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# **The Academic Triathlon**

## **-Bridging the Agora and Academia\***

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## **The Academic Triathlon -Bridging the Agora and Academia**

### **Abstract**

We address the lack of relevance of business school research and how the potential gap between research and practice may be related to the lack of interaction between faculty members and non-academic stakeholders (e.g. industry, professions, society). Our problematization of this lack of relevance leads us to conclude that business-school research is a case of reward folly; we hope for relevance to external stakeholders but we reward for relevance to academic stakeholders. Drawing on Stokes' (1997) research taxonomy, we conclude that business-school research should combine internal and external validity, which would involve business school faculty performing rigorous and relevant research, and interacting with practitioners; that is, an "academic triathlon". Faculty members should conduct research and teaching activities as well as interact with industry, and act to disseminate their research findings among external stakeholders. Consequently this should have implications for the academic structure at business schools and the resources available to faculty members. Proceeding in this way will result in the narrowing of the gap of understanding between faculty members and management and, ultimately, to bridge the gap between contemporary versions of the Agora and the Academe.

## **The Academic Triathlon –Bridging Agora and Academia**

*Contrary to what many believe, literary fame has nothing to do with excellence or true glory or even with a writer's position in the syllabus of a university's English Department, itself as remote to the Agora as Academe's shadowy walk. For any artist, fame is the extent to which the Agora finds interesting his latest work. If what he has written is known only to a few of other practitioners, or to enthusiasts ... then the artist is not only not famous, he is irrelevant to his time, the only time he has.*  
-- Gore Vidal

In line with his innate irreverence, Vidal criticizes the deeply entrenched prejudices held by some academics about the objectives of research and its impact and focus, and he calls for uniting the Agora and Academia. The societal decouple from academic research constitutes a common issue for institutions of higher learning and a major matter of concern for business schools. As noted by Simon (1967), a central mission of scholars and educators at professional schools of management is to conduct research that contributes knowledge to a scientific discipline, on the one hand, and to apply that knowledge to the practice of management as a profession, on the other. However, at many business schools, the lack of engagement with managerial practice for the production of research results in academics reading “each others’ papers in their [our] journals and write their [our own] papers so that we may in turn, have an audience ...: an incestuous closed loop” (Hambrick, 1994: 13).

Criticisms of less-than-relevant research produced by business schools is a constant theme of debate among deans, as well as in faculty meetings, conferences and publications. In the oft-cited article “How Business Schools Lost Their Way”, Bennis and O’Toole (2005: 3) outline the rise of what they call *methodolatry*, the system within which teachers at business schools fear being seen as focused on spreading ideas; to satisfy the interests of their colleagues, they only focus on issues related to methodology, and avoid matters of real use

in the professional world: “The system creates pressure on scholars to publish articles on narrow subjects chiefly of interest to other academics, not practitioners [and] business people are starting to sense that individuals in the Academy are not engaged in the same profession they practice.”

Similarly, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) questioned the direction that academic research has taken in recent years, and its impact on the professional world (Iñiguez de Onzoño, 2011). They pointed to three barometers to assess the impact of research carried out by business schools in the real world. The first was an analysis of the origin of *BusinessWeek*'s Top Ten business books over two decades; in 1984, there were four books written by business school academics in the top ten, with just one in 1991 and 2001. The second was based on Rigby's (2001) list of management tools –the concepts and analytical frameworks used to illustrate management practices and to enable decision-making. Rigby selected the 25-most popular management tools, based on a book list published by the Dow Jones Group, along with interviews with academics and company directors. His conclusion was that only eight of these analytical tools originated in business schools, while 17 came from consultants or corporations. Drawing on Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988), Pfeffer and Fong suggest differences in the language and tone used by academics and managers respectively when discussing organizational practice. They conclude that while academics are increasingly influenced by the literary constructs of managers, the inverse is not true for managers.

