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The Police Problem Employee

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Police supervisors at all levels are concerned with the marginal and unsatisfactory police employee. They analyze causes and symptoms in an effort to understand and to solve the complex problems of job disaffection, dissatisfaction, contraorganizational behavior, and reduced performance.

With steady increases of cost-push inflation [1] and the attendant effects on the costs of recruiting, selection, and training, police managers are looking more closely at ways to improve the performance of current employees. Those officers and police employees who are judged marginal or unsatisfactory are coming under closer scrutiny by police managers for several reasons. Efforts are being directed at finding the causes of marginal performance and in determining solutions to the problem.

This article explores the issue of the marginal performer in the police department and the changing environments in today's society that have created different employee expectations, and therefore, disaffection and marginal performance. As part of this examination, the article also considers the results of a 1981 survey of police managers' perceptions of employee performance and offers some suggestions for dealing with marginal performance.

The Clay-Yates Study

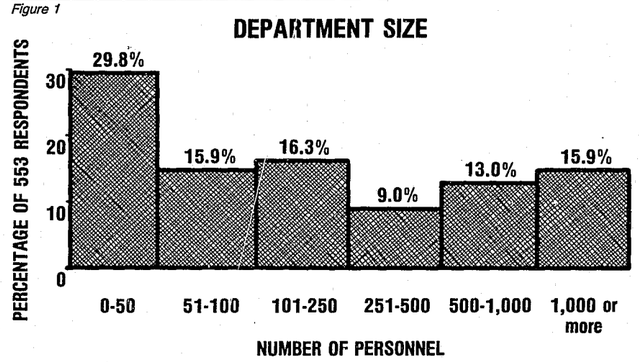
The results of a research study conducted by Special Agents Reginald R. Clay and Robert E. Yates of the FBI Academy indicated the scope of the problem of marginal police performers. The researchers set out to identify and profile the police marginal and unsatisfactory employee by using a questionnaire survey given to a nationwide sample of police supervisors and managers.[2]

The Clay-Yates study was completed in early 1981. One hundred and eighty-three randomly selected participants of the 117th Session of the FBI National Academy responded to an initial survey instrument. The instrument was modified for validation and then given to an additional 1,200 law enforcement supervisors. Five hundred and fifty-three of these were used to derive a significant sample of data for consideration.[3]

Special Agent Robinette

The study respondents were all supervisors of law enforcement personnel. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents had been police supervisors for over 2 years; 93 percent had been in police work for 7 or more years. The respondent group represented a variety of departments and agencies: 16 percent were from departments of 1,000 or more sworn personnel; 54 percent were from departments of intermediate size; and 30 percent were from small departments (50 or fewer sworn personnel). (See fig. 1.)

Figure 1



The researchers set out to identify employee problem areas by frequency of occurrence and severity of the problem. Those surveyed were given 16 choices of problem behavior and asked to select the most frequently occurring and the most serious. The responses indicated that the most frequent employee problem area is often viewed as the most serious; 38.5 percent cited the most frequently occurring problem was the police officer who did "just enough to get by." The data also indicated that the supervisors regarded this employee as their most serious problem. The second most frequently occurring problem was absenteeism and tardiness (19.9 percent) followed by resistance to change (11.2 percent). (See figs. 2 & 3.)

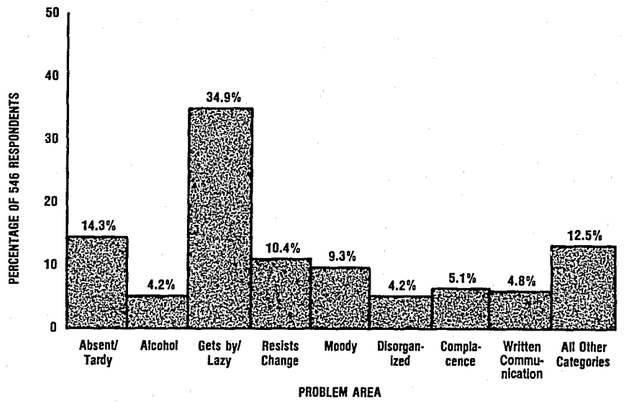
Police Problem Employee Profile

An examination of the Clay-Yates data produces a profile of the police problem employee in the United States today. The problem employee is a male officer assigned to patrol or investigation who has some college education and is between 25 and 39 years of age. As stated before, the most frequent and most serious difficulty is that he does only enough work to get by. The study shows that the largest single group of these employees (28 percent) were 30 to 34 years of age and had 6 to 10 years' service with the department. (See figs. 4 & 5.)

