

EDITORIAL

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION



CITIZENS AND GOVERNANCE IN A
KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

This WORKS Newsletter is the final edition bringing together some key conclusions of the project and presenting its last output. It is not obvious to summarise the results of four years of intensive research carried out by 17 teams and, all together, more than 40 researchers coming from 14 EU Member States. The research included different empirical approaches, combining the study of theories and concepts, the quantitative analysis of data coming from different EU-level databases and a huge number of case studies in highly diverse sectors and business functions, carried out in 14 nations and including both organisations and individuals. And the researchers also took a policy perspective in their empirical work to better frame and understand their findings, they built in a gender perspective systematically and put their work to the test of regular peer reviews.

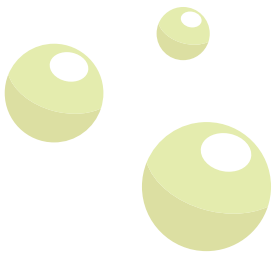
Bringing together and, more importantly, integrating the huge outcome of such a diversity of data, knowledge and perspectives was not an easy task. The project generated a considerable number of publications and more of them will with no doubt follow even long after the project has ended. The final batch of WORKS publications is presented in the last Newsletter, including a series of 11 volumes on the key project themes, a policy report, a training resource pack and comprehensive conference proceedings. All can, as usual, be ordered and downloaded easily from our project website.

While the research itself was ambitious, it is an even more meticulous exercise to synthesise some final conclusions on just a couple of pages. This is difficult because it is almost inevitable that some key findings are not presented to their full value, that some qualifications and nuances bite the dust in the final editing, that some interesting findings do not receive the attention that they deserve. Nevertheless, we have made an attempt in this last edition of the WORKS Newsletter and it actually turned out to be possible to come up with some general trends and conclusions. The main reason for this is simple: one of the important findings of the project was that some trends about changes in work appear to be surprisingly clear and unambiguous, despite the huge diversity of firms, industries and regional contexts studied. Looking at an IT firm in Hungary, a clothing company in Portugal, a public administration office in the UK, a research lab in Austria, a food company in Norway or a post office in Greece: of course the differences were huge and the comparative analysis extremely complex. Nevertheless, some general trends could indeed be discerned and we did not want to spare you of them. These main highlights of the project therefore receive some space in this last Newsletter edition.

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The empirical work of the project was long over and the major analyses of the data were basically done when the world faced the outburst of a major financial crisis, followed by an economic downturn that struck, and is still striking, all industries and regions all over the globe in a particular fierce way. Given the main research interest of the WORKS project, changes in work in the knowledge-based society, the consortium partners are of course particularly motivated to trying to understand how industries and companies will respond to this major crisis and what will be the effects on work and on workers. Although the project was about to end and no time nor resources were left to go back to the field, the EC agreed to extend our contract with three months. This gave us the opportunity to still formulate some concerns and questions that arise when looking at the economic crisis from the perspective of the WORKS outcome. Although these reflections are not supported by the thorough empirical evidence to which we adhered throughout the project itself, they are presented in this issue as well. Finally, it is obvious that even a comprehensive project such as WORKS leaves a lot of questions unanswered and, therefore, some suggestions for future research could also be derived from our work.

On behalf of the whole WORKS consortium, I wish you a good reading of this edition and I hope that it can arouse your interest and appetite to read more of the WORKS outcome.

● THE PROJECTS WORK

RATTLING THE VALUE CHAIN: WORK IN THE AGE OF FLEXIBILITY (AND WHAT COMES NEXT?)

After four years of research, WORKS has yielded new knowledge on how work changes when value chains are under restructuring. While it is difficult to identify uniform trends in today's EU of 27 member states, there are some clear tendencies which are pointed out below. Meanwhile, the current financial and economic crisis raises general concerns about how companies will react and how workers will be affected. Although the WORKS research was carried out before its outburst, the WORKS consortium reflected on possible effects of the crisis. Some concerns and question are added to the project's highlights...

