

Taking “The Learning Organization” into the future: introduction of and by the new editor

In this introductory piece, I will introduce some changes to the journal and suggest which themes the new editorial team is especially looking for in articles for *The Learning Organization (TLO)*. First, the new vision and strategy for the journal, along with some notes on its structure, will be briefly outlined. Second, the people involved in realizing this are presented. Third, some topics and debates which *TLO* wants papers on are presented.

Overall strategy and structure

The vision is to make the journal a natural publication choice for any scholar in the areas of learning organization (LO) and organizational learning (OL), but simultaneously for it to be of interest for practitioners, how do we accomplish this?

On one hand, the idea is to increase the academic quality of the journal, which – at least indirectly – is also of gain for the more practitioner-oriented readers (in accordance with the saying “there is nothing as practical as a good theory”). The intention is that *TLO* is going to become a forum for academic and intellectual debate on matters connected to LO/OL. Thus, we in the new editorial team welcome articles that argue in opposition to any article already published in the journal – we want the journal to be a forum characterized by an open and good debating climate. Of course, articles that start up a debate or that connect to a debate started up elsewhere than in *TLO* are also welcome. Authors are, of course, free to take any standpoint – it is as OK to argue from a very critical approach as to argue from a position that is very traditional/uncritical, as long as the argumentation is clear, supported and fair.

The journal will continue to publish both regular issues, containing a more or less heterogeneous set of papers, and issues that are collections of papers on a certain topic. Such issues will be called “special issue” when guest-edited, and “themed issue” when edited by the editorial team (that is, by those of us who regularly edit manuscripts for *TLO*). Articles could have a conceptual focus or be more focused on practice. In both cases, there must, of course, be a connection to a clear definition of LO/OL.

Papers may be conceptual, rest on reviews of literature or based on empirical research. All papers must, though, be explicitly connected to at least one debate within the area of LO/OL (see examples of such debates below, toward the end of this editorial piece). Any type of method is acceptable, as long as the method is not *the* focus of the paper and as long as it helps in the argumentation. *TLO* has recently received quite a few papers that use quantitative methods to study the relationship between two or more concepts, and although this kind of approach of course may be relevant, such papers are not relevant for *TLO* without clear, explicit and extensive reasoning as to how the results contribute to at least one debate within the area of LO/OL. Papers must be between 2,000 and 5,000 words (there may be exceptions, though, even if they be rare – check with the Editor) (for further information about length, form and style, please see the “Author guidelines” on the *TLO* website).

On the other hand, we do not want to lose the many readers that *TLO* has who would call themselves “practitioners”. For this reason, a new role has been installed in the *TLO* editorial team, the “Implications for Practitioners Editor”. This role will concentrate on drawing



implications for practice from the articles in each issue and, thus, help to make the journal accessible also for practitioners. These insights will be presented toward the end of each issue. Additionally, this role will also run an interactive online function where readers (all readers, not only practitioners) can comment on that which has been published in the journal and, thus, participate in the debates that are dealt with in the journal without necessarily having to author a whole paper themselves. You will find a link to this interactive online function on the *TLO* website.

In addition to papers, *TLO* will also start to publish book and media reviews, which we thus also want to receive. Guidelines for such reviews are presented elsewhere in the journal.

Occasionally, *TLO* will publish “invited articles” from recognized scholars within the research area of LO/OL. This is, of course, a way to make the journal more attractive to scholars around the world.

The former “Editorial Advisory Board” exists no more. Instead, two new boards have been created: the “Senior Editorial Advisory Board” (SEAB), consisting of ten highly recognized scholars within the field, and the “Editorial Review Board” (ERB), containing 40 likewise recognized scholars within the field, who are the main reviewer source for articles in the journal. Some members of the former Editorial Advisory Board have chosen to join the new ERB, whereas others have chosen to retire from their duties for *TLO*. I want to thank all of you for the good work you have conducted for *TLO* and wish you the very best with whatever you will do in the future!

People

In this section, I present the names of the people who assist in producing the content of *TLO*. Welcome on board, all of you!

