

Strategies to Deter Turnover Intentions amongst Expatriate Academics in the Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa

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Abstract

The retention of talented academics is a growing concern for many institutions of higher learning. The multinational expatriates are perceived as individuals sent by multinational cooperation to a subsidiary to transfer knowledge. The expatriate academics labeled as “knowledge workers” are those individuals with outstanding skills that chose to go and work abroad on their own accord. The literature reveals that expatriate academics have a high tendency to quit when their expectations are not met. Scholars contend that researching turnover intentions is important as it can provide an indication of an individual’s perception and judgment, and it can be assessed in the present to help understand and possibly deter the cause of actual turnover. Therefore, the paper aimed to provide sound strategies to the management of the institutions of higher learning that can be used in ensuring that quality expatriate academics are retained in South Africa Universities and a wake-up call to other countries. The paper adopted a quantitative approach to collect data using a five Likert-scale questionnaire from 125 expatriate academics employed in two universities in South Africa. A snowball method was adopted and all data collected were analyzed using SPSS version 25, which generated data into tables. The paper reveals that many expatriate academics felt that the strategies to manage and retain talents were insufficient, leaders of the institutions should provide millennial expatriate academics with a flexible working environment to balance work, and family lives. It further reveals a need to compensate expatriate academics with tailored-made benefits. The paper recommends that the institutions of higher learning in South Africa recruit expatriate academics on a full-time basis to enhance commitment and engagement and deter turnover intentions.

Keywords: retentions, turnover, higher learning institutions, expatriate academics, benefits and strategies

1. Introduction

There is a scarcity of talent academics in the institutions of higher learning in many countries including South Africa. This challenge often forced leaders of the institutions to search for talented academics outside the country that can contribute and excel in teaching and learning as well as producing research outputs (Reynolds, 2005 as cited by Ngo Henha, 2019). These academics are often labeled “foreign academics”, “academic migrants” or “international academics”. The transition provides quality academics in the institutions of higher learning in SA through expatriates who add a significant value towards the academic perspectives. The obstacle commences when expatriate academics are unable to adjust to these new countries as this portrays a sign of failure to their assignment (Pinto, 2012). Expatriate academics are influenced by many factors that can either make them stay or leave the institutions especially those located in SA. From 38 different countries, 138 expatriate teachers intended to return to their home countries due to a negative correlation of work and adjustment (Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison & Diehn, 2016). Similar challenges were discovered in the five universities in North Cyprus, however, expatriate academics intention not to leave (Tanova & Ajayi, 2016). While Kim and Slocum Jr (2008) found no relationship between interaction adjustment and intention to leave among 88 Korean Engineering managers employed in USA organizations. The challenge is that institutions still not sure, if there are doing their best to retain expatriate academics even though they link and interact with host nationals to adjust to work and learn more about the environment (Tharenou & Caulfield,

2010 as cited by Tanova & Ajayo, 2016). Richardson et al. (2006) and Zhu et al. (2016) conclude that negative adjustment of expatriates is linked with labour turnover. One of the major causes of academic turnover is the lack of organizational commitment (Gill et al, 2013). It is a huge loss for the institutions of higher learning to lose talent expatriates (Awang et al (2016). Therefore, there is a serious need for South African institutions of higher learning to investigate how well they can keep such talented expatriate academics within the system. Literature is silent about interventions that can be implemented by such institutions to ensure that expatriate academics are satisfied and will stay in their institutions until their retirement phase. This should compel all institutions of higher learning to have strategies in place to retain expatriate academics and to learn from them as we leave in a diverse universe.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Expatriate Academics

According to Richardson and Wong (2018:299), expatriates are those sent abroad by multinational companies on a temporary assignment, while expatriate academics are those who initiated their expatriation. Thus, categorized amongst self-selected expatriates, expatriate academics are often labeled as “foreign academics”, “academic migrants” or “international academics” (Selmer and Luring, 2011:2055; Trembath, 2016:115). Due to the limited research on expatriate academics in many parts of the world, the literature on multinational expatriates usually provides a basis to understand and research on self-selected expatriates. Scholars contend that both multinational and self-selected expatriates live and work outside of their countries; therefore, they are both subjected to challenges such as cultural and social adjustment, family adjustment, and isolation (Mendenhall, 1996 as cited by Richardson and McKenna, 2006:8). However, the major difference between the two categories of expatriates lies in the initiation of expatriation; the assignment types; the motives of expatriation; pre-departure training; the time limit in the assignment; compensation; career paths; and the support system in non-work-related issues (Reynolds, 2005:60; Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010:6; Schoepp, 2011:61 as cited by Ngo-Henha, 2019).

