

Observational Assessment of the Balanced Scorecard Strategic Alignment Process: A Study of a Utility Company

By

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Abstract

As part of a larger study, this paper presents an exploratory and qualitative analysis of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) implementation of a utility company in Malaysia. Specifically, the paper explores whether the use of BSC facilitates the alignment between corporate objectives, strategic business units' strategies and the key performance indicators of individual managers. After sixteen years of BSC implementation, the company has received some mixed responses, both positive and negative feedback from its stakeholders. One of the major proponents about BSC is its purported ability to create vertical and horizontal alignment between each separated business segments, divisions and at individual level, particularly in a complex organization. Therefore, this study presents an observational assessment on how a Malaysian company which have been utilizing the BSC methodology for more than a decade and still trying to find a better match and alignment between corporate objectives, SBU strategies and KPIs of individual managers. It presents the current state of BSC alignment tools and processes used, and premised on some observational and documentation analysis, suggests on several improvement initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Balanced Scorecard has received extensive attention from the practitioners and researchers since its introduction and implementation by the US companies. The framework was developed based on performance management practices of companies by Kaplan and Norton (1992). Its simplicity and practicality has driven many companies from other parts of the world to adopt this methodology into their system to manage the company's performance and to sustain its competitive advantages.

After more than a decade of development, many studies have empirically observed the implication of BSC implementation towards organizational performances. However, implementing the BSC is not only a matter of monitoring its outcome, more importantly is whether the outcome facilitates better alignment between corporate objectives, Strategic Business Units (SBUs) strategies and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of individual managers. The cascading effect of successful BSC implementation should permeates across different levels of organizational and managerial hierarchies. Successful and effective BSC implementation is still a major stumbling block for many organizations (Bourne & Bourne, 2005). One of the major contributions of BSC successful implementation which has been highlighted in many studies is its ability to align different organizational parts in achieving the corporate performance (Kaplan and Norton, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006; Bloomquist and Yeager, 2008).

To date, there is still lack of published studies looking at the implementation process which is crucial before it can bring significant benefits to the companies particularly in the Asian companies' context (Anand, Sahay and Saha, 2005; Othman, 2006, 2008; Jusoh, Ibrahim and Zainuddin, 2006 and Sandhu, Baxter and Emsley, 2008). Most of the available studies are done in the Western companies which have a different cultural setting compared to Malaysia (Davis, 1996; Davis and Albright, 2003; Maiga and Jacobs, 2003; Braam and Nijssen, 2004, Hendrikson, Menor, Wiedman and Richardson, 2004; Ax and Bjornenak, 2005; Decoene and Bruggeman, 2006 and Nielsen and Nielsen, 2008). The current study is part of a larger

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research carried out on a large utility conglomerate in Malaysia. Specifically this paper highlights the observational assessment made by the researcher during her recent three month internship with the company. Hence the objectives of this study are to [1] Describe the BSC implementation processes of the company; and [2] Provide an exploratory finding on the BSC alignment of corporate objectives, cascading down to SBUs strategies and managerial KPIs. Though the result is basically exploratory in nature, it certainly provides sufficient foundation and direction for a more comprehensive later case study of the company.

BSC IN PERSPECTIVES

The notion that traditional performance measurement system is not capable to capture all performance drivers' information has led to the creation of the BSC. Previous researchers (Kaplan and Norton 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2006; Neely, 2005) highlighted that relying solely on financial information is not enough to capture the performance information in current business environment which are getting complex.

Many studies have proven that BSC is a good methodology if implemented properly (Maiga and Jacobs, 2003; Davis and Albright, 2003; Braam and Nijssen, 2004; Kaplan and Norton, 2006). In a comparison between BSC adopters and non-adopters amongst US companies, Neely et. al. (2004) initially observed positive impacts of BSC on companies' performance. However, further analysis revealed that the impact is not significant between the two groups. An investigation by Braam and Nijssen (2004) into how different usage of BSC affects firm performance produces two results. The use of BSC that compliments firms' corporate strategies has positive impact on performance while implementing BSC without clear link to corporate strategy will frustrate performance improvement or may negatively affects it (Kaplan and Norton, 2006 and Bloomquist and Yeager (2008). In contrary, BSC implementation focusing only on measurement demonstrates negative influences to performance Voelpel, Leibold and Eckhoff (2006). In line with this evidence, Davis and Albright (2004) who studied the implication of implementing BSC in an organization using a quasi experimental method towards bank branches in the US found significant differences in financial performances of the implementers compared to the non-implementers.