Implied in the study is a definition of problem employees. The marginal performer is one who has demonstrated the ability and willingess to perform well, but who is actually doing only "enough to get by on the job." [4] The

Figure 2

MOST SERIOUS EMPLOYEE PROBLEM AREA



unsatisfactory employee is one whose level of performance is consistently below that established as acceptable by the law enforcement organization.

In addition, the Clay-Yates study asked police supervisors who were managing problem employees to identify the causes of the problems. Although complex by nature, these causes of poor performance can be broadly assigned as follows: (a) External influences, i.e., factors away from the job environment, (b) the personal and unique weaknesses of the individual, (c) departmental mismanagement, i.e., organizational forces other than the immediate supervisor, and finally, (d) the immediate supervisor. Of the Clay-Yates study respondents, 39.9 percent laid the blame of poor performance on the individual employee; 26.9 percent located the cause in outside influences; 26.6 percent accused departmental mismanagement; only 6.6 percent fixed responsibility on the immediate supervisor. (See fig. 6.) In 60 percent of the cases, the duration of marginal performance had extended over a year.[5]

A clear understanding of marginal performance necessitates a closer examination of some of these causes.

External Factors

Today's young police employee grew up in the 1950's and 1960's when a personalistic philosophy began to permeate American society and the national mood focused on material abundance, GNP growth, and technological advancement. American workers began to change the kind of jobs they performed. In the 1950's, 65 percent of the work force was engaged in industrial occupations and only about 17 percent was employed in information (personal service) occupations. In the following 30 years, the number of Americans in industry dropped to 27 percent while the ranks of the "white-collar" information worker rose to 58 percent in 1980.[6]

During the 1970's, a "self-fulfillment" movement started to spread throughout the United States. By the late 1970's, national surveys showed more than 7 out of 10 Americans (72 percent) spent a great deal of time thinking about themselves and their inner lives.[7] Traditional values were completely reversed, and the self-denial ethic which once fueled the faltering engines of industry was lost in the search for self-fulfillment.

The rising expectations of an expanding middle class and the higher educational levels of those entering the work force combined to produce a perception of needed self-fulfillment. Police departments were not excepted. During this time, the U.S. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice called for the professionalization of police. The U.S. Congress voted large Federal appropriations to increase police officer education and management training.[8] With subsequent liberal LEAA educational funds, law enforcement and criminal justice programs proliferated in newly created junior colleges and technical schools, as well as on traditional campuses. Previously, such programs were not available to the police aspirant. Education raises personal expectations. Those entering the police profession during the 1960's and 1970's brought expectations of advancement and personal income growth which traditional police departments can scarcely meet. Such a reality is bound to cause individual frustration and other discontent manifested in "burn out" and other forms of counterproductive behavior.

Figure 3

MOST FREQUENT PROBLEM AREA

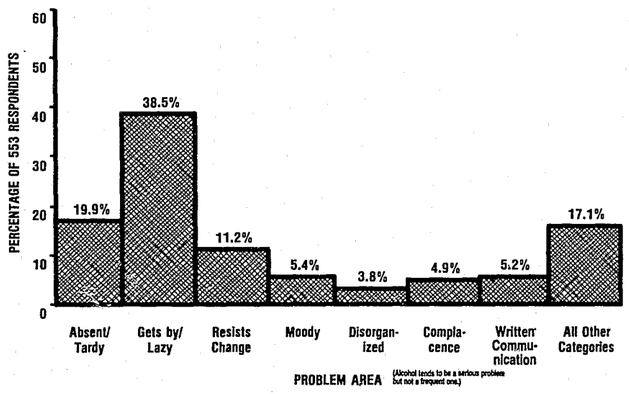
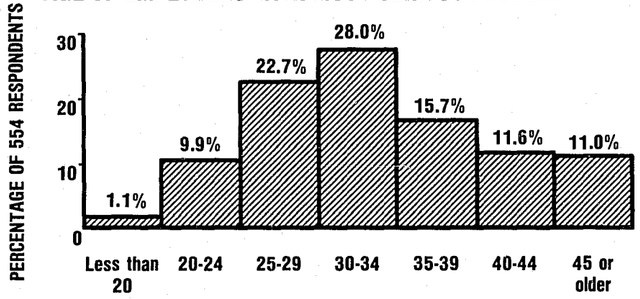