Outsourcing and offshoring but also integration

The research showed simultaneous processes of fragmentation and integration of value chains. Outsourcing is not only a strong tendency in manufacturing sectors but also in service industries and in public services. Business support activities (ICT services, logistics, customer services and so on), are increasingly outsourced to specialised firms. This contributes to a growing specialisation of industries and to a lengthening of value chains. However, processes of integration and consolidation are also observed. These aim at strengthening control over the value chain and improving the competitive position of the firm within the chain.

The growing interconnectedness of firms in global value chains and networks may have as an effect that the impact of the

current economic crisis on one unit in the chain or network quickly multiplies to other units. This became obvious where the capacities of supplier companies were no longer used or freelance workers no longer employed. The economic crisis is likely to demonstrate in a very acute way the global nature of our economy, affecting all sectors and regions, small and large companies, private and public organisations. There seems no place to hide...

To date it is not yet fully clear how companies will restructure as a response to the crisis. Will they accelerate investments in product and process innovation as a survival strategy or will they rather shift to cost-cutting as the major corporate response? Or will they combine both? Cost-cutting may be necessary as a short-term reaction to empty order books or postponed investments, or it may be related to a more drastic revision of the overall corporate strategy and structure.

If cost-cutting prevails, what will be the effect on outsourcing and offshoring strategies? On the one hand, the crisis may speed up decisions to outsource and offshore activities to low-cost destinations. But some firms may decide to cancel or postpone restructuring plans and even reverse outsourcing and offshoring practices. This could be because of overcapacity or to save on expensive offshore project investments. Firms may also choose to keep the work in house or to bring it back in again in order to save jobs and to secure the availability of qualified staff in view of future economic revival. Different impacts are likely to be seen in different business functions. Activities linked to launching or marketing new products are likely to be postponed, but there will be continuing demand for activities linked to servicing existing customers.

Fragmentation of work and employment conditions

Restructuring often deeply affects employment and working conditions. Differences in wage levels and employment regulations between countries, sectors and firms directly impact on employment conditions.

An overriding research finding is an increase in the fragmentation of employment conditions even within firms. In IT services, workers formerly employed under the same contracts become fragmented workforces with different terms and conditions. In customer services, service providers operate under different labour regulations than their public sector counterparts. Manufacturing companies down the value chain, even within the same country, carry out more standardised tasks under more precarious labour conditions.

The power relations between organisations within the value chain have immediate consequences for labour. Compared to focal firms, companies or units in a dependent position tend to offer lower wages and worse conditions to their workers. In addition, the contract concluded between organisations often directly impacts on work processes, employment relations, working conditions and forms of control. The position that an organisation holds is not static, however, and thus a movement along the value chain may also change the quality of working life. The upgrading of suppliers or service providers, in turn, puts pressure on the focal companies' workforces as they face additional competition.

It is an open question whether, under the conditions of the current crisis, redundant capacities are cut at suppliers and remote subsidiaries or at the often high-cost focal companies.

More skills needed to work harder?

Across industries, business processes are accelerating, and time horizons are becoming shorter, for instance in the software industry where work is mostly project-based, or in the clothing industry, where collections now change every month rather than around the seasons.

These trends imply that the workers need more skills to be able to respond to this speeding up of business. They also increasingly need to collaborate 'over the boundaries', with workers in other firms, from other sites around the globe and with customers.

These new skills do not necessarily concern the core professional skills, but concern social and communication skills, the ability to work fast and to combine information from very different sources, the flexibility to deal with different kinds of customers etc. Hence, the observed upskilling is very closely related to work intensification.

Analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey confirms that, on average in the EU-15, work has become more intense between 1995 and 2005. At the same time, however, jobs became less complex and more routine overall, with workers having less autonomy and fewer learning opportunities.

Next to this, the case studies also showed a growing standar-

disation of work, more procedures, monitoring and control and more bureaucracy in almost all business functions and industries.

It is not a big surprise then that a high proportion of workers in Europe feel overqualified for the work they do, which causes dissatisfaction. While not increased overall, dissatisfaction is also especially high amongst people with fixed-term contracts or in casual work. This improves if they move to other jobs.

However, there is a risk that the current economic crisis, with a general economic slow down, a speeding-up of restructuring and an increase in corporate failures, will limit the opportunities to change jobs. The increased contractual flexibility that was observed in relation to value chain restructuring may imply that those workers with temporary contracts will be the first to be made redundant when firms have to rationalise. The reduced opportunities to find a new job will then especially be problematic for them.