Studies also reveal multiple results on non-financial performance. For example, Tayler's (2008) study on the effect of utilizing BSC measures on employee "motivational reasoning" has shown that managers, who are involved in selecting BSC initiatives when using BSC measures to evaluate the initiatives, perceived the initiatives as more successful compared to those who not involved. In addition, when given the causal effect chain, their evaluations appear to be less affected by their involvement. They concluded that BSC causal chain does not provide enough guidance to overcome motivated reasoning but help managers to improve his/her strategy evaluation.

Jusoh et. al.(2006) conducted a study on alignment and multiple performance measures based on the BSC perspectives in Malaysian companies manufacturing companies, highlighted that alignment have an implication towards firm performance. Utilizing the quantitative relational approach, they concluded that different types of measures are needed for a different strategy to ensure effectiveness. Another study on BSC in Malaysia, looking at the implementation perspectives was conducted by Othman et. al (2008). The study revealed important problems faced by a Malaysian organization that implement BSC. However, their study did not focus on the alignment issue.

There are a number of companies that implement BSC in the west, but not many study addresses on the process of implementing the methodology. However, few papers have discussed on the implementation guidelines. For instances, Roest (1997) introduced the ten fundamental rules of BSC implementation: (i) no standard solution for BSC implementation; (ii) top management support is essential; (iii) strategy is the starting point; (iv) determine a limited and balanced number of objectives and measures; (v) a continuous process - no in-depth analysis upfront but refine and learn by doing; (vi) take a bottom-up and top-down approach; (vii) it is not a system issue, but system are issues; (viii) consider delivery system at the start; (ix) consider the effects of performance indicators on behavior and (x) not all measures can be quantify. Meanwhile Hendricks, Menor, Wiedman and Richardson (2004) recommended another guideline for effective BSC formulation and implementation. They pointed that to be successful in BSC implementation

it is crucial that BSC senior leadership be fully involved, having a clear firm's business vision and strategy, clear performance categories that link vision and strategy to results, effective cascading process, measures and meaningful standards, appropriate deployment of budgeting, IT, communication and reward systems; and utilizing BSC as a facilitator of organizational and cultural change will indeed improve the effectiveness of BSC usage.

Back to the issue of alignment, besides strong emphasis by Kaplan and Norton (2006), Decoene and Bruggeman (2006) have developed a theoretical argument showing how strategic alignment processes of BSC improve firm performance and how motivation intervene the relationship between alignment and performance. They suggest that a combination of effective strategic alignment and BSC-based compensation plan are expected to have positives effect on extrinsic motivation of manufacturing executives.

From the management field perspectives, alignment has positive impact on firm performance as described in many studies (Skinner, 1969; Venkatraman, 1984, Venkatraman, 1989; Knoll and Javenpaa, 1994; Paladino, 2000; Tarigan (2005); Jusoh, Ibrahim and Zainuddin (2006); Kathuria, Joshi and Porch, 2007; Drew and Kaye (2007) and Bloomquist and Yearger, 2008). Tarigan (2005) study the relationship between strategic alignment among general managers and manufacturing managers towards what are the most important strategic priorities and firm performance. He found a positive relationship between alignment and performance and the relationship is even stronger in a decentralization system. Drew and Kaye (2007) proved that the alignment of the board attention to strategic activities of companies may leads to improvement in performance. Meanwhile a Malaysian study by Jusoh et al. (2006) who conducted a study on the effect of alignment between strategy (miles and snow topology) and performance measures (BSC framework) towards firm performance demonstrate that alignment between these two concepts does have implication on performance.

