



## UNDEREMPLOYMENT AND WORKERS' DESKILLING: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract

*This paper analyzed the Nigerian labour market experience in relation to underemployment and its linkage to workers' deskilling. The paper adopted the desk review approach by relying on existing data on underemployment from the official records of the accredited government agency (National Bureau of Statistics) saddled with the responsibility of keeping such data. Other supportive data were generated from the International Labour Organization (ILO). The secondary data (which are purely descriptive) from the official records of this agency and international institution were presented, analyzed and used as the basis for explanation of the phenomenon of underemployment and its linkage to workers' deskilling. The result showed that out of the 72.90% workers who were employed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2020, 28.57% were underemployed. Another 22.8% represent the underemployed workers out of 66.72% of people engaged in working activities in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2020. The paper concludes that a significant percentage of workers in the Nigerian labour market are in jobs that under-utilize their training, skill and technical know-how, and that underemployment as observed in the Nigerian labour market is linked to workers' deskilling. However, the paper recommends that the labour market operators should embark on retraining and reskilling the affected workers. This could serve as a panacea to deskilling, especially in the short-run.*

**Keywords:** Underemployment, Workers' deskilling, Labour market, Skill underutilization, Nigeria

### Introduction

The analysis of Nigerian labour market presents unique features which affect the functioning of the market. Among these features is the issue of underemployment – a phenomenon which has generated and is still generating concern among various operators in the labour market. The growing unemployment rate which stands at 33% according to the data from National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] (2020) has resulted to job seekers taking up jobs

below their training, skills and experience. Again, workers who work more than 20 hours but less than 40 hours a week and workers who engaged in activities that underutilize their skills, time and educational qualification (Ikeje & Anwural-Islam, 2020) are victims of underemployment. Specifically, the underemployment rate among young people (15-34yrs) in Nigeria dropped to 20.2% in second quarter of 2020 from 25.7% in

third quarter of 2018. The underemployment data of second quarter of 2020 showed that Zamfara State recorded the highest rate (43.7%), while Anambra State had the lowest rate (17%) (NBS, 2020).

The National Bureau of Statistics for over a decade now has demonstrated that underemployment is part of the features of the Nigerian labour market and is often treated alongside unemployment. While attention has been paid on unemployment, it appears that underemployment does not attract equal attention. However, the analysis of the functioning of the labour market using unemployment criteria does not reflect the true nature of the market. This is very instructive especially given various programmes of government aimed at tackling unemployment, which are believed will lower the rate of unemployment and ensure the effectiveness of the labour market. However, the observed scenario shows that unemployment is not just the only problem confronting the effectiveness of the labour market, rather underemployment is part of the problem. While unemployment is a major issue especially in the developing countries such as Nigeria, there are still large numbers of job holders who put-in fewer man hours, are paid lower wages, under-utilize their skill and as a result could not produce optimally or engage the full-capacity of their skills (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2003). Just like the case of Nigeria, most of the people who work fewer hours or utilize less of their skills see those jobs as temporary and transitory, but many often end up spending more time than they originally anticipated on the job resulting to loss of skills which they acquired through education and training. Most of these workers operate within the informal labour market (informal sector) where they are involved in activities below their skill level, which constrain them from exploring their full potential for higher productivity.

In addition, government effort over the years in creating jobs have not necessarily resulted to availability of jobs requiring higher skill. Most government programmes in this regard could be described as poverty alleviation programmes and entrepreneurial support programmes such as N-Power, Market Money etc. (which are part of government's social protection programmes) are

designed to encourage self-employment. The beneficiaries of these schemes operate in the informal sector where income is low and level of skill requirement is equally low. The challenge therefore is that most of the beneficiaries with higher skills operating in these schemes are faced with the tendency of being deskilled. Although there has been growth in the informal and service sectors in recent times, the growth does not translate to jobs requiring higher skill (Ikeije & Anwarul-Islam, 2020). Thus, high level manpower that are being produced by the universities and other institutions of higher learning often see the opportunities in the informal sector as safety net to cushion the effect of unemployment, even though most of the available jobs require skill below their educational qualification and training. This scenario depicts the situation of the Nigerian labour market where workers who are underemployed are not quite different from the unemployed since the causes of both unemployment and underemployment are similar and the victims tend to exhibit similar behavioural traits (ILO, 2003).

