

Blending work and learning: the impact of a workplace learning programme on the low-skilled and long term unemployed

1. Introduction and context

Recent examinations of the Irish labour force reveal a cohort of vulnerable workers with relatively low educational attainment, literacy and numeracy challenges (Behan *et al*, 2011; Healy, 2009), and unstable employment (Byrne & Smith, 2010). As Ireland pushes towards a knowledge based economy, there is a danger that this cohort of workers will be left behind (Behan *et al*, 2012). This level of additional unemployment would have a devastating effect on individuals and society. Unemployment is linked with many negative physical (Gerdtham & Johannesson, 2003; McKee-Ryan *et al*, 2005) and mental (Lynch, 2003; McArdle *et al*, 2007) health issues, alongside overwhelming likelihood that the cycle of unemployment would be passed on to the next generation (Ballarino *et al*, 2009; Breen *et al*, 2010). These impacts can be counteracted both through employment provision and education, which can act as a defence by improving self-esteem and increasing employability, even in challenging times (McKee-Ryan *et al*, 2005; McArdle *et al*, 2007).

Approaches to tackling this issue can be grouped into two strands; 1) Labour Market Programmes (LMP), and 2) Education System Initiatives. LMP are collaborations between the education sector and an assortment of industry partners from for profit, to social enterprise. These partnerships focus on providing a mix of training, personal development activities and employment opportunities (Clark, 2000: 102). Their success has been attributed to their focus on integration with the labour market alongside training and additional support (Marshall & Macfarlane, 2000), instead of focusing on these separately (Anderson *et al*, 2004; Card *et al*, 2010; Halpin & Hill, 2007). Projects such as the Lifelong Learning Café (Seddon & Ferguson, 2009), Charcoal Lane restaurant, and Fifteen Foundation (<http://www.fifteen.net/>) found that this multi-faceted approach improved employees capabilities, personal capacity and long-term employability. Campbell *et al* (2011) also noted an improvement in self-image, where participants began to view themselves as employees rather than recipients of welfare.

Both formal and semi-formal education initiatives are re-engaging students with education by focussing is on real world learning. The EigenWijs School for living in the Netherlands found that encouraging students to solve work based problems while reflecting on the consequences of their actions encouraged students to think independently, and take control of their learning (te Riele, 2009). The Friesland Extreme Learning College has taken this concept further by involving industry partners in the evaluation of student work, resulting in increased motivation and achievement amongst students (Meijers, 2009). Similarly the Macleay Vocation School, and Crossroads initiative have successfully blended vocational training, workplace learning, and employability skills to re-engage students in education (Eason, 2009). These findings support the most recent ESRI early school leavers report which recommends engaging students through a non-traditional approach of work based learning and employability skills (Byrne *et al*, 2008).

Programmes that increase the educational attainment, versatility and employability of the most vulnerable in our society help to ensure they have the best opportunity for a fulfilling and healthy life (Smith and McCoy, 2009). Greater educational attainment leads to a healthier lifestyle (Ross and Wu, 1995:738), and more positive participation and contribution to community life (Ross & Mirowsky, 1989). The increases that are achieved in numeracy, literacy, problem solving and professional skills, not only improve individuals' employment and further education opportunities (Bynner 2004:32), but have a positive impact on their respective organisations. Employers recognise the benefits in re-engaging their employees with education. Re-engagement can transform low-skilled workers attitudes in the workplace; increasing their flexibility, promoting a positive attitude to change, improving their relations with management and other staff, and reducing staff attrition. Workers who participate in education are also more competent in performing tasks; becoming more independent, requiring less supervision, and are more capable of solving problems on their own. These affects, coupled with the positive impact on workers promotional opportunities, indicate potential gains for both employees and employers (Groot & Vann De Btrink, 2000). This provides strong evidence that education can help to ensure a flexible workforce, equal opportunities, and socio-economic growth (Stenberg, 2011). However, in order to bring about success for both employers and individuals, Behan *et al* (2007) recommend that programmes are regulated, accredited and flexible (Behan *et al*, 2012). Employers must also be supported in understanding their own business needs and the needs of their employees to get the right mix of technical (literacy, numeracy, business specific), IT (computer literacy, ECDL) and interpersonal (communication skills, personal management, teamwork) training into their programmes (Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2005: 415).

