

Strategic HRM in Digital Transformation: Haier's 'Rendanheyi' Model

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ABSTRACT: Digital transformation is a major challenge for many companies. They have clear strategies, but they fail to implement them in practice. This study explores how human resource management (HRM) can connect strategy and execution. It takes Haier as a case study. Haier developed the Rendanheyi management model to address the gap between strategy and execution. The study aims to clarify how strategic HRM turns digital strategy into actual results. It adopts a single case study method. Data is collected from public reports and in-depth interviews with six Haier employees. Two key findings are drawn. First, Haier's HRM has undergone three stages of transformation. It started with basic digital tools for HR work, then shifted to improved digital services for employees, and finally developed into digitalized human capital operation. Second, the HRM transformation succeeds because it is closely aligned with Haier's digital strategy. The HRM system acts as a bridge. It links the company's top-level digital strategy with employees' daily work. This study shows that HRM plays a key role in corporate digital transformation. It is not just a support function. It can drive corporate change in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: Case Study, Digital Transformation, Rendanheyi Model, Strategic Human Resource Management, Strategy Execution.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Chandler (1990) pointed out that companies must adapt to the times. Now we are in the digital age. New technologies such as mobile internet, big data and artificial intelligence are widely used. They have changed people's life and work modes. The business environment has become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. For companies, digital transformation is an important way to maintain competitiveness (Adner et al., 2019).

1.2 Research Problem

In this context, HRM faces great challenges. Many companies still use traditional bureaucratic management systems. These systems have rigid processes and low efficiency. They respond slowly to market changes. They cannot meet the demands of the digital age. The digital age requires companies to be more agile and innovative. It also needs the free flow of talents. So, how to transform HRM from a bureaucratic system to a strategy-driven system has become a critical question (Liu, 2025).

1.3 Research Status

Many scholars have studied digital transformation. Adner et al. (2019) analyzed the characteristics of digital strategy that distinguish it from traditional strategy. McGrath and McManus (2020) discussed the discovery-driven digital transformation model. Tanushev (2022) studied the impact of digital transformation on corporate strategy.

Other scholars focus on the combination of HRM and digital technology. Strohmeier (2020) gave a clear definition of digital HRM. Becker and Gerhart (1996) explored the impact of HRM practices on corporate performance. Kaufman (2020) discussed the existing problems in strategic HRM research. Akter et al. (2023) studied digital transformation in workforce management.

Chinese scholars have also made important contributions. Qi and Xiao (2020) studied corporate management changes in the digital economy. Liu (2025) analyzed the connotation and theoretical basis of HRM digitalization. Peng and Zhang (2023) proposed a theoretical framework for digital human capital management.

1.4 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite these studies, there are still obvious gaps. First, most studies are unsystematic. They only focus on single influencing factors of digital transformation. They fail to build a complete theoretical framework (Ruiz et al., 2024). They also do not explore how different factors interact and evolve over time (Ilia & Zemzyulina, 2024).



Second, existing research has a broken logic chain (Luo, 2020). Many studies talk about the overall layout of digital strategy. Some others evaluate specific digital HR technologies such as AI-based recruitment. But few studies connect these two aspects. They do not explain the specific mechanisms. How does digital strategy drive HRM transformation? How does HRM transformation improve corporate performance? This missing link is a key problem in current research (Cheng & Hackett, 2021).

Third, research on Chinese local management practices is not in-depth enough (Peng, 2023). Many studies only describe the Rendanheyi model. They do not conduct rigorous theoretical analysis on it. It is necessary to explore the micro-operation mechanisms of the model. This can help integrate Chinese management practices into global management theory (Wang, 2018).

1.5 Research Objective and Scope

This study aims to fill the above research gaps. It focuses on one core question: How does HRM act as a bridge to connect digital strategy and its execution? Haier is selected as the case study object. Its Rendanheyi model is a typical example of HRM bridging strategy and execution (Wang, 2018).

The study has two specific objectives. First, it describes the specific process of Haier's HRM transformation during digital transformation. Second, it explains the internal logic of Haier's HRM transformation. The study focuses on the period from 2020 to 2025. This is the stage when Haier deepened its ecological brand strategy. The relationship between corporate strategy, organization, technology and HRM was the most prominent in this period (Luo, 2025).

