How technology is changing leadership

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Introduction

How is technology impacting leadership? Technology is at the forefront of a perfect storm of global forces challenging the status quo, changing markets and undermining industry incumbents. Yet there are few 'digital natives' leading organisations and 'digital immigrants' are often less at ease with technological developments.

What then is the impact of all this technology on leadership at the top? We spoke to twenty executives leading organisations in a range of industries to understand how technology is changing both the nature of leadership and the way that leaders operate. Our findings follow under four headings - leading yourself, leading others, maximizing effective communication, and leading organisations.

> 'It can feel like you are in an arms
> race to stay on top of everything.'
> *- Chief Information Officer*

Note
Throughout this document the term technology is used very broadly to include social media, mobile, big data, cloud computing, privacy and the internet of things.

Executive Summary

Leading yourself

Engage with information highly selectively	It's not possible to stay on top of the abundance of information now available. Choose to engage with the information that supports what you can uniquely contribute to the business.
Be clear what you stand for	Being consistent and staying close to what you believe in will yield dividends in a technological world with higher levels of transparency and scrutiny.
Continue to build stamina and resilience	Review and evolve working practices by simplifying and standardising activities, and shedding extraneous calls on energy and time. Carve out moments for replenishment and balance, whether time for family or moments of micro-renewal through the day.

Leading others

Make remote working effective	Create a framework that helps colleagues respond to what they are seeing locally yet stay aligned with the company plans. Use technology such as video calling and yammer to actively bridge distance.
Facilitate 'rich' conversations	Actively make space for richer and deeper conversation to ensure ideas are still talked about in depth.
Actively maintain alignment	With more information now available at all levels, help colleagues understand how ideas and opportunities they see fit into the organisation's plans. A participative approach to strategy and planning, beyond the top team, can be beneficial.

Maximizing effective communication

Work with the new fundamentals	The desire for transparency should be informed by the awareness that the distinction between internal and external communication has evaporated. Create clear rules for personal engagement with social media.
Recognise the continued importance of personal engagement	The convenience of communication tools cannot replace the personal touch of being present and walking the floor.
Use social media	Watch and learn before engaging and then do so in the way that suits your own style and abilities.
Be disciplined and thoughtful about email	Be careful not to be drawn in to unnecessary email threads and details. Stay alert to the fact leaders are the role models for email use.

Leading organisations

Be active in learning	Regularly test the impact of work done and be responsive to the feedback. Keep questioning to ensure thinking remains fresh.
Keep focussed on the right ideas	Being highly responsive to the abundance of information can be a trap. The biggest threat to a good idea is the next good idea!
Take time to really think	Carve out enough time to think in detail about how the longer term and short term come together.
Remember the fundamentals about change	The increased frequency of change and ease of communication does not change the need to help people make the transition. The engagement of the leadership is essential for major change programmes to be effective and complete.
Stay the course	Moving towards a strategic vision takes significant learning, continuous iteration and a combination of confidence and humility. Resist the temptation to go for a short term win at the expense of the long term.

Leading yourself

Perhaps the most obvious impact of technology is on how executives operate - managing the risk of information overload, navigating in highly transparent environments, and looking after themselves so they have the emotional energy and personal resources to perform their roles.

Engage with information highly selectively

Technology means executives are exposed to greater flows of information. One contributor from the banking sector described this as "a torrent of white noise" which is like "drinking from a fire hose". This, along with the temptation to be 'always on', means it's all too easy to be drawn into a constant, frenetic busyness. To keep up with it all, executives can be tempted to push ever harder, working less productively, and leaving themselves depleted. In this situation a level of anxiety may take root and a downward spiral can begin.

It is easy to simply blame technology for the information overload. However, often what is really behind it is a creeping, compulsive attitude to stimulus, updates and news.

While the ability to focus on what really matters, rather than the long list, has always been critical for leaders, it has never been a more important skill. With so many inputs it's easy to go off course. In a digital world it is essential to recognise that attempting to process ever increasing quantities of information is not the answer. It is not possible to be on top of it all and the effort to do so will not deliver the benefits it used to.