Furthermore, the similarity between unemployment and underemployment is that they have the capacity of eroding the skills of their victims, but strict unemployment figure will not recognize those who are underemployed – the justification being that at least they have something doing. However, this defeats the International Labour Conference Employment Policy Convention (No. 122) which was adopted in 1964. The major focus of the convention was to encourage economic growth and development, increase standard of living, ensure availability of the needed human resources and eliminate unemployment, and underemployment. The major thrust of the policy is to encourage ILO members states to promote “full, productive and freely chosen employment” by making sure that there is: (i) full employment for all job seekers; (ii) work that employs the full productive capacity of the workers; and (iii) the freedom for workers to choose the kind of work they want, where they possess the right training and skill that would enable them function at the optimum level. The second and third objectives apply strictly to the situation of underemployment. But the question still remains: to

what extent has Nigeria as an ILO member state complied with this policy in her labour legislations and actual implementation of the Employment Policy Convention (No. 122)? This question is important given that the rate of underemployment continues to rise, partly due to poor economic policy implementation that is incapable of stimulating the kind of growth that will ensure full and productive employment, and partly due to labour shading resulting from redundancy, business closures and downsizing.

Thus, the underutilization of skills which result in low productivity and loss of skill (deskilling) appear to be the major concern associated with underemployment since this has a direct implication for economic growth. Although there is no official record regarding the rate of skill loss arising from underemployment in Nigeria, the obvious is that underemployment accounts for low productivity, low wage and inability of affected workers to secure a decent living. On this premise, the paper seeks to analyze the Nigerian labour market experience in relation to underemployment and its linkage to workers deskilling within the labour market.

## **Conceptual Review**

### ***Underemployment***

Underemployment is part of the features of the Nigerian Labour market and is often analyzed alongside unemployment. The difference is that underemployment focuses on persons who are already in employment. Taking in isolation the NBS (2018) described underemployment as a situation which occurs when one works less than full-time hours, which is 40 hours, but work at least 20 hours on average a week and /or when one works full time but is engaged in an activity that underutilizes one's skills, time and educational qualifications. Underemployed persons are those whose work are below their training, skill and preferences, especially when measured against hours of work and level of productivity (ILO, 2003). Following the ILO Employment Policy Convention, workers under this condition are regarded as not reaching full employment level in terms of time they spend at work and their level of production (ILO, 2003).

Underemployment as an element of the labour market can be measured using two major

approaches: the labour supply approach and the labour demand approach. In the labour supply approach, workers tend to make comparison between the conditions of their present work in relation to their present capabilities and desires with another work condition they find more desirable and are ready to take-up. Following this rational comparison, a worker can be said to be underemployed if he is ready and capable to transform his present work circumstance to enable him put in additional hours in another work, or engage his abilities meaningfully, or make more money for each hour, or take up job in an organization that has higher productive capacity, etc., notwithstanding the current working hours or his productive capabilities in his current job situation (ILO, 2003). This situation also relates to multiple job holding (also known as moonlighting) whereby a worker is willing and able to take up more than one job as a result of insufficient or inadequate utilization of skill in the current job and to augment low productivity or low income in the current job. On the other hand, the labour demand approach is more like a theoretical model about workers' possible capabilities and desires. It involves comparing the present level of skill use against a benchmark of skill level the worker will possibly be able to provide if there is an improvement in his work situation. Therefore, those workers whose present level of skill use did not match the established standard were considered as underemployed (ILO, 2003).

However, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians in its 16<sup>th</sup> ICLS resolution in 1998 provided internationally standardized conceptual framework for measuring underemployment. It provided guidelines for the conceptual definitions and operational definitions of two measures of underemployment. These measures categorized workers in line with the nature of their work within a given time period, such as a week. The two measures relate to: time-related underemployment, and particular types of inadequate employment situations. Time-related underemployment refer to employment arrangements where the working hours of workers are not enough for the workers. In this case, it deals with workers who are ready and also possess the ability to work more than the total

number of hours spent in all jobs they are presently working on during the period under consideration and who work, the period under consideration, less aggregate hours in all their jobs than an established limit (ILO, 2003). What is critical in this measure is the readiness to engage extra time, the readiness to come to work the extra time, and having worked fewer hours than an established limit relating to hours of work. On the other hand, particular types of inadequate employment situations cover workers who, during a short period under consideration, were ready to transform their present work arrangement or to effect changes to the activities they carry-out in the course of their work and/or situation, for any of a set of reasons informed by national situations (ILO, 2003). What is common in these two measures is that both reflects under-utilization of workers' skills and both are defined in terms of a substitutable work arrangement in which the worker is ready and present to work.

### ***Incidence of Underemployment in the Informal Sector***

Conceptually, in Nigeria, the informal sector refers to any business activity or means of revenue that is not properly regulated by government or other public authorities, such as businesses that are not legally registered and do not keep detailed financial records, and workers who work without basic social or legal protection or benefits (Bank of Industry, 2018). The informal sector in Nigeria has experienced growth in the last two decades (Ikeije et al., 2016) and greater part of this growth is found among the service providers. At the same time, the level of employment generation has equally increased in this sector. According to a 2018 ILO estimate, informal employment accounts for 93% of total employment in Nigeria, with 95% of women working in the informal sector compared to 90% of men (ILO, 2018). However, the characteristics of jobs and activities in this sector conform to the features of underemployment. Some of these features are low wage, temporary, part-time and self-employment that do not guarantee full utilization of skill and time. According to the World Bank (2015) many Nigerians work, although it is mostly in low-paying jobs. Work options are more

plentiful in the informal economy, and they may pay little or nothing. (Ikeije & Anwarul-Islam, 2020).

Although underemployment exists in the formal sector, it does appear that it is equally contributing to the increasing size of informal sector underemployment as many underemployed in the formal economy find solace in the informal sector (Distinguin et al., 2016). Because this sector provides an alternative to many skilled workers who could not secure a full-time job in the formal sector, the workers have no choice than to accept the available offers which often under-utilize their education, skill and time. The under-utilization of skill, education and training arises from the fact that most of the activities within this sector require little or no training and therefore do not provide highly skilled workers the opportunities for full utilization of their skills, training and education. Common examples of activities in the informal economy are street traders, subsistence farmers, small scale manufacturers, services providers (such as hairdressers, fashion designers, event managers, caterers, private taxi drivers, carpenters, bricklayers, dry cleaners, photographers etc.). Since this sector is largely unregulated, entry is quite easy thus making it the easiest option for most unemployed skilled workers. However, the major challenge is the likelihood of the skilled workers losing some of the skills they have acquired with the intention of utilizing in the formal sector employment or in a full-time employment that would require such level of skill.

In addition, employers operating in the informal sector (whether in service provision or manufacturing) often recruit skilled workers to run small informal businesses offering low wages. This practice is possible due to lack of regulation that would have ensured compliance with minimum wage policy and benchmarking of wages based on market rate. This equally explains why many employees in the informal sector keep multiple jobs in order to augment the meagre income they make from the primary job. Although multiple job holding is not only a feature of the informal economy in Nigeria, as it is also an element of the formal economy, it is argued that it is prevalent in the informal economy since many skilled job holders in the informal sector are underemployed in terms of

skills and time and therefore are willing and available to take up extra work.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The incidence of underemployment and its relation to workers' deskilling can be explained using the human capital theory. Human capital theory can be traced to the early work of Becker (1964). The basic tenet of the human capital theory is that education and training raise the skill level of workers, thereby making workers with adequate education and training to be more productive than those who do not have such skill. This implies that a person with more education and training is capable of providing a greater quantity of meaningful productive effort than someone with less education and training (McConnel et al., 2009). Human capital theory is of the view that a higher degree of education and training leads to higher income; the more knowledge, skill, and talent you have, the more likely you are to find a better job (Blair, 2012). Therefore, a worker that possess higher skill acquired through higher education and training will be more productive when placed on a job that requires equivalent or proportionate skill, otherwise the worker might find himself in a job that underutilizes his abilities, time and educational training. Underutilization of skills which is synonymous with underemployment in the long run creates a condition of loss of skill - deskilling (Nwakanma & Onyeonuru, 2021).

