

Soft Skills Enhancement and Bulgarian National Policies: Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract: This paper provides focus on the national and business policies in Bulgaria targeting development of soft skills primarily in students and young employees. It aims to outline some specific challenges, underutilised opportunities and the need of new strategic policies formation and implementation in student/graduate soft skills development while taking into account current trends in the global, EU and national context.

Keywords: soft skills development; policies; students; employees

JEL: M53 Training

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to offer an overview of soft skills development policies designed primarily for students and young employees in Bulgaria within the context of some global and EU trends. It highlights some specific challenges, underutilised opportunities and the need of new strategic policies formation and implementation in student/graduate soft skills development.

2. GLOBAL AND EU CONTEXTS FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BULGARIA

2.1. Recent global trends in business, higher education and labour markets

During the last couple of years we have witnessed dynamic developments in business, Higher Education (HE) and the Labour Market (LM): the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a disruptor, accelerating the processes of digitalization, hybrid work/study, further internationalisation and mobility as a result of LM reshuffling and the need for filling new skills shortage gaps. Hence, all stakeholders in the process HE – Business – LM have been affected, with some facing great challenges. There is a clear recognition that technology and the COVID-19-induced recession will further impact the global labour market. Nevertheless, soft skills development in graduates and employees alike has been clearly seen as a common denominator of economic competitiveness and employability.

2.2. The global context

Recent research has found that from 2000 to 2012, non-STEM professional jobs, which require soft skills, such as strong analytical skills, the ability to communicate and work in teams, problem-solving skills, grew much faster than jobs mainly requiring skills

measurable by IQ or achievement tests. This trend does not imply an end to the role of cognitive skills but it recognizes that they alone are not enough for obtaining a well-paid job (Demming, D.J., 2017).

The 2020 WEF *Future of Jobs Report* argued that 'automation, in tandem with the COVID-19 recession, is creating a 'double-disruption' scenario for workers. In addition to the current disruption from the pandemic-induced lockdowns and economic contraction, technological adoption by companies will transform tasks, jobs and skills by 2025'. (World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report*, 2020).

The Report predicted high skills gaps within the next five years. Employers considered the following skills most important: critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, and self-management skills: active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility. Companies estimated that 40% of workers would require reskilling of six months or less. 94% of all business leaders expected employees to acquire new skills on the job. (ibid.)

Inequality was considered likely to worsen by the dual impact of automation and the pandemic recession, with the public sector in need of providing stronger support for reskilling and upskilling for at-risk or displaced workers. (ibid.)

2.3. The EU context

There have been a number of studies of graduates' skills and employability across different European countries in the last few years, e.g. a survey by Pereira et al., conducted in the period 2015 – 2019 (Pereira, E.T., Vilas-Boas, M. and Rebelo, C.C., 2019). The students from several EU universities included in the study considered communication, thinking and interpersonal skills the most important skills to get a job in their own field of study. On the other hand, the skills lacked by students the most seemed to be personal, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills. The survey indicated a huge soft skills gap that needs to be addressed by HEIs.

An overview of some recent EC skills development initiatives that bear reference to soft skills development at national and EU level with view of further internationalisation and digitalization of HE and the required cooperation of all stakeholders in the post-pandemic period indicates a common goal: improving the employability of EU citizens and the competitiveness of the EU economy. European Skills Agenda, 2020, is such an example. The Agenda strengthens skills intelligence, increases the number of STEM graduates and fosters entrepreneurial and transversal skills, along with skills for life. It also aims to provide sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. Furthermore, it advocates for an initiative on individual learning accounts and proposes a European approach to micro-credentials. (European Commission, 2020).

3. THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BULGARIA

3.1. Strategies and research on the national level

Several factors play a role in defining some national strategies, targeting skills development and better employment opportunities for young people. Recently, there has been a significant drop in the number of employed young people. The current pandemic has further deteriorated their employment prospects.

In 2020, youth employment rate (age 15-24) decreased below 40%. It is expected that the rate will be even lower in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (See Table 1).

