

ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYABILITY: A CASE STUDY FOR THE ROMANIAN LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract: This article presents the importance of English as an employability skill on the Romanian labour market nowadays. The purpose of the research is to gather information about the necessity of knowing English for securing employment and to what extent English is used regularly by Romanian professionals at the workplace. The study provides information about the employees' current level of English proficiency, LSRW English skills used at the workplace, confidence in LSRW skills and area for improvement.

Keywords: English, employability, soft skill, language proficiency, LSRW

Literature review

Nowadays the labour market is extremely competitive, therefore job seekers need to possess as many soft skills as possible in order to maximize their chances for securing a good job. English language proficiency is undoubtedly an essential employability skill in today's professional world. Good communication skills in general are crucial for any job and English language knowledge in particular is key for the global labour market. Therefore, most non-speaking English countries across the globe have introduced English as a compulsory or elective subject in primary, secondary and tertiary education. The concept of 'employability skills', meaning a set of qualities and competencies necessary for employment, is extensively analysed by (McQuaid, 2005) and was used starting with 1990's in various official documents regarding employment in UK and Canada. In 2000's, the term is frequently used in educational and professional contexts, as a set of key skills to be developed during formal education in order to be prepare individuals for their professional activity. Employability skills are also referred to as transferrable skills, soft skills, work-readiness skills or foundation skills. Regardless of the terminology, these skills usually target communication, initiative and enterprise, learning, teamwork and leadership, planning and organising, problem-solving, self-management, technology. Even if the labour market is dynamic and certain soft skills are required for specific positions and others are more highly-valued depending on the occupational field, communication skills have preserved their place at the top of the list for a long time. The ability to communicate coherently and effectively is inherent to all jobs in general, and when employment has a global component, English is imperative, being the lingua franca of the present.

Professional communication is carried out in English either partially or completely, therefore a certain minimal level of English proficiency is necessary. There are numerous studies focusing on the importance of English for employment in many countries, highlighting once again the constant interest of researchers, linguists and education experts in this topic, only in the last decade, a selected few are mentioned hereon. (Pooja, 2013) speaks about the widening gap between the English language skills required by employers and the actual skills acquired by Indian graduates, caused by multiple factors from low quality teachers to non-innovative teaching techniques or the inability to build real English competencies to meet the evolving needs of the professional world. (Clement & Murugavel, 2015) point out the special connection between the Indian labour market and the English language due to the fact that India was under British rule for a long time, but also because of the current globalisation of the labour market; their research focuses on the effectiveness of English language courses offered to engineering college students. (Singh, 2019) underlines the necessity of building English skills in ESL Indian Classroom especially for university graduates. (Sankar & Rajan, 2016) refer to governmental responsibility in providing good English educational programs, especially at university level, and the increasing need for refining English language skills, also mentioning specialized vocabulary in the technical field. Similarly, (Thomas et al., 2016) analyse the labour market in Bahrain and find that English is valued by Bahrain employers and polytechnic graduates are expected not only to communicate in English generically, but also to be able to use it confidently in their area of expertise. (Ting, 2017) brings Malaysian employers' perspective, stating that there appears to be a correlation between unemployment and lack of English proficiency; average English skills are considered acceptable by recruiters, as long as the candidates' communication skills are good, but more advanced English level is mandatory for customer service and marketing positions. (Uppe et al., 2019) looks into the Indian labour market, especially into job interviews conducted in English, and finds that good knowledge of English is linked to faster career growth; in addition, the article presents the problems faced by language learners and teachers in the teaching/learning ESL and underlines the importance of each of the four English language skills in professional activity.