> 'Using an old model in a new world you will not win and will constantly feel on the back foot.'
> - CEO

Executives need to cultivate an ability to be very discriminating in their engagement with information, moving in and out of the flow as work and priorities dictate. Absolutely critical is to draw a line and to step out of the information flow when they have what they need. This avoids being overwhelmed and racing to try and keep up. Watch a twenty year old as they step in and out of different sources of information if you want to see this done expertly!

Executives who engage with the information flows successfully have typically spent time thinking about how they can maximise their strategic contribution to their businesses. They then connect with the information that supports their unique contribution. They are not thinking simply about the scope of their role, but about dovetailing the objectives of the business with those things only they can deliver. Essentially they have developed a narrative to guide them on what is most important and where to engage.

Be clear what you stand for

Technology has changed what people are looking for in their leaders. Not so many years ago leaders were valued for their knowledge and information, which could be controlled and be a source of power. Now that information is more accessible, it has put much more emphasis on the leader's experience, their views on where the organisation is going, the reasons and motivations behind their actions, and the personal values that inform their approach. This is why some now think that what an executive stands for is part of the job!

With smart phones and social media there are more ways for people to quickly find out and share information about an executive. Discrepancies will be spotted. Faking it, or displaying arrogance, can now be picked up instantly. Staying close to heartfelt values and to what an executive truly believes is right, helps them to be consistently 'on message' or 'oven ready' at any point. Being authentic engenders and breeds self-confidence.

People trust leaders who show they are listening, who evolve their thinking and who set an example by being honest about their mistakes and what they can learn from them. The levels of transparency and scrutiny from social media can expose and magnify vulnerability in a way that can make executives feel more reluctant to show this learning. It takes real skill to do so while also engendering confidence, particularly in difficult times.

Making decisions that are informed by a set of personal values helps give an underlying consistency to decisions, even if circumstances change. It can also help a leader be credible even when they do not have 'the' answer. When a decision turns out to be wrong, a leader will be able to explain the underlying principles that informed their decision. This tends to be more compelling to colleagues than relying solely on commercial expediency.

The level of transparency can feel uncomfortable as nothing seems to be missed. For example, one contributor described feeling the pressure to display good parenting skills while flying long haul with his three children, just in case it was witnessed! It is not always easy in the spotlight. Some become more comfortable by recognising that if they are striving to do the right thing, it will tend to come through and help them recover if something is taken out of context. A history of decency and respect for others will provide a positive context in which their actions can be viewed.

Tactically, executives can also help themselves by recognising the potential impact of their social media persona in times of controversy. In particular, ensuring their Linked-in profile3 is up to date can remove the potential to be mocked by detractors and the media.

Continue to build stamina and resilience

There is a growing recognition of the connection between emotional and physical health on the one hand and, on the other, the ability to remain confident and grounded, keep perspective and make good judgements. Yet an always connected world presents new risks for emotional and physical health.

Building resilience and stamina is essential to coping with the speed with which businesses operate. It is helpful if executives make clear decisions about how they want to function, including how to pace themselves. This needs to be done deliberately, from a positive place and not while feeling under siege. Decisions should be based on an understanding of how they work most effectively as well as a more personal review of the way in which they want to live their lives.

Reducing extraneous demands on time and energy is important. Simplifying and standardising activities, where possible, can provide a helpful foundation. At home this might entail paying someone to do the housework or to look after a property. At work this could mean ensuring the support team filter and respond to requests and approaches on the executive's behalf, texting rather than calling an assistant, and coming out of every meeting with all the actions delegated. Clearly it is important for each executive to be realistic about what will work best in their specific circumstances given their disposition and the demands on their time.

There is a growing recognition that multi-tasking is not a solution. It can be incredibly tempting to scan an email when talking to someone on the phone and not really take in what they say. Neuroscience now has provided evidence that multi-tasking can impact memory as well as judgement. The impaired performance can simply increase subsequent demands on time and mental reserves.

In response to increasing demands it is easy to slip into working harder rather than developing more effective practices, or even redesigning the way a role is performed. Regularly reviewing what is working and being prepared to experiment with new approaches is essential.

Many executives think actively about how to replenish themselves. For some this includes looking for points of 'micro' renewal in the course of the day. This typically involves stepping away from work for a very short time to do something personal that helps gives a sense of self, or to get a moment of relief by taking a break from all the inputs. For one executive this meant a quick look at some classic bikes on the internet and for another a walk around the block.