Tab. 1 Employment rates by age groups (%)

Age/Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
15 – 19	3.3	3.7	4.9	4.6	4.8	3.1
20 – 24	33.9	33.4	39.2	36.6	39.2	34.9
25 – 29	66.6	64.7	69.0	69.9	72.9	70.4
15 – 64	62.9	63.4	66.9	67.7	70.1	68.5

Source: Koefitsienti na zaetost po mestozhiveene i vazrastovi grupi, 2021.

<https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=835> [Accessed June, 20th, 2021].

As a result, several strategies have been developed to deal with these unfavourable trends.

3.2. Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2013 - 2020

The provision of training in key competencies (acquiring skills for teamwork, communication skills, foreign language training, etc.) covers a significantly larger number of employed and unemployed young people so that they are able to acquire skills for maintaining employment in changing conditions and to fill newly created jobs. This strategy is being overhauled for the next decade. (Ministerstvo na truda i sotsialnata politika, 2013).

3.3. Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021 - 2030

Policies at the national level are in line with current trends in modern education, which involves not only direct transfer of knowledge from teachers to students, but also builds skills for independent and critical thinking, teamwork and personal development. The set of skills required in the 21st century is constantly expanding and changing dynamically. The need for social and emotional intelligence is becoming more and more prominent. Along with this, emphasis will be placed on transversal skills such as critical thinking, expressing an informed opinion, taking initiative, problem-solving orientation and teamwork skills.

An important emphasis is placed on building social skills and emotional intelligence from an early age. It is envisaged to expand the range of activities aimed at the development of personal and interpersonal skills. (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2021).

3.4. National strategy for life-long learning for the period 2014 – 2020

One of the foremost challenges was to promote attainment by all citizens of universal key competences, such as learning skills, proactiveness, and enterprise, and cultural awareness, as well as **soft skills such as skills for teamwork, decision-making, conflict resolution**, etc.

Some of the key activities in the Strategy included giving credits for participation in youth programme projects so that employers could recognize this participation as evidence of key competences and soft skills in applicants with no previous job experience. (Ministry of Education and Science, 2014).

3.5. Competence approach in primary and secondary education 2019

This approach was developed by the Ministry of Education to help pedagogical professionals in their search for new teaching methods. It was intended to generate ideas and suggestions how to transform subject-oriented classroom work into a result-driven one so that it could provide life-long learning skills and predetermine successful career realization in the labour market.

The shift of focus in training from teaching knowledge to mastering key competencies and developing problem-solving skills brings to the fore the main features of the competence approach.

A special place is given to the **transferable (soft) skills** that are not related to specific subjects, but are horizontal and include understanding personal needs in the learning process and discovering opportunities and abilities to overcome learning difficulties both individually and in groups, **i.e. taking into account various learning paths**.

The competence approach is currently being implemented via changes in school curricula, syllabi and educational standards in all educational levels. (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2019а).

3.6. Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021 - 2030

Strengthening the understanding of competencies as a dynamic system of knowledge, skills and attitudes and applying the competence approach is considered a priority in higher education. Stimulating the development of functional competencies and **skills for creative and critical thinking, communication, teamwork and leadership** comes to the fore. (Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето i naukata, 2020).

The Executive Agency Operational Programme *Science and Education for Smart Growth* 2017

The Programme outlines the following goals: improving HE quality and strengthening the links with the labour market; introducing new forms of teaching, developing integrated and business-oriented programmes; introducing specialized programmes to improve methodological and managerial competences in higher education; providing widening access to HE while developing professionals in priority areas aimed at solving problems in the labour market. ("Executive Agency Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Programme", 2021).

Mechanisms to stimulate HEIs in developing close links with businesses and focusing on employability skills development in students

Following the very negative demographic and socio-economic tendencies, resulting in the declining number of students finishing secondary education, and huge discrepancies in the labour market, some legislative changes were introduced in Bulgaria, connecting the subsidy provided for support of education in state-funded universities to the quality of provided education and its compliance with labour market needs (Yordanova, 2018).

