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Abstract

Strategy is a political act, and yet that has received very little attention in IS strategy research. The purpose of this paper is to explore the mixes between politics, power and strategy using a case study of implementation of a Student Administration System. This takes Strategic Information Systems out of the realm of the purely socio-technical view of information systems and moves it into a dimension which deals with the real social interactions that occur within organisations as a result of the implementation of a strategy in the form of a Student Administration System. This case study shows the power struggles, primarily by two Senior Executives and the users of the information system. The discourse behind this project was initially to create uniformity across a system therefore enabling more than 30 universities around Australia to move from a diversified system to a centralized system. It was through this resistance and through their positions that the two Senior Executives were able to create the discourse that framed many of the decisions and implementation of the system. There eventually became an acceptance that it was for the social good of the University that the Student Administration System was adopted across the University of Australia.

Keywords

Power, politics, strategy, information systems, organisations

INTRODUCTION

Strategic Information Systems, the applications that contribute to an organisation at a strategic level, have been a key element of the discipline of information systems for a considerable time focusing on many elements of strategy including: IS strategic alignment (Chan and Huff, 1993), CIO's power, influence in IS strategic implementation (Enns and Huff, 1998) and CIO's influence behaviours (Enns, Huff and Higgens, 2000). However, strategy is a political act, and yet that has received very little attention in IS strategy research. The purpose of this paper is to explore the mixes between politics, power and strategy using a case study of implementation of a Student Administration System. This is important because it takes strategic information systems out of the realm of the purely socio-technical view of information systems and moves it into a dimension which deals with the real social interactions that occur within organisations as a result of implementation of a strategy in the form of a Student Administration System.

Power, Politics and Strategic Information Systems

Markus (1983), in her landmark paper, suggested that power, and more particularly politics, play a fundamental and important role in information systems. In her paper Markus discusses the social aspects of information systems, particularly management information systems and provides us with a definition of power and politics in the IT context. Markus (1983) highlights the use of power and organisational politics in information systems. However, power and organisational politics are not applicable only to MIS implementation. Power and organisational politics is evident in information systems as a whole. More recent work by Romm and Pliskin (1999) and Ngwenyama and Lee (1997), also highlight the fact that politics and power do have some impact on information systems as a whole.

In a recent paper, Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) argued that power and IS implementation are much more deeply interrelated and contextualised within information systems. In a case study of an organisation implementing an

information policy, Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) highlighted that power plays an extremely important role within the nature of the information system itself. The study described how the systems implementation policy worked for an organisation the specific committee and the subgroups associated with the implementation of the information systems. Complexity, messiness, inconsistencies, ambiguities and dilemmas were revealed within the multiple levels of systems implementation policy formulation and re-formulation. What eventuated was a breakdown in the social relations between the participants in the information systems implementation.

The power that was held by either the technical people or the management was challenged, constructed, re-constructed, challenged again and eventually broken down. In this process a discourse became evident, not in isolation from information systems but in relation to it. The constraints from other policies such as strategic planning, government requirements and business practice became evident as they detracted attention and action away from the original purpose of the system itself. The big picture concerning implementation of business strategies subjugated assistance for the system implementation revealed that there was an expectation that subgroup members would just accept the bigger picture. However, these same members contested and publicly opposed that and subsequently the role of the strategy and the direction of the strategy itself were challenged. The system implementation was encoded in a number of complex ways. There was a struggle over directives and demands from the organisation and there were struggles over issues created by various and changing interpretations of the system throughout implementation. In essence there was plurality of interpretations of the system itself and this eventually impacted on the nature of and the importance of the strategy perfecting that implementation.

So what is the relevance of strategic information systems in general? Strategy is the business focus. It aims to improve business performance or business efficiency and has occupied much of the business literature. The oft-quoted Porter (1980) research and theory exemplifies this approach. Traditionally, in strategic information systems literature, strategy is seen as a rationalist concept and is about the production of business value. In essence, this is measurable business value. But strategy also serves other purposes and it is in some sense of this that one person or another uses a strategic information system or the strategy associated with an information system to centralise power or control. This begs a number of questions: How does politics and power impact on strategy and the development of a strategic information system? What are the outcomes or the effects of this process? Does the strategy itself have wider levels of value? Is there a personal value or personal motivation associated with the development and implementation of strategy?

