Aboriginal Workplace Integration in Northern Canada

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ABSTRACT

Economic development requires skilled labour yet Indigenous people face persistent educational and labour market challenges across northern Canada. Systemic problems are widely known and relate to political funding cycles, short-term programming, and the lack of collaboration among key stakeholders. Such barriers are not only consistent across northern territorial and provincial jurisdictions, but they are widely known and well-documented. Research and stakeholder interviews suggest that barriers to education and successful transition to the labour market are a result of disjointed and short-term educational and skills-training programs that do not recognize the importance of fully supporting the learner, their families, and their communities. This paper identifies and examines best practices aimed to close the gap between education and skills training to meet successful long-term employment goals. Specifically, we suggest that using a holistic approach to training could help to advance economic development goals that promote Aboriginal participation in the market economy.

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INTRODUCTION

As economies evolve, the labour market requires increasingly more skilled workers, yet in many markets Indigenous people are not represented in terms of equal participation. According to Fang and Gunderson (2015) Indigenous peoples fall into what they describe as a "vulnerable" group, which is any group that is disproportionally and persistently excluded from the labour market for longer than others. This gap in employment then leads to social and economic exclusion making it difficult to maintain and increase overall wellbeing.

Governments, industry, and Indigenous communities have invested heavily in closing this gap through workforce training, upgrading, professional development, and employment-based skills preparation, with the shared goal of encouraging greater Aboriginal participation in the market economy. Northern institutions, often with southern partners, work with communities, companies and individuals to take advantage of workforce and training opportunities.

Many agencies have produced limited circulation reports on the efficacy of their programs. Experience in many northern communities shows weak transitions from work skills and transition programs into the paid workforce (Bruce et al., 2012). Furthermore, more than two decades of preferential hiring and on-the-job training initiatives have produced more jobs and more Aboriginal employees but without substantial shifts in the general patterns of low-skilled work and economic prosperity (Luffman & Sussman, 2007).

While employment rates have risen for Aboriginal people — closing the gap from 19.1% in 2001 to 15.8% in 2006 — employment gaps (the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employment percentages) still remain and are more prevalent in the North and on reserves. Many Aboriginal people living in the North are, at present, under-qualified for the best-paid and highest-demand jobs in the resource economy (Gibb & Walker, 2011). Efforts to catch up have not been overly successful. Industry employers are increasingly seeking employees with strong essential skills including cognitive abilities, the ability to solve problems, and the capacity to think critically. Other key skill sets include teamwork and collaboration, and oral and written communication. To more fully integrate northern Aboriginal people in the labour market, fundamental changes to training and education are necessary (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2013). The juxtaposition of these influences means that employment preparation is increasingly important, as workforce participation rates in the North remain well below national averages. In this paper, we examine the barriers and best practices to skills training and labour market transition programs with a focus on Northern Canada. The North, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the Provincial North or the northern parts of the provinces, from Labrador to northern British Columbia, and the Territorial North — Nunavut, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

METHODOLOGY

This research took place in three phases: an initial scan of the academic and grey literature on Aboriginal skills training programs, education and workforce development programs; a jurisdictional scan of government, industry and Aboriginal-led programs in six case study regions (Northern Ontario, Northern Manitoba, Northern Saskatchewan, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon); and stakeholder interviews to confirm findings in the literature.

TABLE 1
Stakeholder Interview Distribution

Region	Number of Representatives
Northern Ontario	6
Northern Manitoba	9
Northern Saskatchewan	18[1]
Yukon	10
Northwest Territories	5
Nunavut	7
National	4
Total	59

Note:
1. Members of the research team were invited to a workshop on Aboriginal skills training programs, which included representatives from major mining companies, postsecondary institutions, and government.