Many BSC studies however focus more on empirical relational findings. This is similar to previous literature in alignment issue. Additionally, previous studies on the alignment issue focus very much on the alignment between firm business strategies and information system and technology strategies. There is lack of published studies that look into the implementation processes in the real organizational context which could provide fruitful insights from a different research perspective. Therefore, this paper emphasizes on the need to explore into the processes perspectives to seek understanding of the reason why achieving alignment is a challenging task for any BSC implementers and the factors which impede the creation of strategic alignment via understanding the processes design to achieve it.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Many platforms can be exercised to find the underlying reasons why many BSC adopters faced a lot of difficulties in creating strategic alignment between the separate business units and division. This study adopted the qualitative case study approach and utilizes specifically the observation and interview methods as the data gathering strategy. Specifically, the study hopes to provide detailed narration on how the case company ensures successful BSC implementation as well as achieving alignment. Previous published studies have empirically proven that achieving alignment has positive impact on firm performance. However very limited study on the processes perspective has been done specifically on an Asian company setting such as Malaysia.

To achieve the two basic objectives of (i) describing the BSC implementation processes of the company and (ii) exploring how the BSC implementation facilitates the alignment processes, an observation of the real implementation process in an organizational context is chosen as the data collection strategy (Creswell, 2007). For the actual study, the researcher was granted permission by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the human resource division to undergo a three month attachment program. As part of a "win-win" initiative, the researcher is to understudy the effectiveness of the BSC alignment process and the "BSC Healthcheck" system. Once reviewed, the researcher is to provide a written report to the Strategic Department of the company outlining feedback obtained from different managerial levels on strengths and

weaknesses of the BSC system. The researcher is also encouraged to suggest improvement initiatives to be carried out to further improve the alignment mechanism of the BSC methodology. Observations and interviews have been identified as the most appropriate data gathering strategies due to their ability to capture a more realistic and true information direct from the sources itself. Moreover, this approach can mitigate the possibility of human biasness of providing information as compared to questionnaire survey and interview approaches (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1998).

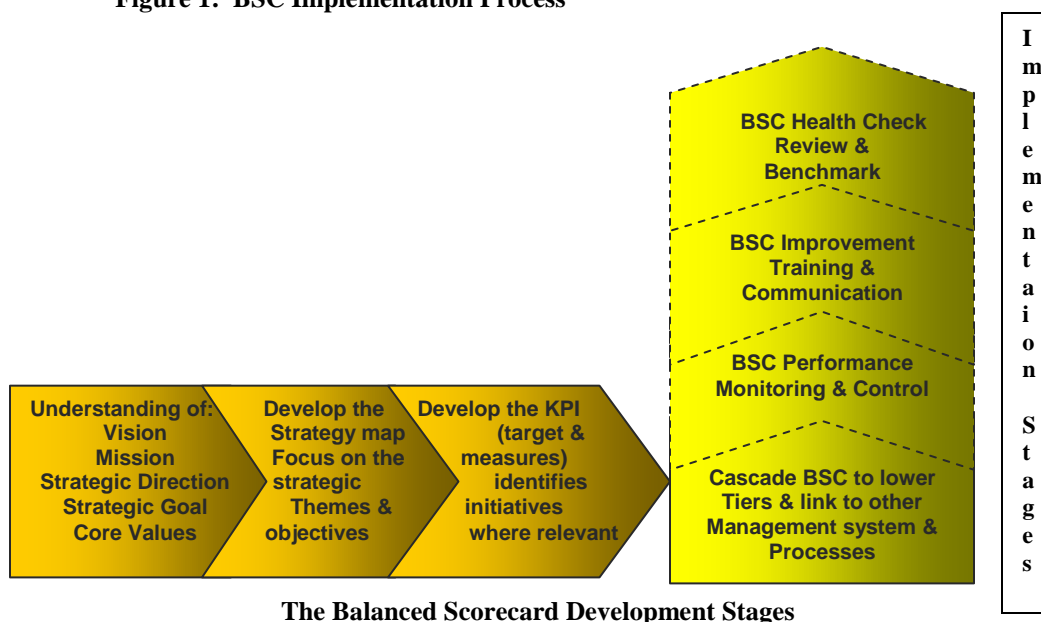
The attachment program was very timely as the company was just at the early stage of the BSC new cycle which took place after it underwent a major reorganization exercise when the company is now split into two entities. Whilst one entity is focusing on an international and regional market and assuming a new name and identity; the other is given the domestic market and is strategizing on product diversification. The attachment session has enabled the researcher to take part as an observer in various management meetings related to BSC implementation. There were different meetings that discussed on the development of departmental strategy maps & scorecard; the selection of performance measures; the development of detailed definitions of each measures; the aligning of different divisional objectives and measures. The researcher was also allowed to observe and participate in various in-house and other computer-based training sessions. In addition, the researcher was given the opportunity to review the BSC performance management system and how it was used for tracking, contracting and evaluating employees' performance. The observed events were recorded in a log book and interviews taped and transcribed. Based on the observations and interviews, the BSC implementation and its related alignment process are analyzed. For the purpose of this paper, only the exploratory results are discussed and revealed.