With the demands of senior roles, executives have to concertedly create space for themselves and their personal lives. Some contributors thought it easier to create a 'pull' strategy. This entailed stepping back, deciding how they wanted to live their lives and then drawing out the implications for how they would approach their leadership role. Others took a more bottom up approach, which included blocking regular time for themselves and their family which ran alongside their work. Others developed a set of rules, such as protecting time on a Friday afternoon so they could stop work earlier, and minimising business travel at the weekends.

> 'It is hard to be resilient if you don't have a sense of your own power and choice in the way your life is running. It is easy to feel a victim'.
> - CEO

The underlying theme is that leaders fare better when they make active choices about how they are going to manage and balance other aspects of their lives with a demanding role.

Leading others

Technology is changing working practices, enabling remote working and affecting the way we communicate and collaborate. Leaders are adapting to these changes but are also maintaining a focus on the fundamentals - creating relationships based on trust and ensuring that the right conversations still happen.

Make remote working effective

One of the biggest changes is the way technology enables remote working. It matters less where people are, or even what continent they are on. Some leaders still struggle with the perceived loss of control that accompanies remote working. Most recognise, however, that the sense of control from physical co-location is illusory. Rather, it is the attitude to work that really matters.

Remote working does mean there is less information to inform an assessment of an individual's performance. It does, however, successfully place the focus on what they deliver and the outcomes of their contribution.

Not surprisingly, to those we spoke to who work in highly international businesses remote working is nothing new. They are used to not seeing colleagues, including direct reports, for extended periods of time. As one international executive noted, it is easy to see someone every day in an office and not engage with them. It's not physical co-location, but the nature of the relationship that drives and shapes the communication. Indeed, with remote working an executive can be forced to give more thought to how and when to interact, which can in turn make the communication very positive and efficient.

Leaders need to provide colleagues in remote offices with the long term vision and clarity over priorities that allow them to make informed decisions about what to respond to locally,

while still heading in the same direction as the rest of the business. Time still has to be invested to build the relationships, get to know colleagues and to understand what really motivates them. This provides a foundation from which it is possible to pitch stretching targets, which motivate rather than demoralise - or worse, cause a colleague to 'throw in the towel'.

Technology can be used proactively to bridge distance and create a personal touch. For instance, using video links for surprise 'drop in's' at remote team gatherings to give a prize or to acknowledge the work being done. It can also be beneficial to use video, be it video conferencing, skype or facetime, for remote one to one and team sessions. This brings with it the advantage of limiting dual tasking; with conference calls attendees might be tempted to do emails and other work rather than fully engage in the meeting.

Technology also provides a greater range of ways of staying in touch at a distance. For instance, tools such as Yammer mean an executive can watch a conversation unfold and readily see what others are thinking. When 'on the road' it is a way of staying connected with what is happening in the organisation and with what people care about.

Facilitate 'rich' conversations

The importance of proper thinking – fast, radical and deep - is increasing with the more disruptive forces at play in many industries. Yet, as more information is transmitted by text or chat, the reduced profundity of some human interaction means some of the depth and emotional dimension can be lost. This impacts on the generation and harvesting of ideas that comes from richer conversations.

As colleagues speak and meet less, conversations, whether digital or face to face, can become too transactional. A leader needs to consciously structure non-transactional time to make space for richer and deeper conversations. It is important

to actively encourage conversation and interaction in the organisation to ensure ideas are talked about in sufficient depth. There is a greater emphasis on the leader thinking how the right conversations can be facilitated by bringing people together to work in the same room or on joint initiatives.

Actively maintain alignment

Technology allows information and data to be distributed throughout the organisation, creating greater visibility of potential market opportunities. Colleagues need to understand how their insights relate to the overall strategy. If they only interpret information locally, they might head off in the wrong direction.

One of the key ways to achieve stronger alignment, engagement and contribution across the organisation is to take a participative approach to the development of plans and strategy. This involves engaging teams beyond direct reports. Many executives still struggle with this, not least because they feel it suggests they do not have the answer. However, there are many ways to achieve participation and leaders can identify the options with which they are most comfortable. One contributor, who was keen to get input and challenges to the strategy from a broader group, borrowed from speed dating. After the initial work by the top team he set up a meeting with seventy colleagues, involving time limited conversations and table rotation. The output of these conversations was then fed back into the strategy.