We travelled to each of the six case study regions throughout August and September 2015 to meet with representatives from government, industry, educational institutions, and Aboriginal organizations that were engaged with skills training, education and/or workforce development programs. We met with 59 stakeholders as listed in Table 1. Meetings were instrumental in identifying gaps, trends, and scholarly and professional analyses that have shaped current programming in the Canadian North.

BARRIERS TO ABORIGINAL SKILLS TRAINING, EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

There is an extensive body of academic literature on Aboriginal education and its challenges in northern contexts, much of which is focused on the quality of primary (K-12) and post-secondary (college/university) delivery (Preston et al., 2012; Mackay & Mcintosh, 2012), including culturally relevant programming (Wilson, 2004; Tuck et al., 2014), jurisdictional issues surrounding quality of on-reserve delivery (Turner & Thompson, 2015; Calver, 2015), and a wide range of socio-economic issues including absenteeism and graduation rates (McFarlane & Marker, 2012; Janosz et al., 2011; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012).

While much less academic literature exists on northern workforce development and employment, or skills training strategies, there is a growing body of government and non-government authored reports and studies on Aboriginal inclusion and workforce development. This literature, in conjunction with stakeholder interviews revealed a number of barriers and challenges to successful skills training and workforce development.

Socio-economic Issues and Supports

The literature and more so, our interviews, revealed several consistent barriers, many of which are related. The most prevalent are listed below and suggest that a wide range of

socio-economic barriers to Aboriginal skills training and post-secondary educational attainment are highly varied and complex. In many cases, personal and social issues preclude learners from successfully entering or completing programs. The top three issues revealed in the interview process were related to childcare, substance abuse, and remoteness.

One of the primary socio-economic barriers is childcare. Taking time to attend courses often means having to leave home and with it, family and community support, making such opportunities difficult to embrace, particularly over the long term (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010; Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2013; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013; Abele & Delic, 2014). Family responsibilities also include care for family members other than children (Brunnen, 2004).

Because many educational and training programs focus on preparation for employment in the industrial sector, learners are required to maintain sobriety not only during training, but afterwards while on the job often undergoing random drug tests. This is particularly crucial when it comes to operating heavy equipment common in the resource sector. However, McColeman (2014) and interview respondents identify personal barriers including, alcoholism, addictions, poverty and low self-esteem as well as having a criminal record as serious impediments to employment. Often, training programs and industrial jobs require a criminal record check, which provides additional hurdles to acceptance into skills training programs and subsequent entry into the workforce (Brunnen, 2004; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013; Abele & Delic, 2014).

Another concern is that those most in need of skills training often live in remote communities, with limited connectivity (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a), higher transportation costs and fewer work opportunities, and lower rates of having a valid driver's license (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013; Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a). One of the most widespread findings in terms of barriers was the lack of support including: insufficient financial resources, poor academic support in the way of tutors, role models, and mentors (Abele & Delic, 2014; Canadian Labour Business Centre, 2005; Carter & Polevychok, 2004).

Essential Skills and Educational Attainment

An overarching theme in the literature, and in our discussions, was the importance of essential skills, and the lack thereof. Life Literacy Canada has identified nine essential skills including reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use and continuous learning. These skills are "needed for the workplace ... [and] are used in every job to varying degrees and at different levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change."[1] Accountability and responsibility were also articulated during the interview process as being essential to training, and job acquisition and retention.

Language has long been identified as a barrier to training (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014) and encompasses reading, writing and document use. Necessary skills within the industrial sector include numeracy and computer use, and an under-

[1] See ABC Life Literacy Canada regarding essential skills, p. 1 (http://abclifeliteracy.ca/nine-essential-skills).

standing of how to work collaboratively and think critically (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2004; Construction Sector Council and Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada, 2005). Basic skills are often taught at home and in primary and secondary school, but with lower educational attainment, and lower participation rates in post-secondary institutions these basic skills are often lacking (Abele & Delic, 2014; Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015b).