Previous strategic information systems research has not yet shown how politics and power are pervasive. Instead, they tend to show the business context in which strategy comes into play. We would contest this and argue that inevitably strategy is about power and that those who control the strategy and control the focus of the strategy actually enable power and will therefore influence the direction, shape and feel of the information system that is being implemented. So if power is an issue in strategic information systems how does it manifest itself and why? How does it further the manifestation of value other than business value in the organisation? Why does it even manifest itself at all? Dealing with these theoretical issues, we would propose that it is best examined through a particular case study, discussed later in the paper. The objective of this paper is to answer the question, how do politics and power impact on strategy and the development of a strategic information system?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Information systems implementation takes place in the fluid setting of changing business. Implementation evolves more than just through a multistaged context (McLaughlin, 1987). Systems implementation is also an iterative process (Corbitt, 1997). McLaughlin (1987) claims that implementation success depends critically on two broad factors: local capacity and will. However, there are other factors that play an important role in ensuring success. Belief may also be nurtured from action. Even motivation or will is influenced by factors beyond the reach of implementation. Environmental stability, competing centres of authority, contending priorities or pressures and other aspects of the social-political milieu can influence implementation or willingness profoundly (Yin, 1994).

Experience (McLaughlin, 1987) has proven that successful implementation generally requires a combination and balance of pressure and support. Pressure by itself may be insufficient when objectives contain their own implementation directions (Corbitt 1997). Pressure per se cannot effect those changes in attitudes, beliefs and routine practices typically assumed by reform policies. Ball (1990) argues that implementation results from the effects of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism. Communication of ideologies and arguments can be deliberately distorted by misinformation to influence process and gain power (Forester, 1989).

Implementation of business change is essentially political and non-rational (Self, 1981). They are influenced by pluralistic inequality associated with sectional interests, power and factions, often associated with specific stakeholders. In essence, implementation is divided and governed by the various stakeholders involved in the information systems processes. Lee, Corbitt and Kong (2000) suggest that the stakeholders who create commerce, either actively or passively construct and determine the nature of the commercial relationship, the business expression of implementation. In this process these pluralistic constructions of power and influence interact to impact on the path that implementation follows. This implementation process is influenced by, and influences human behaviour. Individuals can subvert and/or avoid attempts at regulation and unintended, unanticipated or unacknowledged consequences often result (Wallace, 1991).

One approach to studies of implementation in information systems has focused on factor studies. The failure of information systems implementation has been linked to the absence of an IS champion or change agent, lack of management support (Ginzberg, 1981; Kydd, 1989; Corbitt 2000), strain on already restricted managerial time (Cragg and King, 1983), poor attitudes towards Information Systems (Corbitt, 1997), absence of education and training (Cragg and King, 1983), organizational problems (Markus, 1983), technical problems (Cragg and King, 1983), and perceived gaps between expectations of IS supporters and those expected to use the system (Kydd, 1989).

Success in implementing intraorganisational information systems is attributable to a number of success factors (Grohowski and McGoff, 1990). These include organizational commitment, the existence of an executive sponsor within the organization (Raymond, 1985), the existence of an operating sponsor within the organization to provide quick feedback across the organization (Montazemi, 1988) and the existence of dedicated facilities within the organization. Cragg and King (1993) suggest that the implementation of IT in small businesses occurs most successfully where there is demonstrated relative advantage in terms of time saved, benefits accrued or discomfort decreased, and where competitive pressure could be addressed as IT was seen as an enabling technology that could make the firm flexible and profitable. Corbitt (2000) suggests that misguided conceptions that Electronic Commerce would deliver efficiencies, reduce costs, and improve service delivery all at the same time, was a common mistake. Finally, the central importance of the role of management is supported by Parr, Shanks and Darke (1999) and Duchessi, Schaninger and Hobbs (1989).