FINDINGS

The BSC Implementation Processes

Bloomquist and Yeager (2008) have upfront commented that “a key to successfully designing and implementing the BSC system is its alignment with the strategic plan”. Thus implementing the BSC requires company to carefully design the processes to ensure its successful implementation elements are fulfilled. Based on researcher's observations through a three-month attachment program in the chosen company, Figure 1 summarizes the steps involved in the implementing process of BSC:

Figure 1: BSC Implementation Process



Company XYZ has been using the BSC extensively from performance measurement system to strategic management system since year 2004. Prior to using the BSC, the company started off by utilizing the KPIs since 1996.

This company fully adopts the BSC methodology proposed by Kaplan and Norton. The initial implementation stage starts when twelve managers were sent to the US to attend the BSC workshop conducted by Kaplan himself. The aim of sending these officers for training was so that this group will act as internal BSC resource trainers once the system is implemented by the company. They came back as trainers and started their task of developing the company's BSC. Subsequent BSC training programs were undertaken by either the internal resource trainers or from time to time a consultant who is also a partner to Kaplan and Norton Collaboration is called to provide in-house training. Selected managers, usually the head of a particular Strategic Business Units (SBUs) will either voluntarily or appointed to attend the training programs. As a result, BSC concepts may be mastered by certain managers whilst other managers only capture the basic concepts without truly understand many of its implementation factors.

The implementation processes starts with the creation of company's corporate level Vision and Mission. This is the basis for the top management of the company to develop its strategic company's direction or objectives and goal. The company has also developed their strategic core values which are also the basis of many of its strategic business decisions.

The development of the company's *Strategy Map* is done after the top management's confirmation. This company implemented a customized strategy map for every strategic business units and divisions. In the beginning the strategy map is developed by the BSC representatives appointed in specific SBU and division themselves through a brainstorming session handled internally. A strategy map is an important element of BSC development in any company (Kaplan and Norton, 2004, 2006). It shows how the company planned to achieve its vision and mission by providing a clear picture on how the objectives on each scorecard four perspectives are linked together to achieve the ultimate financial outcome due to its nature of establishment - a profit-making organization. However, the development of the company's strategic objectives for each perspective is not only driven by its vision and mission but also driven by the strategic themes. The corporate objectives are then matched to see the causal-effect relationship which will directly underline irrelevant objectives which are not supported.

The strategy maps will be linked up with the units' key performance indicators (KPIs) which consist of a specific measures and target for a particular objectives set in the strategy maps. These have to be related. The units must decide the best measures that can drive the units' performance. The measures must be critical for the unit performance. Together with the measures are the targets set for the units to achieve for that particular year which must be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely (SMART). Sometimes the units must come forward with a certain project to achieve the target set in the scorecard. These projects are called initiatives which will also be monitored in the scorecard. The observation also reveals that managers have problems in identifying the KPIs for their strategic objectives. But, this is more critical for the non-financial measures. Another problems identified is when the measures has been identified, some of the measures is not currently available for performance tracking. They do not have the right mechanism to track the measures and the current performance tracking system is also another hurdle for the managers to overcome.

One of the mechanisms used to overcome the problems above, the company will conduct the "challenge session" where the objectives determined earlier will be challenged by the head of the units and the main BSC resources team to provide justification for the chosen objectives. There are two challenge sessions. The second challenge session will include the top management before the maps which contain the strategic objectives of those particular units are approved. After approval of the maps, any amendment to the objectives will also have to be approved by the top management.