Over a decade of public policy in Ireland has been working to address the issue of upskilling the most vulnerable in the Irish workforce (Healy, 2009: 19-24). The current programme for government (Government for national recovery, 2011-2016) has acknowledged the potential social and economic cost of further unemployment and has committed to improving literacy, numeracy and workplace skills through community, vocational, and mainstream education. The paper aims to bridge the gap in current literature by providing an in-depth look at a collaboration between industry and education, between work and learning, to provide further insight into the best possible path forward to achieve these goals in a cost effective manner. The paper will bridge the gap in the following ways: 1) provide in depth qualitative and quantitative data from participants in a programme, allowing deep insight into their perceptions of the benefits of taking part, and 2) An evaluation of a new approach to workplace learning, potentially gaining greater insight into possibilities for the future.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

This study was carried out in Fastload Ltd (name changed for confidentiality reasons), an Irish social enterprise which runs a commercial operation while providing relevant work experience and training to the long-term unemployed. Their mission is to provide staff with

the skills and confidence to reengage with employment and further educational opportunities. This study focuses on twenty five (n=25) staff members who have completed training programme. Participation in the training was compulsory. The authors' involvement in the project was from a research perspective only, having no impact on the workings of the programme or content delivery.

2.2 The programme

The training programme is a practical initiative aimed at improving the employability of staff by providing real work experience, accredited training, mentoring and support, in a commercial business environment. The programme is fully accredited having been developed in conjunction with a local further education college. It emphasises capturing learning that takes place during work, whilst providing relevant training for future employment or education opportunities. Work experience focuses on promoting and tracking positive work behaviours, and providing quality products and services to customers. Training is provided on a modular basis and consists of the following modules: personal effectiveness; work experience; product packaging and assembly; communication; mathematics; workplace safety; work orientation; and computer literacy. Additional mentoring and support are also provided by an organisational psychologist.

2.3 Description of process

All activities took place on the Fastload premises; on the job training, one to one meetings, and support sessions took place at work stations, packaging lines, and other locations throughout the workplace. Training sessions were held in the training room and were facilitated by a fully qualified external tutor. Staff also took part in independent learning, including documented reflection on personal work, and learning achieved during training sessions. Staff engagement in the programme was supported through: mentoring provided by management; team based learning and collaborative completion of assignment tasks; and coordinators who liaised between staff, senior management and training facilitators. Staff were also allocated a number of work-time hours each week to complete assignment tasks, hold team meetings and run study groups.

2.4 Instruments

Data collection was carried using a written questionnaire, and although certain information such as gender and age was elicited, questionnaires were kept anonymous. Data gathered was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information. Quantitative questions were asked by providing staff members with a statement to which they could attribute their level of agreement. A five point rating scale was used where 1='strongly disagree', 2='somewhat disagree', 3='neither disagree nor agree', 4='somewhat agree', and 5='strongly agree'. Following each question, qualitative data was gathered through the use of open questions requesting staff members to justify and elaborate on their numerical responses. A series of questions were asked with the following themes in mind: 1) The learning achieved through the programme, and 2) The impact the programme had on attitudes to work and the working environment.

In the first category, learning achieved, staff members were first asked to outline the most significant aspects learned on the programme, then more specifically, improvements achieved in their literacy and numeracy skills, ability to use ICT, and communication skills. In the second category, attitudes to work and the working environment, staff were asked rate changes in their attitudes to work, relationships with management, and relationships with other team members.

2.5 Procedure

Staff took part in the programme during their employment in Fastload and participation in the programme was compulsory. The questionnaire was distributed to staff in groups, with each group completing their questionnaire in the on-site training room. The author and a member of Fastload management were present to provide clarification of questions if needed.

2.6 Data Analysis

Of the twenty-five participants ($n = 25$) in the survey, fifteen ($n = 15$) were female and ten ($n = 10$) were male. The youngest participant was twenty-three years old and the eldest was sixty-six with the average age being forty-eight years of age. Of the twenty-five participants, sixteen ($n=16$) were single in status (including widows/widowers and separated /divorced). The average school-leaving age was fifteen years; the youngest was twelve and the eldest was nineteen. The lowest level of education attainment achieved was completion of primary education and the highest was completion of the state Leaving Certificate ($n=3$).