Daft and Lengel (1986), Kydd (1989) and Corbitt (1997) suggest that the interaction of equivocality and uncertainty in organisations can provide a useful means of understanding the important role of information in the adoption and implementation of IT. Corbitt, Behrendorff and Brown-Parker (1997) suggest that demonstrated relative advantage in terms of time saved, benefits accrued or discomfort decrease, and where competitive pressure could be addressed by IT, enable implementation. However, such factor studies are not reflective of the process which occurs through implementation. Implementation is neither driven entirely by factors of success or failure. Rather the implementation process in information systems is more reflective of the stakeholder relationship interactions and the impact of the context, both business, organizational, social and cultural, in which the implementation occurs. However, these conceptualisations ignore the political specter and the element of power in systems implementation.

Markus (1983) argued that resistance in MIS implementation was either people-determined or system-determined. However, Markus also extended that argument and focused hers on a variant of integrationist theory, which suggested that there was a political aspect of and resistance towards IS and MIS implementation (Romm and Pliskin, 1999; Myers and Young, 1997). Resistance is defined, according to Markus (1983, p. 432) as "a product of the interaction of system design features with the intra-organizational distribution of power, defined either objectively, in terms of horizontal or vertical power dimensions, or subjectively, in terms of symbolism." Markus (1983, p. 432) suggests, we believe, that potential users would resist information systems if "they cause a re-distribution of power that either conflicts with the organizational structure (objective definition) or with the interests of individuals who are likely to lose power as a result of the implementation (subjective definition)."

More recently Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) argue that power is more diffuse and non-systematic than Markus (1983) had argued. Power within organisation in systems implementation results from and creates subjugation of one group to another. It is people influenced rather than people determined. Determinism suggests that the power exists as some quantifiable whole and is ingrained and objective. Power in reality is subjective. It is, and is becoming, rather than exists unmoved or unchanged. Power changes and is changed. It forms and reforms as the context in which it is created or displayed and is recontextualised by the actors operating within it. The sub group leaders in the organisation described gained their ability to resist from reputation gained and respect imbued in their legitimate power. Power is enacted by subterfuge, containment, disruption, challenge and radical action. Power is not static but

dynamic and enforced through challenge rather than hierarchy or organisational structure, as the more interpretive/positivist paper of Markus in 1983.

The Creation and Transformation of Power Relations

When discussing the term power, we should not view it as a static, absolute term or concept. Instead, power should be viewed as a constantly changing, transforming concept, whereby people may have power at one point in time, and may have less, or no power at another point in time. This is similar to Foucault's (1978) view of power. For Foucault (1978), power is in the form of power relations, as opposed to power constantly held by one person for their entire existence. We need to understand that people do not have power implicitly. We should be focusing on the fact that power is a technique or action that individuals can engage in. According to Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) power is not possessed, it is exercised; essentially, 'Power is'. Power creates and is created by organisational attributes, social or cultural attributes and individual attributes. As a result, a power relation occurs where there is the potentiality for resistance. Power only arises between two individuals each of whom has the potential to influence the actions of the other and to present resistance to this influence (Foucault, 1978; Markus, 1983; Peszynski and Corbitt, 2003).

There is an inherent political nature to power, and similarly to Foucault, Forester (1989, p. 45) sees power as political communication and concludes that "power works through the management of competence, or obfuscation; of trust, or false assurance; of consent, or manipulated agreement; and of knowledge or misrepresentation. Each of the three modes of power works in this way, either to thwart articulate democratic participation and encourage positivity, or to encourage articulate political action and the rationalisation of a democratic planning (policy) process." Forester (1989), following the argument of Foucault (1971; 1979; 1978), argues that these three modes of power derive their effectiveness from differential levels of knowledge existing in society.

Foucault (1977) suggests that there is a link between power and knowledge. The work by Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) supports Foucault's (1977) work. That is, the knowledge held by the technical people and the knowledge held by management contributed to the information systems implementation. According to Foulcault (1977, p. 66) "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." The knowledge held by each respective group constantly created and transformed the power relations during the implementation process.