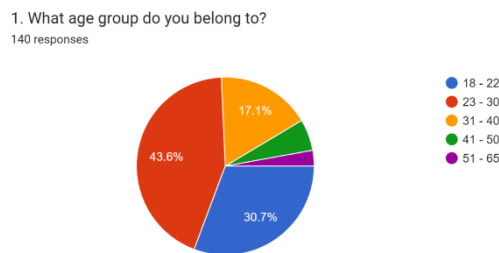
The studies mentioned above reveal two things: firstly, English is an important employability skill on the global labour market in many Asian countries and secondly, there is enormous responsibility on the English teaching community in colleges and universities to ensure that these skills are acquired through good English for Special Purposes programs tailored to meet the needs of today's employers. However, these studies are mostly conducted in Asian countries and do not contain information about the current situation of English as an employability skill in Europe and other regions. For a broader global perspective, EF English Proficiency Index (2022) offers recent and statistically accurate data on how proficient in English is the non-native English-speaking population of the world. Europe is the only one which scores very high on the proficiency band (with a score of 558), Asia comes second with moderate proficiency (with a score of 500), followed closely by Latin America (with a score of 495) and Africa (with a score of 490) and last comes Middle East with very low proficiency (with a score of 445). To narrow down the information for the purpose of this research, EF EPI 2022 indicates that Romania is in the category of high proficiency countries (position 17 in the 111 countries ranking),

while Bucharest the capital city is placed in the leading group of very high proficiency capitals (position 12 in the 111).

Applicative Research

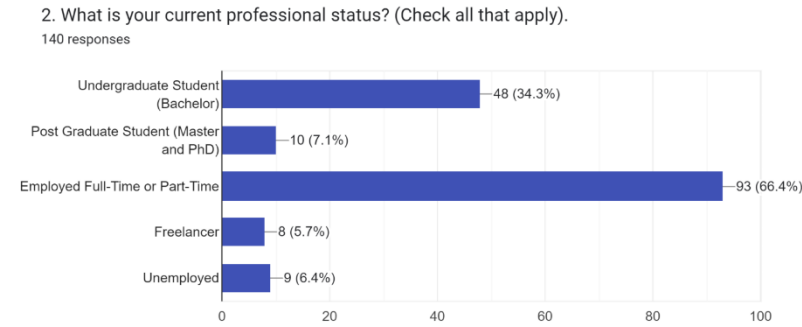
The main aim of this research is to analyse to what extent English proficiency is necessary for employment on the Romanian labour market in 2023. For this purpose, a survey containing 15 questions has been disseminated among Romanian university students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs who were employed (part-time or full-time), but also to Romanian professionals through employment platforms such as LinkedIn; a number of 140 responses have been gathered over a period of 3 months. Even though this study was mainly targeting university students and young professionals, due to the openness of the distribution channels, a small percentage of the respondents belong to other age categories. This applicative research has the following specific objectives: to determine whether English is a pre-requisite for employment on the Romanian labour market; to determine whether English is used regularly at the workplace in Romania and to what extent; to identify which of the four skills (LSRW) are more frequently used by Romanian employees; to identify which of the four skills (LSRW) are more developed among Romanian employees and which ones need further improvement. The survey consists of 15 questions: an introductory section meant to provide information about the respondents' age, professional status, field of activity (Q 1, 2, 3), another section about the respondents' English period of study, English language certification and level of proficiency (Q 4, 5, 6), leading towards another set focusing on English in the professional environment as a pre-requisite for the job and frequency of English usage at the workplace (Q 7, 8, 9), prevalence of LSRW skills in usage (Q 10, 11), as well as speakers confidence about these skills (Q 12, 13), information about exchanges occurring with native and non-native English speakers (Q 14) and the final question targets individual perception about linguistic areas that need improvement (Q 15). As you can see in Figure 1, over 74% of the respondents are young professionals under 30 years of age, 17% are between 30 and 40, and less than 10% are over 40.

Figure 1. Respondents' age



In relation to the professional status, which can be observed in Figure 2, out of 140 respondents, 58 were university students (41.4%), 26 of which were also employed either part time or full time (18.5%), 67 respondents were employees but not students (47.8%), 8 respondents were freelancers (5.7%) and 9 respondents were unemployed (6.4 %) at the moment of survey completion.

Figure 2. Respondents' professional status



The respondents belong to various fields of activity, as can be seen in Figure 3, making the research relevant for the Romanian labor market. The top three are law and law enforcement (25%), public services and administration (18.6%), accounting, banking, finance and management (11.4%). Other fields of activity with more than 5% are: human resources (8.6%), engineering, manufacturing automotive (6.4%), retail and sales (5%), marketing and public relations (5%).