3. Findings and Discussions

Findings are now presented using quantitative data and extracts from qualitative responses. Findings are presented using the themes mentioned previously; 1) The learning achieved, 2) Impact on attitudes to work and the working environment, 3) Impact on attitudes to further employment and training, 4) Perceptions on how the programme was delivered.

3.1 Learning Achieved

In order to get a sense of what staff had gained from participation, they were asked about improvements in their abilities in a number of key areas which had been targeted by the programme: (i) numerical ability (ii) reading and writing ability (iii) ability to use ICT and (iv) ability to communicate.

3.1.1 Numerical ability

The majority of staff (Fig 1) appear to have noticed improvements in their numerical ability, with eighteen ($n=18$) staff responding positively. Their responses indicate a number of reasons why they felt their ability to work with numbers improved. Staff commented that their 'confidence levels' had improved, that 'lifelong fears of maths' had been overcome, how having the ability to assist their 'grandchildren with their homework' was a major milestone, and how the opportunity to engage with numbers for the first time in fifty years was a welcome challenge. Six ($n=6$) staff members neither agreed nor disagreed that their

ability to work with numbers had improved, explaining that their competence and confidence with numbers was sufficient prior to taking part in the programme. A small number of staff members (n=2) disagreed (somewhat/strongly) with the statement, citing difficulties in using computers as their reasons.

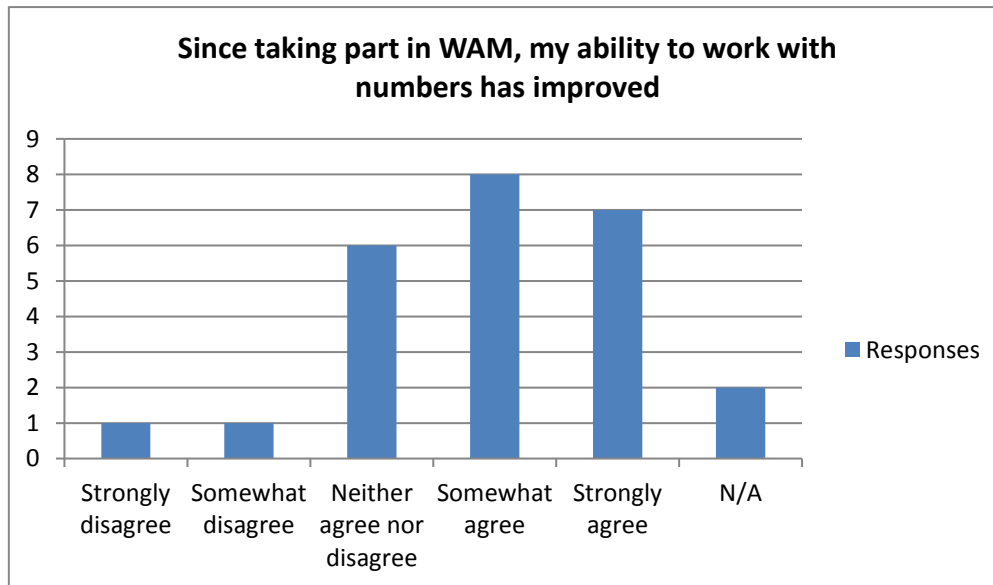


Figure 1 - Improvements in mathematical ability

3.1.2 Reading and Writing Skills

When asked about the impact the programme had on their reading and writing ability, staff offered broadly the same pattern of responses (Fig 2) as in the previous category on numerical ability, as can be seen from Figure 2. Once again, the majority (n=15) of staff responded positively to the statement, either somewhat or strongly agreeing. Staff commented that they had ‘improved confidence’ in their literacy skills, and ‘better concentration’ when attempting to complete reading and writing tasks, as a result of the programme. One staff member noted that, until WAM, they had not had the opportunity to read or write since they left school in their very early teens. Seven staff members (n=7) neither agreed nor disagreed that their reading and writing skills had improved, and three (n=3) disagreed. However all explained that their competence was sufficient prior to taking part in the programme.

