Staffbase

Internal Communications App—All You Need to Get Started

The Benefits of a Digital Employee Communication Channel

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by Frank Wolf

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Mobile Apps Are the Envy of Today's Top Companies

They are regarded as convenient, are limited to essential functions, and can be introduced quickly—which is exactly the opposite of large and cumbersome IT projects in the company. It is therefore not surprising that apps are increasingly discussed in terms of internal company communications. At best, communication is directed to as many employees as possible (or more precisely: to *every* employee) and it should not be enacted on a mandatory basis. Everybody decides for themselves how often and how much internal communication to consume. As a result, it is not an easy task to simultaneously please and reach everyone—including non-desk employees.

Employees without easy access to a PC at work are no marginal group but rather the majority.
Nowadays, every large company owns an intranet which is also used for distributing communication content. Most of the time, intranets are only accessible via PC. Intranet terminals in warehouses or at the production level have been established during recent years, but their use has not won through.
This communication gap is especially painful because the employees receiving the least information are often the ones who view communication as a central engagement driver.

NON-DESK, OFFLINE, FRONTLINE

Different prerequisites but the same result: **barely reachable by internal communications**

Non-Desk Employees

Frontline

Offline

Desk Employees

## The Benefits of a Digital Employee Communication Channel

Apps help provide access to employees smartphones, thus creating a new channel for internal communications. This applies to devices provided by the company as well as privately owned ones. Compared to traditional communication media, an app, as a mobile and digital medium, offers many benefits.

Comments

Valuations
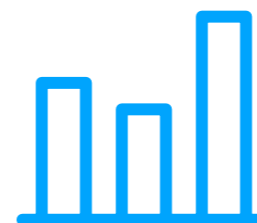
Analysis

Digital communication allows interactions such as comments, valuations, or—in the simplest case—an analysis of the contents most read by employees.

All of these elements not only establish a dialogue between top management, middle management, and the operational level, but they also help communication officers spot important topics and contents in addition to actively managing them.
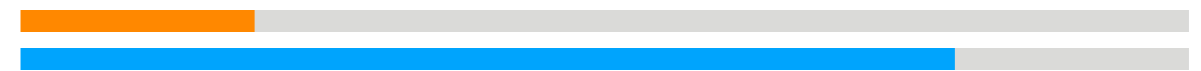
An app also has the advantage of making internal communications more up to date and automatically compiles content for the reader.

In this way, employees only receive information important to the whole company or their specific location or area.

Paper-Based Communication
Digital Communication

**Interactions**

Realtime

Local

Rich Media

Costs

# An Internal Communications App for iPhone, Android, and what else?

The mobile operating systems iOS (Apple) and Android (Google) have more or less divided the market in two.

Consequently, there are only a few devices remaining that should not be forgotten, including regular PC or laptop browers, which covers the possibility that employees might want to access information on their own devices at home. Writers in particular might wish to process content on a larger screen. Editing articles and pages should, therefore, be possible on both a PC and the app.