Maintaining alignment also puts emphasis on the top team being consistent in the messages they communicate.

One contributor looked to do this by having informal meetings called 'stand ups' where the immediate team met or dialled in to share information on a regular basis.

'We were sitting in this enormous organisation with so much movement we needed to spend more time on alignment. We invested a huge amount of time in working together so we could understand what was happening, respond appropriately and facilitate the change so we were all on message.'

- Managing Director

Maximizing effective communication

Work with the new fundamentals

Technology can enable more efficient and open communication. However, it also brings with it the possibility of whatever is said going everywhere, very quickly. Leaders actively balance the desire for greater transparency with an awareness that the communication could be outside the company in minutes. The idea that communications can be managed and controlled is over, and with it the clear distinction between internal and external communication.

'It is important to think what any com-munication could look like as a headline in the Daily Mail.'

- Chief Scientific Officer

As more communication is instant it brings with it a danger of being less or ill considered. A leader can be drawn into an exchange on Twitter or Linked In that they later regret. It is easy to make a mistake. One way around this is to develop clear rules on engagement with social media. This may include never responding when the company is criticised, when very tired or after one or more drinks. Having such rules of engagement significantly reduces the risk of being inappropriately drawn in.

'It is important to be quite careful in what you post. Whatever is out there is out there forever.'

- CEO

With more communication channels available, a leader can more readily get their message and conviction 'out there'. Authenticity is often highly prized and social and other media makes it possible to demonstrate it quite 'loudly'. The shadow of this is the potential to be increasingly 'larger than life' and, without noticing, squeeze others out by taking too much airtime. It is essential to actively create the space for others to say what they are thinking. Executives need to be listening and responding to others – it is easy to lose sight of this imperative in the focus to develop and maintain one's own messages.

Recognise the continued importance of personal engagement

With so many new ways to get messages 'out there' it is important to be aware of the dangers of retreating or disappearing behind these channels. This is particularly relevant for introverts but any busy executive can be seduced by the convenience of equating digital communication with rich social contact. Technology cannot replace the personal touch such as being present and walking the floors.

To maximise impact, executives need to give careful thought to how to use all channels, alongside investing in meeting people face-to-face when possible. Meeting people throughout the organisation can do much to cultivate openness, build relationships and signal an interest in dialogue. One CEO did this by having two seats; one on each floor of the building. Another moved away from 'town hall' sessions where he presented slides to everyone, to more fluid sessions with questions and answers to encourage an exchange of thoughts and ideas. To facilitate dialogue, the number of people attending any one session was limited to fifty, with multiple sessions across the day.

Use social media

Social media has changed the way people interact and how they organise and create information. Although some executives are dismissive of social media, all contributors were clear that its different ways of communicating are here to stay. Even if specific applications disappear they will be replaced by quicker and easier versions or new innovations that build on current usage patterns.

It's hard to argue that more communication is a bad thing. An executive can engage with social media to get more frequent inputs from a broader range of stakeholders, including those they are leading. This can help them keep their finger on the pulse and to fine-tune their leadership, with associated gains in impact. For those leading organisations with younger people it is essential to connect with them in the way they are used to. This means social media.

> 'If you want permission to take someone somewhere else you need to meet them where they are.'
> - *Chief Commercial Officer*

It is critical to fully understand the medium before engaging. This means an executive needs to spend time watching over a protracted period how the various forms of social media are used and then make an informed decision about their own engagement, bearing in mind their interests, strengths, and individual way of working. For those working internationally they also need to bear in mind cultural differences in use.

Some who had experimented with social media realised people are not interested in only business. With rare exceptions, they also don't want posts to include mundane information about everyday life unless it gives real insight into what the leader stands for. Having a broader purpose and clear motive behind their engagement made their communications more compelling.

Executives need to be realistic about their ability to generate compelling content. Some have a natural flair. They can create communication that feels honest, natural rather than crafted, can write easily and create a following. These executives use blogs and Twitter to show their thinking about different time horizons, putting out subtle messages as well as sharing insights to accelerate joint knowledge and understanding. The brevity of something like Twitter can have a distinct upside as the posts have to be pithy, providing soundbites that are easy for the team to digest.