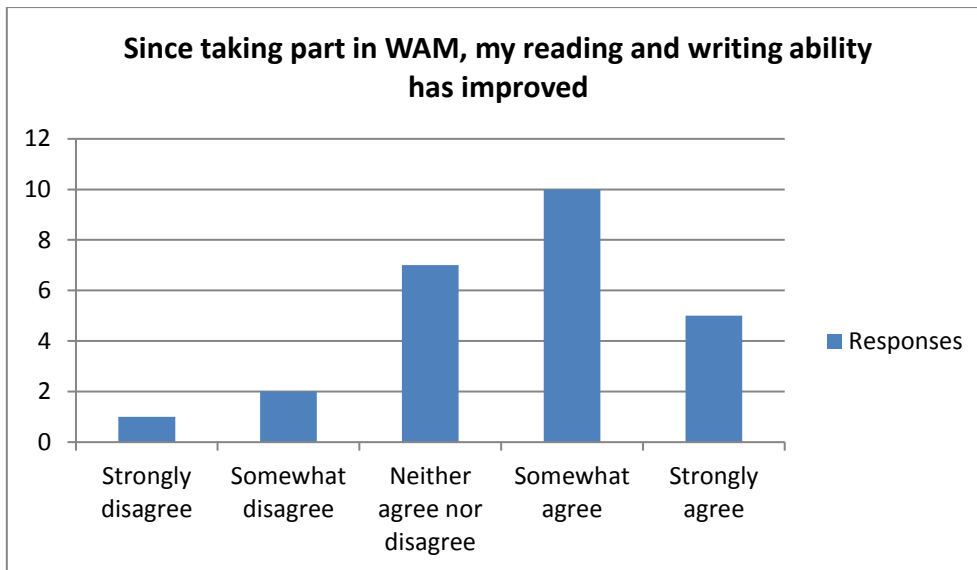


Figure 2 - Improvements to reading and writing ability

3.1.3 ICT Skills

In relation to improvement in ICT Skills the feedback was very clear – at both ends of the spectrum (Fig 3). Once again, a majority (n=12) of staff were positive regarding the impact the programme had on their ICT skills, either somewhat or strongly agreeing with the statement. They outlined a wealth of reasons for this positive impact. For example staff commented that they could now ‘turn the computer on’, ‘send e-mail’, and ‘contact friends’. While these comments are heartening to see, it is perhaps the comments about the use of ICT in a work context which provide the most encouragement with staff saying their ‘skills improved greatly’ and they could now perform tasks such as ‘prepare invoices and credit notes’. One staff member commented that they were no longer ‘daunted’ by the use of ICT. Seven staff (n=7) neither agreed nor disagreed that their ICT skills had improved, with each explaining they felt they were already proficient in ICT. Two (n=2) staff members in particular stated they had already completed an ECDL, or other more advanced ICT training course. A total of six (n=6) members of staff disagreed with the statement, with a clear theme across all six responses. While none of the staff members suggested the programme content was poor, or that little was learned, they all stated that more time was required on computers to practice the skills being taught.