Editorial review board

I want to start with the ERB, which replaces the former Editorial Advisory Board. It consists of 40 hand-picked people with a very high competence within the areas of LO/OL. These people will review most, but not all, of the manuscripts that we in the editorial team send out for review. Reviewers are what we could claim to be the “working bees” of a journal, and their contribution to a journal can never ever be overemphasized. Just like working bees, they do a lot of hard work, but are rarely acknowledged or recognized. I am very proud to present the following team of 40 highly competent ERB members:

Elizabeth Abenga, *Kenya*
Carina Abrahamson Löfström, *Sweden*
Aini Ahmad, *Malaysia*
Muhammad Babur, *Pakistan*
Cinzia Battistella, *Italy*
Ivan Blanco, *USA*
Manfred Bornemann, *Austria*
Stephen Bushardt, *USA*
David Coldwell, *South Africa*
Roberta Cuel, *Italy*
David Delgado-Hernandez, *Mexico*
Laurie Field, *Australia*
Lynn Godkin, *USA*
Washika Haak-Saheem, *United Arab Emirates*
Siu Loon Hoe, *National Singapore*
Vered Holzmann, *Israel*
Jacky Fok Loi Hong, *People's republic of China*

Dima Jamali, *Lebanon*
Grace Khoury, *Palestine*
Hanna Kurland, *Israel*
Edda Tandi Lwoga, *Tanzania*
Bijaya Mishra, *India*
Mariia Molodchik, *Russia*
Pak Tee Ng, *Singapore*
Nhien Nguyen, *Norway*
Wael Omran Aly, *Egypt*
George Papageorgiou, *Cyprus*
Rajesh K. Pillania, *India*
K.F. Pun, *Trinidad and Tobago*
Michael D. Quinn, *USA*
Kala Retna, *New Zealand*
Jane Santos, *Brazil*
Yusuf Sidani, *Lebanon*
Peter A.C. Smith, *Canada*
Andrea Valéria Steil, *Brazil*
Mónica Velasco, *Mexico*
Max Visser, *The Netherlands*
Karen Voolaid, *Estonia*
Barry L. Wisdom, *USA*
Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, *Australia*

I am also proud to say that 50 per cent of them are females and 50 per cent are males. This is not really anything that one should have to comment on or be proud of in an as enlightened era we live in, but because people still in 2017 are not always selected because of their competence, but because of their gender, too many boards still contain a majority of male members – many males are, thus, selected without any other reason than that they are males. As long as things are like they are, there is, unfortunately, still reason to not only select 50-50 but also to make a statement out of it. Thus, all 40 are, of course, selected because of the highly appreciated competence they bring to the theme of reviewers, but I have picked 20 of them from the female part of the population and 20 from the male part. It would be shortsighted and irresponsible to select from only half of the population. Hopefully, other journals will follow this initiative to make their boards more gender equal. To balance the number of females and males is, obviously, not the only solution to all gender inequality problems that the world faces, but it is something. We may, when it comes to *TLO*, not be able to have such a balance in each single case. Thus, it cannot be guaranteed that each single issue that is published will contain a bunch of articles that in total have been authored by 50 per cent females and 50 per cent males. Some things depend on factors that we are not able to have any impact on. But where we can, we try.

We – that is, the reviewers together with the editorial team – do our very best to offer authors/contributors quick and helpful feedback on their manuscripts submitted to *TLO*.

Senior Editorial Advisory Board

Just like the ERB, the SEAB, which is the other board that has arisen after the settlement of the former Editorial Advisory Board, consists of highly competent and well-recognized scholars within the field of LO/OL, of which 50 per cent are females and 50 per cent are males. The SEAB members provide support and advice for the journal in general – and the editorial team in particular:

John Burgoyne, *UK*
Anthony DiBella, *USA*
Michaela Driver, *USA*
Amy Edmonson, *USA*
Bob Garratt, *UK*
Silvia Gherardi, *Italy*
George Huber, *USA*
Victoria Marsick, *USA*
Robin Snell, *Hong Kong*
Karen E. Watkins, *USA*

Former editors-in-chiefs

I also want to acknowledge the good work of all the previous editors and thank them for taking *TLO* to where it is at present. Below, you will find a list of all the previous editors:

John Peters 1994-1998 (Founding Editor)
Harald Harung 1998-1999
Paul Tosey 1999-2000
Jim Grieves 1999-2001
Steven Cavaleri 2001-2005
Steven Walczak 2005-2007
Deborah Blackman 2008-2010
Henk Eijkman 2010-2012
Doug Tuggle 2012-2016

Associated editors

The editorial team of *TLO* consists of a number of associated editors and the Editor-in-Chief (plus the Publisher, the Content Editor and the Publishing Editor). One of the Associate Editor positions will draw implications for practitioners from the articles and, thus, in each issue briefly present what a practitioner may want to take away from the articles in the particular issue. This role (i.e. the “Implications for Practitioners Editor”) will also run an interactive online function to give readers a chance to comment on the works published in the journal. This role will be shared by Nataša Rupčić and Simon Reese.