The link created between knowledge and power is created via discourse (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). As a result, Foucault (1978, p. 100) suggests that "we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies." According to Ball (1990, p. 17), discourses are, "about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority." Foucault (1977, p. 49) further elaborates, stating that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak…Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention." Discourses represent meaning and social relationships; they form both subjectivity and power relations. Discourse enforces the link between knowledge and power. The work by Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) supports the use of discourse in the linking of power and knowledge in information system. It was through discourse in which the technical people and management challenged each other and implicitly, their power.

Corbitt and Thanasankit (2002) extend Foucault's theory of power and argue that power is not limited to existence. It is also related to leadership and acceptance. Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) argue that power and hegemony change and are changed. They form and reform as the context in which it is created or displayed and is recontextualised by the actors operating within it. Hegemony is existential, created by previous experiences, and influenced by current experiences. Power relations and hegemony, due to their existential nature are dynamic, transforming and constantly changing. We create our ideologies, hegemony, discourses and power relations at the same time we are created by them – similar to Giddens' view of society under Structuration Theory (1984).

A strategic information system is implemented to either increase efficiency or improve business effectiveness and potentially increase profit. However, we would argue, based on the previous discussion, that the enabling of that strategic information system, its implementation, its operational objectives and its outcomes are informed by more than business goals and strategy formulation. That discussion highlighted the importance of discourse. Who's agenda is being served by the strategy? Who is controlling the business agenda and determining who can say or

defend what? How is the hierarchy created and by who? In essence is the strategy fundamentally an expression of power by one or more people?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a study that emerged from participant observation of the implementation of a Student Administration System, supplemented by informal interviews and discussions with staff. In the process of participating in that process the authors discovered that such an important Student Administration System re-invigorated debate about the value of centralized strategic information systems across the university. What emerged was an accidental disclosure about the previous SIS – the student administration system. Many staff were willing to discuss the history of that system and its impact. The discourse it generated was at the centre of those disclosures. Staff, both general and academic, related stories about the history of domination and control with the implementation of the student administration system. It was that data and those discussions which formed the case study registered here. Each of the 25 participants participating in the discussions was asked about this project and their responses were collated and form the data set which frames the analysis presented in this paper. The questioning was informal at first but then became more formal as the discourse and problematic process emerged in discussions and from the participant observation.

Data was recorded and transcribed from discussions. Notes were taken in the observation scenarios> Documents were collected and used as verification of conclusions reached. Interviews were recorded and were based on an informal set of questions (Kitwood, 1980) which were extended during the interviews (Spradley, 1979). Data was transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis of data based on the propositions of power and politics derived from the literature. Sorting of these findings was related to the thematic disclosure in the texts created and this formed the basis of the analysis .

Meek (1987) argues that much research is accidental. Such accidents where actors disclosures become important as they not only contextualize process, they also recount power relations, and disclose discourse. In doing this they substantiate Foucault's (1977) argument about constituent knowledge and its embeddedness in history. This knowledge emerges as the foundation of power and, with discourse, enables consideration of a story and the deconstruction of the decision that supports, frames and creates, in this case, a Student Administration System.

CASE STUDY

A Strategic Information System that formed the basis for this case study was the implementation of a Student Administration System in a University in Australia. This University is large, having around 70,000 students over a number of campuses. The Student Administration System that was developed emerged, initially out of an attempt by the University system in Australia to collaborate and develop an information system, which would support student administration across all of the universities of Australia. The idea was that there would be a uniform system of classifying students with a standardized way of labeling courses and units. In essence the discourse behind that particular project was to create uniformity across a system so that interchange between universities, government data or government collection of data was able to happen. In effect there was a discourse of control centrally. It was moving the 30 plus universities of Australia from a diversified system to a centralized system.

In the University of Australia, senior management wanted to adopt this system immediately it was available. However, the national project collapsed. As the University of Australia was the lead player in this project, its Senior Executive, senior members of the University including the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Pro Vice-Chancellors, decided that the investment had to be returned. A strategy was put in place to complete the development of the Student Administration System and implement it in the University. The reasons the developments continued were more about reputation and the desire to gain control of the process running inside the University of Australia, rather than real business value gain from the strategy.