Figure 3. Respondents' field of activity

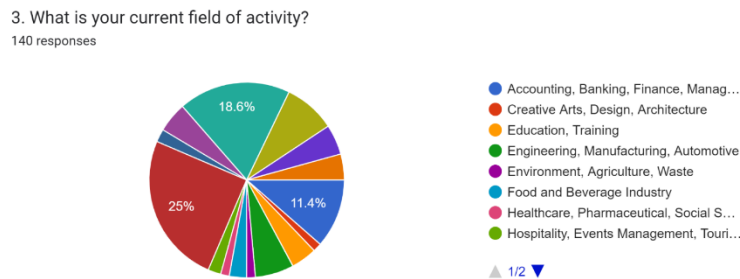
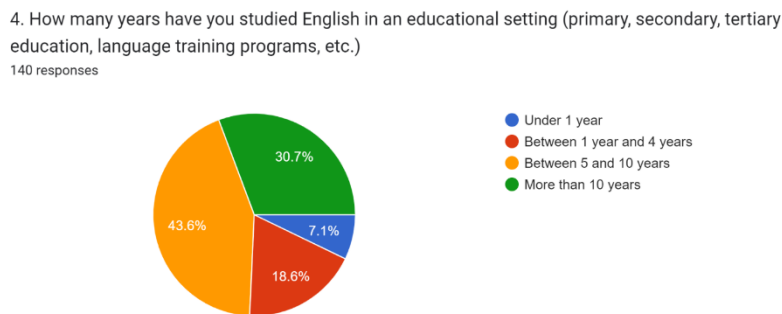


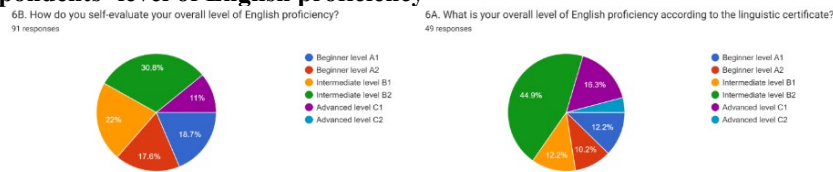
Figure 4 illustrates that over 73% of the respondents have studied English in school for a considerable amount of time, 43% for more than 5 years and 30% for over a decade. Slightly over 7% of the respondents have less than 1 year of training in the English language, indicating that they are a minority.

Figure 4. Respondents' period of English studies



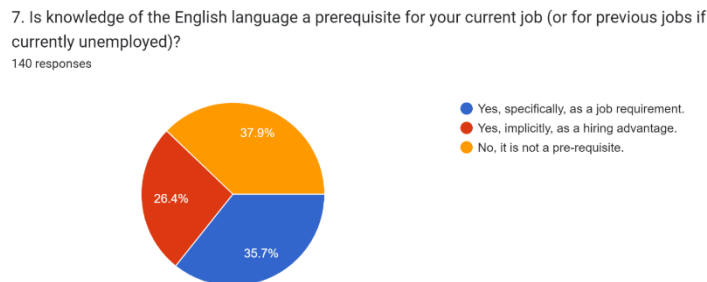
Even though most of the respondents have studied English for a long time, only 35% of them are holders of a certificate of linguistic competence in the English language according to their answers to Question 5 regarding the attainment of a national or international certification. The respondents' level of proficiency in English according to the certificate obtained and according to the respondent's self-evaluation is illustrated in Figure 5. The respondents from both groups indicated level B2 upper-intermediate as predominant (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages), which reflects good knowledge of the language, ability to understand complex texts with general and specialized vocabulary, capacity to produce texts on various subjects, to explain or describe things coherently, as well as to interact with a certain degree of fluency and spontaneity.

Figure 5. Respondents' level of English proficiency



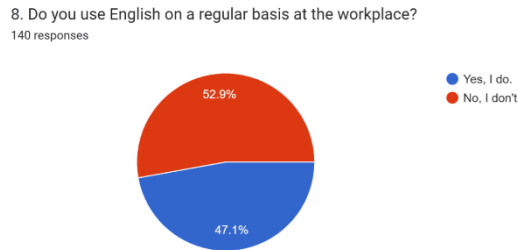
In addition to the 45% of certified respondents with B2 upper intermediate level, come 20% more, especially respondents with over 10 years of study, who managed to obtain an advanced linguistic level (16% - advanced C1 and 4% - proficient C2 equivalent to native speaker). This adds up to a significant 65% of certified respondents who have very good or excellent command of the English language. Not necessarily relevant, but worth mentioning, the self-evaluated respondents were more modest and only 42% of them think they have reached levels B2 and C1, and over 35% still believe they are beginners at levels A1 and A2. As far as the importance of the English language for employability as a pre-requisite for the job, Figure 6 shows that for more than 35% of the respondents English was a job requirement specifically, while 38% did not need to know English for the job, however, the scales tips in favor of 26% of the respondents who know the language. As a conclusion, the survey shows that English is relevant for more than 62% of the Romanian labor market, either as a pre-requisite for certain position or as a hiring advantage.