In summary, compelling empirical evidence suggests a gap between business-school research and managerial practice. In this context, both academics (e.g. James March) and practitioners (e.g. John Reed, then chairman at Citibank) claim that business school faculty should aspire to research excellence and managerial impact (see Tushman et al, 2007: 347). Our examination of the research activities conducted at business schools has implications for the role of deans and academic managers in guaranteeing the

relevance of research, as well as for allocating the necessary resources to faculty members and staff.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, as part of Section 1, we problematize the notion of relevance by examining its multiple dimensions; if research is decoupled from practice, what is its purpose? Who are the target stakeholders? Section 2 provides a frame of reference for the social positioning of business schools. In Section 3, we examine the institutional and organizational factors that currently inhibit the attainment of such a frame of reference and we suggest potentially corrective actions. Finally, the paper ends with some concluding remarks.

### **1. The elusive notion of research relevance.**

Relevance is a target-driven notion (in the sense of which stakeholders are being addressed) and, hence, the attainment of relevance ultimately depends on the extent to which research engages with others (Modell, 2014). In this respect, Lukka and Suomala (2014) draw on Flyvbjerg (2001) to suggest that relevance may adopt a three-fold perspective: theoretical, practical and societal. This adequate categorization of relevance suggests that the research community, industry and the management profession, and society at large would be linked to the three-fold perspective, respectively. Scholars are not indifferent to internal and external incentives (e.g., career progression, compensation), and they may also have their own agendas, which are not necessarily linked to those of the research community, practitioners and society

Adopting an actor approach to the categorization of relevance, "academics" constitutes an additional, fourth category. Without entering into solipsism, we contend that the perspective of some academics conducting research to engage, at least partially, with themselves cannot be neglected; the self would become a significant other for some academics, and this adds to the three-fold perspective of relevance (Modell, 2014).

Self. Career success is the primary goal for academics (Ohlson, 2011). For some scholars, any other research goal (e.g., citations, impact on practitioners, increasing compensation packages) is instrumental and, ultimately, secondary to progressing in their careers (e.g., tenure, promotion). In this respect, it is not uncommon that faculty members change their priorities after tenure. Arguably, such changes are driven by goals that are not necessarily linked to engagement with the research community or the management profession. On the other hand, these changes are driven by personal goals.

Research community. Ideally, engagement with the research community should be motivated by an examination of meaningful topics and an examination of 'big' ideas. However, and as noted by some commentators (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Chua, 2011), there is an increasing trend to go for 'gap spotting' and produce investigations that address simple subject-matters, which result in very 'marginal' knowledge. Colquitt and George (2011) establish that effective topics should meet five distinct criteria: a) significance, address a grand challenge, b) novelty, change the sense of the debate c) curiosity, propositions that counter a reader's taken-for-granted assumptions, d) scope, to which extent the landscape involved in a topic is adequately sampled, and e) actionability, provide insights for practice. Scholars successfully targeting the research community have excellent records (e.g., publications in well-regarded journals) and their investigations are influential and highly cited (e.g., Social Sciences Citation Index, Google Scholar, Scopus).

Industry and the professions. Extant literature assumes that industry and the professions are targets, in terms of relevance, of business research. As noted above, a basic tenet of this literature is the research-practice gap. For example, Gopinath and Hoffman (1995) conducted a survey of CEOs of major US corporations to examine the practical relevance of strategy research and found that, compared to academics, CEOs emphasize operating issues; disagree on the priority of strategic issues; and are generally unfamiliar with research-based journals. This lack of business research relevance has been particularly evident

during the ongoing financial crisis (Magnan and Markarian, 2011). To address this gap between business research and practice, some jurisdictions have enforced regulations to deliver more relevant research by linking research to practice (e.g., research assessment exercises in Australia and the UK, see Tucker and Lowe, 2014). Research that matters to the industry and the profession features engagement with practice and/or practitioners (e.g., performance measurement techniques: Balanced-Scorecard; see Kaplan and Norton, 2006).

Society. Some authors consider that the literature on relevant research has extensively focused on micro-managerial practices and has neglected society as a major stakeholder (Lukka and Suomala, 2014; Modell, 2014). Although the societal influence of business research is questionable, regulatory agencies consider that such research is potentially relevant for them. Among the notable exceptions in this area, we can refer to investigations examining the functioning of earnings management, financial instruments and financial institutions in the advent of the economic downturn (Barth and Landsman, 2010). In a similar vein, Activity-Based Costing has been influential in the regulation of costing systems for the telecommunications industry within the European Union (Hopper and Major, 2007).