Another question is what strategies firms will apply for the most skilled. Will they strengthen retention policies in anticipation of future economic revival? If this is the case, the combined effect of more job security for the high skilled with less employment opportunities for the lower skilled may result in a growing segmentation on the labour market as well as a growing divergence in employment and working conditions across the workforce.

Gender and ethnicity under restructuring

For women, the benefits of restructuring are ambiguous. In some knowledge-based industries, for instance, new, relatively high-skilled jobs are created for women, especially in functions that involve communicating with clients or customers. However, these can only be taken up at the price of adopting a 'masculine' lifestyle, including long hours and a sacrifice of work-life balance. In low-skilled production industries, on the other hand, restructuring may exacerbate existing patterns of segregation and be associated with an increase in precariousness.

Despite the increase in migration into the EU in most of the case studies black and immigrant workers were found only in the most precarious positions at the bottom of the value chain. In high-skilled jobs there is a growth in a 'global culture', in which workers are increasingly expected to be geographically mobile and to speak global languages, notably English, in order to progress.

Industrial relations and managing restructuring

During the restructuring, workers experience high demands but have no way of controlling what happens, because procedures are strictly standardised, so they have to adapt passively to changes that become more and more frequent. The trend toward the increase in demands in work and the reduction in

work influence, leads to an increase in the risk of psychological strain.

With the current economic crisis, it is likely that the frequency and scope of restructuring will increase and changes in work will occur in rapid succession. In a context of a lack of control and workers' influence, the question is to what extent these changes will deepen and proliferate feelings of insecurity, increase the risks of psychological strain and, in general, bring about a deterioration in well-being at work.

The institutional context, like the nature of the industrial relations system and national policies on training and employment, makes a big difference. Value chain restructuring affects a broad range of workers in a variety of contexts and economic sectors. How the aftermath of restructuring is managed differs considerably according to the strength of actors of interest representation. Financially driven strategies drive cost-cutting to regions and sectors with lower wages and less protected employment regulations. Some companies used value chain restructuring to offshore and outsource poor working conditions to less regulated regions. In the end, the competition for cost also puts pressure on core workers in contexts with high levels of regulation.

If restructuring increases as a result of the economic crisis, then companies will continue the trend to outsource jobs to regions or sectors where they can impose poorer working conditions and less attractive jobs. This will increase inequality between regions in Europe and even within countries between sectors and worker categories.

Worker representation remains important, as a means of giving workers a 'voice' in the restructuring process. Outcomes tend to

be more favourable to workers when there is a process of negotiation. Nations and sectors with strong worker representation were often able to mitigate the negative effects of value chain restructuring for workers.

The economic crisis and continuing job loss connected with it may weaken workplace representation, making it even less possible to be proactive in value chain restructuring initiatives and decreasingly effective in responding to the consequences.

There is a danger that the current economic crisis puts labour on the defensive and weakens workers' influence in restructuring processes. Will it be possible not only to strengthen the rights to participation but also to ensure the enforcement of such rights?

Towards sustainable jobs...

If companies and industries want to remain competitive, their innovation strategies need to be based on an educated workforce, working in jobs and workplaces that allow them to develop their competences and to collaborate, and that offer employment security.

These requirements seem to become even more relevant in the light of the current economic crisis. Will firms be able and willing to invest in such sustainable workplaces and employable workers in order to mobilise all resources to face the crisis? Or will they rather intensify and standardise work and put pressure on working and employment conditions in an overall cost-cutting strategy?

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH...

WORKS generated a lot of new insights but, on the other hand, a lot of questions remain unanswered as well. To find these, more research is needed. Here are some suggestions, directly derived from the project results.

