researchers have taken different stances when referring to HR practices, but it appears that there is a consistent focus on the contribution of HR practices to enhancing human capital (Du Plessis, Nel, Struthers, Robbins & Williams 2007). The shared assumptions of a number of authors has resulted in the definition that 'HR practices are a set of activities that actively contribute to achieving organisational objectives' (Macky 2008), which have the ability to gain a competitive advantage over other organisations (Barney & Hesterly 2006). HR practices, i.e., the programmes, processes and techniques that direct the management of an organisation's human resources, can complement, substitute for, or even conflict with other organisational practices. This can result from reactive and ad hoc choices made by HR practitioners in response to circumstances. It is, however, the HR function's effectiveness in an organisation within the ambit of a county's applicable legislation that will determine the quality as well as the extent of observing all elements of diversity management.

A range of change "triggers" to which organisations must respond in order to survive often happen unexpectedly. These factors are, amongst other things, laws and regulations (for example, legislation on age discrimination), the globalisation of markets, and the internationalisation of businesses reacting to major political and social events (Galang 2008; Mthembu 2010).

Diversity

Global diversity has been a key focus in most countries around the world as a result of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1945. The United Nations and its various bodies have also been instrumental in the acceptance of various conventions which provide guidelines on a global scale, such as Convention 111, which outlines anti-discrimination principles.

Having people from different cultures and backgrounds is also the norm in NZ and SA organisations due to the fact that these countries are changing continuously and becoming increasingly multi-cultural and diverse (Du Plessis 2009; Bryson & Ryan 2012). According to Ulrich et al., (2012), worldwide immigration patterns have sharply internationalised the labour force and there is a need for organisations to move beyond intellectual diversity and formally ingrain diversity into their culture. HR as a profession, therefore, has to recognise and espouse the value of diversity because diversity management has been identified as an emerging strategic necessity for survival in a globally diverse environment.

In this regard, diversity is defined as follows by Nel et al., (2011): "it encompasses all forms of difference among individuals, including culture, gender, age, ability, religious affiliation, personality, economic class, social status and sexual orientation" (p. 113). Diversity is the opposite concept to universality because certain activities occur across cultures, that is, they are common to all cultures, but their manifestation may be unique in a particular society. The importance of cultural diversity should, however, not be underestimated, since an organisation's culture as a system of shared values and beliefs, leads people, decision-making processes and procedures and control systems to interact so as to produce behavioural norms. Cultural diversity should, therefore, be addressed by observing Hofstede's (1991) approach to understanding cultural diversity.

Härtel and Fujimoto (2010) believe that it is the responsibility of HR practitioners to manage diversity and to teach other managers and employees what their role in 'diversity' is. This is especially important for organisations in NZ because, like many other developed countries, NZ is experiencing skill shortages; in this context, valuing diversity management takes on a new urgency. This creates challenges to the HR practitioner's ability to manage a diverse workforce.

It also needs to be noted that NZ has both an indigenous and a western culture, which suggests that both Maori and European cultures are meant to have an influence on society and in workplaces (Jones, Pringle & Shepherd 2000). In addition, there is also a growing number of Pacific Island people, Asians, Indians and many other ethnic groups, which can have implications on workplace diversity. This makes NZ quite similar to SA in a number of contexts.

Different interests, backgrounds, competencies, skills and talents, if harnessed properly, can be beneficial to productivity and successful teamwork. This is recognised by Ely and Thomas (2001), who say that diverse groups and organisations have performance advantages and that the recurrent aspect among high performing groups or teams is the integration of that diversity. Diversity management also involves conscious efforts to actively recruit members from ethnic minorities. Demographic trends in NZ and SA clearly indicate that diversity is a distinguishing characteristic of both countries. HR practitioners need to recognise the uniqueness of each individual and the varied perspective and approach to work that they bring to the organisation (Rijamampianina & Carmichael 2005).

