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# The Question Concerning Empowerment: Subjects of the Enterprise or Enterprising Subjects?

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## ABSTRACT

Enterprise Systems (ES), historically justified as means of control, are paradoxically also becoming integral to empowerment. Some researchers suggest that achieving the right balance between control and empowerment is a key challenge for today's organizations. Others argue that such simple dichotomous conceptualizations fail to account for the co-existence in practice of a high degree of control and empowerment. To account for these seemingly paradoxical effects, we argue that empowerment does not result from the relaxation of organizational controls over particular functions but rather from the application of techniques of control, including the ES, aimed at shaping employee identities in accordance with organizational goals and desires. Understanding control as intrinsic and not separate from empowerment, we suggest that the empowered employee is not merely a subject of the enterprise but more so continually constructed as an enterprising subject. We discuss implications for theorizing the role of ES in empowerment initiatives.

## Keywords

Empowerment, Control, Enterprise Systems, Foucault, Discipline, Power

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, employee empowerment has emerged as an important managerial goal alongside the more traditional function of control (Drucker, 1988; Manville & Ober, 2003). The Enterprise system (ES) is deemed to have the potential to usefully contribute to both these goals through the information visibilities it allows (e.g., Elmes, Strong and Volkoff, 2005). The simultaneous attribution of effects of empowerment and control to the ES suggests an apparent paradox since employee empowerment is commonly said to necessitate the relaxation of managerial control yet ES have long been regarded as technologies of control (e.g. Hanseth, Ciborra & Braa, 2001). How then can ES as technologies that facilitate control simultaneously facilitate employee empowerment?

In light of this apparent paradox, some have argued that achieving the right balance between control and empowerment is the key challenge for today's organizations that seek the benefits of empowerment (Donlon 1996; Malone 1997). Control and empowerment have been conceptualized as a dichotomy or end points of a continuum (Psoinos, Kern and Smithson, 2000) such that increasing control over particular functions through the functionality of the ES constrains empowerment and, conversely, decreasing the degree of control through appropriate configurations supports empowerment. More recently, Elmes et al (2005) have challenged such conceptualizations by noting that the functionality of the ES can simultaneously engender a high degree of control and a high degree of empowerment. They suggest that to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of such paradoxical effects we must consider the actual practices that are enabled and constrained by the ES as it is put to use in organizational settings and attend to their interplay in the context of the every day activities of managers and employees.

Building on and extending this work, we attempt to theorize the interplay between control and empowerment to account for their seemingly paradoxical co-existence. We extend Elmes et al's theorizing beyond considerations of disciplinary power as a technique of control by considering Foucault's (1977) thoughts on the connection between disciplinary power and the construction of identities. We thus highlight the role of techniques of control in shaping the identity of employees so as to align not only their behaviour but also their desires with organizational aims. We therefore theorize the empowered employee

as an effect of control exercised on employees through disciplinary techniques that include, but are not limited to the ES. Understanding control as intrinsic rather than antithetical to empowerment, we suggest that the empowered employee is simultaneously a *subject of the enterprise* (i.e. controlled) and continually constructed as an *enterprising subject* (i.e. empowered). We discuss the implications of this altered understanding of the empowered employee for theorizing the role of the ES in empowerment initiatives.

## EMPOWERMENT, CONTROL & ENTERPRISE SYSTEMS

Harnessing the initiative and innovative capacity of employees is deemed a key competitive factor (e.g. Drucker 1988; Manville and Ober, 2003). To this end, empowerment projects seek to motivate individuals to take initiative and think innovatively about their jobs, to act proactively rather than blindly follow routines and to willingly or even enthusiastically contribute to the achievement of organizational goals toward increased efficiency, effectiveness and competitive advantage (Argyris, 1998; Malone, 1997).

The organizational literature focuses on two main aspects of empowerment. On the one hand, empowerment is seen as the delegation of decision-making authority and resources to employees (Lee and Koh, 2001). In this sense, empowerment means to give power to (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). On the other hand, empowerment can be understood along psychological lines as the process whereby an individual's belief in his or her self-efficacy is enhanced (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). The employee enjoys more personal control over how to perform his/her job, which in turn can lead to increased job satisfaction, high morale and a drive for innovation and initiative (Psoinos et al. 2000). It has also been suggested that a more meaningful approach to empowerment may in fact combine both behavioral and psychological aspects (Lee and Koh, 2001).