- The WORKS project has vindicated the use of the concept of the 'business function' as a unit of analysis, and this approach has now also been adopted by Eurostat (in the International Outsourcing Survey) and the US Bureau of Labour Statistics (for collecting data on mass layoffs). However most economic and labour market statistics are still collected using the 'enterprise', the 'sector' or, more rarely, the 'establishment' as the unit of analysis. **There is a need for systematic in-depth research to develop definitions and indicators of business functions and to find ways in which these can be mapped onto existing data sets in which economic activities are classified by sector, enterprise or occupations.**

- The WORKS results demonstrate that restructuring does not only occur in the private sector but also in the public sector. **There is a need for qualitative research on the impact of this restructuring on the working conditions, occupational identities and career paths of public (or formerly public) employees, as well as on equality of opportunity and work-life balance.** This research should focus on the opportunities, as well as the threats, that result for workers from being transferred from a public organisation to a private company.
- The WORKS project was able, to a limited extent, to study the development of new sectors (in this case, the provision of IT services) arising from the outsourcing of business services. **There is a need for further systematic research on the growth of other sectors supplying externalised business services and the multinational companies that are emerging to supply these outsourced services, for instance in HR, back-office processing, customer services and accounting services.** In particular, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which such developments represent a competitive opportunity for the EU and the extent to which they might pose a risk to European competitiveness and employment.
- Externalisation is often used to increase an organisation's flexibility. However, the WORKS research findings also revealed limitations in this respect. Outsourcing can reduce

responsiveness, slow down overall workflows, and intensify 'bureaucracy' where needs for control and monitoring increase. **More research is needed into these increasingly bureaucratic cross-organisational work processes and their unintended consequences in terms of rigidity, delays and work strain.**

- There are clear country differences in the scale of differentials between labour market segments and in the related fragmentation of employment conditions through value chain restructuring. The WORKS research found a flexibilisation and precarisation of employment contracts mostly in the public sector. But also in other sectors restructuring partly undermines employment regulation regimes. **Future research needs to analyse how policy makers and social partners in different countries address labour regulation in the view of a growing fragmentation of employment.**
- Value chain restructuring also affects the circulation of knowledge. Increased demands on documentation and standardised procedures render knowledge explicit but get in the way of actual, situated problem-solving and longer-term creative vision as they cut into the time and discretion workers have available for both aspects of innovation. The WORKS research showed that standardisation and new demands on tacit knowledge are interrelated, and put on workers as an additional demand. The remaining and increased demands on knowledge tend to be invisible and underrated, specifically when newly imposed routines get in the way of competent work performance. **Future research should address these issues not only related to 'knowledge work' but to different forms of work of various occupational groups.**

- The analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey showed that jobs in the EU15 became less complex and more routine between 1995 and 2005, with workers having less learning opportunities. But, in general, knowledge is considered as a driving force of growth and welfare in the European economy, driven by the growth of service sectors, the aging and better educated work force. Also other results shows that jobs may become more complex as a result of organisational change. WORKS has also demonstrated that the introduction of ICTs is a prerequisite to value chain restructuring but has contradictory effects on skills: they require more skills of those workers who use them, but they are also preceeded by the standardisation processes and, hence, they generate more routine jobs as well. Finally, the divergent evolutions of job complexity and skill use across EU countries remains to a large extent unexplained. **How can we explain all these 'complexity paradoxes'? A lot of questions about the evolution of the knowledge-intensity of jobs and the use of skills are still open. More research is needed in this domain.**
- Restructuring cuts across the traditional bargaining units (the firm, the sector, the region, etc.) used by the social partners to regulate working conditions. **There is a need for qualitative research to compare different approaches to industrial relations that aim to traverse the value chain and investigate the extent to which these are exportable from one national industrial regime to another.**

NEW WORKS PUBLICATIONS

TOWARDS A FUTURE AGENDA FOR POLICY UNDER VALUE CHAIN RESTRUCTURING

BY P. MEIL, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE WORKS POLICY PILLAR

Four years of research in the complex and diverse area of changes in work in the knowledge-based society laid the foundation for identifying policy challenges that are now addressed in a new WORKS publication. Issues covered include: skills and knowledge, gender and equality, employment and work, the labour market context and social governance structures - all targeted by the EU guidelines as major aspects of reaching the Lisbon goals. The report deals with the following questions:

- What current policy debates surround these issues?
- What institutions or structures are mainly responsible for regulating them?
- What policy challenges emerge from the WORKS case studies? What deviations are there between policy and practice?
- Which levels of policy and actors should address the challenges?

Here are some snapshots from the outcome.