It is also well documented that organisations that effectively manage change by continuously adapting their bureaucracies, strategies, systems, products and cultures in response to the impact of the complex, dynamic, uncertain and turbulent environment of the twenty-first century are identified as masters of renewal (Nel et al. 2011; Truss, Mankin & Kelliher 2012; Ulrich et al. 2012). This also applies to the way in which the composition of the workforce with respect to gender, age and ethnicity is managed as its profile changes in different countries. Immigration, an aging workforce as well as more gender awareness are points in question (Harvey & Allard 2005). NZ businesses are not exempt from this trend and for the past decade organisations have been facing the need to change in order to remain competitive in the global market. Consequently, the HR function has become more multifaceted over the years as the pace of change quickens, requiring a transition towards more value-added roles, such as the role of a change agent (Ulrich et al. 2012). HR practitioners, as champions, have to have the competencies, capabilities and discipline to make change happen and need to be skilled in the management of employee resistance to change. Managed change is proactive, intentional and goal-oriented behaviour (Cleland et al. 2000; Ulrich et al. 2012; Ulrich & Smallwood 2003). Overall, there is a clear indication that change is inevitable, and it is part of managing ever increasing diversity in organisations' workforces.

Equal Opportunity

Although diversity is acknowledged globally as an inherent part of any modern society, it is also critical that equal opportunity is actively supported and preferably legislated for to provide maximum freedom to a work force so that they may work without fear and in conditions which promote a level playing field. Usually the constitution of a country, and its labour legislation in particular, would provide this protection to the work force. In SA the Constitution Act (1996), the Employment Equity Act (1998), and the Labour Relations Act (1995), guarantee this protection to its citizens and the work force. In NZ the Human Rights Act (1993) and Employment Relations Act (2000) would broadly fulfil these roles. Other labour legislation is, of course, relevant in both counties apart from the major statutes outlined above.

Work-Life Balance

Finding the 'balance' between work and non-work, with neither of them intruding into the other in terms of time, resources, and emotional energy, could be an elusive goal for individuals and organisations (Nel et al. 2012). Furthermore the difficulty for employees to maintain a 'balanced' life between the paid work they perform and increased responsibilities, such as looking after the children or dealing with financial pressures, can cause stress which

can translate into decreased productivity and retention issues as employees look for better working conditions (Härtel & Fujimoto 2010). An organisation's response to their employees' needs may be family responsive programmes, which may include components such as leave programmes, dependent care and health/wellness programmes (Macky 2008; Stone 2010; Bryson & Ryan 2012). Offering flexible work arrangements, which are the cornerstone of almost all work-life balance initiatives, can have significant beneficial results (Strack, Dyer, Caye, Minto, Leicht & Francoeur 2008). One of the reasons for this may be that the one factor that helped employees achieve 'balance' was something in the control of every employer: that the company was actively helping to achieve a work-life balance for their employees.

Many younger employees tend to have new and non-traditional expectations about work. A particular demographic challenge comes from Generation Y (people born after 1980). As observed by Guthridge, Komm and Lawson (2008), these individuals demand, among other things, a better work-life balance. It becomes evident that these employees, who operate from a position based on their perception of the organisation's commitment to work-life balance, need to be managed differently. Ultimately, employees are interested in having both a good job and a life beyond work, and there is a need for HR practitioners to implement policies and practices that will increase employee commitment and also show commitment to diversity in the workplace.

BACKGROUND TO THE COLLECTION OF THE EMPIRICAL DATA

A very comprehensive HRM questionnaire covering 358 items to identify HRM and management trends was jointly compiled in NZ and Australia (AU) in 1994. It was used for a survey to identify the future competencies and roles of HR in those countries for the year 2000 for use by the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand (IPMNZ 1994). This study formed the basis of four subsequent research studies which could be used as pointers regarding diversity, equal employment and work-life balance. The four studies are briefly outlined below. However, due to the magnitude of the various studies, only issues focusing on the components outlined above are analysed and compared for the various studies, and reported in this article.