2.2 Academics' Turnover Intention

Several scholars have reported the negative effects of voluntary turnover on organizations (Zahra *et al.*, 2013:85; Akhtar *et al.*, 2016:655) and on Academic Institutions (Kim, 2015:139). However, despite the plethora of research on voluntary turnover, preventing employees from leaving their organization is still a big challenge for many Institutions of Higher Learning. Investigating people who have already left the organization seems to be a reactive approach to addressing the problem of turnover (Ngo Henha, 2019). Scholars have attributed countless causes with suggested solutions to counter voluntary turnover, hence the focus on turnover intention as one of the strategies related to retention. Scholars assume that conducting research on the turnover intentions phenomenon is a more proactive approach to deter voluntary turnover as it can produce more accurate results on why employees leave their organizations (Kaur *et al.*, 2013:1221; Rizwan *et al.*, 2014:4; Ngo-Henha, 2019).

With regard to turnover intention, the determinants of job satisfaction presented in Figure 1 below have been hypothesized by many theories and models influencing employees' turnover intentions (March & Simon, 1958; Vroom, 1964; Herzberg; 1964; Adam, 1965; Becker, 1993 as presented by Ngo-Henha, 2017). Additionally, the same facets of job satisfaction were found to determine talent retention (Ashraf and Joarder, 2010:171; Kusnin and Rasdi, 2014:345).

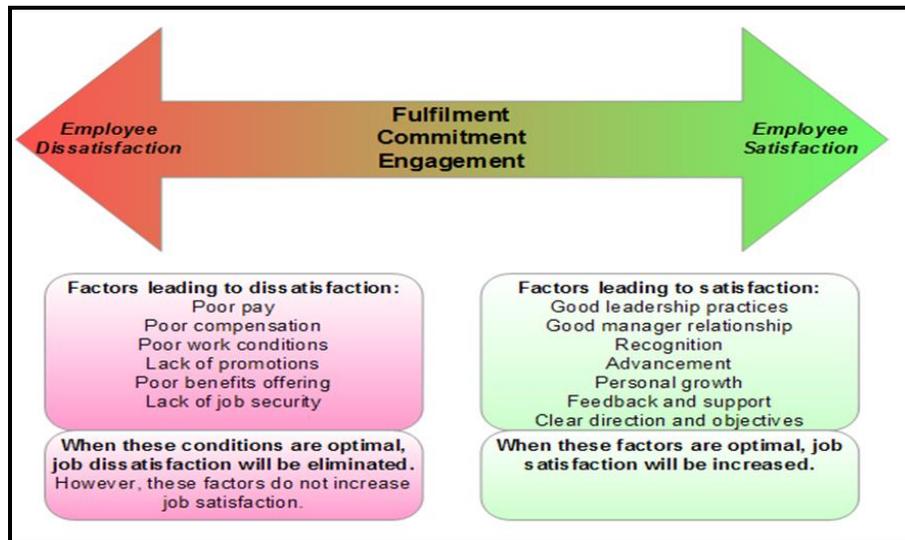


Figure 1. Job Satisfaction Model

Source: Field, J. (2008:1). Adapted.

2.3 Factors Affecting General Academics' Turnover Intentions

Contemporary studies on turnover intention have highlighted concurring views by Smart (1990:408), Matier (1990:41), Johnsrud and Rosser (2002:528), Zhou and Volkwein (2004:14), Rosser and Townsend (2006:129), and Daly and Dee (2006:781) that academics' turnover intentions are influenced by various factors including demographics (Awong, Ibrahim, Nor, Razah, Arof and Rahman, 2015:24; Regassa and John, 2016:89); working conditions (Ibrahim and Perez, 2014:46; Ahmed, 2015:14); perceived organizational support (Regassa and John, 2016:90); academics' level of satisfaction with their jobs and institutions (Robyn and Du Preez, 2013:13; Jalees and Ghauri, 2016:17); academics' level of commitment towards their institutions (Joarder and Sharif, 2012:62; Ahmed, 2015:19); and the perceived job opportunities in the labour market (Nyamubarwa, 2013:87). The empirical studies of some of these factors are discussed below.