Figure 6. English as a prerequisite for the job



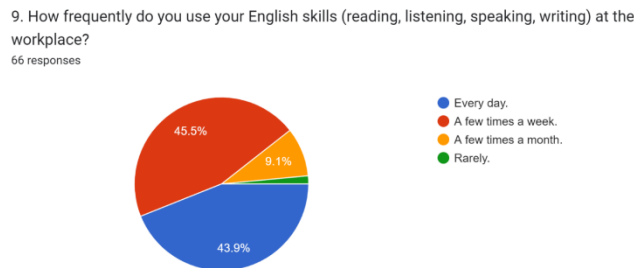
Even if English is important for getting the desired positions, it is surprising that not as many respondents use it as much as it was anticipated. Figure 7 shows that more than 52% of the respondents do not use English at the workplace on a regular basis.

Figure 7. English usage at the workplace



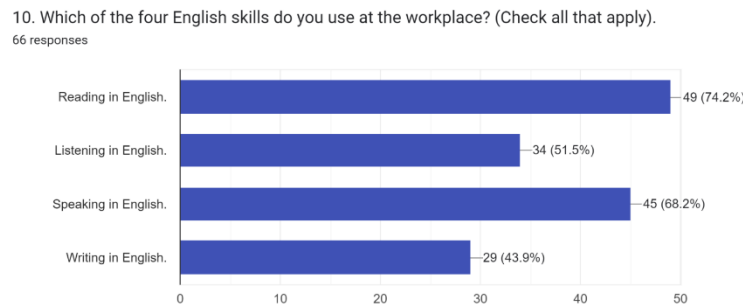
However, those who need English use it daily (44%) or several times a week (45%) and only 10% of the respondents need English a few times a month or less, as can be seen in Figure 8 below. This indicates that there are many positions on the Romanian labor market for which English is an essential skill without which professionals would not be able to perform daily tasks and assignments, and this is true not only for one field of activity, but for all the fields listed in Figure 3.

Figure 8. LSRW English skills frequency of use at the workplace



The research continues to further analyse if the respondents use all four skills (LSRW) in English equally or if there is more prevalence of one over the others. As it can be observed below in Figure 9, according to the 140 respondents, who were allowed to select two options, all four skills are used, but reading in English is the predominant activity (over 74%) and speaking in English comes on a close second place (almost 70%), these two are practiced with more frequency than listening (51%) and writing (nearly 44%) in English.

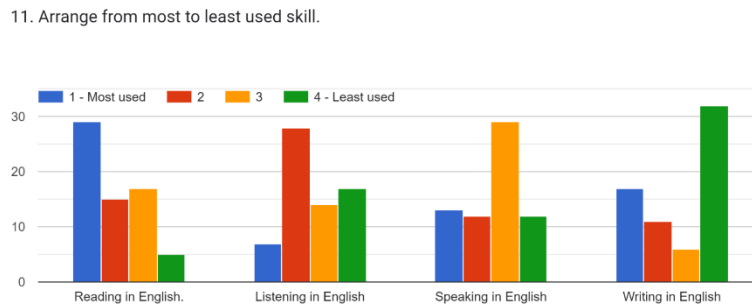
Figure 9. Prevalence of LSRW English skills at the workplace



This indicates that exposure to texts written in English is predominant at the workplace; it can be through emails, agreements, internal provisions, manuals, reports, articles,

notifications, regulations, etc. Reading is an input skill and therefore an intermediate level in terms of grammar and vocabulary is enough for general comprehension of the written material. However, speaking is an output skill and needs a more advanced level of English, and more practice, therefore it needs specialized language classroom activities in order for the student to reach satisfactory performance level. Speaking in English at work usually occurs in face-to-face conversations, meetings, presentations, phone conversations, teleconferences, negotiations, etc. The top of the skills made by respondents to this study from most to least used skill, that are to be taken note of in Figure 10, puts reading first as the most frequently used skill at work, listening is placed second, speaking third and writing comes last according to a great majority of the respondents.