Information is commonly regarded as central to notions of empowerment (Pfeffer 1994; Wilkinson 1998). In order to deal with environmental change, complexity, volatility and uncertainty, organizations and employees must process and exchange information (Tushman and Nadler, 1986). Information systems, including ES, are said to support empowerment initiatives principally through the provision of information (Psoinos et al, 2000). Concurrently, the ES is regarded as a technology that enhances control, an important managerial goal in its own right (e.g. Egelhoff, 1984). Further, upper management fears of losing control are often blamed for failed attempts at empowerment (e.g. Argyris, 1998). Simons (1995) has argued that most writing on empowerment fails to recognize that empowerment and control must be balanced in such a way that one does not result in the failure of the other. This balancing act has been identified as a key issue for organizations to consider (Donlon 1996; Malone 1997).

Research on the relation between ES and empowerment – encompassing only a handful of studies to date – has been framed against the backdrop of the dual goals of control and empowerment and the potential tensions between them. An empirical investigation by Psoinos et al (2000) suggests that while information systems, including ES, may contribute to empowerment through the provision of information, they may also restrict the freedom of employees by constraining action through inflexible processes and by raising expectations about performance, both in terms of role expansion and time pressures. Information systems may contribute to empowerment or control depending on how they are deployed. Control and empowerment thus must be carefully balanced to ensure that control does not impede employee empowerment. Moreover, Psoinos et al. (2000) note that information systems do little to facilitate the provision of power, knowledge and rewards which are core requirements for empowerment alongside access to information. As such, information systems can support empowerment but their presence is not sufficient.

Sia, Tang, Soh and Boh (2002) also recognize the potential for the ES to engender both control and empowerment. To ease the tension between these seemingly opposing goals, they suggest that techniques of control that are “compatible with the spirit of empowerment” (p. 24) can comfortably co-exist with empowerment. Drawing on a Foucauldian view of power, they argue that the ES engenders an “information panopticon”, a kind of control through visibility of information that is compatible with empowerment because of its unobtrusive mode of operation. The information panopticon renders the employee more visible to management even as it makes information for decision-making available to the employee, thus potentially enabling both control and empowerment. In spite of the dual potential afforded by the information panopticon, Sia et al report that the organizational propensity toward maintaining pre-existing hierarchical structures and modes of operating in the research setting they studied reinforced managerial authority rather than empowerment.

In a more recent study, Elmes et al. (2005) examine the relation between ES, empowerment and control also using a Foucauldian lens. They similarly accord centrality to the panoptic visibilities enabled by the ES but report the simultaneous presence of empowerment and control effects. The paradoxical co-existence of a high degree of control and a high degree of empowerment as a result of information visibility is captured in the concept of “panoptic empowerment”. Additionally,

Elmes et al note that the ES engendered a high degree of conformity through the process models inscribed in the system. Adherence to prescribed processes though also required employees to engage in reflection about how their practices fit within the larger context of the organization. The requirement both for conformity (a kind of control) and reflection (a kind of empowerment enabled by information visibility) is captured in the concept of “reflective conformity”. Elmes et al argue that the same measures can simultaneously produce high levels of control and empowerment, leading to paradoxical effects. Rather than attempting to dissolve such paradoxes by tipping the balance in favour of control or empowerment – by, for example, emphasizing the impact of organizational preferences (Sia et al, 2002) or other managerial practices (Psoinos et al, 2000) – Elmes et al suggest that we attempt to transcend the paradoxes by understanding how contradictory effects can co-exist in complex interactions. Following this line of thinking, control and empowerment should not be conceptualized as opposing forces that must be carefully balanced because they necessarily engender opposite effects, with increased control leading to decreased empowerment and vice versa. Rather, as Elmes et al (2005) illustrate in their empirical analysis, control and empowerment can in some cases co-exist in a productive relation in spite of inherent tensions. The authors propose that “harnessing the power of an ES requires balancing the inherent tensions of panoptic empowerment and reflective conformity, so that the various interconnected activities support rather than interfere with each other” (Elmes et al, 2005: 31).