Although, it is argued that increase in human capital is linked to performance (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011), however, excess human capital may also have a negative impact on the work outcomes (Rehman et al., 2021). This is because underutilization of skills (underemployment), according to this theory, occurs when education and training (human capital) are not adequately proportionate to the outcomes from the job such as salary (Buchel, 2001). This often results to voluntary labour turnover or the willingness and availability of the worker to take up extra jobs to augment income or complete the hour for a full work day. Studies by Erodgan & Bauer (2009) have shown that workers whose productive capability are not fully utilized may likely leave the organization and seek jobs that match their skills and training

elsewhere. This decision comes as a way of resolving the conflict created by the mismatch between education and training (Skill) and job description. This is also typical of the feature of the Nigerian labour market (especially the informal labour market) where individuals continue to improve upon their skills through education and professional training with the anticipation of changing to a suitable job that match their skills, but are stuck in the job below their skill due to lack of opportunities arising from the inability of the government to create more jobs. The high rate of unemployment means that many workers, though with higher education and training, resort to self-employment in areas where their skills may not play a major role or where their skills are underutilized thereby deskilling them.

### **Methodology**

In analyzing the phenomenon of underemployment with its attendant workers' deskilling in the Nigeria labour market, this paper adopted the integrative desk review approach which involved systematic search of official reports relevant to the topic. The researchers relied on existing data on underemployment from the official records of accredited government agencies saddled with the responsibility of keeping such data. This method allowed for easy summary of the existing empirical data in the records of these agencies, which also created room for easy interpretation and comprehension of underemployment. Therefore, the main data on underemployment in Nigeria were generated from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Other supporting data were generated from the International Labour Organization (ILO). These secondary data from the official records of these agencies were presented and used as the basis for analysis and explanation of the incidence of underemployment. Basically, the data generated for the purpose of this paper were purely descriptive.

### **Empirical Data on Underemployment in Nigerian Labour Market**

Labour force statistics have consistently reflected the growing underemployment rate alongside growing unemployment rate. When taken in isolation, the underemployment rate among age

group 55-64 recorded the highest (25.7 %) in the last quarter of 2020. The age group 45-54 came in second with 24.4%, while those with the lowest underemployment rate were the age group 15-42 with 19.8% (NBS, 2020). Underemployment rates within the states in Nigeria showed that Benue State recorded the highest (43.5%), while Lagos State

recorded the lowest (4.5%) in the last quarter of 2020 (NBS, 2020). However, the general outlook shows that there has been a consistent rise in the underemployment rate from the fourth quarter of 2014 to the fourth quarter of 2020 as presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Underemployment Rate from 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2014 to 4th Quarter 2020**

YEAR	QUARTER 1 (%)	QUARTER 2 (%)	QUARTER 3 (%)	QUARTER 4 (%)
2014	-	-	-	17.9
2015	16.6	18.3	17.4	18.7
2016	19.1	19.3	19.7	21.0
2017	20.4	21.2	21.2	20.5
2018	20.2	20.1	20.1	-
2019	NA	NA	NA	NA
2020	NA	28.57	NA	22.8

*Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2018, 2019 & 2021).*

From Table 1, the underemployment rate increased from 16.6% in the first quarter of 2015 to 18.7% in the fourth quarter of 2015. In the first quarter of 2016, the underemployment rate stood at 19.1% but rose to 21.0% in the fourth quarter of the same year. In 2017, the situation seemed not to have changed as the underemployment rate still remained at 20.5% at the end of 2017. Although, this scenario remained the same in 2018, the highest rate was recorded in the second quarter of 2020, which stood at 28.57%. The underemployment rates in the second and fourth quarters (28.57% and 22.8%) of 2020 are quite significant when compared to the overall employment rate which stood at 66.70% in the last quarter of 2020. In other words, a significant proportion of those considered to be employed are in jobs that underutilize their skills, time and educational qualification.