EU guidelines: necessary but not sufficient

Many regulations defined at the EU level are meant to achieve equality, decrease discrimination, improve the quality of work life, educate the workforce, ensure job security, govern restructuring and its effects. But they turn out to be not very evident in practice, or only very selectively. There are many reasons for this. For one, Europe has a variety of institutional trajectories within which economic development and social policy have been operating. The diverse national contexts of regulation and protection are difficult to monitor, measure, and evaluate. The regulations function best in settings that already have high levels of institutionalised representation, but even then, they are sometimes bypassed. Additionally, an increasingly financially led logic evident in the last decades has driven more aggressive cost-cutting strategies in companies in which they sought ways to avoid strong regulations for employment and work.

Tensions between different regulation levels

Areas of regulation which are so significant for the experience and capability of work – training, education, labour market supply, governance structures, and organisation of social dialogue, have been traditionally anchored in regional and national settings. WORKS showed that value chains are moving across borders of country and industrial branch. This makes the contexts in which occupation, sector, and national frameworks are emerging and the boundaries for policy formulation more and more diffuse. In general, there is also a growing rift between European growth, and therefore the ever larger social space in which regulation is supposed to take place and the simultaneously growing individualisation in a number of aspects of work life: contracts, training provision, negotiation, redressing wrongs committed at the workplace. This potentially allows companies and workers to evade state and corporatist regulation. Further, it may lead to a 'slithering away' from former forms of regulation and more leverage for purely market solutions to company strategies. Many of the challenges that arise as a result of value chain restructuring, the locus of conflict and negotiation, and thus the needs for regulation, will occur within the company and between its units along the chain.

This does not make it necessarily impossible to govern value chain restructuring processes in a socially sustainable way. It requires new roles and responsibilities for the stakeholders: the participation of individuals, social partners, sector level social agreements, and the mobilisation of regional resources.

Policies informed by micro-level research

Supranational institutions such as the EU have a responsibility to use their regulatory power to mitigate inequalities forming across the value chain and to better monitor and enforce existing regulation. Top-down support from EU legislation, institutions, and availability of resources are the necessary foundation for bottom-up protection of workers and working life. Studies at the workplace level such as WORKS can only provide detailed snapshots of what is happening to policy 'on the ground'. However, they are extremely important sources for corrective measures of meso- and macro-institutional initiatives. Studies carried out at the workplace level uncover the gaps between how regulation is meant to function and the reality and thus important impulses for policy formulation emerge.

More research is needed on what causes the weaknesses of policy implementation in different contexts and which actions should be promoted to empower actors at different levels – individuals, social partners, regional and national institutions, and EU monitoring and control organisations, including the co-ordination between the different levels.

Meil P. (ed.), Challenges for Europe under value chain restructuring: contribution to policy debates has now been published and can be ordered via www.worksproject.be.

UNDERSTANDING A CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

RESOURCE PACK FOR UNION TRAINING ON VALUE CHAIN RESTRUCTURING

NOW AVAILABLE!

WORKS is a comprehensive study on processes of value chain restructuring, the drivers behind these and their impact on work and workers. The research has been carried out in a wide variety of business functions, companies and sectors of 14 different EU Member States. The WORKS study made one thing clear: restructuring can have a deep impact on workers: it is likely to affect their job content and employment conditions, the skills they need, their contracts and working times, their professional identities and career trajectories, the quality of their work and of their lives, their psychosocial health. It is therefore no luxury to investigate how these important changes can be managed in such a way that the negative impacts are limited and the positive outcomes for workers stimulated. WORKS wants to contribute to this ambitious goal and has produced a *resource pack for training* targeted at unions dealing with value chain restructuring and its effects. Its purpose is to support employee representatives in unions or works councils all over Europe in their roles as active partners in these change processes.

Restructuring challenges the way in which unions and works councils, as well as individuals and groups of workers, can influence change. Being a part of a change process trying to make an impact on what kind of restructuring, which goals should be considered and how to implement

the change is in itself a challenge. One of the most important roles in dealing with restructuring from a union representative perspective is therefore to identify the possible short- or long-term effects of the change. Based on this analysis the union can then negotiate and influence the change – supporting the positive effects and trying to mitigate the negative ones. Viewed from this perspective, the purpose of the resource pack is first and foremost to create a deeper understanding of restructuring issues and their impact on working life and to enable concrete action.