Study No. 1 Covering HR Practice in NZ for 2000 and Forecasted for 2010

The questionnaire of the NZ and AU study in 1994 was edited and slightly modified and used in 2001 by Burchell (2001) in association with the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ) to determine a future perspective on human resources issues in 2001 and forecasted for 2010 in NZ. The minor modifications involved updating and reducing the questionnaire, as it was too long, as well as refining questions for clarity.

The questionnaire covered human resource goals, roles and activities, as well as the implications of changes in the business environment and identifying practices for gaining competitive advantage. The respondents were asked to rank the five most important goals, roles, and activities in the categories, which were contained in the questionnaire for 2001 and 2010. Respondents were also asked to prioritise the future activities of HR. However, the reporting of the results and comparisons only focus on diversity-related issues in this article.

The final section of the questionnaire sought to obtain demographic information from the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed to all members of the HRINZ. A total of 1,510 questionnaires were mailed, of which 150 usable responses were received, which represents 10% of the sample. After the responses were verified, the survey results were written up.

Study No. 2 Covering HR Practice in SA in 2002 and Forecasted for 2010

The same questionnaire used in NZ in 2001 was used with permission, after minor editorial modifications, for an identical survey in SA in the last quarter of 2002. The questionnaire was distributed by mail to all registered members of the Institute of People Management (IPM) in SA, regardless of the position they occupied in the organisation. The address list of the IPM was used to mail the questionnaire. It resulted in 1,640 questionnaires being mailed. The survey results are based on a total of 207 useable questionnaires, and represent a 12.6% response rate.

The responses obtained from respondents in both countries' surveys were compared regarding the following: the profile of the respondents by profession, the organisation size, and the type of industry. From the response in both countries, it was clear that it was broadly similar for comparative purposes. There was, however, a difference between the largest employee size groupings between the two countries due to their demographic differences.

Study No. 3 Covering HR Practice in NZ in 2008 Only

This study by Paine (2008) and an invitation to participate in this study went to 364 members of HRINZ that had 'opted in' to participate in any forthcoming HR research requests. A total of 179 participants responded to a reduced survey questionnaire, but only 151 completed questionnaires were usable, giving a response rate of 41%. This was representative of the 'opted in' members of HRINZ. The data was collected via an e-survey, which was specifically designed for this study.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections with 40 questions (this number was made up of main questions and sub-questions). Several sub-questions were formed to explore, amongst other aspects, diversity related themes. These were: change agent, strategic partner, recruitment and retention, work life balance, diversity management, and demographic aspects. All the questions in the questionnaire were closed questions. Due to length limitation, aspects covered in this article only focus on the aforementioned topics.

Some of the themes in the study were diversity related aspects and form a small part of the actual study, but they are used for comparative purposes in this article, and they could be useful to obtain a picture of the views of HR professionals with regard to diversity.

Study No. 4 Repeat Study Covering HR Practice in NZ in 2010 Forecasted for 2020

The NZ study of 2001 was again used with minor modifications in 2010. It was clear from the previous studies that the questionnaire was too detailed, which, combined with the fact that it was paper based, discouraged participation. For the 2010 study, a section on information management was eliminated by using a sample of eligible respondents. The

reporting format was changed to an e-survey using Survey Monkey as well. A 5-point Likert scale was used, which ranged from "unimportant" to "critical to success".

The 2010 study again focused on the HR practitioners in NZ organisations who are registered as members of the HRINZ. At that time, the HRINZ had 3,620 individual members who were involved in the management and development of HR in private and public sector organisations throughout NZ. The target population was limited to HRINZ members who had registered to participate in HR research requests that the HRINZ provided links to, and the total number of HRINZ members in this category was 635. A total of 119 members responded but only 98 questionnaires were fully completed and usable, resulting in a 15.4% response rate.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results of the various studies are compared in this section and conclusions drawn from it.