Skills assessment has proven to be problematic when skills are not certified or officially recognized (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010). Although many Aboriginal adults have not completed high school, they have gained life skills through work and life experience, but require grade 12 as a minimum to be considered for some jobs. Furthermore, the skills taught in secondary school and beyond are often not connected or related to job-specific skills (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015b). According to Simon (2013), institutions often teach irrelevant skills, yet cannot predict the skills that will be needed in the future. Additionally, skills such as teamwork and collaboration gained through traditional Aboriginal activities or knowledge are often not recognized in spite of being valuable in the workplace (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015b). Stakeholders also reported a lack of workplace readiness skills including knowledge about punctuality, accountability, absenteeism, and requesting time off for example. In addition, many people spoke about the need for employer readiness in building Aboriginal cultural awareness and an understanding of unique HR needs.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem affecting skills training and workforce development in the North is educational attainment, especially high school. As the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2013) points out, the focus on education and training is largely meaningless for people who do not matriculate. Hodgkins (2015) agrees that training is ineffective unless the K-12 system is improved. This issue is multi-faceted and includes quality of K-12 education, especially on reserve, underfunding, access to education, high turnover among teachers, the intergenerational trauma associated with residential schools, and little hope that a high school degree will lead to employment. McColeman (2014) echoed the concern about poor quality of on-reserve education, arguing that a high-school diploma from on-reserve schools often does not provide the essential skills needed to pursue post-secondary education, skills training or to enter the labour market.

Inadequate Programming, Assessments, Monitoring and Funding

An important barrier to successful skills training is the lack of programming available within small, remote communities. Key elements lacking included employment-specific training that would lead to gainful employment both in and beyond communities, culturally relevant programming and teaching methods, and instructors with knowledge of local needs and challenges (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013; Abele & Delic, 2014; Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a).

Program opportunities in smaller centres have been limited because of the high cost of delivery due to remoteness, low enrolment, the need for highly technical labs and equipment (e.g., machinery used in the mining industry), the lack of meaningful collaboration among stakeholders, poor infrastructure, and the lack of funding for community and individual sup-

port necessary for local delivery (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a). Additionally, individuals are often unaware of existing programs and lack the support to successfully navigate the search and enrolment processes. Perceived barriers regarding program availability and opportunities were also noted specifically for apprenticeship programming (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2004).

Another barrier cited by regional stakeholders was related to the constantly shifting federal policy environment. Essentially, just as organizations were getting familiar with a new funding program, it would be eliminated or shift focus. The literature and stakeholders recognize the fact that Aboriginal labour market development is a long-term initiative that requires long-term funding and programming to match. Hodgkins (2015) found in his study of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP) program in the Northwest Territories that funding was periodic and resulted in a fragmented short-term delivery that led to programs between employers and agreement holders.

Systemic Issues

One of the most commonly identified barriers was the lack of understanding and coordination among different agencies and service providers. Often, federal programs are targeted at providing employment opportunities where the problem has been identified as high unemployment or low participation in the labour market. The prescribed solution is to match people with jobs, or train them for specific employment opportunities. However, unemployment in many northern locations is a symptom of larger problems (e.g., social and personal challenges; limited economic opportunities) that require unique and innovative solutions that are more holistic. So, while funding is provided for education, it is often inadequate in terms of the individual and programmatic supports required for success. Overall, as discussed in many of the categories above, removal of most barriers require long-term approaches, flexibility, and support (Simon, 2013).

Often related to a mismatch in programming is the lack of collaboration in terms of development and delivery, funding, and long-term support (Abele & Delic, 2014). Programs that do not include all stakeholders at the table often result in failed initiatives; primarily for those that do not have employers and communities engaged. Apprenticeship programs are frequently offered where there are not enough opportunities to fill hours, or journeypersons to mentor trainees (Canadian Labour Business Centre, 2005). Changing regulations can diminish the chance of success for skills certification providing more stringent rules and steps required in the process (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2004). Finally, barriers to employment arising from union regulations are often cited as an impediment to employment in spite of workers having the necessary skills and credentials (Brunnen, 2003b). For example, unions often secure labour agreements leaving those who are not members of the union with no possibility of employment, and new local companies without the opportunity to compete for bids. Similarly, because the North is heavily reliant on natural resource extraction where the economy can follow a boom/bust cycle, temporary unemployment makes it difficult to remain engaged in the workforce.