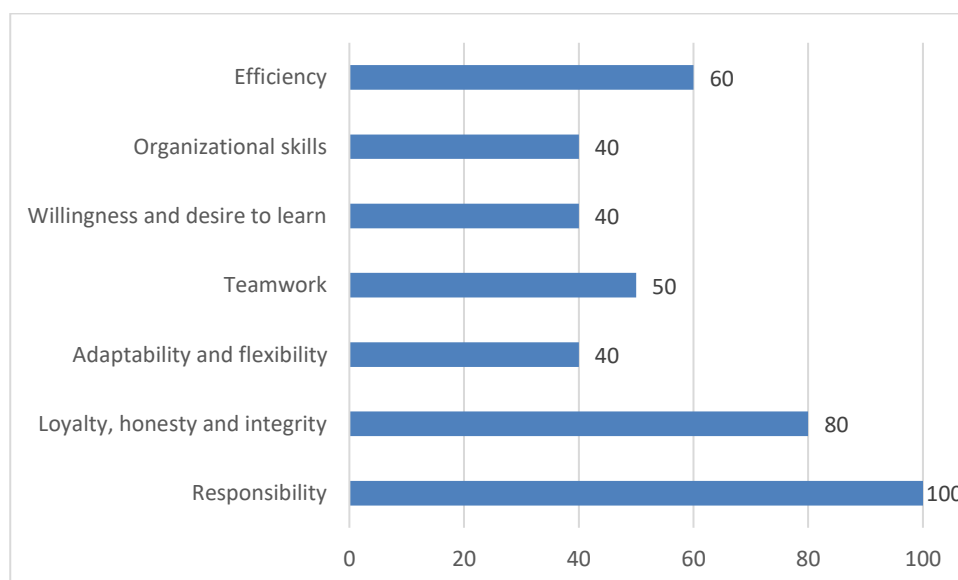
Survey, conducted by the Ministry of Education, co-funded by Erasmus + on the skills needed for successful realization at the labour market, 2018

The survey targets identifying skills needed for successful realization in the Bulgarian labour market. It was conducted among employers and unemployed people from September to October 2018. For the typology of these skills, a report of the World Bank and the Open Society Institute was used, in which the skills for employment were divided into three large groups: cognitive, socio-emotional and professional. 'Soft skills' belonged to the category of **socio-emotional skills**.

The survey was part of a national stakeholders' consultation process for outlining **steps and measures for improving adult skills**. The management's assessment of employees' skills showed the worst results for these **soft skills: adaptability and flexibility, taking initiative, and creativity**. (Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето i naukata, 2019b).

The most important skills for employability according to managers were responsibility, loyalty, honesty and integrity, efficiency and teamwork (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Importance of skills for employability



Source: Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето i naukata, 2019b. Analiz na rezultatite ot anketno prouchvane na umeniyata, neobhodimi za uspeshna realizatsia na pazara na truda. Sofia. <http://lll.mon.bg/uploaded_files/Analiz_na_rezultatite.pdf>.

While the tested group included employers and 29+-year-old unemployed adults, the study has interesting implications for the parameters of soft skills and the importance of their development regardless of age.

4. NATIONAL LEVEL – THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE: PROJECTS, RESEARCH, INSIGHTS AND INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN

4.1. Projects and research

Bulgarian businesses have been quite proactive in applying a range of up-to-date forms of soft skills development in current and potential employees and in attracting talent. The following examples illustrate this trend:

The National Competence Assessment System MyCompetence

The National Competence Assessment System MyCompetence is an online platform created by the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) in the field of human resource management and development. It offers information on models of sector competences for key positions; job descriptions; assessment tools; e-learning resources and other specialised services for assessment and development of workforce competencies. Moreover, it offers various assessment tools for different soft skills – managerial competencies, social competencies, emotional intelligence, team efficiency, motivation and satisfaction, decision-making skills and problem solving, business negotiations, workplace stress management skills, abilities for concentration and attention to detail.

In addition to the competence frameworks, a variety of free-access e-learning courses were developed and provided on various topics such as effective workplace communication, time management, leadership and emotional intelligence, conflict resolution. ("MyCompetence.bg", 2021).