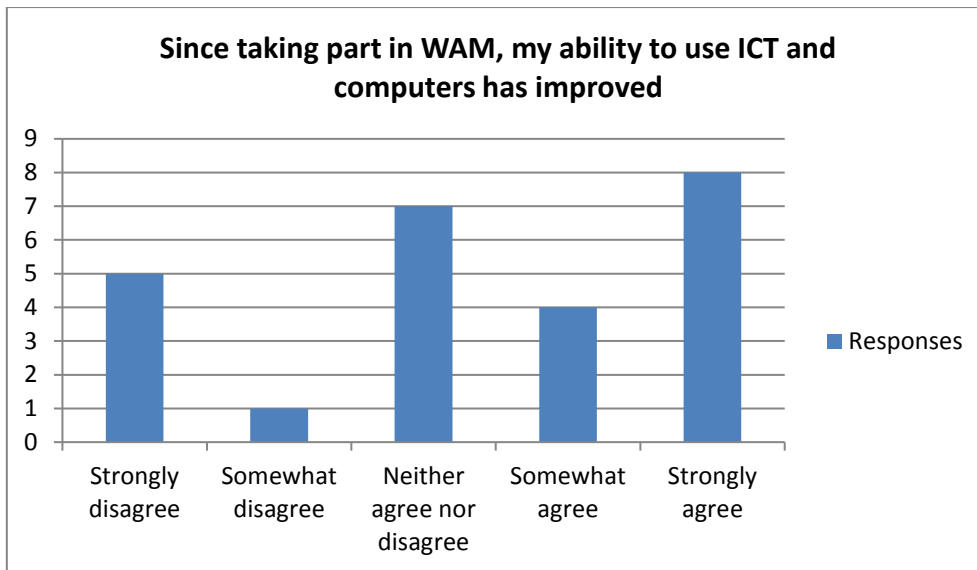


Figure 3 - Improvements to ICT ability

3.1.4 Communication Skills

The area of communication skills, appears to have been the most successful in terms of impact staff, with an overwhelming majority (n=21) stating that the programme had a positive impact (Fig 4). Staff commented on how group work and discussions had improved their confidence to ‘speak up and speak out’. Others explained how their ability to communicate had improved across a range of communication competencies: e-mail; telephone; conversation and interaction with others. One staff member recorded they had ‘never worked with nice people before’, with others individually referring to how experiences working on reception, as part of teams and with people who were ‘on the same level’ helped in improving their ability to communicate. Three (n=3) staff members neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, while only one (n=1) disagreed. Once again, these less favourable answers do not appear to be negative reviews of the course, but rather indications of previous experience in working with teams, and high level of communication skills when joining the programme.

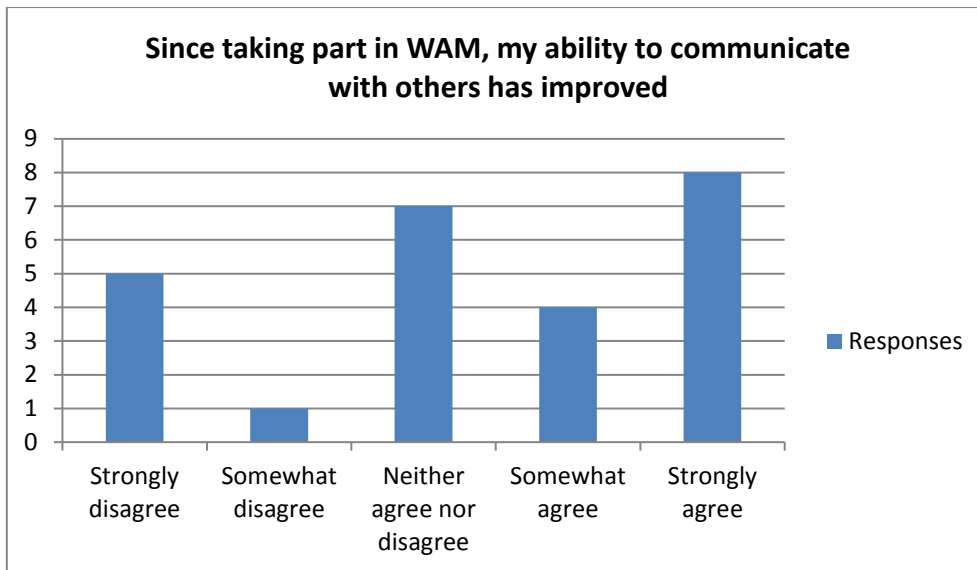


Figure 4 - Improvements to communication skills

Data in this category clearly indicates that the programme had a positive impact on staff members learning. The majority of staff indicated improvements in their basic skills such as working with numbers, and reading and writing. These alone are essential improvements in a person’s employability and factors that enable individuals to work and/or apply for future work and training. However, in addition to this, we can also see staff members’ ability to work with ICT and communicate with each other has improved also. An increased confidence in using technology is essential in today’s employment market, and extremely helpful when undertaking further educational opportunities. Similarly, the ability to communicate well, both with team members and through different mediums such as email and telephone forms an essential part of many employment opportunities. Witnessing staff members improvements in these areas suggests they are better prepared for the future world of work.

3.2 Impact on work environment

In order to get a sense of what impact the programme had on staff members attitude to work and to their working environment, staff were asked about changes in a number of key areas: (i) relationship with co-workers (ii) relationship with management (iii) overall attitude to work.