Following the approval of the strategy maps and scorecard by the top management, the higher level BSC will be cascaded to the lower divisional, units and individual levels using the same process. However, this company only maintains their strategy maps and scorecard up to the level which they named them as Top

Tier, Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels. The lower levels in the specific units i.e. the divisions themselves have to develop their own scorecard to support the upper level scorecard - specifically the objectives, measures, and targets.

Nevertheless, setting the right objectives, measures and target is inadequate without the monitoring and control system in place. The company utilizes the BSC performance reporting as its approach of monitoring and controlling the SBU's performance. The reporting is done on monthly basis and is monitored by the specific units developed mainly for that purpose. This unit is responsible as the resources center where any doubts on BSC concepts and implementation and the monitoring and controlling task will be handled by this group. This group will gather all the BSC information from the SBUs to track their performance and report it to the top management in a reporting session which is conducted twice a month. However, the divisional performances are not monitored using this platform assuming that the achievement of the SBUs will indirectly portray the achievement of the division lay under the specific SBUs.

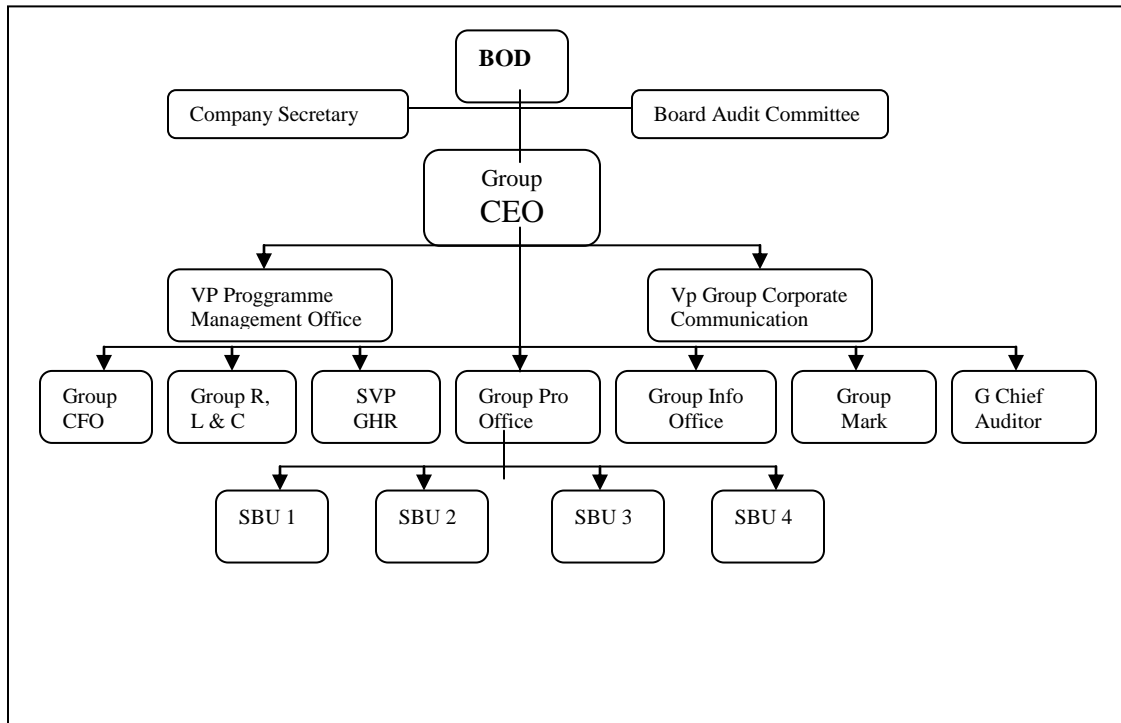
Like the development stages, the training and awareness program are conducted throughout the company. Employees are made known that the company will use BSC as its performance management and strategic management system via face to face briefing by the head of units and divisions. Other channel like newsletter is used to create awareness to all the executives' level employees. This is a continuous process. Finally, in year 2007, the first health check review was conducted by the company's BSC consultant to assess and benchmark the extent of BSC development and usage in the organization. The health check has highlighted several areas related to BSC implementation for further improvement. From an internal document viewed by the researcher, it was revealed that the company had conducted a self-assessment electronic questionnaire to solicit employee feedback from various organizational levels. The next sub-section details out the status of the BSC alignment of this company.