Figure 10. Most to least used LSRW English skills



When it comes to the respondents' confidence in performing the four skills (LSRW), reading is the favourite workplace activity in English for nearly 32% of the respondents, as can be seen in Figure 11. This choice is probably a combination of everyday practice, decreased level of difficulty associated with input skills and more flexibility for timeframe. Surprisingly, 30% consider speaking a skill they master better than listening (over 25%) and writing (12%). The reason behind this preference probably lies in the respondents decreased interest in perfect pronunciation and accuracy in English and more in rendering the message across as the main purpose of communication.

Figure 11. Respondents' most confidence in LSRW English skills usage

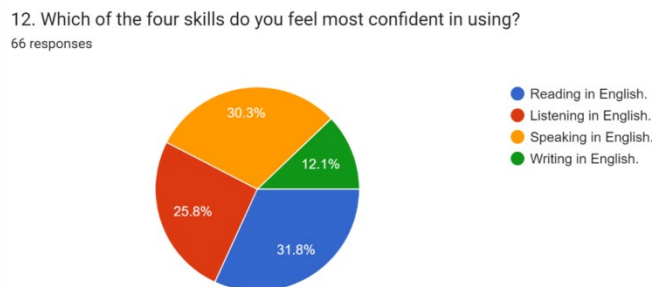
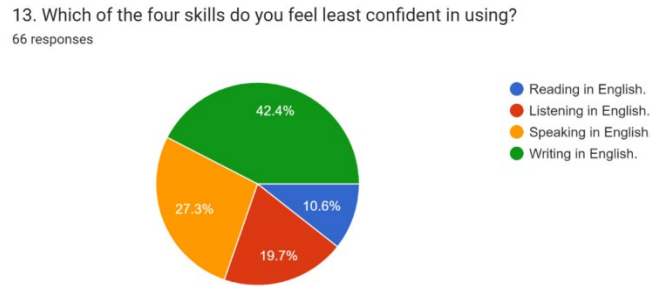


Figure 12 is illustrative for the reversed hierarchy, the respondents are less confident when using English in writing (42%) and speaking, nearly 28%. It is not surprising that respondents find these output skills more difficult; it has already been established by ELT research, that output skills (SW) develop after the input skills (RL) at a slower pace and inferior level of complexity.

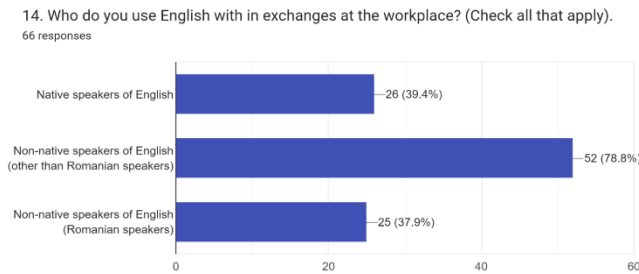
Figure 12. Respondents' least confidence in LSRW English skills usage



It takes time to build and enhance these output skills by constant practice at the workplace and to continue outside it as much as possible. Writing especially through its permanent characteristic puts additional pressure on professionals. Writing texts in English (reports, emails, memos, agreements) that contain grammar and spelling mistakes can reflect poorly on one's professional image, good command of the English language is part of one's skills and abilities on the job. By contrast, speaking is ephemeral, so even if the respondents' fluency is not great, pronunciation is not perfect and grammar and vocabulary may prove problematic, if the message gets across, professional image is unaffected, as long as communication is successful.

Question 14 aims to gather information about the respondents' exchanges at the workplace, being given the possibility to select one or all of the options. Figure 13 indicates that the respondents use English mostly with non-native speakers other than Romanians (almost 80%), confirming once again that English is the lingua franca of the present moment in various fields of activity.