Others, for whom it feels less natural, are rightly concerned about the time it may take, and whether the result would be interesting or just add to the noise. These executives tend to use social media more straightforwardly; for drawing attention to important things or congratulating people. They very actively supplement it with personal engagement such as walking the floors.

Leaders who recognise the more intuitive understanding that younger people have of social media can delegate its use to younger colleagues. This works well if they are given the

freedom to push the executive's messages. It is, of course, essential there is no pretence that the executive is doing the posting. In this situation, rather than thinking how the message gets out there, a senior leader's role is in providing the thinking about the company and how it is positioned.

'I found a lot of success identifying bright members from other generations, such as two or three graduates, and creating a focus group where we talk directly. Also getting them to interview me and write it up on a blog and social media in a way they thought appropriate. It seemed powerful. The organisation responded well to a leader using more tools.'
- *Managing Director*

Executives who engage with social media must accept they are 'fair game' and cannot control what others say in response. They need to recognise it is about dialogue. It is not just about broadcasting their message; using social media to shout louder.

There are numerous ways executives can make social media work for them. It is about being informed, clear, confident and realistic, recognising that, implicitly or explicitly, such communications say something about them as a leader.

Be disciplined and thoughtful about email

Many executives get a few hundred emails a day. With smart phones and tablets there can be an increased expectation of an instant response.

The ease with which executives can be copied into email streams can have the effect of pushing responsibility upwards. Leaders can be drawn into inappropriate detail, become overstretched, and are turned into bottlenecks. This can also dilute the accountability of those below.

Although tempting, executives need to resist being drawn in and remain thoughtful and disciplined in how they engage with email. They also need to be alert to the fact that emails are open to misinterpretation as they can be perceived through the reader's own expectations and mood as well as studied for hidden signals and sentiment. The same words, viewed without a shared context, can mean different things to different people.

Some of our contributors respond to all emails, but many do not. Practices range from having their support team filter and respond, using email filters to automatically file mails into folders, not reading emails they are copied on, and only replying quickly to VIPs and time critical issues. Some also actively push back on emails that are not relevant. A notable number of contributors use social media, along with chat and text, to capture more immediate communications and use email for more detailed exchanges.

Executives have had success with remaining focussed on their priorities and on the flow of work rather than letting email become the dominant feature of their day. Actively creating blocks of time when they do not do email is critical to creating space to think and engage with others.

There is a danger that sending a lot of emails, seven days a week, throughout the day, can create the impression a leader is not on top of things. Sitting in a meeting doing emails is certainly viewed as disrespectful and unacceptable. The 'always on' approach can breed resentment within organisations and leaders have a responsibility to actively manage this dynamic; role modelling thoughtfulness about when and how they communicate with email.

Leading organisation

Technology delivers a constant flow of information and data about market position, customers and new capabilities. This adds additional complexity for leaders actively balancing the need for agility and responsiveness, with the importance of a longer term vision and sense of direction for the organisation.

Be active in learning

Being responsive requires active learning - engaging with the data and associated feedback on an ongoing basis. Traditionally, an executive could review all the inter-dependencies and decide on a course of action that would hold over a long period of time. However, increasingly leaders need to be prepared to work with a test-and-learn approach. Software development provides a good example of this methodology; working in iterations, testing the impact of the work done in the targeted environment, and making further changes based on the result. To do this well a leader has to continue questioning in order to keep their thinking fresh. Having people around them who will give honest feedback or even be deliberately challenging will greatly support this approach.

> 'It does not have to be perfect. Just start and then there is a process of discovery. Often it is better to be quick and change than slow and planned.'
>
> *- CEO*

This emphasis on agility and responsiveness can result in more, smaller incremental changes and less reliance on a few extensively planned bigger steps. In such a scenario identifying and committing to the big capex spends that will provide the backbone of the business for the longer term can feel

like a brave decision. Higher levels of responsiveness must be balanced against the need for predictability in managing formal processes like budgeting and reporting to markets.

Keep focussed on the right ideas

Being overly responsive can be a trap! With the amount of information, even just on a smartphone, it can seem like there are opportunities coming all the time. It can be a challenge to keep focussed.