The work of Elmes et al begins to usefully illuminate the complex relations between empowerment, control and the ES as they play out in practice. The richness of empirical description around practices of control and empowerment related to ES suggests, as Elmes et al note, the need for further investigations to deepen our understanding of how ES might best be embedded in organizational practices so as to allow for empowerment. Our aim in this paper is to contribute to this line of research on a theoretical level rather than in an empirical direction. We seek to build on this stream of research by attempting to extend our theoretical understanding of the relation between ES, control and empowerment. In particular, we argue that attending to the construction of employee identities in the context of empowerment can enhance our understanding of the “paradoxical and seemingly contradictory outcomes of [ES]” (p. 32). The principal elements of a theoretical lens that permits such an investigation are outlined in the next section.

## **POWER, DISCIPLINE & THE SUBJECT**

Like Elmes et al (2005), we see promise in a Foucauldian approach to studying the organizational impacts of ES and the question of empowerment in particular. A Foucauldian lens is particularly useful in so far as it allows us to attend to both the behavioural and psychological aspects of empowerment (Lee et al, 2001). As noted above, two key practices are commonly associated with the project of empowerment: the transfer of power to employees and the promotion of a feeling of personal control, leading to higher morale, job satisfaction and a drive for innovation and initiative. A Foucauldian lens offers the potential for new insights into these practices as this theoretical approach differs significantly from traditional conceptualizations of both power and human beings (or the subject). Furthermore, as will become clear in what follows, a Foucauldian lens allows us to theorize the link between these practices and understand their relations by focusing attention on the construction of employee identities. Finally, the approach suggested here addresses the function of various kinds of technologies, including the ES.

In this section, we present Foucault’s conceptualizations of power and discipline. We then articulate their relation to the construction of identity or the ‘subject’.

### **Power**

Against a commodity view of power as something possessed by agents such as managers, Foucault (1982) argues that power is not something that can be possessed but rather something that exists only when it is exercised or “put into action” (p. 778). Power is exercised by individuals or groups who act upon the acts of others. As an “act upon other acts” (Foucault, 1982), the exercise of power both enables and constrains subsequent actions. The implementation of an ES in an organization, for example, may allow managers to more closely monitor operations. However, it may not allow them to legitimately claim ignorance of the status of certain operational process when something goes amiss. The act of implementing the ES both enables and constrains further actions. Crucial to this conceptualization is the idea that those over whom power is exercised are maintained as people who can act and therefore are free. The possibility of resistance, of acting and thinking otherwise, remains open to those over whom power is exercised though the exercise of power enables and constrains future actions at a particular place and time (Foucault, 1982).

If power only exists when it is exercised, then to study power we must consider it as it is put into play, focusing on *how* power works. Foucault (1980) notes that power increasingly functions through bureaucratic or technical means: by way of procedures, techniques and practices that gain their legitimacy from the knowledge of experts, rather than through overt

coercion or domination (Foucault, 1980). As a result, the workings of power tend to be more subtle and hidden, more difficult to pinpoint. This calls for an approach focused on material practices, on disciplinary techniques (Foucault 1977), such as information systems, and the way these function at the point of application.

## Discipline

To investigate the ‘how’ of power, Foucault (1977) carefully considers how discipline functions, attending in particular to the techniques (i.e. systematic practices which might or might not involve technologies such as information systems) through which it operates. Foucault notes that at our present time in history disciplinary techniques are aimed at making the individual useful within a system of production, maintaining individuals in a relation of “utility-docility” (p. 137); that is, as individuals who are both useful and willing to be useful. To this end, disciplinary techniques target the behaviour (i.e. the actions) of individuals by treating them as objects and subjecting them to systems of control predicated on the organization of space, management of time, comparison to averages, supervision and routine examination (Foucault, 1977). A multitude of formal and informal procedures, practices and technologies that also include ES are employed to accomplish these tasks and promote productivity in our time. These may seem like rather commonplace or simple techniques. Indeed, such techniques are pervasive in many societies. They operate in schools, factories and other types of organizations where they are taken up for a variety of specific purposes. Yet, Foucault would argue that such commonplace techniques have profound effects.