Coordination of benefits and programs beyond skills training is also important. There is a "lack of coordination between funding sources, delivery agencies, training institutions, and local housing authorities" (Canadian Labour Business Centre, 2005: 5). Additionally, significant disincentives arise when people are forced to make trade-offs and must permanently or temporarily give up support related to housing or social assistance when they relocate or

register for training (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a). In such cases, the lack of understanding of program benefits and outcomes results in a lack of motivation and often dissuades people from engaging in training or pursuing opportunities that could be beneficial to improving wellbeing in the long term.

BEST PRACTICES

While the barriers identified above are not surprising there are many practices that have proven to be successful, particularly when combined and used over time. In most cases, best practices have arisen as a direct result of addressing challenges and barriers. Problem solving also requires unique approaches to the myriad situations occurring across different jurisdictions. Solutions and best practices largely run parallel to the barriers and challenges discussed above.

Social Supports to Complement Program Delivery

By far the most important element to successful programming is support: for the individual learner, to overcome socio-economic barriers, and support from and for the community. Programs that recognize the range of personal and social barriers and that provide direct, and often one-on-one support to individuals have proven more successful where individual learners have been better able to navigate skills training programs and to ultimately secure long-term employment (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a; Government of Saskatchewan, 2007). Additionally, focusing on the individual and the community collectively is more likely to promote sustainable outcomes (Brunnen, 2003a). Moral, financial and logistical support can alleviate burdens that impede individuals from finishing courses (Carter & Polevychok, 2004).

Support networks that focus not only on the individual learner, but on building community capacity and relationships based on trust have shown more success (Atlantic Canada Opportunities, 2003). Finally, new forms of support that are increasingly used include job coaches to help build confidence, workplace mentors, support from elders both in the community and on the job site, as well as progressive training that uses a step-wise flexible approach (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015).

Focus on Essential Skills

Recognition of experiences, attitudes, and skills enables potential employees to enter skills-training programs or the workforce more readily without needing unnecessary and irrelevant credentials (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a). Essential skills training focuses on key skills necessary for success on the job. Furthermore, skills assessment is equally important and is evolving from focusing on credentials, to assessing only those skills necessary in the workforce. This not only increases the labour pool, but can vastly expedite the hiring processes. An example of this is the approach used in the Process Operator in Training (POinT) Program between Manitoba Jobs and the Economy, northern communities, industry and education stakeholders to prepare people for employment at Vale, Thompson. Workplace Education Manitoba assesses appli-

cants and places them into one of four categories, which correspond to different levels of skills training needed to secure employment.

Innovative Programming

Two general best practices emerged as a way to overcome inadequate programming: those focused on and delivered in the community, and programs that are culturally relevant. We briefly present both in turn.

Delivery of Community-based Programming

Equally important to holistic support and a focus on essential skills, is the delivery of culturally relevant programs within communities (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a). While this approach is more expensive up front, it is likely more cost effective and efficient over the long term given greater success. Factors that weigh heavily in the success of such programming almost always include community delivery, use of access programs, and are developed using partnerships with communities (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002).

It is critically important to note the importance of community-based programming with respect to addressing socio-economic challenges. Offering programming within communities can significantly reduce complexities associated with travel and off-reserve housing, family responsibilities, childcare, and emotional issues arising from being away from home. Providing additional support and flexibility in programs further promotes the success of community programs and can serve to establish long-term trusting relationships with stakeholders (Holmes, 2006; Hargreaves, 2013).