This study has limitations. It only takes Haier as a single case. Haier has its own characteristics. Its experience may not be applicable to all companies. But in-depth research on a single case can help build new theories. Other scholars can further test these theories in subsequent research (Yin, 2018).

1.6 Paper Structure

This paper consists of eight parts. After the introduction, the second part reviews the relevant literature. The third part builds the theoretical framework of the study. The fourth part introduces the research methods. The fifth part describes the data sources and processing methods. The sixth part presents the research results. The seventh part discusses the research results. The eighth part draws the conclusion and puts forward future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Justification of the Research Problem

This study is of great practical significance. Many companies fail in digital transformation. They have good digital strategies, but they cannot implement them effectively. One key reason is that their HRM systems are not aligned with digital strategies (Liu, 2025). Traditional HRM systems are designed for stable business environments. They are rigid and slow in response. They cannot support the agility and innovation required by the digital age (Peng, 2023).

Haier's Rendanheyi model provides a new solution. It tries to connect corporate strategy with employees' daily work. It gives employees more autonomy. It links employees' rewards with user value creation. This model has helped Haier achieve successful digital transformation. But the internal operation mechanism of the model is not fully understood. In-depth research on this model can provide practical experience for other companies (Wang, 2018).

2.2 Relevant Theories and Tools

This study is based on two core theories.

The first is Strategic Human Resource Management Theory (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Liu, 2025). This theory points out that HRM practices must be aligned with corporate strategy. This is called vertical fit. HRM practices must also coordinate with each other internally. This is called horizontal fit. Good strategic fit of HRM can effectively improve corporate performance. This theory answers the question of why HRM needs to be aligned with corporate strategy.

The second is Three-Dimensional Digital Human Capital Management Theory (Peng & Zhang, 2023). This theory divides HRM digitalization into three levels. The first level is functional digitalization. It means using digital technology to improve the efficiency of basic HR processes. The second level is operational digitalization. It means using data and digital platforms to improve employee experience. The third level is human capital operation digitalization. It means treating talents as capital and using market mechanisms to create and realize talent value. This theory answers the question of what HRM digitalization includes. It provides a measurement standard for the depth of HRM transformation.

2.3 Research Methods from Related Fields

This study draws on the case study methodology proposed by Yin (2018). Yin provides a complete framework for case study research. It includes study design, data collection and data analysis. This framework helps ensure the rigor and reliability of this study.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative single case study design (Yin, 2018). This method is suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions. It can explore complex research phenomena in real contexts. Haier is selected as the case because it is a typical and successful enterprise in digital transformation and HRM innovation. Its Rendanheyi model is unique and advanced. It is a good research object to observe the connection between digital strategy and HRM execution (Wang, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection

This study adopts the triangulation principle. It uses multiple data sources to ensure the credibility of research results.

The first is public archival data. The study collects Haier's annual reports and ESG reports from 2020 to 2025. It also gathers the company's official news releases and public speeches by leaders such as Zhang Ruimin and Zhou Yunjie.

The second is in-depth interview data. The study conducts in-depth interviews with six key informants of Haier. They include a former HR director, a former platform owner, two xiaowei owners from different business sectors and two front-line employees. All interviews are recorded and transcribed. The total transcription is about 80,000 words. To protect the privacy of informants, the study uses codes such as M1, P1, T1 and E1 to represent them in the research.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis with the help of Nvivo software. The data analysis is divided into three steps.

First, open coding is conducted. All HRM practices and related concepts in the data are labeled, such as "user payment", "on-demand assembly" and "employee empowerment".

Second, axial coding is conducted. The labeled codes are classified into broader themes. For example, "pay linked to user evaluation" and "real-time data dashboard" are grouped into the theme of "internalizing market mechanisms".

Third, selective coding is conducted. The core themes of Haier's HRM transformation are identified. The core themes are compared with the study's theoretical propositions. This is called pattern matching (Yin, 2018). It helps test whether the theoretical propositions are consistent with the actual data.