Figure 4

AGE OF EMPLOYEES WITH MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM AREA



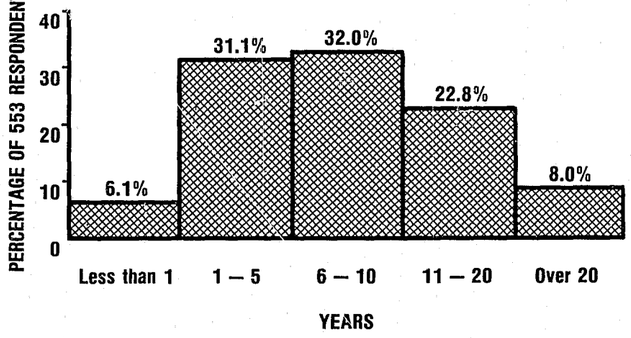
The police "problem employee" of the 1980's comes from that social, economic, and psychological turmoil. The pervading cultural psychology of affluence has reversed the self-denial ethic; the tradition of police service to the community is, in some instances, also reversed. Those who entered police service seeking affluence and self-fulfillment become bored with routines and cynical toward the public after the excitement of mastering police skills is gone.

Traditional police organization structures leave very little room at the top for large numbers of educated recruits. In 1977, 42 percent of the officers of departments surveyed by the Police Executive Research Forum had associate or higher degrees.[9]

The officers came to police work with expectations of promotion, pay increases, and enlarging job responsibilities. Not all of the expectations can be met. Frustration occurs, enthusiasm for the job diminishes, and behavior changes, often for the worse. Moreover, many of the young recruits joining departments today bring with them a psychology of affluence which moves them to seek increasing salary levels. This attitude flies in the harsh face of economics. Cost-push inflation and antitax movements, such as Proposition 13 in California and Proposition 2.5 in Massachusetts, combine to strain public revenue. Cutback Federal and State budget management requires police to share smaller and smaller portions of public revenues. Budget cuts affect salary levels. Consequently, there is less to go around at a time when individual expectations of affluence are rising. Such countervailing forces are another source of frustration for the individual officer.

Figure 5

TENURE OF EMPLOYEES WITH MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM AREA



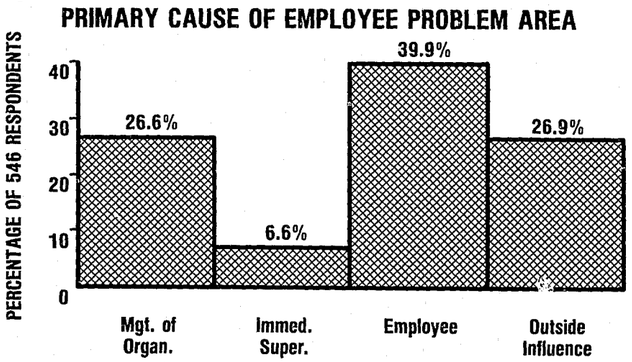
Time-Psych Zones and the Expectation Curve

Coupled with social change are the individual, physical, and mental developments of each person's life. These circumstances of personal change can be described as "time-psych zones." Daniel L. Levinson published the results of a study of basic importance in his book, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*.[10] It is the first such study which explains adult development according to an age-linked time-

". . . the most frequently occurring problem was the police officer who did 'just enough to get by.'"

table. He relates each stage of development to a man's job as the primary base for his life in society. The findings indicate that as we grow older, motivation patterns change. Personal, physical, and environmental circumstances change. Needs change; therefore, behavior changes.