Some examples include the mobile training centres used by Cambrian College in Northern Ontario, which brings training to remote Aboriginal communities. Cameco, in Northern Saskatchewan, has full-time workplace educators at two of their mine-sites who work in partnership with Northlands College to provide GED and grade 12 upgrading and skills training to employees (McColeman, 2014). Community-based Adult Educators at Nunavut Arctic College undertake community needs assessments to determine what programs the community wants and the kinds of employment opportunities that exist or are on the horizon. Where training cannot be delivered in the community, engaging the community in the design, bringing elders to the training site, and including traditional country foods can provide additional support and success for learners.

Culturally Appropriate Curricula and Methods

Programs that have been developed using community engagement, that provide an Aboriginal voice and culturally relevant curriculum, Aboriginal teachers and/or intercultural training for faculty, serve to better promote retention in post-secondary educational programs (Abele & Delic, 2014) as well as skills-training and community-based programming. Furthermore, respect for how Aboriginal people learn is essential for success and should include hands-on and practical approaches.

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2005) provides an inclusive assessment of the importance of culturally relevant programming that calls for awareness of Aboriginal culture, providing safe learning environments and to focus on community needs for example. Culturally appropriate curricula are as important to learning as cultur-

ally appropriate methods. Individuals learn in many different ways — by reading, writing, listing and doing for example. Aboriginal people have a strong oral tradition and learn better through hands-on exercises (Taylor, 2015). Ball (2004) has written extensively on the "generative curriculum model" as a way to use indigenous knowledge and methods in teaching and learning with a focus on the use of community learners to foster community development.

The Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in the Northwest Territories, for example, uses mixed methods to enhance students' success and has reported higher success rates. Training for essential skills has been combined with traditional knowledge and activities, and academic learning. Students are required to complete a land-based field school where they learn hands-on about their environment using traditional practices such as fishing, hunting, and energy production. While essential skills such as teamwork, oral communication and problems solving are directly related to these traditional practices.

Innovative Systems

Systemic problems require holistic and broad solutions. Our findings suggested that persistent failures of the system were a result of the lack of collaboration and the inability of stakeholders to integrate solutions over time with a view to bridging the gap between training and gainful employment. We focus on two general best practices that emerged from our interviews.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Long-term Partnerships

Both the literature and interviews with stakeholders pointed to collaboration as being essential for learner success. Establishing partnerships with business and across all governments in skills training helps to address geographic and demographic realities and build flexibility into programming (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2013). Furthermore, best practices in terms of partnerships include: good governance structures, building strong relationships, and collaboration (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013). Funding should also be structured to provide incentives to work collaboratively rather than to induce competition and duplication of services (Hodgkins, 2015).

Collaboration with employers was deemed highly important to ensure that learners who successfully completed skills training and other academic programs were able to find jobs (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013). One of the key barriers to success was the lack of job opportunities after completion. Many programs worked directly with industry (e.g., mining) and trained for specific positions for which there were openings (e.g., Vale in Thompson, MB, and the Mine Training Society in Yellowknife, NT).

Successful collaboration brings all parties together to not only share funding, but to consult with communities on their needs and desires; to develop relevant programming from cultural, academic, and employment aspects; to deliver programming and to identify necessary support systems to assist learners, their families and communities. Almost all academic, government and regional sources and stakeholders discussed the need for continued and enhanced collaboration. Additionally, there is a need to balance economic outcomes with development opportunities (Brunnen, 2003b; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2004b).