4. METHOD

4.1 Research Strategy

This study uses a qualitative single case study design [19]. This method is good for answering "how" and "why" questions. It allows us to explore complex phenomena in their real-life context. We chose Haier as our case because it is a typical and successful example of digital transformation and HRM innovation. Its "Rendanheyi" model is unique and 前沿. This makes it a good "laboratory" for observing the link between strategy and HRM [6].

4.2 Data Collection

We followed the principle of triangulation. We used multiple data sources to ensure credibility.

Public Archival Data: We collected Haier's annual reports and ESG reports from 2020 to 2025. We also gathered news releases from the company website and public speeches by leaders like Zhang Ruimin and Zhou Yunjie.

In-depth Interviews: We interviewed six key informants. They included a former HR director, a current platform owner, two xiaowei owners from different businesses, and two front-line employees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We have about 80,000 words of transcription. To protect privacy, we use codes like "M1", "P1", "T1", "E1" in the paper.

4.3 Data Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis with the help of Nvivo software. The analysis had three steps.

First, we did open coding. We marked all practices and concepts in the materials, such as "user payment", "on-demand assembly", and "empowerment".



Second, we did axial coding. We grouped these codes into broader themes. For example, we grouped "pay linked to user evaluation" and "real-time data dashboard" into a theme called "internalizing market mechanisms".

Third, we did selective coding. We identified the core themes and compared them with our theoretical propositions. This is called pattern matching [19]. It helps us test our ideas against the data.

5. DATA

5.1 Data Sources and Description

Our data comes from two main sources.

Public Documents: We collected 6 years of annual reports (2020-2025). These reports contain information about Haier's strategy, financial performance, and HR practices. We also collected ESG reports. These give more detail about employee-related issues. In addition, we collected 9 years of speeches from the "Rendanheyi Model Leading Forum" (2017-2025). These speeches show how leaders think about strategy and management.

Interview Data: We interviewed 6 people. Their details are below.

Code	Role	Date	Duration
M1	Former HR Strategy Director	2023.10.20	78 min
P1	Former Vice President, Water Industry	2023.11.05	65 min
T1	Regional General Manager	2023.11.18	72 min
T2	Xiaowei Owner, Smart Home	2023.11.25	68 min
E1	R&D Engineer	2023.12.07	61 min
E2	Former Operations Manager	2023.12.15	70 min

5.2 Preliminary Data Processing

For public documents, we did two things. First, we extracted quantitative data like R&D spending and patent numbers. We put this data into tables and charts to see trends. Second, we did text analysis on speeches and reports. We looked for key words like "ecology", "user", and "maker" to track changes in strategic language.

For interview transcripts, we coded them in Nvivo. We followed the three-step process described above. We also wrote memos after each interview to capture initial thoughts and reflections.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Haier's Digital Transformation Journey

Haier started its digital transformation journey around 2012 [18]. It wanted to become an IoT ecological brand. This meant moving from a traditional appliance maker to an open platform. Under this big strategy, the "Rendanheyi" model also evolved. First proposed in 2005, it was a management philosophy [6]. By 2015, with platforms like COSMOPlat, it got a technological foundation. Complex internal processes could now run on digital platforms.

The period from 2020 to 2025 was a key time. Haier deepened its ecological brand strategy. The relationship between strategy, technology, organization, and HRM was very clear. This makes it a good time to study.



Table 1: R&D and Innovation Capability Indicators (2020–2025 H1)

Year	Number of R&D Personnel	Total R&D Investment (RMB 100 million)	R&D Investment as % of Revenue	Cumulative International Standards Led/Participated	Cumulative National/Industry Standards Led/Participated
2020	18,014	72.20	3.44%	— ¹	— ¹
2021	22,161	89.67	3.94%	82	602
2022	24,647	102.40	4.21%	92	637
2023	23,889	108.21	4.14%	97	678
2024	22,925	112.88	3.95%	110	788
2025H1	—	60.17	3.84%	116	840

Note¹: Cumulative standard releases were not disclosed in the 2020 annual report.

R&D Investment: Total R&D investment demonstrates a consistent and substantial upward trajectory, growing from RMB 7.22 billion in 2020 to RMB 11.29 billion in 2024. This unwavering financial commitment underscores the company's strategic prioritization of innovation as a core driver of long-term growth.