An important effect of these techniques is the production of knowledge. Treating individuals as objects allows the assembly of an ‘objective’ knowledge of each employee that serves as the basis for rewards and sanctions, and that can be used to promote conformity through intervention (i.e. the exercise of power). Foucault argues, however, that using this knowledge to forcefully shape action through fear of reprisal or the enticement of reward is not the primary goal of discipline. Systems of discipline have as their principal aim the training of individuals so as to progressively attune them to actively *want* to conform, independently of the presence or absence of controls and systems of reward and punishment, producing employees that govern or regulate their own behavior reflexively (cf. Giddens 1984) and therefore need no supervision or coercion (Foucault 1982).

Foucault (1977) proposes that when individuals are entrained to align not only their behaviour (or actions) but also their desires with organizational goals they become both “obedient” and “useful” and in fact become “more obedient as [they] becom[e] more useful, and conversely” (p. 138). We are now ready to consider what Foucault means by the ‘subject’.

## The Subject

*Foucault (1982) has sought to understand the various ways in which individuals are made subjects, in the dual sense of being subject to effects of power that operate through discipline and being constituted as subjects who regulate their own conduct. Subjugation produces a self-disciplining subjectivity through the operation of “[m]odern technologies of power [that] subjugate by forcing individuals back in on themselves so that they become tied to [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982: 212). In confrontation with the various kinds of measurements and comparisons that are produced through discipline, individuals engage in reflection and self-assessment, in the process constructing their subjectivity (or identity) along particular lines. For example, when an ES provides employees with statistics about their performance on tasks and comparisons to the performance of their peers or industry best practices, employees may come to view themselves as good or poor performers, as followers or leaders, or perhaps as ‘empowered’ or ‘controlled’. This self-knowledge, which is produced through disciplinary techniques that treat employees as objects, thus also plays a role in constructing the identity of employees as subjects.*

*A Foucauldian understanding of what it means to be a human being departs from classical notions of the subject as a conscious, autonomous being. To be a person is to be a subject that is constructed or “produced” (Foucault, 1980) by overlapping techniques of power. The empowered employee is a particular kind of constructed subjectivity. As a self-regulating subject, s/he is an individual who understands his/her place in the organization and the broader social milieu and acts accordingly. The self-regulating subject is produced as an effect of power and the disciplinary technologies through which it flows. As such, the empowered employee is an effect of techniques of discipline put into play in organizations. In the context of the pursuit of empowerment and a variety of interventions designed to promote empowerment, the enterprise system, as a modern disciplinary technology, contributes to this production.*

*To attempt to articulate to our argument in concrete terms, in the next section, we consider some examples of how the ES may contribute to the realization of the empowered employee as a constructed identity.*

## THE ENTERPRISE SYSTEM AS A DISCIPLINARY TECHNOLOGY

In this section, we depict the ES as a disciplinary technology that controls employees by treating them as objects, thus making them subjects of the enterprise, while simultaneously enabling the construction of their identities as enterprising subjects (i.e. as empowered employees) . We will then suggest that employee resistance to the implementation of a disciplinary system like the ES is actually resistance not only to control but also to the construction of their identities.

### Subjects of the Enterprise

To be a subject of the enterprise means to be the target of systems of control, of which the ES is one. Through the functions of the ES, discipline is applied to meticulously control the behavior of the employee (Foucault, 1977). For instance a user commented: “If you are not doing your job the way that you are supposed to, the system will catch you.....SAP creates a standard process for everyone to follow.....There is a set order to things” (in Elmes et al., 2005: 23). The ES is embedded with particular rules and procedures that serve to control the processes by which employees can accomplish their work. Another example is the SAP workflow module that can perform task-flow analysis and prompt employees (via e-mail) if they need to take action (Brady, Monk and Wagner, 2001). In addition to process control, the outcome of work is also controlled: “The ERP system now shows how efficient and inefficient each department is by making clear the money that each department makes” (a user in Sia et al., 2002: 29). By informing the work environment (Zuboff, 1988), the ES allows the employee to be constituted as a describable, analyzable object. Consequently, a manager can use comparative methods to calculate the gaps between individuals and their distribution in a given population. This way, the employee becomes a subject of the enterprise.