There will also be a book and media review section – if not in each single issue, then as often as there are reviews of books or other media to present. The associated editor who will take care of this section is Teresa Rebelo. Teresa introduces the book and media review section in some more depth later in this issue (see also the *TLO* website).

The third associated editor – Naomi Birdthistle – will work together with me in my main duties in editing articles that are submitted to the journal. She will also have a special responsibility for papers that connect entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial organizations, family firms or small-and medium-sized enterprises with LO/OL.

The editor

To say a few words about myself, I am Swedish but currently working in Norway. Before starting to work in Norway, I worked for a few years at a British university in China. I have for a long time had a research interest in the areas of LO and OL and published a few works in *TLO* (Örtenblad, 2001, 2004a, 2007a, 2007b, 2015). To begin with, my approach toward LO was quite skeptical, and I thought that LO was “only” a fashion. But, I have since then given the concept second thoughts and now think it would be a mistake – also by the academic community – to avoid the concept just because it may no longer be that fashionable. My strong belief currently, which goes hand-in-hand with my “mission” for *TLO*, is that we

should avoid viewing LO/OL in terms of either “Utopian sunshine” or “Foucauldian gloom”, which has previously been the tendency, as noted by Driver (2002). Thus, there is a strong need for a place (i.e. a journal) where concepts and practice connected to LO/OL can be openly debated and for research that tries to go beyond presuming that LO/OL is good for all *or* bad for all. More about this in the next section, below.

There is reason to give those who want to submit papers to *TLO* a fair chance to get an idea of my thoughts regarding what a good paper is and what my demands on papers are. I will do my best to reply to emails, and there is always the opportunity to talk via Skype or the like. But, I also want to offer interested scholars a chance to discuss with me in more depth. This can perhaps be arranged if the interested scholar and I happen to attend the same conference, but this may not always be the case. For this reason, I will at least look into if there is any interest among potential paper submitters for a “*TLO* mini-conference/-workshop/-seminar” to be held yearly and at a location that is accessible to all and – preferably – close to many of those who would like to attend such an event (that is, it will at least not always be held in Bodø, Norway, where I am located).

Emerald

I would like to thank the publishing and editorial teams at Emerald for having confidence in me and giving me the opportunity to act as the Editor-in-Chief of *TLO*, which I consider to be a very honorable position within the LO/OL community. Notable members of the Emerald team who have aided this journey, so far, have included Mike Joyce, Jessi Shatz, Jo Alexander and Sarah Baxter – and to all of them I send thanks for their support. For 2017, the team will now include Helen Alexander, Chloe Campbell and Adrian Paylor who are Publisher, Publishing Editor and Content Editor respectively and will support *TLO* moving forward.

Suggested themes for authors

All topics related to LO/OL are relevant for and of interest to *TLO*. There should always be some kind of a connection to the organizational aspect of learning in cases when, for instance, individual learning in organizations is the theme of a paper. Below, I outline a few areas that will be of particular interest.

Putting learning organization/organizational learning in context

Many works especially on LO, but also on OL, are normative and assume that these concepts are relevant for any organization, no matter where in the world or in which sector/business it exists. Moreover, it is also too often assumed that LO/OL is good for all, no matter which perspective is taken; at the least, the perspective taken is rarely made explicit. There is, thus, reason to suggest that the context and the perspective are explicitly considered in works on LO/OL. This is so very important that there is reason to frame this as a clear break in LO/OL research and, thus, term it “The learning organization 2.0” or “Organizational learning 2.0”. But, of course, works that strongly disagree with the necessity in taking the context and/or perspective into account are also welcome, as long as the authors argue adequately for their standpoint. Thus, questions such as the following are relevant to debate: Is the LO a universally applicable idea? Do the ideas of LO and OL have to be contextualized (before they can be implemented in practice)? Some sub-themes with an especial relevance are elaborated upon in more depth below.