Taken together our analysis of managerial research conducted in universities and business schools, suggests that the notion of relevance is highly elusive. Often, research relevance is understood as a single-dimension notion (e.g., impact on industry and professions), while academics have a rather different perspective on what is relevant, and behave accordingly. In other words, the current situation of business research largely reminds one of Kerr's (1995) follies; faculty members are rewarded for the number of published articles on their business school's list of journals while it is hoped for them to produce relevant contributions to other stakeholders (e.g., management, regulatory agencies).

## 2. The social impact of research conducted in business schools.

Concerns over the lack of relevance of managerial research have brought about re-examinations of the social positioning of business schools. Drawing on Stokes' (1997) research taxonomy, Tushman and O'Reilly (2007) and Tushman *et al* (2007) elaborate on the social role of business schools. According to Tushman *et al* (1997: 347-348), Stokes considers that research should be assessed on the basis of the joint goals of understanding and use. In this respect, Stokes shows that some research was purely driven by a quest for understanding without an attempt to find a specific use, as was the case with Bohr's discovery of the structure of the atom. Furthermore, other researchers undertook projects with the sole purpose of developing applied uses, such as Edison's invention of the phonograph. Yet others developed programs that combined a quest for understanding and an attempt to apply their findings, as was the case with Pasteur's contribution to microbiology (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: Stokes' Quadrant Model of Scientific Research  
(Stokes, 1997: 73; see Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007: 770)

		Relevance: Considerations of Use	
		No	Yes
Rigor: Quest for Fundamental Understanding	Yes	<i>Bohr's Quadrant</i> Basic disciplinary research	<i>Pasteur's Quadrant</i> Professional schools Business schools
	No		<i>Edison's Quadrant</i> Consulting firms

As noted by Tushman *et al* (2007: 347), consideration of Stokes' Pasteur Quadrant would suggest that business school research should be assessed by two criteria: "its external validity (the extent to which the theory matches the

phenomenon studied) and internal validity (the extent to which the data fit the research question).” Under the current model of business schools focus on research, we observe that rewards are decoupled from expectations. Therefore, academics operate in the Bohr’s quadrant in an overall attempt to establishing management as a legitimate academic discipline with a strong focus on analytic models (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). In turn, this brings about the current division of scholars between practitioners and those interested in academic research. Furthermore, business schools ‘operating’ in the Bohr’s quadrant promote scholars with deep scientific profile, and this results in business school research is conducted “in directions no longer comprehensible or relevant to business students and managers” (Shoemaker, 2008: 120). Therefore insights from the Stokes’ model, as applied to business schools by Tushman and O’Reilly (2007) and Tushman et al (2007), requires revisiting the current research model.

Conducting research in the Pasteur’s quadrant does not deny the centripetal value that research should play in scholarly careers but problematizing the current research model, which is heavily inspired by the natural sciences (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Consequently, we suggest a more complex, sophisticated research approach. Such an approach has financial implications but does not primarily aim at “transferability into cash” (Starkey and Tempest, 2008: 382). Our contention is that producing relevant research for stakeholders such as the industry and professions and society at large, would involve academics competing in an *academic triathlon*, consisting of developing high-quality, relevant research as well as skills to communicate with management and disseminate their knowledge-creation. Consequently, this proposal goes beyond Tushman et al’s (2007) notion of using executive education as a lever in shaping practice and research. Management education requires scholars that can combine different facets; from a solid research background to the ability of performing effectively in class and interfacing with top managers. Therefore, we propose the substitution of “gurus”, wise sages

who generate knowledge, by “academic triathletes”, that is, scholars who perform high quality, rigorous research as well as engaging in an interactive, two-way approach, where propositional knowledge meets prescriptive knowledge (Tushman et al, 2007). This mutually beneficial virtuous cycle can be seen in executive education programs as well as MBA programs, where participants have considerable experience, giving teachers the opportunity to benefit from feedback by professionals attending their classes.