### Enterprising Subjects

As an enterprising subject, the employee is “expected to work entrepreneurially within the ‘empowered’ domain” (Styhre, 2001: 800). We contend that it is not just an entrepreneurial attitude that is required but a willingness to conform. The ES demands that the employee conforms in particular ways. For instance, in the case of an ES in a hospital environment, a nursing manager commented that “the more we are able to see, the more we need to know to have a grasp of the patient information” (in Sia et al., 2001: 30). The increased access to information required that the nurse undergo additional training in order to be able to effectively deal with patient information and act appropriately. In addition, the ES imposes a particular work ethic on the employees as the result of the compression of time. A user reported that “Previously it was acceptable to take more than a week to generate an ad-hoc report for management. Now, they want it fast. And the ERP system is real time. We have to get the data out promptly” (in Sia et al., 2001: 30). Even when users were lacking enough information to perform their jobs, Elmes et al. (2005) found that they developed work-arounds to ensure that they could perform their jobs efficiently, “as such, these employees took responsibility for remaining empowered to do their job” (19).

### Resistance

Viewed in a Foucauldian sense, individuals are neither entirely autonomous beings that act in accordance with intrinsic desires or inclinations (i.e. subjective phenomena), nor simply entities that respond in predictable ways to external forces and constraints (i.e. objective phenomena) (cf. Orlikowski and Robey, 1991). Thus, it is important to resist the temptation to view identity construction unproblematically as the outcome of the exercise of power. Though disciplinary power seeks to entrain individuals and thus structure their identities in particular ways, disciplinary power is not equivalent to complete domination or coercion. Indeed, Foucault (1980) suggests that in order to analyze power relations in a more empirical way, one should take the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point.

Resistance is commonly understood in terms of resistance to control: “I did whatever I wanted and still learned from it. And they don’t like that because we are telling them that there are some things they cannot control” (in Prasad and Prasad, 2000: 396). We contend that it can also be usefully understood in terms of a resistance to identity construction. In a case study reported in Doolin (2004), an ES was being implemented in a hospital. The system was intended to monitor and scrutinize clinical activity and consequently influence the way that doctors behaved. Our contention is that the doctors resisted not only to the control that the managers tried to exert over them but also resisted to the formation of their identities in particular ways that served the hospital’s objectives. “[Doctors] don’t like this monitoring business....I guess its just their culture, their professional culture – that they’re clinicians and managers shouldn’t be telling them how to treat their patients” (Doolin, 352). By resisting both subjugation and identity formation, the doctors were able to continually resist the ES and reinterpret its role in everyday work. Eventually, the system was relegated to a less significant role within the hospital.

We have depicted the ES as a disciplinary technology that controls employees, thus making them subjects of the enterprise, while simultaneously enabling the construction of their identities as enterprising subjects. A complex notion of causal agency

(Markus and Robey, 1988) is at play here as the effects of the ES are neither the result of the action of employees as autonomous subjects nor simply the outcome of structural constraints imposed by the ES on the organizational environment. Rather, the manner in which ES as disciplinary technologies achieve particular effects entails viewing employees both as objects amenable to control and as subject with identities formed in interaction and confrontation with organizational and societal practices. As noted above, forms of resistance to techniques of control that objectify employees as well as techniques of control that attempt to construct their subjectivity along particular lines have been reported. The simultaneous attempt to control employees objectively and mould their identities as subjects may very well explain the rather contradictory observation that “The ES works well as a control system only to the extent that workers take control of their work and of the system” (Elmes et al, 2005). It is in this way that control and empowerment are intrinsic to each other.

## IMPLICATIONS

We have attempted to demonstrate in this paper that control and empowerment, rather than being in tension, are intrinsic to each other: empowerment relies on control and, in today’s business environment, effective control relies on the empowered or enterprising employee. The employee who is empowered to carry out the work of the organization must be trusted to carry out that work in a manner that is in keeping with the interests of the organization, as well as to ensure that the interests of the organization continue to circumscribe the work that is conducted. The empowered employee is therefore always a constructed subjectivity inscribed with the will reflected in the ES and in the norms of the organization. Thus, rather than control and empowerment working in opposition to each other and therefore needing explicit intervention to effect a balance, they serve to reinforce each other such that high levels of control can (and do) engender high levels of empowerment, as Elmes, et al. (2005) point out.