Examining and judging the universal applicability of the learning organization and organizational learning. A topic that I have recently worked with quite a lot myself is the examination and judgment of the relevance of LO for organizations in various generalized contexts (such as a particular national culture, religion, sector or industry). Many works on LO/OL – especially, perhaps, works on the LO – still assume that these concepts are

universally applicable and, thus, that any organization, regardless of which generalized context it exists in, could be recommended to adopt LO (according to a static definition of the concept). Actually, in much research recently submitted to *TLO*, the context is not brought up explicitly, and this is something that needs to be changed. For instance, I often see manuscripts that study empirically the “level” to which organizations currently are “learning organizations”. The authors conclude that these organizations need to do this and that to correspond to the ideal of LO. I have in my own work argued that we should avoid regarding LO as a static ideal that is good for all and instead find/construct versions of the LO concept that are fully relevant for organizations in particular contexts. For example, if one element of the definition of “learning organization” is an “organic structure”, then this element may be less relevant for public organizations and for other mass-producing organizations. Thus, both of the two variables involved in any study that puts LO into context – that is, the LO concept and the particular context – should be kept open and flexible; not only should the researcher consider whether the factual organization has to adapt to the LO concept (viewed as an ideal) but must also consider if the LO concept in itself may have to be adapted to be fully suitable for organizations in a particular context.

Not everybody may agree with me, and I have no problem with that. However, I would like to see that the assumptions (which are often implicit) of the kind that were discussed above (i.e. that the concept can and should be applied and practiced by any organization, without first having to go through a process in which the relevance is examined and judged and where the concept may have to be adopted to fully make sense) are made explicit and accompanied by strong arguments. Further, works that believe that LO/OL are perfectly universally applicable should preferably convincingly argue against those who suggest that these concepts are not universally applicable (such as myself) and those who have criticized the very content of the concepts and, thus, not at all agree that LO or OL are “ideals” (Caldwell, 2012; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Coopey, 1995; Fenwick, 1998; Grieses, 2008).

Some may argue that what many scholars in fact do is that they select the elements of LO/OL that they find relevant for organizations in the particular context, but without mentioning this and without discussing which elements that they have not selected or reasons for not selecting these elements. If this is so, then I would like to suggest that this is made explicit. Preferably, studies that put the LO into context should all start in an overview model of the LO concept, which includes various aspects of the LO and from which an explicit selection is made, for the particular context. It is only when such explicit selections are presented that we can compare between various generalized circumstances. This is what I have tried to do in my previous research on the LO put into context (Örtenblad, 2004b, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2015, 2017, Örtenblad and Koris, 2014).

Thus, works that explicitly examine and judge the relevance of an integrated definition of LO/OL for organizations in a particular setting are most welcome to *TLO*. Works that take other stands in the debate on whether the LO/OL concepts are universally applicable are, of course, also welcome – as long as they explicitly argue for their position and against what we could call the contextual position.

The very interesting – and, unfortunately, under-recognized – works by Easterby-Smith and Bogolyubov (Easterby-Smith, 1998; Bogolyubov and Easterby-Smith, 2013) on OL and LO, respectively, in different national cultures (using Hofstede) would be a good start for those who want to further study the relevance of LO and OL for organizations in various national cultures. Among other highly interesting works that relate LO and OL to culture, I want to mention Aini Ahmad’s works on LO in Islamic organizations (Ahmad, 2010, 2013). It would be very interesting to see works on whether LO/OL are as relevant to other religions as Ahmad claims LO is to Islam.

When it comes to the relevance of LO/OL to organizations in various particular generalized contexts, I have myself authored a review piece on those generalized contexts for which previous literature has suggested that an inclusive overview model of LO is not fully relevant and, thus, for which adapted models of the LO are suggested (Örtenblad, 2015). Further studies, where other generalized contexts than those that were brought up in that review piece are studied, would be really interesting. It would, for instance, be highly interesting to read an advanced discussion on why different works seem to have reached such very different conclusions as to whether Chinese organizations in general are already LOs, as Elkin and Cone (2009) and Hong *et al.* (2013) have reached.