Figure 6



Time-psych zones are the zones of personal expectations which change with age. In early adulthood, during one's first major job responsibility, achievement expectations run strong and high. These are modified by experience and reality during the midlife transition and become settled only through the turbulence of the transition. Often, this transition is marked by confusion of needs and desires. The desire to acquire additional possessions, to taste life in the fast lane, to travel to new places, and to meet new and important people engaged in exciting activities are all seen as needs. Personal goals are shaped by the marketing media which also raises these expectations in order to increase product sales. The individual needs more money, more leisure, and more freedom from commitment to job and home. As Yankelovich claims, ". . . desires are infinite. Anyone trapped in the fallacy that the self is a failure to the extent that all one's desires are not satisfied has set herself or himself up for frustration." [11] Stability is regained during the middle-adult era and carries over through a less turbulent transition into late adulthood. The significance and effect of the stages and transition on a police officer's career and work-life are important.

The early stages of a police officer's career are usually characterized by high expectations of service achievement. He often daydreams of exciting successes in his assignment. He views the successes as necessary coin with which to buy preferment and career-enhancing assignments of increased responsibility. Persons riding the expectation curve in their 20's and early 30's are adaptive to change. They view change as challenging, presenting new opportunities for achievement. They have a high tolerance for negative hygiene factors in the work environment and conditions.[12] They are future-oriented, seldom reflective, and have a high readiness for training. They have a low tolerance for perceived opportunity restriction. Often, they equate self-fulfillment with career advancement and will consider any real or imagined attempt to restrict their advancement with animosity and resistance.

As officers peak on the expectation curve (usually during or just after Levinson's midlife transition), they adjust their expectations. Motivation patterns and other job performance characteristics change. Those on this flat downside of the expectation curve are resistant to change. They often view a change in tactics, procedures, or policy as a threat to their new-found stability and will actively resist change, or worse, try to subvert it. The old saying about "not being able to teach an old dog new tricks" applies some folk wisdom to the reality. These officers also have a low tolerance for hygiene negatives and can take personal offense at minor adjustments in their work environments. They respond negatively to any deterioration in perks or seniority and working conditions. They are present-oriented and think of success in terms of completing today's task and not in terms of tomorrow's assignment. They have a high tolerance for stable policies, rules, and procedures and a low readiness for training, new job-learning experiences, and additional career-related formal education. (See fig. 7.)

The results of the Clay-Yates study support this expectation curve phenomenon. The large majority of marginal police performers fall in this age group. As reflected in the data, the average marginal performer has between 8 and 16 years' police service.

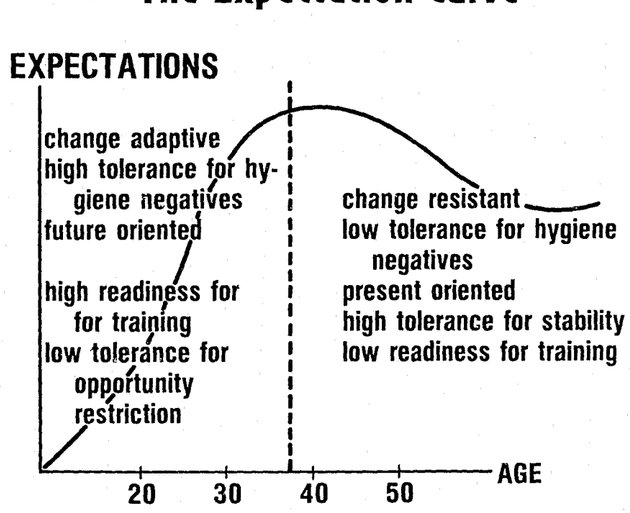
Change Comes to the Police Department

Changes in the social environment, values, demographics, technology, and economy have all combined to create a managerial atmosphere of turbulence. Once the most stable of municipal organizations, police departments now struggle through strikes, reorganizations, new public policy, and vastly increased operating costs. Between 1967 and 1977, the per capita cost of policing in a large city had risen from $27.31 to over $91, an increase of over 257 percent.[13]

Police work is labor-intensive. The human resources are the most effective of the resources applied in policing and also the most costly. Any cost-reduction analysis or efficiency-improvement effort must focus on improving human resource management. The intuitive perception of this reality has generated concerned interest in the management and salvage of the marginal performer.