Achieving alignment

Alignment can be categorized into vertical and horizontal alignment. It is noticed that in the scorecard discussion or meeting, 'alignment' is always emphasized. Most of the managers understand that alignment is needed to achieve organizational vision and mission.

The observational and interview findings of this study provide some evidence on the process of implementing BSC in a company which has a very complex organizational structure and huge number of employees (36,000). Literature has pointed that BSC implementation should utilized top down and bottom up approach (Roest, 1997) with high commitment and buy-in from the top management level. In this case study, the BSC implementation is a top-down initiative. Achieving alignment vertically and horizontally is derived through the cascading process, which is not an easy task (Bourne and Bourne, 2005). Cascading company level strategic objectives to the lower level is easiest when there is no deep hierarchy level. On contrary this company has a very complex organizational structure which complicates the process. Figure 2 depicts the organizational structure of the company before its de-merger exercise. Even the "top management" comprises of a four-layer structure. In short, an organizational structure which is "vertically-inclined" may slow down the cascading process due to beauracracy problem. It can be observed in the company that even though discussions are conducted, but the initiatives to have the sessions must come from the particular SBUs or departments. Some SBUs or departments are very proactive in taking the initiatives to have meetings and discussions between their units and other related units, but some are not depending on the extent of buy-in of the BSC concepts by the head of that particular SBUs or departments.

Figure 2: Company XYZ Organisational Structure



The team needs to design the implementation processes that permit alignment between the separated SBUs, divisions and finally all individuals in the organization. The cascading process has been a topic highlighted in all scorecard development meetings. The strategic management group of the company has designed a specific and a more systematic way of cascading the objectives, measures and targets from the upper management level to the lower level. To date they have reached the *Tier 1* level. A cascading matrix which consists of all related objectives and measures has been developed to ensure the lower level will capture relevant objectives and measures in their scorecard. This is to guarantee that the lower level will not simply put any objectives which might not be critical for the BSC purpose. Apart from this matrix, other basis used in the cascading process is the job operating procedures or also addressed as the job term of reference at the individuals level scorecard.

To ensure that alignment exists, series of discussion among the SBUs and the divisions are conducted to discuss on how certain division can support other division when needed. The cascading process is an iterative process where reviewing of the objectives are done by the top management for the top level scorecard and consequently by the head of each SBU's, divisions and units to ensure that any changes in the top level scorecards will be highlighted and reviewed at the lower level scorecards. Feedbacks from certain managerial level are also sought.

Kathuria, Joshi and Porth (2007) have pointed that for an alignment to exist; it requires a shared understanding of organizational goals and objectives by managers at various levels and within various units of the organizational hierarchy. But, the observations in this case have shown that alignment is hardly seen in the company's meeting. Even though the company has fully adopted the BSC tools alongside with the processes described by Kaplan and Norton (1992), lack of understanding of the BSC itself with regards to what should be the best measures for a particular objectives has resulted in low level of effectiveness of the measures to highlight firm performance. The measures selected are not compelling to drive the company's performance.

CONCLUSION

To date, very limited evidence is available with regard to the BSC alignment process in organization especially in Malaysian companies. The current study is an attempt to fill up this gap. As the researcher is given the opportunity to go through a three month attachment program with the company, it is now possible to provide a narration on how this utility company who pioneered the BSC has implemented the methodology. Findings of this study highlight important BSC implementation process required to ensure the alignment of corporate objectives, SBU strategies and managerial KPIs. Despite having implemented the BSC technique for over a decade, the strategic alignment remains an area that needs further improvement. The remaining part of this doctoral study will examine reasons (including behavioral) for misalignment, hence proposing for improvement strategies. Another aspect that will be the focus of that study is the development of a suitable “BSC Healthcheck” for the company, taking into consideration the cascading needs of employees at different managerial levels. As stipulated by earlier studies, an effective cascading process depends on factors such as the level of managers understanding of the company & the departments’ strategic objectives; managers buy-in of the initiatives; communication; time constraints and supervisions & coordination. An effective cascading process will provide an organization with a good platform to achieve alignment which is always linked to better firm financial and non-financial firm performance.

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