Executives need to be highly selective about the opportunities they respond to. The biggest threat to a good idea is the next good idea. One contributor described focus as being about not doing the other things that could be right. It requires saying no and lives in every minute through always asking, 'why are we talking about this?' In a similar vein, the armed forces provide specific training aimed at ensuring the focus remains on the first plan when, in the chaos of battle, other compelling opportunities may emerge.

With the increased flow of information at different levels in an organisation, the team can respond to too many ideas or opportunities, dissipating organisational effort and focus. A leader has to be particularly attuned to the need to quickly shut anything down that is not aligned with the strategy. One contributor found that being incredibly focused had the unexpected benefit that stakeholders got the message and the number of 'extraneous' requests and communications dropped. This happened not just for him, but for his team also.

> 'There is so much turbulence, idea generation and questions you have to be careful the noise does not overtake. There is a danger of getting too caught up in the short term.' *- Chief Information Officer*

Take time to really think

With the constant flow of data it is easy for short term issues to soak up much of the available time. Responding and taking action can feel concrete and, to a degree, reassuring. It can be harder than ever to step away from the flow to create sufficient space to really think. It takes extended time, away from interruption, to think in depth about the business and to plot a consistent path for long and short term imperatives. Identifying the guiding principles that will help clarify the parts of the strategy that should and should not flex in response to market changes is difficult and takes time.

Remember the fundamentals about change

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the need for agility is often accompanied by the necessity for cultural and behavioural change. Change is now sometimes described as the only constant. The increased frequency of change, along with more routes to communicate it, has contributed to a sense that it can be achieved quickly. However, it is important not to be seduced by this notion - many of our contributors felt that today bigger change programmes are more often ineffective and only partially completed. This is because the thinking about the implications for people is incomplete. Also insufficient time is invested in engaging colleagues so they feel part of the change.

'There's a danger once the change is announced that a box is ticked and it's onto the next change. The executives forget the real work begins then in helping people make the transition. If you want something to stick you need to get out there. The importance of engaging personally cannot be overstated.'

- Global Head of Operations

Staying the course

Providing direction in an uncertain world requires leaders to be comfortable with very high levels of ambiguity. Moving towards a strategic vision takes significant learning, continuous iteration and a combination of confidence and humility. With this ambiguity and complexity it is all too easy for an executive to lose their 'mojo' and compromise; going for a short term win at the expense of the longer term.

Conclusion

Technology is contributing to an intensity and a pace that is changing working life. With the abundance of information, perpetual connectivity and high levels of transparency, executives need to think carefully about their working practices, how they pace themselves, and how they look after their own wellbeing. Staying firmly anchored in their own beliefs and values, and not losing sight of how they want their lives to be, remains essential.

Technology is impacting how leaders interact with, motivate and manage others, as well as the way they communicate. While adapting to accommodate technology is important, there should remain a focus on the human dimension - developing relationships, engaging others personally and encouraging dialogue. In a digital world leaders need to be alert that a short term pull means the long term can get lost.

'There is no option to resist change – if you are stuck you need to think how to get unstuck. Change has to be your friend.'

- Commercial Officer

Being comfortable with the impact of technology, proactively engaging with it and thinking through the implications personally and for working life brings significant benefits; it helps leaders rise above the noise, yet remain connected and grounded.

Remaining current, continuing to learn, being flexible, adaptable and open is essential to thrive as a leader in today's fast paced technological world.

Further reading

Harmonizing life's domains – how trade off thinking limits leaders' potential Stewart Friedman Egon Zehnder The Focus, autumn 2015.

Is Your Leadership Right for the Digital Age? Barry Libert, Jerry Wind, Megan Beck Fenley, Knowledge@Wharton, 6th February 2015.

The New Normal – Explore the Limits of the Digital World. Peter Hinssen, Mach Media, 2010.

Your Brain at Work – Strategies for overcoming distraction, regaining focus, and working smarter all day long. David Rock, Harper Business, 2009.

Leadership Development – Is It Fit for Purpose?, Corporate Research Forum, May 2014.

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About Hay Hill Partners

Hay Hill Partners is a business coaching and executive mentoring firm focusing exclusively on working one to one with business leaders. Our clients are typically board or Exco members and their direct reports. The strength of our approach lies in the combination of our own business experience, our coaching expertise and the insights we gain from working with clients across multiple sectors.

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