### **3. A redesign of the business school model.**

Compliance with management, professional and societal expectations of business-school research, requires a redefinition of its leadership, structure and operations. Otherwise, ongoing criticisms against the lack of relevance of business school research will remain in the medium and long-term. Overall, our proposal for a redesign of the business school model aims at conducting research in the Pasteur’s quadrant, which results in enabling faculty to have the multi-faceted capacities of academic triathletes.

Our proposal consists of (i) actions that affect the leadership, structure and delivery of business schools (e.g., incentive system, PhD program), and (ii) resources available to faculty members to successfully perform in the Pasteur’s quadrant.

#### **3.1. Business schools deans**

Business schools deans should lead the implementation of a stakeholder approach in their institutions (e.g., the Pasteur’s quadrant research approach). As noted by Thomas (2007: 41), contexts exert a lasting impact on the governance structures of business schools, and this makes it problematic to determine the specifics of a dean’s professional and personal features that would ensure the successful implementation of the Pasteur’s quadrant approach under all circumstances. Furthermore, the ever changing environments of business schools make it difficult to establish a clear-cut relationship between a dean’s profile and the school’s performance prospects

under the Pasteur's quadrant. Taking these limitations into account, we may outline some features of a business school's dean that can drive a stakeholder approach to business school research.

Lorange (2008) notes that a business school's dean should focus on strategic decision-making and change and, hence, her/his profile conforms more to a partner in a professional service firm rather than to a senior middle manager's features. Arguably, shifting from the Bohr to the Pasteur's research quadrant constitutes a significant change in a business school's mission, whose implementation should be enforced by the dean. Considering the necessary alignment between deans and their business schools, deans implementing the Pasteur's quadrant should combine a profound knowledge of the research environment along with a solid, interpersonal, diplomatic and political skills (Davies and Thomas, 2009). Finding these features in an individual may be problematic; in cases where the dean has a marked orientation towards external stakeholders, it may be convenient to appoint an associate dean to lead research assessment exercises within the business school.

### 3.2. The structure of business schools and program delivery.

*The incentive system of faculty members.* The tenure and promotion processes should account for the multifaceted profile of business-school faculty. As noted above, the generation of knowledge constitutes a central tenet of institutions of higher learning, and such is the case for business schools. Furthermore, new knowledge should be disseminated as otherwise it would be useless. Therefore, criteria for faculty promotion and tenure should include high-profile research to be published in well-regarded, premier outlets. However, criteria for the dissemination of research should also comprise the publication of research findings in practitioner focused journals, as this will enhance the diffusion of the generated knowledge. Consequently, assessment criteria for research outputs in well-regarded academic and professional journals as well as successful communication with participants in business schools program should be enforced.

As noted above, business school faculty should also be assessed according to their teaching performance. It would be excessive to ask junior faculty, who have just earned a PhD in a top-tier institution, to successfully perform in executive education programs. However, an academic career with progressive sequential exposure to undergraduate programs, pre-experience master-degree programs, experienced master-degree programs, executive masters, and executive education will ensure the academic growth of new faculty members. Furthermore, the incentive system of business school should also consider links with the world of business, either through membership of boards, or through consulting work.

The time-scale of evaluations is central to any performance management system (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/14/09/taking-pain-out-tenure-and-promotion>). In this respect, our experience at IE Business School suggests that tenure track faculty appreciate yearly feedback on their results, which also provides them with a sense of their upcoming tenure evaluation prospects. On the other hand, tenured faculty generally seek a longer-term evaluation perspective and, hence, assessment exercises conducted on a two to three-year basis help them to receive feedback on results and set ambitious goals.

As in any performance management system, the evaluation metrics should be transparent to both faculty members and administrators (Thomas, 2007). While measuring publication records and teaching performance, including peer evaluation, are standardized practices in business schools, the situation is rather contentious with respect to other aspects of the triathlon analogy, such as the impact of business school research on managerial practice. In doing this, we should go beyond the standard bibliometric indicators or article citation rates (<http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/>). In management, as in the social sciences, the impact of ideas cannot just be measured by how often they are turned into patents or registered as inventions, which is the approach generally used in other scientific disciplines. In this respect, we would suggest:

(i) recognizing a piece of academic work on the basis of its inclusion in management programs taught around the world; for example, models or concepts such as the Balance Scorecard, Blue Ocean Strategies, or Non-market Strategies, which are now part of just about every MBA program; (ii) bringing together academics from business schools, corporate universities, development departments, consultancies, and management of publishing houses to design systems that would allow for periodic analysis of research produced by schools and their use as management tools in the business world (e.g., [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)). Ideally, this would result in a range of measuring systems reflecting diverse cultural and business practices, and thus the heterogeneity of the research (Starkey and Tempest, 2008).