ManpowerGroup Employment Outlook Survey Q3 2021

Manpower, an international business consulting company, has undertaken studies to identify global trends with view of soft skills shortage identification and the shift in their set in terms of importance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results about employees in Bulgaria indicate that some of the skills required for employment are connected with underdeveloped soft skills.

Talent shortages are at a 15-year high as hard & soft skills are more difficult to find than ever before. 69% of companies globally report talent shortages, with Bulgaria at even a higher level – 71% of employers in Bulgaria are having difficulty filling jobs. Amid the current pandemic, soft skills have been increasing their importance. According to the report, the top 5 skills are: a/ accountability, reliability, discipline; 2/ resilience, stress tolerance and adaptability; 3/ collaboration and teamwork; 4/ initiative taking; 5/ reasoning, problem-solving. (ManpowerGroup, 2021).

4.2. The consultants' view

Admittedly, the demand for a more flexible approach to talent management is far greater than ever before. What are the policies of big multinational companies towards developing **soft skills in their employees?**

The Big 4, Bulgaria

All the Big 4 in Bulgaria provide information on their Bulgarian sites and in the media regarding the importance of soft skills for their employees:

➤ PwC in Bulgaria emphasizes the importance of soft skills as part of their employee induction training: 'PwC Bulgaria is certainly a great learning experience. Here, each individual has access to various local and international learning possibilities, focusing on technical and **soft skills aspects**.' ("PwC Bulgaria", 2021).

➤ Dr. Konstantin Kyricis, a lecturer and expert on the development of international training programs at the Academy of PwC in Central and Eastern Europe defines the category 'soft skills' as the skills most desired by employers. He admits that 'all

our research among CEOs is always focusing on the balance between technical skills and soft skills. If you ask me what is more important, I will be honest and I will say that this is soft skills.' He recognizes communication as the most important skill, followed by the ability to organize our day and meet deadlines. ("Koi sa nay-zhelanite umenia ot rabotodatelite dnes? Govori ekspertat", 2021).

➤ KPMG in Bulgaria also highlights the importance of soft skills training in the process of life-long learning: 'At KPMG we believe that learning is a life-long process at your own hands. You will have the opportunity to attend our classroom in in-person and virtual trainings, as well as other web-based trainings. You can choose from a variety of professional, technical and **soft skills trainings starting from Day 1 of your employment.**' ("KPMG Learning", 2021).

➤ Deloitte in Bulgaria outlines the importance for newly appointed employees to adopt 'essential and practical skills, which will improve **agility, resilience** and realize benefits'. ("Surviving and thriving in uncertainty | Deloitte | Risk, ERM, Finance, Services", 2021).

➤ Ernst&Young Bulgaria has a clear vision of the skills required for a tax professional in the context of some emerging trends: 'Apart from an understanding of how to apply robotics, AI and automation as well as the capacity to analyse data in real-time, the ability to be a C-suite influencer' (Nibbe, 2018) is an absolutely essential skill for a more purposeful, contingent workforce, i.e. there is an emphasis on **upward management and influencing skills** and **adaptability**. Likewise, E&Y senior management have clear understanding of the importance of soft skills for the strategically changing role of CFOs: '**the agility to adapt to continuous change**' has been identified as the most important personal and leadership quality required for a private company CFO to succeed in the future. 82% of private company respondents agreed with the statement that 'to drive culture change, CFOs need to move beyond technical left-brain skills to **develop competencies in people-oriented right-brain areas.**' (Tavierne, 2021).

Horizons, a consulting company in Bulgaria, outlines a few factors that indicate the increasing importance of soft skills: 1/ Career progression and advancement. 2/ The modern workplace is interpersonal. 3/ Consumers and customers require soft skills. 4/ The future workplace will rely on soft skills. 5/ Soft skills are difficult to automate. 6/ Soft skills are in high demand by recruiters. ("Kolko sa vazhni mekite umenia - Horayzans Bulgaria", 2020).