This is what you can find in the resource pack:

- *Chapter 1* takes its starting point in the concept of value chain restructuring. It tries to lay a foundation for a deeper understanding of the processes changing the relations between companies as well as different group of employees often hidden under concepts like outsourcing, offshoring and flexibilisation.
- In *Chapter 2* we go through the forces behind restructuring processes and stakeholders involved in restructuring. We specifically discuss globalisation, the development of information and communication technologies and different management strategies and techniques.
- *Chapter 3* is the first of three chapters supporting you to analyse the restructuring that is going on in your company, sector and business function. The chapter contains a basis

for analysing the critical features of different sectors and business functions in the context of value chain restructuring.

- *Chapter 4* goes further into the analysis of restructuring processes. In this we go deeper into the analysis of different national settings and regional aspects.
- In *Chapter 5* we analyse how restructuring affects different aspects of work; skills and competencies, flexibility and fragmentation, occupational health and safety, and gender issues. It takes the restructuring as given and looks into how different groups of employees and occupations are being influenced by the change.
- In the last chapter, *Chapter 6*, we discuss different ways for unions to act in the change process and establish a working social dialogue in restructuring. The purpose of this chapter is going from understanding and analysing restructuring to discuss strategies and actions on different levels.

This book is primarily written as a resource pack for employee representatives and unions on different levels in European

working life who are confronting change and restructuring. Its aim is to enhance union competence in change in working life. But it is also very relevant for human resource managers or students of working life.

Much of the book is built on reports and case studies written by WORKS project members. A draft version of the book has been discussed in a workshop with union representatives and members of the European Employee Support Network (EESUN). The book will be soon available on www.worksproject.be as a PDF document, with practical bookmarks to scroll quickly through it.

Tengblad P. (ed.), *Understanding a changing world of work. Resource pack for union training on value chain restructuring* is available on www.worksproject.be.

WORKS RESULTS WRAPPED UP IN 11 VOLUMES

After four years of work, the WORKS partners have produced 11 'thematic reports'. Co-authored by WORKS partners with specialist knowledge on each theme, these WORKS books bring together all the results of the WORKS theoretical and em-

pirical research around key topic areas, to make them accessible to a wide academic and policy audience. The 11 volumes are now published.

FRAGMENTATION OF WORK: THE FUTURE OF WORK IN EUROPE IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

WORKS final conference, 8-9/10/2008, Rome – Italy. Conference proceedings available!

After the final international WORKS conference a comprehensive conference report has been published. It includes all presentations from the plenary and parallel sessions, from WORKS partners as well as from the external discussants who critically assessed the project's outcome. Further, a summary of all discussions and interventions in plenary and parallel sessions is included. This way, the conference proceedings are an important legacy of the project's outcome and of its the dialogue with its

audiences. It may serve as a major documentation pack. You can download it for free from the project's website.

A list, as well as a full overview of all WORKS publications is included in a special leaflet that comes with this Newsletter. All the WORKS books can be ordered via links on www.worksproject.be. They are also directly downloadable from www.worksproject.be.

WORKS-RELATED PUBLICATION

Volume 3 No 1 of Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation is entitled Working at the interface: call-centre labour in a global economy.

Call centres illustrate the consequences of globalisation for labour perhaps more clearly than any other form of employment. Call-centre workers sit at the interface between the global and the local, having to transcend the limitations of local time zones,

cultures and speech patterns. They are also at the interface between companies and their customers, having to absorb the impact of anger, incomprehension, confusion and racist abuse whilst still meeting exacting productivity targets and staying calm and friendly. Finally, they take the brunt of the conflict at the contested interface between production and consumption, having to deal in their personal lives with the conflicts between the demands of paid and unpaid work. Drawing, amongst

others, on organisational theory, sociology, communications studies, industrial relations, economic geography, gender theory and political economy, this important collection brings together survey evidence from around the world with case studies and vivid first-hand accounts of life in call centres from Asia, North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe. In the process it reveals many similarities but also demonstrates that national industrial relations traditions and workers' ability to negotiate can make a significant difference to the quality of working life in call centres.

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