**Table 2: Time-Related Underemployed from 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2014 to 4th Quarter 2020**

YEAR	QUARTER 1 (‘000)	QUARTER 2 (‘000)	QUARTER 3 (‘000)	QUARTER 4 (‘000)
2014	NA	NA	NA	13.05
2015	12.21	13.57	13.21	14.42
2016	15.02	10.64	11.20	11.55
2017	16.84	17.68	18.03	17.70
2018	17.80	17.99	18.22	NA
2019	NA	NA	NA	NA
2020	NA	22.94	NA	15.92

*Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2018, 2019 & 2021).*

When considered from the time-related underemployment, the data in Table 2 show that a significant proportion of the underemployed belong to those who work fewer hours in the job than a particular selected threshold. As stated earlier, time-related underemployment refers to employment arrangements where the working hours of workers are not enough for the workers. It deals with workers who are ready and also

possess the ability to work more than the total number of hours spent in all jobs they are presently working on during the period under consideration and who work, during the period under consideration, less aggregate hours in all their jobs than an established limit (ILO, 2003). Therefore, the data covered workers who are able to work above 20 hours but less than 40 hours a week. The figure of those in time-related underemployment rose from 13.05million in the last quarter of 2014 to 22.94million in the second quarter of 2020. This is quite a significant increase and could be due to non-standard employment arrangement characterized by part-time work, temporary work and contract employment, which have become part of the features of the Nigerian labour market.

**Table 3: Underemployment Rate by Gender from 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2014 to 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2020**

YEAR	MALE				FEMALE			
	QTR 1 (%)	QTR 2 (%)	QTR 3 (%)	QTR 4 (%)	QTR 1 (%)	QTR 2 (%)	QTR 3 (%)	QTR 4 (%)
2014	14.7	14.9	12.9	15.0	20.6	20.9	18.2	21.1
2015	13.9	15.4	14.6	15.7	19.6	21.6	20.4	22.0
2016	16.2	16.4	16.7	17.9	22.2	22.4	22.9	24.2
2017	17.7	20.4	20.5	19.2	23.2	22.0	21.8	21.8
2018	18.2	15.4	15.4	NA	22.5	25.9	25.9	NA
2020	NA	NA	NA	21.8	NA	NA	NA	24.2

*Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2017, 2018, 2019 & 2021).*

In terms of underemployment by gender, Table 3 shows that the female gender has a higher underemployment rate than male in Nigeria from the first quarter of 2014 to the last quarter of 2020. In the first quarter of 2014, the underemployment rate for the male was 14.7%, while female underemployment rate was 20.6%. In the last quarter of 2020, the underemployment rate for the male was 21.8%, while that of the female stood at 24.2%. The reason could be that more women are more likely to face difficulty in getting full-time job that requires putting in 40 hours and above in a week since they combine household jobs with other jobs, hence they take up part-time jobs, temporary jobs or self-employment that underutilizes their qualification, skill and time.

**Table 4: Underemployment Rate by Place of Residence from 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2014 to 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2020**

YEAR	URBAN				RURAL			
	QTR 1 (%)	QTR 2 (%)	QTR 3 (%)	QTR 4 (%)	QTR 1 (%)	QTR 2 (%)	QTR 3 (%)	QTR 4 (%)
2014	9.1	9.2	8.0	9.3	21.1	21.4	18.6	21.6
2015	8.6	9.5	9.0	9.7	20.0	22.1	21.0	22.6
2016	9.5	9.6	9.8	10.5	23.5	23.8	24.4	25.8
2017	10.2	8.8	9.0	13.8	25.0	26.4	26.9	23.2
2018	14.5	15.5	13.7	NA	23.0	22.3	22.8	NA
2020	NA	NA	NA	16.2	NA	NA	NA	26.9

*Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2017, 2018, 2019 & 2021).*

Comparatively, the underemployment rate by place of residence between urban and rural areas in the fourth quarter of 2017 in Table 4 shows urban areas have lower (9.1%) underemployment rate in the first quarter of 2014 than rural areas with higher rate (21.1%). The underemployment rate maintained the same trajectory till the last quarter of 2020 with the urban areas having a lower rate of 16.2% against the rural areas with 26.9%. This could be said to be expected since most of the employment opportunities in the rural areas are

seasonal and as such may not require full-employment capacity. The rural areas are agrarian with pockets of artisans and self-employment in small scale businesses. These jobs require unskilled or semi-skilled labour and may not require full-time employment of 40 hours and above in a week as the standard criteria for measuring full employment. As a result, if rural farmers just work on their farms during the planting and harvesting seasons and do nothing else, they will be considered underemployed (NBS, 2018).