2.3.1 Gender and General Academics' Turnover Intentions

The predictive effect of gender on academics' intentions to leave was reviewed in the literature. Scholars found that gender had a strong relationship with academics' turnover intentions. Moreover, studies revealed that female academics had higher turnover intentions as compared to male academics (Xu, 2008:616; Noor, 2011:243; Hundera, 2014:57). Thus, despite the under-representation of women in the Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Xu's (2008:616) study indicated that male and female academics both had intentions to leave their institution, but turnover intentions were more significant for female academics.

2.3.2 Geographical Location and Academics' Turnover Intentions

Thus, Ingersoll (2001) as cited by Nair, *et al.* (2016:114) claims that the geographical location of an institution plays a crucial role in academics' turnover decisions. Similarly, a study conducted by Holland and Arrington (1987) on 463 accounting academics postulated that geographical location was the determining factor of academics' decisions to relocate (Nair *et al.*, 2016:11). Likewise, Mahony, Mondello, Hums and Judd (2006:422) in their empirical study conducted on 172 Sport Management lecturers in North America indicated that the working location of academics influences their turnover intentions. Equally, Nair, *et al.* (2016:119) attested that working location predicted lecturers' turnover intentions in a study conducted on 401 lecturers of private universities in Malaysia. Additionally, the predictive effect of the location of the region on academics' turnover intentions has also been addressed. Scholars revealed in their studies that the location of the region strongly predicts academics' turnover intentions (Yan *et al.*, 2015:541). Inversely, Tourangeau, *et al.* (2013:6) found that the location of the institutions does not influence academic turnover intentions. While other individuals have challenges of adjusting to the new country, interacting with others, and work differences (Wilkins & Neri, 2018).

2.3.3 Collegial Relationships and Academics' Turnover Intentions

Employees spend most of their time at work. Therefore, the interaction, collaboration and relationships with

colleagues are vital for their satisfaction and their adaptability (Shah, 2012:1243). Schoepp (2011:63) states that collegiality is a trademark of Higher Education as it is characterized by mutual respect amongst colleagues, a sense of responsibility and equality amongst peers. Macfarlane (2016:32) refers to collegiality as a shared responsibility in the governance of an institution in which all academics have a say in decision-making. Tourangeau, *et al.* (2013:3) claim that collegial relations in the academic context refer to the quality of the relationships between colleagues in an organization where there is mutual respect, equal treatment and trust. Shah (2012:1244) asserts that fostering a collegial culture is not only beneficial to the individual employee, but to the organization as a whole. A review of the literature on co-workers' support revealed that academics are sometimes faced with challenges in the workplace such as bullying, mistrust, conflict, violence, mistreatment and rudeness in the workplace. Consequently, antagonistic relationships with colleagues were found to be related to an employee's intention to leave the organization (Razzaghian and Ghani, 2014:40). Matier (1990) as cited by Schoepp (2011:63) asserts that poor collegiality predicts turnover intentions. Zahra, *et al.* (2013:85) concur that collegial relations influence intentions to leave an institution. Expatriates academic can provide the institutions of higher learning with many benefits including ways and knowledge of their home educational system and student centers experience in both teaching and research (Wilkins & Neri, 2018).

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

Research design is the objectives and collection of information sources of the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). The paper investigates the strategies that can be used by SA institutions of higher learning to deter the turnover intentions amongst expatriate academics. The quantitative approach was adopted for the paper in order to collect data.

3.2 Research Participants

The paper had 125 expatriate participants from the two different institutions of higher learning in SA. The paper chose a snowball random method as a sampling technique.

3.3 Instrument and Data Collection

A five Likert-scale questionnaire was constructed in English as an instrument to collect data from participants. The first section assessed the biographic details of the participants followed by the section that covered the aim of the paper. The instrument was pre-tested to determine the reliability before being administered to participants.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyze and interpret data into tables. The inferential statistics, Chi-square test, Fisher's Exact Test, Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis H test were used to analyze the data.