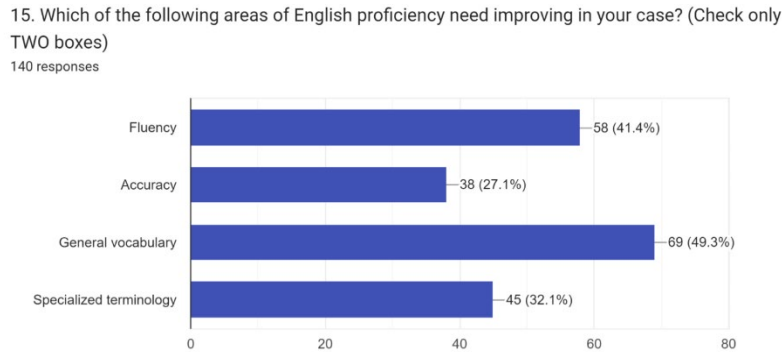
Figure 13. Respondents' exchanges in English at the workplace



Exchanges with native-speakers of English take place approximately as often as interaction in English with Romanian native-speakers. This means that there are sufficient contexts in which Romanian native speakers use English with other Romanian speakers. This type of interaction occurs especially in circumstances requiring collaboration as part of mixed nationality groups. This reinforces the idea that Romanian professionals are integrated into the global professional community. These two types of interaction with native speakers of English and other Romanian remain significant being selected by almost 40% of the respondents. Final Question 15 focuses on which areas of English proficiency need improvement according to the respondents. Even if they are not specialists in English language teaching and their personal perception of linguistic shortcomings may not accurately reflect their actual learning needs, their responses are at least subjectively indicative of their linguistic limitations. According to the responses, which can be seen in

Figure 14, nearly 50% of the subjects consider that their general vocabulary needs improvement and slightly over 40% see fluency as a vulnerable area, 32% feel that their specialized vocabulary is insufficiently developed and only 27% think that they show focus more on their accuracy in English.

Figure 14. Respondents' linguistic areas of improvement in English



The vulnerabilities of the Romanian professionals regarding LSRW development and areas for improvement, highlighted in this study, may be used as guidelines by English language teaching staff, especially at university level, when tailoring their English for special purposes language programs. Details about various strategies to be applied in developing LSRW are analysed by (Nistorescu, 2021) and (Nistorescu, 2022) on two modern Business English teaching coursebooks. The use of these specialized coursebooks in ELT would facilitate fast development of LSRW skills and language areas that Romanian professionals consider faulty. Thus, when entering the labour market, young professional would feel more confident about their skills and abilities in English.

Conclusions

The research has provided the following valuable information about the importance of the English language at the workplace in Romania according to respondents belonging to various age categories, employed full-time, part-time or freelancers, operating in various fields of activity and having different levels of proficiency in the target language:

English is an important employability skill prior to employment either as a job requirement (35%) or as a hiring advantage (26%), in total 61% of respondents indicate that English is an essential soft skill for securing employment.

English is used frequently at the workplace, either daily (45.5%) or several times a week (43.9%), in total almost 90% of the respondents use English as a tool for communication on numerous occasions during their workdays.

As far as foundational skills are concerned, Romanian respondents indicate that all four (LSRW) skills are used in their professional activity, but reading in English followed by speaking in English are significantly more predominant in usage at the workplace than listening or writing in the same language.

In terms of respondents' confidence when using the four skills, reading is viewed as the easiest activity to be performed in English, whereas writing is considered the most difficult in the professional context; however, the responses are not conclusive about which skills between speaking or writing get second and third places in the ranking.

Exchanges with non-native speakers of English (other than Romanians) are twice as frequent as interaction with native speakers of English or with other Romanian speakers, highlighting once again that English is a global language for professional communication. English proficiency needs improvement specially in terms of general vocabulary and fluency, accuracy is ranked last, indicating that respondents are concerned mainly with getting the message across and not being 100% grammatically or phonetically correct. In conclusion, the applicative research on the importance of the English language as an employability skill for the Romanian labour market has shown that undoubtedly English is necessary both for obtaining a job and for performing one's professional activity after getting the desired position. English is frequently used on the job with Romanian respondents being more confident in reading in English but less in writing. Therefore, English remains a skill that needs continuous improvement for the Romanian professional, who has an intermediate or post-intermediate level of proficiency on average, and for whom increasing fluency and specialized terminology is a language enhancement goal.

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