Systemic Changes and Integration

Broad themes on a global scale have been identified as fostering success for skills training including a commitment to community, integration of functions, sustained leadership, Elder participation, use of local language, attention to how people learn, traditional practices and participatory research (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2004). While some changes are occurring on an ad hoc basis, there remains much to do to improve outcomes across the broader spectrum. Policies to increase Aboriginal employment levels should include increasing education and training opportunities for Aboriginal people, in conjunction with creating positive incentives to become more independent (Brunnen, 2003b). To accomplish this, all stakeholders must work together to harmonize funding, development and delivery, and support systems at all levels. In spite of successes, there remain economic realities related to the boom/bust cycle of resource-based economies. Cyclical changes to industry often leave newly-trained individuals during periods of cutbacks or layoffs. Similarly, labour mobility means that apprentices cannot meet program requirements when journeymen leave the North to seek employment elsewhere (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2013). Having employers at the table can alleviate these challenges in conjunction with demand-driven skills training programs. In smaller communities these challenges are particularly pervasive given the lack of an economic base.

Taking a longer-term view to funding and delivery will ensure that programs are not short-lived and provide sufficient time to evaluate outcomes (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2004b, 2009; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). Government funding cycles of two–three years are not conducive to creating meaningful outcomes that often require longer time horizons. Brunnen (2003b) further supports this view by calling for a more holistic approach that relies on transparent communication and dissemination of information, continued reinforcement of the values of education, consideration of social conditions, and a longer-term view that includes patience tolerance and understanding.

Research and practice is showing that success to post-secondary training, and entry into the workforce requires early intervention (beginning in childhood), and ongoing transitions/bridging mechanisms that include holistic support (Holmes, 2006). This was widely recognized within communities. There is a large literature (beyond the scope of this research) on child welfare and well-being and its importance to individuals in later life. Children that grow up in unhealthy environments are less likely to finish school, or to have the essential and life skills needed to further education thus limiting employment opportunities. Recognizing this link, and more importantly, developing programming that targets children and young adults can serve to improve wellbeing by reducing challenges or eliminating barriers before they are created.

The Skills4Success in the Northwest Territories program embodies this thinking and is an example of collaboration that transcends governments and departments. It is one of the most comprehensive approaches we reviewed. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment is leading this initiative, which so far has included: engagement sessions in five regions, an online survey, a series of reports based on the engagement sessions (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015a), a labour market forecast and needs assessment prepared by the Conference Board of Canada, and a recently released 10-year Strategic Framework (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2015c). The next steps include developing action plans in partnership with other levels government, industry and education and training organizations as well as

developing a system for monitoring and evaluation (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2013, 2015a, 2015b).

DISCUSSION

While little critical academic literature exists on Aboriginal skills training and workforce development, the growing body of government and non-government-authored reports and studies, in conjunction with stakeholder interviews revealed a number of persistent barriers and challenges to skills training and workforce development. More importantly, many practices have proven to be successful, particularly when combined and used over time. The barriers and best practices identified in this research are largely consistent across all jurisdictions and widely known. Our findings suggest that the same challenges and best practices have existed since the 1990s.

Change has been slow because of weak collaboration, systemic issues regarding policy and funding, and the failure to take a holistic approach to addressing challenges and solving problems especially with regard to Aboriginal education. Research has shown that barriers to education and labour market development begin to arise in early childhood and have cumulative effects throughout adolescence and into adulthood. To successfully prepare adults for the workforce, changes are required in early childhood education to stimulate learning and the desire to learn by crafting culturally relevant programming and delivery methods, and by providing quality education in communities.

As the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2013: 16) argued: "training programs that come and go may be politically expedient but do not meet the Aboriginal peoples' and employers' needs." One of the most important findings from this research is that successful skills training and employment outcomes require a holistic approach that fully supports the learner, their families and their communities. This requires a long-term commitment rather than the current suite of short-term, project-based approaches.

We heard repeatedly that all systems required to deliver successful skills training are out of sync: programs are short-term, funding is temporary, policies are misaligned with outcomes, and not always do key stakeholders participate. Educational policy is directly related to health and wellness, health and wellness influences the ability and desire to learn, skills acquired through educational opportunities are meaningless without employment and economic development. All pieces of the puzzle must be addressed, collectively and in meaningful partnerships if change is to occur.

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