Diversity Management

According to the research results recorded by Paine (2008) the increasingly diverse workforce in NZ is interesting in terms of diversity management. Table 1 shows the results reveal that the capacity to effectively implement diversity management programmes is 28.4% (category 4 and 5 combined). Almost half of the respondents (43%) indicated a 'neutral' view regarding this capability.

Table 1: Self-identified capabilities in the area of diversity management

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT					
1 for 'significant need for improvement' – 3 neutral - 5 for 'major strength'	1	2	3	4	5
Capacity to effectively implement diversity management programmes	5.3%	23.2%	43.0%	23.8%	4.6%
Competent to deal with the application of legislative issues of diversity management	4.6%	12.6%	28.5%	38.4%	15.9%

Competency in the ability to deal with the application of legislative issues of diversity management and the ability to effectively use the talents of people from various backgrounds were identified at 54.3% and 54.2% of respondents as 'strength'/'major strength'.

HR practitioners need to have the capabilities to articulate the changes required, make them explicit, and lead the process which was previously identified by other researchers reporting on the SA survey (Du Plessis, Beaver & Nel 2006). It can be deduced that even though HR practitioners in NZ organisations in particular have a moderate level of capabilities in diversity management, they must invest time and effort to formally ingrain diversity into the culture if they want to maximise the potential of all available talent.

Equal Opportunity

This aspect refers to Equal Opportunity for females, minorities, and persons with disabilities. Table 2 shows that the 2010 forecasted results for SA respondents are (82.45%) and this

represents an 11.66% increase over the 2002 figure. This emphasises the continued requirement for maintaining an equitable workplace, and the strong focus on redressing perceived past imbalances.

Table 2: Comparison of equal opportunity activities for
females, minorities, and persons with disabilities in SA and NZ

2000 Actual	2010 forecast	% Increase	2002 Actual	2010 forecast	% Increase	2010 Actual	2020 forecast	% Increase
SA %	SA%	SA%	NZ%	NZ%	NZ%	NZ%	NZ%	NZ%
70.79	82.45	11.66	16.43	27.45	11.02	75.2	82.4	7.2

In 1998 the Employment Equity Act set out inter alia to eliminate unfair discrimination in employment practices and promote a diverse workforce broadly representative of SA's people.

In NZ, however, equal employment opportunities (EEO) were low, with only 16.43% expressing high satisfaction with present activities, and 27.45% indicating that it was very important. This relatively low concern with EEO may be accounted for by NZ's long history of anti-discriminatory legislation (Bryson & Ryan 2012; Rudman 2010), and well-established HR practices.

The 2010 and 2020 result for NZ shows a significant increase which clearly indicates a heightened awareness of equal opportunity as the demographics of NZ is changing. The increase was significant over the previous forecast for 2010 versus the actual result for 2010 as well as the forecast for 2020.

However, there are still many aspects, such as gender pay disparity, which will need the attention of HR professionals in both countries and probably elsewhere to enhance and consolidate aspects relating to diversity.

Work-life Balance

The research results recorded by Paine (2008) are discussed in this section regarding work life balance (see Table 3). According to the research results recorded by Paine (2008), the capability to be proactive in the approach to overcoming barriers to implement work-life initiatives showed that 53.6% (4 and 5 combined) of the respondents regarded it as a 'strength'/major strength'. An unexpectedly high 29.1% (3 being neutral) was also recorded. Success in benchmarking and measuring the effectiveness of work-life initiatives was perceived as being strength / major strength by only 23.8% of respondents.