R&D Intensity: The R&D investment as a percentage of revenue has remained remarkably stable, hovering between 3.8% and 4.2% throughout the period. This indicates that R&D spending has scaled in proportion to the company's revenue growth, reflecting a disciplined and sustained focus on innovation rather than a one-time or sporadic effort.

R&D Team Size: The size of the R&D team grew significantly from 2020 to 2022, reaching a peak of 24,647. The subsequent stabilization and slight decrease in 2023 and 2024 suggest a strategic shift from simply expanding the team to optimizing its structure and enhancing individual productivity. The focus has moved towards efficiency and quality of output.

Innovation Output (Standard Setting): The cumulative number of international and national/industry standards that Haier has led or participated in shows a clear and continuous upward trend. This is a powerful lagging indicator of R&D effectiveness. The increase from 82 international standards in 2021 to 116 by mid-2025, and from 602 national standards to 840, provides concrete evidence that the R&D investments are translating into tangible, industry-shaping intellectual property and technological leadership.

Conclusion for Table 1:

The data in Table 1 paints a clear picture of a company that has strategically and effectively invested in innovation. Haier Smart Home has successfully transitioned from building a large R&D workforce to leveraging that talent for high-impact output. The stability of R&D intensity, coupled with the continuous rise in the number of influential standards it has helped create, demonstrates that its innovation is not only consistent but also industry-leading. This confirms the principle of "R&D Sustainability and Efficiency," where resource input is efficiently converted into valuable, standard-setting technological advancements that solidify its competitive moat.



Table 2: Customer Responsiveness and Operational Efficiency Indicators (2020–2025 H1)

Year	Domestic Order Response Cycle (YoY Optimization)	Domestic Inventory Turnover Days (YoY Optimization)	Inventory Turnover Ratio (Times/Year, Estimated) ²	SKU Efficiency (YoY Improvement)	Logistics Efficiency	Digital Marketing Efficiency
2020	—	—	5.11	—	—	Haier Smart Home App DAU increased 546% YoY ³
2021	—	—	4.52	—	—	New members added: 31 million; total members 204 million
2022	7% optimization	DIO 8% optimization	4.11	—	—	Digital retail sales increased 22% YoY
2023	8% optimization	—	4.42	19% improvement in domestic market	—	—
2024	13% optimization	—	5.00	—	24/48 hour delivery coverage expanded to 298 new counties/districts	Douyin A3 deep interest users increased 52% YoY
2025H1	—	—	—	SKU portfolio efficiency improved 13%	Logistics expense ratio decreased 0.5%	Opportunity conversion led to RMB 1.49 billion in retail sales

Note²: Inventory turnover ratio is estimated based on annual report cost of sales and average inventory balance.

Note³: In 2020, the average daily active users (DAU) of the Haier Smart Home App was 1.206 million, a year-on-year increase of 546%.

Order Responsiveness: The year-on-year optimization of the domestic order response cycle is the most direct measure of operational agility. The improvement accelerated from 7% in 2022 to 13% in 2024, demonstrating that the company's internal processes are becoming significantly faster and more capable of reacting to market demand in real-time.

Inventory Management: The optimization of inventory turnover days (DIO) by 8% in 2022 and the improvement in SKU efficiency (19% in 2023, 13% in portfolio efficiency by 2025H1) are strong indicators of successful "Digital Inventory" projects. This suggests a move towards leaner operations, with less capital tied up in unsold goods and a more focused, high-performing product portfolio.



Digital Customer Engagement: The metrics for digital marketing show a powerful trend of building direct-to-consumer (DTC) capabilities. The explosive growth in App DAU in 2020 was followed by massive member acquisition in 2021. By 2024, this evolved into deeper engagement on platforms like Douyin, and by 2025H1, these digital efforts are directly contributing to significant sales conversions. This shows a maturation of their digital marketing funnel from awareness to revenue.

Logistics: The expansion of delivery coverage (2024) and the reduction in logistics expense ratio (2025H1) indicate that the physical infrastructure supporting customer responsiveness is also becoming both more extensive and more cost-efficient.