The marginal or unsatisfactory performer is costly to police organizations. The difficult work of solving the problem of the marginal employee is discomforting to police managers. Some say it is impossible to take effective action because of legal restraints or union policies. Others cite lack of training in managerial skills for shift supervisors and first-line commanders. All are uncomfortable when confronted with the problem employee. Uncomfortable or not, however, police managers must seek solutions.

Figure 7



The Management Challenge

If these data and the trends they suggest are accurately understood, they raise new challenges for police managers. The first is to analyze carefully the factors which contribute to marginal police performance; the second is to find ways to keep the job alive for those who once did it well and with enthusiasm but who have now lost their motivation. Finally, police managers must develop and use effective coaching and documentation skills.

The first challenge, which is analytical in nature, is the most difficult. The police manager is action-oriented. He thrives in an atmosphere of activity. He has little time, inclination, or training for thoughtful reflection. George Odiorne identifies this predisposition as an "activity trap." He writes:

"The activity trap is a self-feeding mechanism if you do not turn it around. Everybody becomes attached to some irrelevancy and does his or her job too well. Its ultimate stage is when the [chief] himself loses sight of why the [department] exists, and demands more and more activity rather than results. . . .

"Meanwhile, all this activity eats up resources, money, space, budgets, savings, and human energy like a mammoth tape worm.

"While it is apparent that the activity trap . . . fails to achieve missions, it has an equally dangerous side-effect on people; they *shrink* personally and professionally." [14]

"Success can be obtained by a recommitment to excellence by the police manager, by a sensitive and attentive concern for the officers under his leadership, and by the acquisition and development of managerial skills."

Without constant attention to the results and contributions that a police manager expects of his subordinates, the manager falls into the activity trap. Some of his subordinates will shrink into the rote process of a job and lose sight of its goals and objectives. With the sure knowledge that activity without goals is wasteful, it is no surprise that these officers become bored or dissatisfied.

As Odiorne points out, however, the trap is not inevitable. It can be resisted and circumvented by enlightened and analytical leadership. The challenge of supervisory analysis calls for the police manager to focus on results in directing his subordinates, then clarify and communicate the results to the people doing the work. Only then will the work itself produce the satisfaction and enthusiasm that keeps the police employee productive. This is not an easy task, but it is specifically managerial and executive in nature. Where the symptoms of marginal performance are unenthusiastic and dissatisfied officers, the manager would do well to find out whether looking busy has become safer than being productive.

The next challenge is finding ways to energize employees. With clear goals and objectives identified, how does the police manager secure employee commitment and enthusiasm for task accomplishment?

The answer here lies in the manager's own commitment and enthusiasm. He must avoid the danger of transparent management, which is the depersonalized processing of organizational directives. If he becomes an executive rubber stamp, he will be viewed as an empty suit, not an effective police manager.

The third challenge is that of developing one's own perception, understanding, and communication skills. To meet this challenge, the police manager must examine his own assumptions about the marginal performer. He must test those assumptions against his wider and probably more objective nonorganizational experiences. He must learn to be sensitive to the expectations of his subordinates. He must also keep in touch with his own time-psych zones. More attention is now directed at officers and employees who are not meeting standards.

Daniel J. Bell, writing in *The Police Chief*, verbalizes the interest when he says: ". . . there needs to be a concentration of effort to move the 'drone' type police officer into other careers outside the police profession." [15] Who is the "drone-type police officer" Bell refers to? Can causes of poor performance be identified and how can they be remedied?

A decision for dismissal or a decision for salvage with the required coaching and counseling must be made. Salvage and renewal are practical, cost-effective ways to meet the challenge. Six out of 10 police managers (65.2 percent) of those surveyed recommend that the marginal police employee be salvaged.[16]

Dismissal is difficult and impossible without documentation. Changes in the legal environment, especially those brought on by affirmative action, equal employment opportunity, and the women's movement require job analyses and validated performance standards. Job analysis and validation were activities that were formerly not required of the police. Standards are determined and stated. Formal defense of standards and associated personnel actions are now required, if not in a court of law then in an appeals commission or grievance board.