3.5 Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The Ethics Policy of the university was adhered to while conducting the paper. Gatekeeper's letter was obtained to collect data from the participants and all were told that the study is voluntary.

4. Results

The study obtained 100% response feedback. The results are as follow:

Table 1. Gender and age

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Age	20-29	Count	5	1	6
		% of Total	4.0%	0.8%	4.8%
	30-39	Count	36	7	43
		% of Total	28.8%	5.6%	34.4%
	40-49	Count	40	6	46
		% of Total	32.0%	4.8%	36.8%
	50-59	Count	18	6	24
		% of Total	14.4%	4.8%	19.2%
	60+	Count	4	2	6
		% of Total	3.2%	1.6%	4.8%
Total		Count	103	22	125
		% of Total	82.4%	17.6%	100.0%

As shown above, Table 1 reveals that the majority of expatriate academics were males with 82.4%. It further reveals that the majority of expatriate academics age was between 40-49 years.

Table 2. Highest education

Honours degree	Masters degree	Doctoral degree
0.8%	26.4%	72.8%
Non- SADC countries	SADC countries	Other areas excluding Africa
47.2%	28.8%	24.0%

As depicted in Table 2 above, the majority of expatriate academics that had doctoral degrees were 72.8% and 26.4% had master’s degrees. It further reveals that most expatriate academics were quite far from their homelands as they were from (non-SADC) countries.

Table 3. Service years

		Frequency	Percent
Number of years in the Institution	0-3	47	37.6%
	4-6	31	24.8%
	7-9	24	19.2%
	10+	23	18.4%
	Total	125	100.0%

As shown in Table 3 above, the majority of expatriate academics that had 0-3 years of service in their institutions were 37.6% followed by those with 4-6 years with 24.8%.

Table 4. Tenure

		Frequency	Percent
Tenure Status	Permanent	73	58.4%
	Temporary	14	11.2%
	Contract	38	30.4%
	Total	125	100.0%

Table 4 above reveals that the majority of expatriate academics were permanent 58.4%. However, it should be noted that almost half of them were either on contract or temporary.

Table 5. Better career paths promotions and performance, better pay for the effort, and better pay in comparison with other institutions

Statement	No	SD	D	Likert scale			Mean	Std.	Fisher's Exact Test p-value
				Neutral	A	SA			
5.1. My institution is making provision for better career paths	125	7.2%	11.2%	29.6%	46.4%	5.6%	3.32	0.997	0.000
5.2. I feel that career promotion is based on merit and performance	125	8.0%	16.8%	23.2%	42.4%	9.6%	3.29	1.106	0.000
5.3. My institution provides better pay in correlation with the effort I put in.	125	16.0%	37.6%	28.0%	15.2%	3.2%	2.52	1.036	0.000
5.4. My institution offers better pay in comparison with other institutions	125	19.2%	34.3%	35.2%	8.0%	3.2%	2.42	0.993	0.000

As depicted above, Table 5 reveals that the majority of expatriate academics agreed with 46.4% that their institution is making provision for better career paths. The majority of them also agreed with 42.4% that their career promotion is based on merit. However, the majority disagreed with 37.6% that their institutions provide better pay in correlation with the effort they put in; and the majority remained neutral with 35.2% that their institution offers better pay in comparison with other institutions.

Table 6. Perks, allowances and benefits, listened to by management, job safety/security, and achievement recognition

Statement	No	SD	D	Likert scale			Mean	Std.	Fisher's Exact Test p-value
				Neutral	A	SA			
5.5. My institution offers perks, allowances and other fringe benefits that are up to my expectations	125	16.0%	36.8%	28.8%	16.0%	2.4%	2.52	1.021	0.000
5.6. I feel the top management always listens to the concerns of Employees	125	16.8%	25.6%	40.8%	13.6%	3.2%	2.61	1.023	0.000
5.7. The terms and conditions of my job bring on better safety and security	125	7.2%	18.4%	35.2%	34.4%	4.8%	3.11	1.002	0.000
5.8. I feel that the achievements at work are well recognized	125	6.4%	21.6%	28.0%	38.4%	5.6%	3.15	1.032	0.000

As portrayed in Table 6 above, the majority of expatriate academics disagreed that their institutions offer perks, allowances and other benefits that are up to their expectations. The majority of them were neutral with 40.8% that top management listened to their concerns, followed by those that disagreed 25.6%. The majority were neutral with 35.2% followed by those that agreed with 34.4% that the terms and conditions of their jobs bring on better safety and security. Furthermore, the majority agreed with 38.4% that achievements at work are well recognized.