Two Senior Executives at the University of Australia put a great deal of personal effort into the development of the Student Administration System. Their views were essentially in agreement based on the having the same knowledge and understanding of why such a system was important. There was a need to control and centralize student administration and as a consequence gain control of the process at all levels and across all areas of the university. Their decision was never spoken openly, but the impact was obvious. When questioned and challenged about the hidden agenda and motives running this project, there was a denial from the Senior Executive that everyone had to comply with the new system. Instead, the justification given was for business efficiency and better process enabling

cost savings. However, no cost savings ever emerged. What did emerge was a much larger Student Administration Department, which was needed to control the new system, and ultimately ensure that everyone complied with the new system – reneging on their earlier denials of compliance.

During the implementation process it was evident that a distinct conflict emerged between the Faculty and School administration staff and the central group. The Faculties and Schools had had a great deal of control over enrolments processes as separate entities. Each had their own institutionalized practices and each had their own simple student administration system governing their practice. The new Student Administrative System challenged this autonomy and there was considerable resistance to the centralized process from the Faculties. In fact, the Faculties refused to attend training sessions for the new product and even scoffed at its value to their business when it had developed in such contentious circumstances. The Student Administration System as a universities-wide process has dissolved in great conflict as one university after another withdrew. This led to staff at the University of Australia perceiving that the Student Administration System was flawed and untested in public, yet in interviews member noted that they really resented the imposition of it across the University and the demands it put on their time to move to new practices. There was also a strong sense that someone else was trying to control their work reflecting a change from one set of supervision reporting to another.

In response to the lack of participation by appropriate staff in training, to a lack of cooperation about implementation and as a reaction to criticism of the new system, the Senior Executive of the University of Australia took a number of decisions. They formally made a directive to each of the Deans that the new Student Administration System was to be implemented immediately. In addition that central Student Administration Department changed the reporting lines of the administrative staff that operated that section of the work in each Faculty and School in the University. This new reporting structure created new positions in each Faculty and each of these people were to work in the Faculty but report to the Head of Student Administration Department. This was peculiar move within the University. Despite significant protests and intervention by the Union, the process of restructure was implemented and the positions were advertised and filled. These new appointees knew that their task was to implement the new policy and thus the Student Administration System immediately. That is, they were employed to specifically ensure that compliance was met and the system was implemented.

The implementation of the Student Administration System was set within a stated need to align the operations undertaken using the new Student Administration System with the University's goal of becoming better in the provision of services to students and as a means of improving communication with students. Students' evaluations over the past seven years would indicate that these goals were certainly achieved. However what was not spoken in the process was the evident discourse that implementation of the Student Administration System was ultimately as much about strategic alignment as it as was about control and centralization of processes. The latter goals were never stated nor recognized officially but were agreed upon as being a driving force for the implementation by the Senior Executive of the University of Australia several years after the implementation.

The University of Australia has driven and implemented change to the Student Administration System over a seven year period implementing new versions as they have become available from its development group. During this process the central Student Administration Department has grown from 30 staff to over 150. That Department has increased its operational budget by almost 50 times. Their strength within the University of Australia is well recognized and the Student Administration System that was the cause of so much resistance has become a benchmark product commercially. The University staff who once resisted the new Student Administration System now embraces the new system and the new changes that have emerged in the system. The centralized reporting of staff responsible for the system has been maintained even when some of those positions have changed in name and the complexity of their responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore the mixes between power, politics and strategy, using a case study of the implementation of a Student Administration System. We have presented a case study that investigates a Student Administration System which would support student administration across all the Universities of Australia. Early in the development of the Student Administration System, many Universities pulled out of this initiative and ultimately, it was the University of Australia that continued this development. This case study showed the power struggles, primarily by two Senior Executives and the users of the information system when this was abandoned as a strategy by other Universities.