*PhD programs.* PhD programs are essential to knowledge generation. Our proposal for changes in PhD programs draws on a recent document published by the The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which is a U.S.-based non-profit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in education. In this respect, The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation released a report "[The Responsive PhD: Innovations in US Doctoral Education](#)"<sup>1</sup>, which examines doctoral education in the US. The study concludes that "there have been too many words and too little action" and reports about a series of successful initiatives developed in PhD programs at different US universities.

We focus on two particular recommendations raised by this report. First, that pedagogy should be an important part of doctoral preparation. For some time, PhD programs have focused almost exclusively on training academic researchers. This has been essential, but not sufficient. In fact, the omission of some other important facets, such as the preparation of candidates to communicate effectively and to link with the corporate world, has reduced the potential development and the opportunities of PhD graduates and, ultimately,

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<sup>1</sup> Many business schools and universities are launching Doctor in Business Administration (DBA) programs. DBAs have received support from the Association of MBAs (AMBA), through a new accreditation scheme that targets this particular program. In this respect, we also encourage DBA administrators to read "The Responsive PhD" report.

their chances to excel as academics (Cornuel, 2007). Second, the report calls for connecting doctoral programs with other major social stakeholders outside universities, mainly the organizations that may recruit or work with PhD graduates: "the doctorate in totality and in every discipline will benefit enormously by a continuing interchange with the worlds beyond academia", says the report.

Taking the perspective provided by the Pasteur's quadrant, the recommendations issued by "The Responsive PhD" report are particularly relevant. PhD students spend several years in learning *inter alia* research fundamentals, research methods, research streams, ethics, and writing academic articles. In the case of PhD students in business administration programs, not much is taught about teaching skills and interaction with the world of business, which will be crucial aspects in their career development. Early exposure to teaching and practice will enhance the strength of PhD students, improve their career prospects, and avoid the unintended consequences of very poor teaching performance in their early years.

As noted by some commentators, PhD programs of many well-regarded institutions of higher learning are strong in quantitative research methods and, in general, adopt a rather functionalist approach to research (Shepherd and Sutcliffe, 2011). As this results in PhD graduates having a strong, but narrow, approach to methods, theory and topics, which could promote a "gap spotting" approach to research, we suggest PhD program include in their curriculum, modules on different research methods and theoretical frameworks. This variety of approaches will provide PhD students with a comprehensive perspective, which will enhance their interaction prospects with management.

Arguably, the structural changes suggested in this section may be endorsed by business schools accreditation agencies, particularly in the frame and interpretation of the standards applicable to faculty, research and intellectual contributions. Moving towards the Pasteur's quadrant does not compromise the legitimacy of the schools but would further their engagement

with practice (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). Furthermore, we are persuaded that business schools actions towards revisiting their performance reviews, incentive systems and PhD programs along the lines suggested in this section would enhance their strategic missions and position as well as their accreditation prospects (Iñiguez de Onzoño, 2011).

### 3.3. Changes in the structure of resources available to staff and faculty.

In addition to structural changes needed for universities and business schools to cope with the specifics of the academic triathlon analogy, these institutions should provide staff and faculty members with new resources to successfully comply with the new profile.

*Improving the writing skills of PhD students and faculty members.* Some commentators suggest that a major reason why academic research does not resonate to academics rests on the writing style (Kelemen and Bansal, 2002), which makes some articles look like as if they had been written in Sanskrit. PhD programs of well-regarded institutions offer modules on writing skills. However, such modules focus on how to write academic articles that target top-tier, premier outlets. Under the Pasteur's quadrant and the academic triathlon analogy, though, faculty members should also target practitioner-focused journals and monographs (Iñiguez de Onzoño, 2011); this will enhance the visibility of their research and tackle eventual criticisms about the lack of relevance of business school research. Publishing in practitioner-focused journals involve a writing style that is considerably different from that of academic research journals (Leisenring and Johnson, 1994). Furthermore, academics might wish to publish a monograph to further disseminate their findings among a wider audience of practitioners and regulators (Iñiguez de Onzoño, 2011).