### **Linkage between Underemployment and Workers' Deskilling**

Statistical evidence so far has shown underemployment as a component of the Nigerian labour market. However, the analysis of underemployment also reflects to a very large extent the phenomenon of workers' deskilling. Deskilling involves a decline in the skill content of a job over time, as well as an increase in the number of persons working in lower-skilled employment. Concerns about deskilling are justified in bringing awareness to occasions where productive capacity, with regards to education and experience, skills and know-how, is not being put to good use (Neiterman & Bourgeault 2015; Parutis, 2014; Trevena, 2013). It is often used to describe a situation of underemployment where workers work in positions that do not require a higher degree even when they have higher certificate. Just as underemployment describes workers' deskilling, the result of deskilling also results to underutilization of human capital, and of worker's abilities, and know-how (which is a situation of underemployment). Although deskilling as originally argued is a process of labour control through the implementation of scientific management which routinizes work and makes it impossible for workers to utilize intellectual skills thereby relying largely on managerial instructions to do their jobs (Braverman, 1974). Deskilling, on the other hand, could be the outcome of underemployment, which results to the performance of work that is considered less intellectually and emotionally gratifying. Specifically, the results from Table 1 showed that underemployment rates in the second and fourth

quarters (28.57% and 22.8%) of 2020 are quite significant when compared to the overall employment rate which stood at 66.70% in the last quarter of 2020. This underemployment rate is a direct explanation of the percentage of workers whose training, skills and technical know-how might have been eroded by under-capacity utilization. Even in terms of time-related underemployment, a large number (22.94million) as at second quarter of 2020 still suggest that full capacity of the workers was not engaged in full productive activities. For those who could not find extra jobs to engage the unused hours, they risked the possibility of losing their skills. This scenario has also been found among skilled or highly skilled migrant workers who took up jobs in other careers (often requiring low skill) that attract low pay and status and ended up losing their skills (Stariton et al., 2017). Especially for migrant workers, structural barriers at the host country such as recognition of educational certification and training subject the migrant workers to underemployment which often lead to deskilling.

Thus, depending on the nature of organization, under-utilizing workers' skill-set, experience, and competence is a further dimension of deskilling (Korzeniewska & Erdal, 2021). This position also agrees with the finding of Adegami (2013) that underemployed workers have jobs that are not challenging, do not allow them to maximize their educational training, experience, and abilities, are underpaid, and have reduced job satisfaction. Amadeo (2021) also maintained that when underemployment persists for a long time, it results to workers' inability to improve on the knowledge of the job through learning while doing the job. Being that they have been deskilled, they may not find it easy to go back to their former job or vocation without further training with its attendant cost implications. Some who are unable to retrain may scale down their life-style and accept long-term underemployment.

### **Conclusion**

The available data on the incidence of underemployment in Nigeria has shown that greater percentage of those regarded as employed are rather underemployed. In other words, majority of the jobs

in the Nigerian labour market are jobs that do not require skills or higher skills and training and full-time engagement. These jobs that do not require full utilization of training, skills and technical know-how of the job holders exist in the formal sector as well as the informal sector, but it appears to be higher in the informal sector because of the unregulated nature of this sector. However, in terms of demographic distribution, underemployment is more prevalent among the female gender than the male. In the same respect, the rural areas appear to present features of underemployment than the urban areas. However, evidence has shown that workers' whose training, skills and technical know-how are underutilized are faced with the danger of losing the skills they have acquired over the years. Thus, the paper concludes that underemployment as observed in the Nigerian labour market is linked to workers' deskilling. Being that many people are already victims of deskilling via underemployment in the Nigerian labour market, and upgrading the available jobs may not be feasible, at least in the short-run, it is recommended that the labour market operators should embark on retraining and reskilling the affected workers. This could serve as a panacea to deskilling, especially in the short-run.

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