ArthurAdams Business Training Centre in Bulgaria offers a portfolio of certification programmes for soft skills and personal effectiveness: emotional intelligence, the 10 'soft skills' we can't live without, time management and priorities, coping with stress and creating positive attitudes, communication skills and interpersonal relationships, assertive communication and self-confidence, administrative skills, anger management, presentation skills, personal effectiveness. ("Meki umenia (SoftSkills) i lichna efektivnost", 2021).

The experts agree that **the ability to inspire and motivate people** is important at any time, but it has increased its significance during periods of uncertainty such as the one currently experienced crisis period across the globe.

4.3. Initiatives

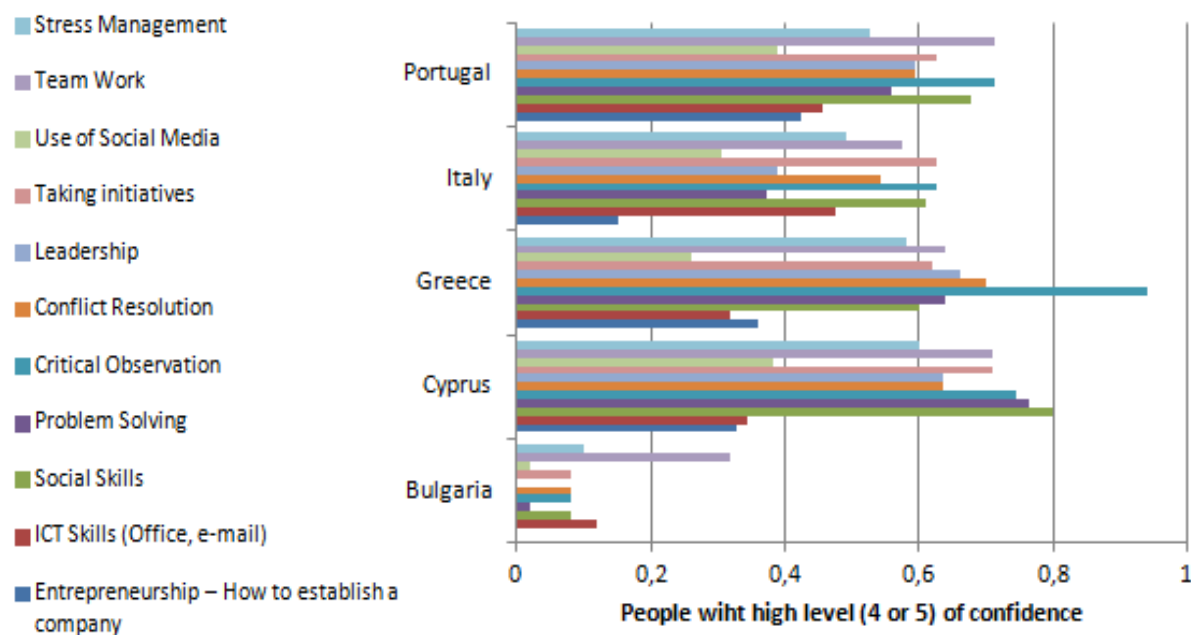
A number of initiatives undertaken by businesses in Bulgaria imply that business representatives do consider soft skills life-long skills that are to be developed and enhanced at all stages in our lives.

Developing soft skills from an early age is seen as a priority. **The Bulgarian game studio KVABA Interactive has introduced an educational game that develops soft skills for children – Space Patrol.** It stimulates critical thinking, teamwork, creativity and leadership in adolescents. It is played by a team of two people who, going through various challenges, learn interesting facts about space and acquire soft skills that they need in real life. The game is used in several schools with very positive feedback. ("Balgari sazdadoha igra, koyato razviva meki umenia u detsata", 2021).

Developing soft skills in students and recent graduates, as well as in employees is considered a strategic goal by many companies and business associations.

The Bulgarian Business Leaders Forum (BBLF) and the Union for Private Economic Enterprise (UPEE) provide excellent examples of business organisations and initiatives, promoting business leadership, establishing stronger links with the communities and **consistently offering communication and soft skills trainings to their current and potential employees.** Both **BBLF and UPEE** have **close links with HEIs** in Bulgaria, providing various trainings, incl. soft skills workshops. Some of their activities will be described in the following sections and good practices examples. ("The Bulgarian Business Leaders Forum", 2021; "UPEE Programs and projects", 2021).