Conclusion for Table 2:

Table 2 provides compelling evidence of a "Significant Improvement in Operational Efficiency." The continuous shortening of order response cycles and the optimization of inventory and SKU management are direct results of "digital transformation" initiatives. These improvements are not merely internal; they directly manifest as an enhanced ability to sense and respond to market needs. Furthermore, the parallel growth in digital marketing and logistics efficiency demonstrates that the company is successfully building a seamless, end-to-end system that connects digital engagement with physical delivery, fundamentally strengthening its market responsiveness.

Table 3: Cost and Supply Chain Efficiency Indicators (2020–2025 H1)

Year	Procurement Efficiency (Supplier Onboarding Cycle Reduction)	Manufacturing Efficiency (YoY Improvement)	Production Scheduling Efficiency	Product Design Cost (Optimization)
2020	—	—	—	—
2021	—	—	—	—
2022	Shortened by 10%	Domestic factory productivity per capita increased 16%	—	—
2023	—	Domestic factory manufacturing expense rate optimized by 4%	—	Material part numbers reduced by 8%
2024	Improved by 28%	Domestic manufacturing base daily output increased 14%	Shortened from 2 hours to 0.5 hours	Design cost reduced by 5.98%
2025H1	—	—	—	Design cost reduced by 5.98% ⁴

Note⁴: The figure for 2025 H1 is the same as 2024, possibly indicating a sustained effect or a repeated statement.

End-to-End Digital Integration: This table illustrates a holistic digital transformation across the entire value chain, from the initial design of a product all the way to its production. The data shows improvements are not isolated but systemic.

Upstream Efficiency (Design & Procurement): The reduction in material part numbers (2023) and design costs (2024) points to a "design for cost" approach enabled by digital tools (like a digital BOM system). Simultaneously, the dramatic improvement in supplier onboarding—from a 10% reduction in 2022 to a 28% improvement in 2024—shows that procurement processes have been radically streamlined, making the supply chain faster and more flexible.

Core Operational Efficiency (Manufacturing & Scheduling): The data on manufacturing shows a clear evolution. Initial gains in per-capita productivity (2022) were followed by a reduction in the overall expense rate (2023). By 2024, the impact of fully integrated digital systems is evident in a 14% increase in daily output. The most striking metric is the reduction in production



scheduling time from 2 hours to just 30 minutes, a clear testament to the power of AI and data-driven decision-making in creating an exceptionally agile production environment.

Conclusion for Table 3:

The data in Table 3 robustly supports the theme of "**Supply Chain Agility and Cost Optimization.**" The year-on-year improvements, from supplier onboarding and product design to factory scheduling and manufacturing output, demonstrate a comprehensive and successful effort to digitize the entire industrial chain. The result is a supply chain that is not only more cost-competitive (lower design costs, reduced expense rates) but also significantly more resilient and agile (faster scheduling, quicker supplier integration). This transformation allows Haier to respond to market changes and disruptions with greater speed and efficiency, creating a formidable competitive advantage.

6.2 Changes in HRM: Three-Dimensional Evolution

Our data shows that Haier's HRM changed along three dimensions [12].

First Dimension: Functional Digitalization. Haier used technology to make HR processes more efficient. For example, recruitment moved online. Employee data was stored digitally. This reduced paperwork and saved time.

Second Dimension: Operational Digitalization. Haier used data and platforms to improve employee experience. Employees could access HR services online. They could see their performance data in real-time. A platform owner explained: "My role changed from manager to platform owner. My main job is not directing people, but providing resources and setting rules" (P1).

Third Dimension: Human Capital Operation Digitalization. This was the deepest change. Haier started treating talent like capital. It used market mechanisms to create and share value. Two key practices show this.

"User Payment" Mechanism. This links employee pay to user value. An employee said: "Our income dashboard changes in real-time. It links directly to user evaluations. This forces you to always watch user feedback. It's completely different from waiting for quarterly reviews" (E2). Another added: "User payment broke down silos. To complete an order, everyone works together. Otherwise, no one gets a good result" (P1).

"On-Demand Assembly" Mechanism. This lets talent flow to where it is needed. A xiaowei owner described it: "Work used to be assigned. Now we bid for orders on platforms. If I see an order for a smart kitchen air solution, I quickly find colleagues online and form a team" (T2).