As the project progressed, the two Senior Executives took control of the implementation of the information system, at all levels and across all areas of the university. In the end, through lack of discussion with stakeholders, the power struggles were challenged and resistance was displayed by the systems users at the University of Australia. The employees refused to use the system despite the control exerted by the Senior Executives. Eventually a new organizational structure had to be put in place to ensure the strategy was met. New people with the right acceptance of discourse were employed to implement the new Student Administration System.

The discourse behind this project was initially to create uniformity across a system therefore enabling more than 30 universities around Australia to move from a diversified system to a centralized system. The intent was then to strengthen the internal control in each university over the powerful faculties who to this time had controlled student administrative processes pretty well. Within the University of Australia the intent was the same – centralize and control. The public strategy of this university was efficiency and uniformity of process. The real discourse was about return on investment and control of administrative processes. This discourse was challenged many times by the users of the system. However, it was through this resistance that the Senior Executives took control of the system, establishing their own discourse. Hegemony was also necessary in the creation of the power relations, particularly for the Senior Executives. It was through their positions that the two Senior Executives were able to create the discourse that framed many of the decisions and implementation of the system. To facilitate this change they created a new structure and employed new personnel to speak the new discourse and exclude those that resisted.

Resistance and conflict is fundamental to the process of creating power struggles and power relations. In the case of University of Australia, the constant iterations of the majority of staff not wanting to use the system, and the Senior Executives, exerting their power, and hegemony as Senior Executives, forcing staff to use the system, enabled this process to take place. Every new systems implementation will go through forms of power struggles as described above. It could be suggested that this process is imperative in order to gain systems acceptance, as many users are intimidated by change. But it also indicates that when creating new systems, gaining the users' viewpoint on what may be helpful in their day-to-day processes could enable greater systems acceptance, therefore removing the majority of the power struggles.

As highlighted earlier, Ball (1990) suggested that the implementation process endures influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism. These were all experienced in the case study of the University of Australia. The pressure, opposition and resistance, congruent with the inflexibility and dogma, of both the senior executives and the staff led to the decisions that took place, and, ultimately, the success of the system. However success relied on implanting new staff who spoke the discourse. This process enabled the rest of the university community to reveal their hegemony and acceptance of the Student Administration System. In a way this parallels the hegemony in national cultures about the acceptance of government IT policy (Corbitt and Thanasankit 2002). The hegemony is clearly dominant in those nations where IT is strategically important to economic advancement, countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. The social good of adoption is considered of far more significance than that of the individual and acceptance of the hegemony is obvious. These societies accept that the dominance of the government will result in the growth and development that will foster success for them and for those that they support economically and socially. In a sense this case study of the implementation of a Student Administration System is similar. There eventually became an acceptance that it was for the social good of the university that the Student Administration System was adopted universally. Dominance by one discourse became accepted and centralized control became practice. That alignment so important for strategy thus became evident in the Student Administration System and the University. The irony in this case study is that the staff refused to use the information system initially, but having initially tried it, now sing its praise. They have in essence adopted the discourse, they have accepted the hegemony.

Markus (1983) argues that politics plays a key role in organizational implementation and acceptance of an information system. Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) argued in another context that complexity, messiness, inconsistencies, ambiguities and dilemmas are revealed within the multiple levels of systems implementation policy formulation and re-formulation. What eventuates in such circumstances is a breakdown in the social relations between the participants in the information systems implementation. The power that is held by either the technical people or the management is challenged, constructed, re-constructed, challenged again and eventually broken down. In this process a discourse becomes evident, not in isolation from information systems but in relation to it. In the Student Administration System case used in this study, social relations were challenged and broken down through power transference and power relations. The messiness created by implementation affected the impact of control and challenged the power held within different stakeholder groups. In this Student Administration System the held power was contested by referred power in the organizational context and created a system fostered and owned by a more

centralized organizational unit. Power was made to shift. The nature of the power of control of the information system was recontextualised from a distributed to a centralized system, mainly through the complexities created, the inconsistencies in practice and the dilemmas of ownership challenging past practice. Each disabled existing power relations and created new ones. Power then became a driver for change and created new sets of power relations, focused in a different social context within the host organization.

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