Table 3: Work-life balance

WORK/LIFE BALANCE					
1 for 'significant need for improvement' – 3 neutral - 5 for 'major strength'	1	2	3	4	5
Proactive in the approach to overcoming barriers to implement work-life initiatives	5.9%	11.2%	29.1%	39.7%	13.9%
Successful in benchmarking & measuring the effectiveness of work-life initiatives	7.2%	26.4%	42.4%	17.9%	5.9%

Employees have changing needs and organisations are required to respond to these flexible work styles. Many employees are now looking for more than just remuneration, and organisations need to understand this quest in order to assist their staff to have a better balance. Organisations' responses to employees' needs may range from providing flexible work arrangements to addressing employees' growing desire to have more family-friendly working environments. These aspects would certainly contribute to the promotion of diversity awareness in organisations as well as in a country as a whole.

More flexible time-off arrangements can also encourage more education and training, which ultimately addresses the issue of skill shortages. If organisations accept that HR practices are potentially going to produce beneficial outcomes for the organisation and the employee, then the areas of practice that are more likely to contribute positively should be identified. HR practitioners need to be significantly more proactive in their approach towards improving work-life policies.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of the results from the surveys executed in 2001 in NZ and 2002 in SA, and again in NZ in 2010 with forecasts for 2020, reveals significant changes in some areas. It provides some interesting pointers for both NZ and SA regarding diversity and its applications in particular countries, provided the commonwealth context of these countries is observed.

There has not, however, been much difference in the forecast for SA, nor in the actual result for NZ for 2010. Diversity certainly appears to have become even more important in NZ, particularly for 2020. This trend is probably also applicable to SA, as demographic changes are speeding up worldwide, although there will be differences between developed and developing countries.

The following capabilities stemming from the results and comparisons of the different surveys are necessary for human resource practitioners in particular and businesses in general, in the area of diversity management:
- Effectively implementing diversity management programmes
- Dealing with the application of legislative issues of diversity management
- Using the talents of people from various backgrounds, experiences and cultures

To manage equal opportunity businesses needs to have:
- More awareness of the plight of females, minorities and persons with disabilities
- More focused attention paid to increasing support from governments in the form of financial rewards, for example, for mentally challenged persons being cared for by parents and caregivers.

To manage work-life balance human resource practitioners, in particular, need to:
- Develop and implement policies in response to changing demographic trends
- Implement a proactive approach to overcoming barriers regarding work-life initiatives.

To manage change effectively businesses need to:
- Successfully frame business strategies and be able to making key business decisions
- Develop and implement coherent HR strategies which are aligned to business strategy
- Develop an achievable vision for the future and envisage its probable consequences

The various issues which were identified provided avenues for the refinement of HR practitioners' jobs to promote and observe diversity in particular. The most significant one is the expectations and challenges for the HR practitioner in aligning HR strategies with business strategies. Previous studies show an increase in the strategic role from 2000 and 2002 respectively (25% to 2010), which is in line with the global survey results of Ulrich et al. (2012) in particular. These trends are also supported by the results of the study by Strack et al. (2008) referring to the global context and Wilson (2010) referring to the Australian context. It is also clear that new knowledge was unlocked regarding HR's current capabilities and their impact on promoting awareness of diversity in organisations as well as in a country context as well. A new kind of HR practitioner, business manager, and employee can be expected in successful organisations in the future who will add sustainable value by harnessing the opportunities which have been created.

Proposed strategic business recommendations are as follows:
- Business managers must be made aware of the crucial effect of effective diversity management on the bottom line of organisations.
- Change itself necessitates that business managers take cognisance of the changed business environment by highlighting the awareness and refinement of employee rights and equal employment opportunity in both NZ and SA.
- To execute business activities successfully would entail that businesses pay more attention to the work-life balance of employees in both NZ and SA due to the negative impact the global financial crisis had on these commonwealth countries.
- The approach to diversity and equal employment opportunity in the two researched commonwealth countries could serve as an example to other commonwealth countries and the world in general.
- Business managers could perhaps lobby for legislative updates in both countries, as it is the domain of responsible and progressive business managers in both countries to enable and enhance business opportunities for the next century regarding the refinement of EEO and dealing with minorities and disabled employees in particular

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