Table 7. Management: support, motivation, talent policies, and cultural diversity

Statement	No	Likert scale					Mean	Std.	Fisher's Exact Test p- value
		1	2	3	4	5			
5.9. The leaders in this institution are very supportive	125	6.4%	20.8%	34.4%	32.0%	6.4%	3.11	1.018	0.000
5.10. I feel that the management/leadership is motivating	125	11.2%	17.6%	36.0%	29.6%	5.6%	3.01	1.074	0.000
5.11. This institution has sufficient talent management policies	125	7.2%	16.8%	36.8%	35.2%	4.0%	3.12	1.980	0.000
5.12. There is sufficient cultural diversity in this institution	125	6.4%	7.2%	15.2%	47.2%	24.0%	3.75	1.097	0.000

Table 7 above reveals that the majority of expatriate academics were neutral with 34.4% followed by those that agreed with 32.0% that their leaders are very supportive. 36.8% were neutral followed by those that agreed with 35.2% that their institutions have sufficient talent management policies. Expatriate academics however agreed with 47.2% that there is sufficient cultural diversity in their institutions.

5. Discussion

5.1 Demographics

Khumalo (2019) revealed a need to consider equality in the workplace since it affects the planning of employees in the workplace. While the paper reveals that only male expatriate academics between the ages of 40-49 were dominating in these South African institutions of higher learning. Therefore, there is a need for South African institutions of higher learning to recruit more female expatriates. The paper found that high turnover intention was prevalent amongst expatriate academics from the age group 30-39 years old as well. Consequently, it is imperative for the top management of both HE Institutions to develop strategies to manage this category of expatriate academics. However, this requires the top management of these institutions to firstly identify the main characteristics of millennial expatriate academics, their aspirations and their values.

5.2 Academic Qualifications and Staff Capacity in South African Universities

The study conducted by Fomunyam (2018) found that South African Universities were challenged and the quality of education was compromised by the poor level of qualification of their academics. In addition, the study of DE Meyer-Heydenrych and Stiehler-Mulder (2018) revealed that South African institutions are also challenged by the limited staff capacity. This paper however reveals that expatriate academics are qualified academics with 72.4% of them holding doctoral degrees and 26.4 % having masters' degrees. South African institutions should therefore have strategies to prevent expatriate academics from leaving to enhance the quality of education and fill the gap of staff shortage. More than half of the expatriate academics were permanent 58.4%. However, it should be noted that almost half were either on a fixed or on a temporary contract, which may be one of the factors, triggering turnover intentions. Nachatar (2021) stresses that expatriate academics be valued and recognized by the management of institutions for their exceptional contributions in teaching, research and services they provide to their university. Furthermore, Khumalo (2019) recommends a need to establish and implement strategies of promotions and growth since these affect employees in delivering quality services. Therefore, the management of institutions of higher learning needs to review expatriate academics' employment contracts and avoid putting them in a situation where their short-term contracts have to be renewed depending on the institution's needs.

5.3 Motivational and Development

Wilkins and Neri (2018) recommend institutions of higher learning investigate and prepare academics before arrival. It is important to understand why individuals wish to work for them and view if it is aligned with institutional objectives. The paper reveals that most of the expatriate academics were coming from non-SADC countries which very far from their home countries. The paper further reveals that these institutions were not offering perks, allowance and other benefits to expatriate academics regardless of the sacrifices of being far from their families and

loved ones. Khumalo (2020) emphasizes a need to gather information in advance for managers and leaders to implement strategies that are fundamental to improve the situation and understand what needs serious attention. Wilkins and Neri (2018) recommend that institutions of higher learning offer effective inductions to address issues and ways of work. This gap needs to be closed by ensuring that management and leaders of these institutions provide unique motivational perks and benefits for expatriate academics. It should be noted that achievements of work were recognized in these institutions and leaders were very supportive. Therefore, management needs to ensure that they maintain recognizing achievements and always provide support to all employees equally. The paper reveals that there were satisfactory talent management policies in these South African institutions of higher learning. Additionally, Wilkins and Neri (2018) recommend managing an individual's expectations through formal career planning and implementing strategies for career progression for expatriate academics.