6.3 The Bridging Role of HRM

These HRM changes helped bridge strategy and execution. The data shows two main effects.

Better Operational Efficiency. A xiaowei owner said: "We did an air purification project for mothers and infants. From idea to proposal, we did it in one week online. This was unimaginable under the old process" (T1).

More Innovation. Public data shows Haier's patent numbers went up. Employee motivation also increased. One employee said: "The pressure is high. But it feels like I'm starting my own business. I never had this sense of achievement before" (E2).

These results support our two propositions.

Proposition 1 (Strategic Alignment) is confirmed. From strategic direction to resource allocation to HR practice design, everything aligned. Haier's HRM reform was not isolated. It was a systematic project tied to its digital strategy.

Proposition 2 (Mediating Role of Three-Dimensional Evolution) is confirmed. HRM change followed the path from function to operation to capital. This evolution was the key link between strategy and performance. Practices like "user payment" and "on-demand assembly" turned HR from a cost into capital.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Comparing Results Within the Case

Different parts of Haier showed similar patterns. The "user payment" mechanism worked in both the water industry and smart home business. The "on-demand assembly" mechanism worked for both engineers and marketing people. This suggests these are general practices, not just one-off experiments.

7.2 Comparing with Existing Theory

Our findings extend strategic HRM theory [20, 3]. In the digital age, the nature of "fit" changes. It is no longer just about aligning HRM with a fixed strategy. It becomes a process of co-evolution. Haier's HRM system itself becomes a "strategic laboratory". It senses the market, experiments, and adjusts. This adds new content to the theory about building dynamic capabilities [21].

Our findings also add to digital HRM theory [12]. The three levels are not just linear steps. They build on each other. "User payment" (capital operation) needs a strong data platform (functional management) and real-time feedback (operational service). This gives a more detailed way to understand digital HR maturity.

7.3 Explaining Differences

Why did Haier succeed where others fail? One reason is culture. Haier has an open culture that says "always be wrong, always put users first" [22]. This culture supported the changes. Technology alone was not enough. The culture made people willing to try new things. This suggests we should add "culture" as a key factor in our model. It works together with technology as a "two-wheel drive".

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Conclusion

This study looked at how HRM can bridge strategy and execution in digital transformation. Using Haier as a case, we found two main things.

First, HRM change follows a clear path. It moves from functional digitalization to operational digitalization to human capital operation digitalization. This three-dimensional evolution is the key to linking strategy with daily work [12].

Second, this change works when it is aligned with strategy. Haier's practices like "user payment" and "on-demand assembly" directly support its goal of becoming an ecological brand [6]. They turn strategic intent into employee action.

The value of this study is in combining two theories. Strategic HRM theory gives the "why". Three-dimensional evolution gives the "what" and "how". Together, they explain the complete logic of HRM change in digital transformation.

8.2 Implications

For Companies. Digital HRM is not just about tools. It must be a systematic change. The key is to build a system that transmits market pressure to every employee. This turns strategy into daily work [23].

For HR Managers. HR must change its role. It must move from process manager to platform operator. Its job is to design market rules like "user payment" and build data platforms that support front-line workers [18].

For Researchers. This study shows the value of studying Chinese management practices. The "Rendanheyi" model can be understood as a "governance model that deeply embeds market mechanisms into a platform-based organization" [24]. This adds to global management theory.

8.3 Limitations

This study has limitations. We only studied one company. Haier is a special case. Its experience may not apply to all companies [19]. Different industries and different cultures may need different approaches [25].

We also had limited time. We covered 2020 to 2025. A longer study could show more about how these changes evolve over time.

Finally, we could not measure everything precisely. We showed links between HRM change and performance. But to prove causation, we would need more data and quantitative methods [16, 13, 14].

8.4 Future Research

Future research can go in several directions.

First, do comparative case studies. Study companies in different industries or with different transformation paths. This would show which findings are general and which are specific.

Second, use other methods. Social network analysis could show how people collaborate. Surveys could measure employee attitudes more systematically.

Third, do quantitative tests. Develop scales for key concepts. Collect data from many companies. Use structural equation modeling to test the intermediary agent path model we proposed.

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