The responses to these questions were overwhelmingly positive (Fig 5) with twenty-three (n=23) agreeing that their relationships with co-workers had improved, seventeen (n=17) agreeing relationships with management had improved, and nineteen (n=19) agreeing their overall attitude to work had improved. With regards to relationship with management, staff members cited a number of reasons for the improvement; predominant among these was that they felt management were more approachable as a result of taking part in the WAM programme. One member of staff commented ‘I can only say good things about them (management)’. In terms of improved relationship with co-workers and attitude to work, some staff members commented that taking part in the programme improved the

communications, co-operation, knowledge of co-workers and management, thereby making the workplace more enjoyable to come to. Others stated that an increase in their self-confidence led to an increase in their enjoyment of work, for example, one staff member suggested that the courses had made speaking up easier and that they were more likely to seek guidance and advice than heretofore. All of those who *neither agreed nor disagreed* felt that they always had a good relationship with co-workers, and a positive attitude to work.

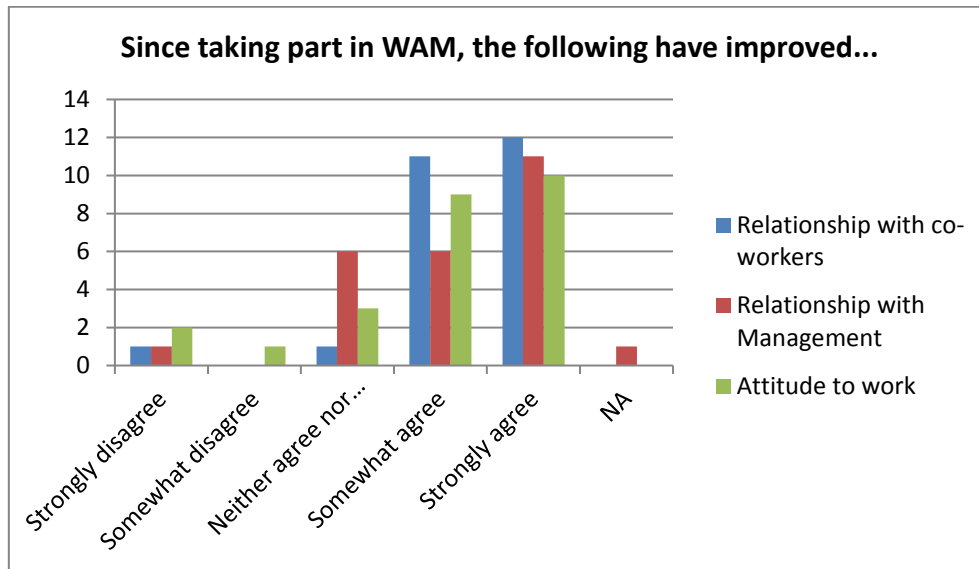


Figure 5 - Impact on working environment

Data suggests that participation in the programme has improved staff relationships with each other and with management. The development of these relationships not only improves the potential performance in their current role, but may also provide them with the skills to work well with others in future employment opportunities. The programme also had a positive impact on staff attitudes to work, improving co-operation and understanding between roles. These changes in attitudes may result in increased productivity, with staff being more likely to seek guidance and advice on how to perform better. Moreover, increasing staff enjoyment and feelings of satisfaction in the workplace may have longer term implications, encouraging staff to be more positive about future employment and/or training opportunities.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The vulnerability of low-skilled workers in the Irish labour force is well documented, particularly the unstable nature of their employment, and the negative impacts of losing such employment. The importance of these issues has led to a variety of approaches to tackling the problem, the most successful of which appear to be initiatives that blend educational attainment with workplace experience. The purpose of this paper was to examine impact of one such programme which blended the teaching of academic knowledge, with workplace skills and experience. Findings indicate that the provision of academic content and on-the-job training in this context has resulted in an improvement in staff competencies, confidence and abilities. The combination of training and the training contexts (in groups, on the factory

floor, interacting with management and co-workers and so on) has had a positive impact on the working environment, both in terms of interrelationships with colleagues and management, and in terms of the engagement and fulfilment derived from the workplace. What has emerged from this study is a picture of a strong and interested team dynamic at work, in which the needs of the trainees are recognised and prioritised, alongside business priorities. Provision of training which reaches out and embraces those whose experience of education is limited appears to have been a well thought out, and successful undertaking. Staff appear to have gained valuable experience and qualifications which will aid them in the future, but also improve performance in their existing organisation through increased levels of engagement and improved attitudes to work.

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