5.4 Ongoing Support and Involvement

The paper reveals that the majority of the participants were neutral followed by those that disagreed that top management of these institutions does listen to their concerns. While Wilkins and Neri (2018) advised management to be approachable, supportive and listen to the challenges of the expatriate academics. Further to provide personal development opportunities to all members in the faculties such as research funding and conference opportunities. Management should make it a priority to offer unique support and engage with these academics to increase their sense of belonging. The paper however reveals that these institutions do promote cultural diversity. These authors also emphasize the need to run cultural events to strengthen team spirit and refrain expatriate academics from isolation and the feeling of loneliness.

5.5 Growth and Benefits for Expatriate Academics

Nachatar (2021) emphasizes the importance to recognize and reward the outstanding performance of international academics. Thus, it is necessary to provide support in the expatriate academics' career growth and groom them for leadership positions. The findings revealed that many expatriate academics were not satisfied with their salaries. The rewards they received were not fair. Thus, to enhance the job satisfaction of expatriate academics, the top management of these institutions should offer *competitive remuneration packages* to their expatriate academics. The top management of these institutions should benchmark to determine how other HE Institutions remunerated their international academics. Developing and implementing *effective compensation systems* that are attractive and tailored to different categories of expatriate academics. For instance, competency-related pay and contribution-related pay frameworks could be designed and adopted by the Human Resource Management departments of the institutions of higher learning. These types of compensation systems reflect fairness in terms of pay and rewards as they entail remunerating an expatriate academic according to his or her performance. Armstrong (2014:91) states that both competency-related pay and contribution-related pay provide for employees to be paid according to the results they produce and to their level of competence. Furthermore, Armstrong (2014:196) contends that engaged employees are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

6. Conclusion

It would be advisable for the higher education institutions to embark on exit interviews of expatriate academics. Exit interviews will provide more insight into and a better understanding of the perceptions of expatriate academics' intention to leave. Thus, they can take strategic remedial action in relation to recruitment, management and retention of expatriate academics. In this way, the expatriate academics will be well informed and more importantly feel valued and remain committed to their current positions in these higher education institutions. The researcher expresses this recommendation with caution as other higher education institutions in South Africa may already have strategies for expatriate academics' retention in place as this study only focused on the HE Institutions in KwaZulu-Natal.

7. Recommendations

- 1) The paper recommends that the institutions of higher learning recognize the expatriate academics' effort and provide them with guidance and regular feedback on their performance.
- 2) The management of the institutions of higher learning are advised to promote collaboration by encouraging group and teamwork between locals and expatriate academics to avoid losing skilled academics.
- 3) It is recommended that the institutions of higher learning provide tailored-made benefits and rewards that meet the needs of expatriate academics to deter their intention to quit.

- 4) It is advised that the management promote the *participation and involvement* of expatriate academics in the strategic decisions of the institution to increase their job satisfaction and ultimately deter the intention to leave the institution.
- 5) The paper recommends that the institutions of higher learning formulate and implement rewards policies that are *fair, attractive and customized* to suit the expectations of expatriate academics. Furthermore, to ensure that the promotion of staff is based on merit.
- 6) It is proposed that the institutions of higher learning conduct exit interviews on expatriate academics to determine the causes of high turnover.
- 7) The paper recommends that the institutions of higher learning engage expatriate academics with *their job* as well as with their institutions. The top management of both higher education institutions should recognize, value, and discuss the knowledge, skills and talents that expatriate academics bring to the institution.
- 8) The management of the institutions of higher learning should promote *open communication* with expatriate academics and timeously renegotiate the compensation package with expatriate academics in order to meet their expectations and keep them satisfied.

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