Who is the learning organization for? Tightly connected to the question of universal applicability is the issue of who the LO/OL is for. Many works on LO/OL avoid this issue. There is often an implicit assumption either that LO/OL is good for all or that an employer perspective is the natural position to take. We should try to get away from such implicit assumptions and at least make these assumptions explicit. Preferably, a discussion of implications from various stakeholder perspectives and/or values should be included.

This is also a topic that I have been occupied with myself (Örtenblad, 2007b, 2011, 2013b). In some works, I have also combined the contextual approach, which was taken up above, and the stakeholder approach into a “contingency stakeholder approach”, such as in a work where the relevance of LO for higher educational institutions is discussed and examined from three different ideal-typical stakeholder perspectives – an employer perspective (typically assumed to prioritize organizational effectiveness and profit-maximization), an employee perspective (typically assumed to prioritize well-being and avoidance of being made redundant) and a societal perspective (typically assumed to prioritize welfare and societal effectiveness) (Örtenblad and Koris, 2014). Thus, we could in TLO very well debate issues such as whether and, if so, how the realization of LO/OL in organizations contributes to making the world a better place.

Avoiding learning organization/organizational learning. Continuing from the assumption that LO/OL may not always be good for all (or at least that LO/OL should not be regarded as static ideals), we could start to think of situations when organizations could be advised to *avoid* becoming LOs or to learn. Which are these situations, if any? What is it that organizations should avoid learning? Where, exactly, is the border between *good* LO/OL and *bad* LO/OL, that is, where should an organization draw the line and stop becoming more of an LO or stop learning?

Comparison of discourse/definition of learning organization/organizational learning in different parts of the world. One thing is the normative question of whether the concepts of LO/OL must be adapted to be fully relevant in various situations, which was discussed above. Another point is the more descriptive question regarding whether these concepts have different meanings in different settings, that is, does what people mean by “LO” (or “OL”) vary over time and in different parts of the world or even in different industries? We could assume that there are differences, at least if we believe translation theorists such as Latour (1987). But can we prove it? One could, for instance, make a comparative study of which meaning the concept of LO has been given by researchers vs practitioners; in different parts of the world; and over time, to see if there are any differences and, if so, which these differences are (and, potentially, how they could be explained).

Organizational learning styles. Is it that organizations have different learning styles, which we have to consider to fully understand any particular organization and how it practices LO/OL, and to recommend what it should do in terms of LO/OL? One such previous work which indicates that different organizations may have different learning styles is Shrivastava’s (1983) interesting article on organizational learning systems. How does the

theory on organizational learning styles comply with the assumption that was sketched out above, that the concepts of LO and OL may have to be adapted to be fully relevant for organizations in different generalized contexts? Is organizational learning styles one aspect of that assumption, or does it stand in sharp contrast to it?

Organizations learning specific knowledge

A lot of research on LO/OL is occupied with the “how” aspect, that is, to understand and improve how LO/OL are taking and should take place. Less research is occupied with the “what” aspect, that is, what organizations learn. There is definitely room for papers on the “what” aspect in *TLO*. Thus, we would like to see papers that conduct research on and discuss whether and, if so, how organizations can (best) learn, for instance:

- to deal with and even use the criticism that they receive from various groups, such as external customers and internal employees; all of us have probably worked in at least one organization where there seems not to be any interest in improving how to do things or to install new routines, which may be more or less frustrating for the employee – why is this, and how could it be improved?
- to deal with and prevent harassment within organizations, such as between manager and employee or between employees;
- to deal with and use diversity (in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc.);
- so-called “translation competence” (Røvik, 1998), that is, how to deal with and make sense of the continuous stream of fashionable management ideas (FMIs) (such as corporate social responsibility, empowerment, knowledge management, lean, and transformational leadership) that organizations are exposed to and how they can learn to deal with and make sense of any particular such FMI;
- from mergers and acquisitions and how to merge;
- how to supply its own need of leadership/managers; and
- the certain business that it performs.

As indicated above, there is also reason to discuss and conduct research on what, exactly, organizations should avoid learning and why they should avoid learning this.