What, then, are the implications of such an altered conceptualization? Rather than being a merely semantic distinction, seeing the two notions as, in effect, two sides of the same coin suggests the need to redirect our efforts as we seek to understand how ES are implicated in empowerment. Traditional conceptualizations (e.g. Psoinos et al, 2000) view control and empowerment as anti-thetical forces that must be carefully balanced. The need for balance suggests that it should be possible to relax control over particular functions while retaining tight control over others, as appropriate. For example, an organization might retain tight control over authority to issue payments while allowing information visibility into cash flows for other purposes. Alternatively, when the same functionality – increased information visibility, most commonly – is implicated in both control and empowerment as in the case where the ES allows monitoring of employee activities, other organizational practices may need to be structured so as to ensure excessive control does not interfere with empowerment or vice versa. If managers, for example, use increased visibilities as a means of maintaining hierarchical relations (e.g. Sia et al, 2002), the potential for information to empower employees is limited at best. Such studies point to the importance of the uses that are made of information systems such as ES in the pursuit of empowerment. Elmes et al (2005) further suggest that perhaps it is not possible to simply adopt the right kinds of control or the right kinds of organizational practices around ES so as to avoid the inherent tensions between control and empowerment. In their detailed account of organizational practices, Elmes et al depict control and empowerment as co-existing, if seemingly paradoxical, realities in everyday practices: an empowered employee must somehow negotiate this tension between control and empowerment. For example, in order to perform their jobs well employees must conform to prescribed processes embedded in the ES while at the same time proactively seek out and reflect on their knowledge of other tasks and processes (cf. Orlikowski, 1992). They must accept the co-presence of control and empowerment in the tasks they perform. How employees are able to do this successfully and why some, as Elmes et al note, may not do so are interesting questions that merit further investigation.

Our contention in this paper has been that employee empowerment can be usefully conceptualized in terms of the constitution through various techniques of control, including ES, of a particular kind of employee: an employee whose identity is shaped in conformity with organizational aims and desires. Following this line of thinking exhorts us to set aside conceptualizations of control and empowerment as opposing forces (e.g. Psoinos et al, 2000) or sources of inherent tension (Elmes et al, 2005). If techniques of control structure identities so as to produce employees who regulate their own behavior reflexively in accordance with organizational desires, then the key to understanding empowerment may not lie in teasing out either the opposition or the tension between control and empowerment. Further, a focus on the construction of identities as intimately tied to techniques of control that include ES, challenges the notion that ES are merely supportive technologies (Psoinos et al, 2000). It accords to the ES a central place in questions of empowerment, alongside a wide range of other disciplinary techniques both within and outside organizations.

We believe a theoretical shift in the direction of the construction of the identity of the empowered employee in the relation to ES can help us to begin to answer the kinds of questions raised by Elmes et al as well as others. While current research has usefully pointed to the need to implement ES so as to support desired outcomes as well as to the importance of considering ES as technologies that are embedded in other organizational practices, the question of what motivates employees to be empowered or alternatively to decline such opportunities remains a difficult one. Traditional thinking has engaged such questions principally by investigating the presence or absence of appropriate incentives or rewards but, as Psoinos et al (2000) note, employees may not necessarily view empowerment as advantageous in spite of incentive structures. Engaging questions of identity construction and resistance might help us account for such observations.

Framing empowerment in terms of the construction of identities rather than the release from controls also opens a space for ethical questions. If to be empowered means to become a self-disciplining subject through the reflexive construction of a particular identity, then is

it really possible to be empowered in a 'true' sense? Considering the two main aspects of empowerment found in the organizational literature (noted in the introduction), having power conferred and enjoying control over job performance, this form of empowerment would serve the purpose but would also serve to mask the power exercised by organizational decision-makers, amounting in its subterfuge to a form of domination. There is clearly an inevitability, especially in a rapidly globalizing context that threatens the integrity of organizations, to such exercises of power. Perhaps, therefore, the central managerial challenge of our time is not to overcome the barriers to employee empowerment or discover how to 'truly' empower employees, but "to acquire the rules of the law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible" (Foucault, 1980: 39-40).

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