Strangely, the procedures to support either a dismissal or salvage decision are similar. Effective coaching *and* a permanent, legal termination begin with documentation. The manager must begin with a clear concept of the unit's goals and objectives. These must be communicated to the employee clearly. The work the employee is expected to do must relate directly to the goals and objectives and be so explained to the employee. The manager is required to plan carefully the marginal subordinate's work, just as the subordinate is required to perform the work. Some measurement of progress must be agreed upon. Performance must be documented on a timely basis; appraisal must be regular, realistic, and frequent.

Performance appraisal is just that—an evaluation of actual performance. The police manager needs to pay personal and honest attention to the work the marginal performer does and the work he fails to do. Only then can both understand when the work is done and the objectives are achieved. The manager has the opportunity to reinforce behavior in a nondestructive and objective way. The manager's feedback is the employee's guide to improving performance.

Significantly, almost half of the supervisors polled in the Clay-Yates study (44.5 percent) claimed success in dealing with their problem employees. The probability of success is good, but success is the result of difficult managerial work.

In these times of shrinking resources, police managers are looking for ways to do more with less—ways to meet the rising public demand to reduce violent crime, restore peace and tranquility, and spend fewer public dollars. There is no room for continued marginal performance in police work. Success can be obtained by a recommitment to excellence by the police manager, by a sensitive and attentive concern for the officers under his leadership, and by the acquisition and development of managerial skills. **FBI**

Footnotes

[1] The term "cost-push inflation" is used to describe the inflationary spiral in which increasing costs act to push up prices and wages in a cyclical effect.

[2] *Problem Employee Survey: An Analysis of Employee Problem Areas in Law Enforcement*, Reginald R. Clay and Robert E. Yates, FBI Academy, Quantico, Va., 1981, p. 3.

[3] "Of the 1,200 law enforcement supervisors surveyed, questionnaire responses from 535 were selected. The screening factors for selecting questionnaires for gathering meaningful data were gleaned from the following questions: (1) Does the respondent currently supervise employees? and (2) Does he have a problem employee?" Clay-Yates, p. 23.

[4] Clay-Yates, p. 6.

[5] Clay-Yates, p. 67.

[6] John Naisbett, "The Bottom-Up Society: America Between Eras," *Public Opinion*, April-May 1981, p. 19.

[7] "In the nineteen-seventies, all national surveys showed an increase in preoccupation with self. By the late seventies, my firm's studies showed more than seven out of ten Americans [72%] spent a great deal of time thinking about themselves and their inner lives—this in a nation once notorious for its impatience with inwardness. The rage for self-fulfillment, our surveys indicated, had now spread to virtually the entire U.S. population." Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 5.

[8] *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, A Report by the U.S. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., p. 109. The Commission recommends: The ultimate aim of all police departments should be that all personnel with general enforcement powers have baccalaureate degrees."

[9] Michael T. Farmer, ed., *Survey of Police Operational and Administrative Practices—1977* (Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, 1978), p. 63.

[10] Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

[11] Yankelovich, p. 238.

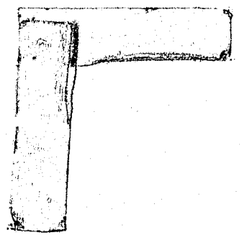
[12] Frederick Herzberg says there are two elements which create employee motivation—the job itself and the hygiene factors. He describes hygiene factors as those things and circumstances incidental to work itself, such as salary, fringe benefits, working conditions supervision, policies, procedures, rules, and regulations. These can be viewed either as positive or negative and can cause dissatisfaction or satisfaction but cannot be viewed as motivators because true motivation, according to Herzberg, comes from the job itself, its scope, its value, and the sense of accomplishment it provides.

[13] U.S. President's Commission, 1967, p. 91; Farmer, p. 13.

[14] George S. Odiorne, *The Change Resisters* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 16.

[15] Daniel J. Bell, "The Police-Personnel Upgrading for Professionalism," *The Police Chief*, vol. XLV, No. 1, January 1978, p. 32.

[16] Clay-Yates, p. 65.



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