*Providing faculty members with an infrastructure to interact with management.* Faculty interaction with business leaders will be instrumental to identify the key issues affecting the business world. In addition to active executive

education programs (Tushman et al, 2007), a growing number of business schools are setting up interdisciplinary centers that go beyond the remit of traditional academic departments through direct links with companies to develop specific projects (e.g., examining widely neglected sectors; services, see Maerki, 2008). These centers encourage interdisciplinary research and, in order to disseminate the findings, offer training programs that address specific issues relating to business management. At the same time, it is important that business schools' boards and advisory councils understand the strengths and weaknesses of their respective institutions. These councils are generally made up of business people and alumni, who can provide invaluable feedback on the real world's knowledge needs. Furthermore, this infrastructure should help to appoint "embedded academics" within companies. This would be another step toward setting up chairs financed by companies in business schools, as it is the case in jurisdictions with a long endowment tradition; the professors appointed to these Chairs work on specific projects with the sponsoring companies. This approach is already in use among consultancies, which send consultants into a company for long-term or highly-important projects. "Embedded academics" would have one foot in academia and another in the business world. At IE we have already put this approach into practice: we have a Human Resources Chair sponsored by leading Spanish fashion retailer group Inditex. The professors who hold the Chairs spend a significant amount of their time working on specific projects with the companies involved, and transfer relevant and up-to-the-minute academic research in their respective areas. Ultimately, this infrastructure will be instrumental in assimilating knowledge produced outside the academic environment, which will facilitate business schools functioning as hubs, bringing in new ideas, concepts, and models generated outside their immediate sphere; for example from consultancies, corporate universities, and other types of forums. Internet offers limitless potential for exchanging ideas and information. Finally, and despite concerns raised by some commentators (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009), business school infrastructure to strengthen links with industry should serve to facilitate joint-

research between practitioners and academics, which should combine theoretical and managerial implications (e.g., Carmona and Grönlund, 2003).

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Business schools should act as bridges between the Academe and the Agora. In Plato's *Dialogues* we see that the participants in the philosophical debates with Socrates are the politicians and businessmen of the day. The Agora and the Academe were linked, not just because of their physical proximity, but because the same individuals were active in both spheres. In this paper, we have addressed the lack of relevance of business school research and how this disconnect is highlighted in the considerable problems in the interaction between faculty members and non-academic stakeholders (e.g., industry, profession, society). This problem has a two-fold causality direction: business schools research lacks relevance because of poor interaction with practitioners but also interaction is limited because of lack of relevance and credibility.

In this paper, we have problematized the elusive notion of relevance; that is, the incentive system of business schools emphasizes rigorous research (e.g. the Bohr's quadrant). However, the expectations are different and bring about a reward folly; we hope for relevance to external stakeholders but we reward for relevance to academic stakeholders. To address this tension, we draw on Stokes' (1997) research taxonomy as elaborated by Tushman et al (2007) and suggest that business school research should combine internal and external validity (e.g., the Pasteur's quadrant), and this would make business schools being accepted as a legitimate interface between theory and practice (Thomas and Wilson, 2011) and, ultimately, business-school faculty would have to compete under the academic-triathlon analogy; that is, faculty members conduct research and teaching as well as engaging in disseminating their research findings among external stakeholders (e.g., the industry and the profession). In turn, this has implications regarding the leadership, structure of business schools, the regulation of research by accreditation agencies as well as on the resources available to faculty members. Proceeding this way will result

in narrowing the research gap between faculty members and management and, ultimately, in bridging the gap between contemporary versions of the Agora and the Academe and, ultimately, in enhancing the business schools' profile in reshaping the relationship between science, business, technology and society (Starkey and Tempest, 2008: 387).

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