Developing soft skills in people 50+ years old is also achievable, as the EmpAct project suggests. Empower Active Ageing (EmpAct) was a project aiming to fill the gap in participation, social inclusion and education of adults over 50 through establishing an EU network. According to project survey results, it is perceived that Bulgarian participants have the lowest level of skills compared to that of respondents in other countries (see figure 2). ("EmpAct Empower Active Ageing", 2021).

Figure 2. Skills Self-Evaluation

Source: EmpAct Empower Active Ageing, 2021. <<http://empactproject.eu/>> [Accessed June, 26th, 2021].

The research also focused on training courses needs. The Bulgarian respondents requested the following training courses for **social and soft skills training**:

- Being creative and innovative (46%)
- Compromise and negotiation (45%)
- Taking initiatives (44%)
- Active listening (44%)

5. SUCCESS FACTORS, CAUSES FOR FAILURE AND LIMITING FACTORS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Success factors

The national success stories are easily identifiable. They include but are not limited to: the focus on transferable soft skills; flexible national policies that reflect the volatility of the LM; teaching soft skills from an early age; teacher training at primary and secondary level of education; HEI staff training.

Business companies and business associations in Bulgaria have been especially proactive with soft skills research, induction training provided to new joiners, online courses accessible for their current and potential employees, soft skills certification programmes, etc. Furthermore, there are good relations and various forms of collaboration between businesses and HEIs. Examples of joint initiatives are events during career days when business companies offer soft skills trainings, presentations, workshops, various training modules. Moreover, businesses do consider soft skills life-long skills and target their development consistently in various age groups.

5.2. Causes for failure, limiting factors

On a national level, the Strategy for Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015 - 2020 lacked focus on soft skills (Ministerstvo na obrazovanieto i naukata, 2014).

With view of the continuing internationalisation of both LM and HE, students joining universities should have at least B1 level of a foreign language (FL) and build on it at least up to B2 (the Common European Language Framework) during their university studies which will hopefully enable them to make the most of Erasmus + mobilities, workshops conducted in FL, internships abroad or at multinational companies. Therefore, high schools should be encouraged to actually meet the required exit FL level and universities should have enough contact hours of FL courses to facilitate the process of acquiring an operational FL level, building simultaneously language, academic and business skills (such as communication, negotiation, presentation skills, critical reasoning, problem solving, diverse teamwork skills, time management, self-management, interpersonal skills) in FL classes and other academic courses.

While there are comparatively good relationships between HEIs and business companies and business associations in Bulgaria, the potential for fruitful cooperation with view of developing soft skills in students and boosting their employability on the one hand, and facilitating the transition from university to work, on the other hand, is not fully developed.

5.3. Recommendations

On a national level, the next strategy for development of vocational education and training in the Republic of Bulgaria needs to incorporate an explicit soft skills agenda.

Further HE collaboration is definitely recommended at regional, national and international level. This will allow a transfer of knowledge and building soft skills in students and academic staff alike, which will also boost their employability and competitiveness.

As large-scale surveys (Ganassali, 2018, 2019) indicate, some of the priorities ahead are: **improving foreign languages command** at least at an upper-intermediate level and above, **developing communication skills** which will result in **confidence building, and focusing on interpersonal skills, emotional and conflict management, as well as tolerance of ambiguity**. With view of developing skills for the future, developing **emotional intelligence and stress management** comes to the fore.

There are some good practices in Bulgaria for joint initiatives leading to better professional orientation and further job placing but there is a **lack of overall strategic approach in this field**. In conclusion, there is a necessity of identification and introduction of new forms of cooperation, which will boost the partnership HE – Business – Government and could provide the labour market with graduates with the required skills sets, matching future business requirements. As the analysis of the current work/study situation during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests, it is also necessary to motivate students to develop **resilience, stress management, life-long learning strategies** along with 'traditional soft skills.'

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