Good examples of learning organization/organizational learning

Is there any evidence to prove that true, pure LOs exist, or that there are organizations that are capable of performing both single-loop learning and double-loop learning in a relevant and balanced way (cf. “ambidexterity”)? Witnesses from and studies of such cases of “actual” LO or OL are very relevant for *TLO* (of course, insightful studies of the absence of LO/OL are also of interest). In all such studies, it is, of course, important to specify which exact aspect(s) of the definition of LO/OL are at stake (or *not* at stake) so that we can draw conclusions on whether there are any cases whatsoever of organizations with “full” LO/OL. Evaluations of existing LOs and, for instance, what they are like to work in are also welcome.

Definitions and perspectives

Papers on what LO or OL mean – and what they may not mean – are always of interest to *TLO*.

What is the learning unit? There may still be reason to further discuss what the learning unit is in LO/OL, that is, are individuals to be regarded as the only learning units or can organizations, *per se*, learn? If the latter, do organizations learn as super-individuals or as collectives (Cook and Yanow, 1993)? Or is it the product/service that the organization produces that learns (such as the flute in Cook and Yanow’s, 1993, interesting article)?

What is not a learning organization? There are, as we are all aware of, quite a few definitions of LO and OL. These tend to be a bit all-inclusive and one could claim that any particular organization always practices some aspect of at least one of these many definitions. If we also consider the fact that learning is something that happens naturally and that is going on within each living unit without thinking much about it – like breathing, if you want – then there is a risk that the concepts of LO and OL may almost become meaningless, as any organization could be said to learn to some extent. It may therefore sometimes be helpful to try to think in terms of what an organization would be like if it did not in any sense learn and what an organization would be like for it to fully disqualify from being a LO or practicing OL in any sense of the concept at stake. Are there any such organizations? If not, does this fact make the concepts of LO/OL meaningless?

Relations to other concepts. There are a lot of other concepts that in various ways may relate to LO and OL. First, there are the other “FMIs” that just like LO and OL deal with learning and or knowledge. I think especially of knowledge management, and also the “learning company”, which some may regard as synonymous to LO but still may be somewhat different, could be claimed to be such FMIs. How can we understand the relation between these concepts?

Second, we have all those other concepts, which perhaps are not that management-oriented, but still have in common with LO the “learning” prefix or with OL the “learning” postfix. For instance, what relates and what tells the following concepts apart: “learning team”, “LO”, “learning city”, “learning region”, “learning nation”, “learning economy”, “learning society”, “learning universe”, etc.?

Third, the concepts of LO and OL are sometimes viewed as synonyms and sometimes not. Although quite a lot has already been written about differences (and similarities) between LO and OL (see, e.g., Örténblad, 2001), any paper that contributes anything insightful in addition to what has already been said about relations between LO and OL is, of course, welcome.

Perspectival debate. Is there reason to make a choice between the (at least) two major perspectives that exist in LO/OL research – namely those perspectives that could be called the functionalistic vs the interpretive perspectives (see, e.g., Örténblad, 2002) – or can they continue to co-exist?

Further, is the LO/OL research generally too uncritical, that is, is there reason to be more skeptical in relation to these? Is LO/OL focusing too much on the behavioral and cognitive aspects of learning, while neglecting the affectional (especially the emotional) aspects?

Critique. Articles are especially welcome that not only criticize the concept of LO and/or OL but also that suggest what LO and/or OL would imply from any particular critical perspective (see Hsu, 2013, for an interesting example of such a work).

Planned special and themed issues

There are, of course, many other topics and themes that are also of interest for TLO; for example, the cluster of issues suggested by the previous editor of TLO, Dr Tuggle (2016). Some topics will be given space in the form of special issues or themed issues.

The present issue (Issue 1 of 2017) is a themed issue on “organizational unlearning” and contains five invited articles that examine the topic. The next issue (Issue 2 of 2017) will, likewise, be partly themed on “organizational unlearning”. One reason for offering two issues in succession on the same topic is to give the authors who contributed in Issue 1 an opportunity to instantly comment on each other’s work. Thus, both of these two issues should be highly interesting for anyone who is interested in organizational unlearning, even if the reason why they are interested in it is that they disagree that there is a need for the concept.

More special and themed issues are to come. Please regularly check the *TLO* website for new call-for-papers for special/themed issues.

Editorial

Anders Örténblad

Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Bodø, Norway

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