Windows Mobile
3.14%

Other
4.86%

iOS
34.9%

Android
57.1%
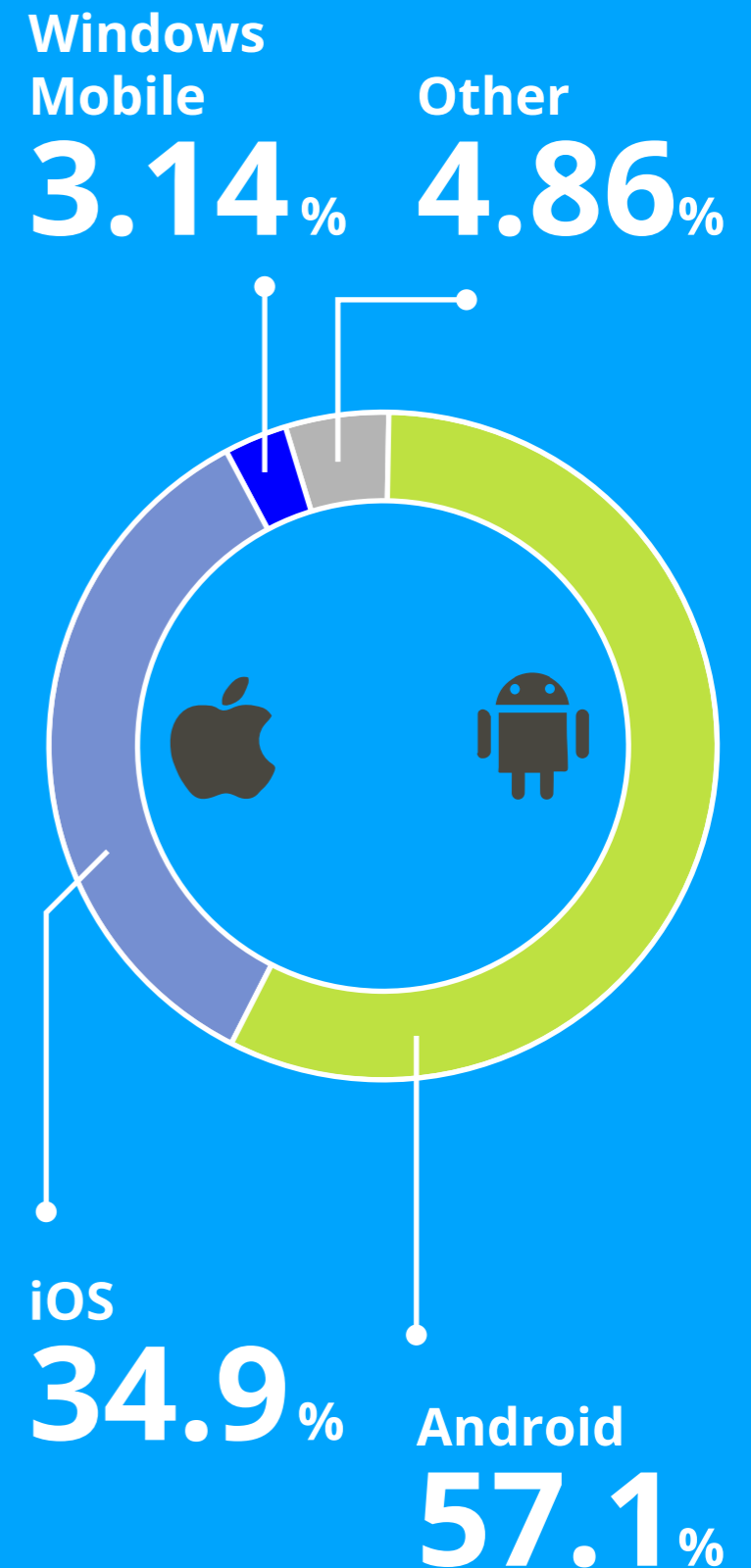
How to Implement an Internal Communications App—Eight Key Points for Getting Started

As easy as the idea of an internal communications app might seem at first sight, the topic can be rather tricky when looked at more closely. Whoever thinks that an app is just an additional channel for the intranet has been fooled. It's more than a matter of adjusting content to mobile screens and thus displaying it responsively. There are some challenges to overcome which are about more than different screen formats. We have compiled the most important aspects below.
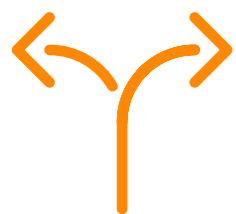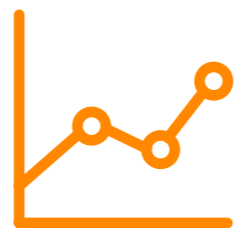
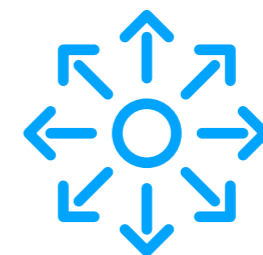| Voluntary or Mandatory? | Which Content? | New Features for Mobile Channel? | Value-based Argumentation? | User Management? | Native App or Web App? | App Distribution? | Fit to Intranet Strategy? |

STRATEGY

TECHNOLOGY

Voluntary or Mandatory?

Voluntariness is a basic principle of internal communications. To a large extent, employees themselves decide which information from the company they want to have available. The closer this information is to their own work and interests, the more exciting it is. Thus, starting an internal communications app is of a voluntary nature and it will replace in-house journals and bulletin boards. However, additional applications like easy communication processes that make rota or manuals accessible on the app are easily conceivable. As soon as use becomes more mandatory, employees will need to be provided with company devices or data tariff rebates. Low-priced tablets, which were unthinkable in recent years due to high costs, can now be run over proprietary WiFi without expensive, individual data tariffs.

What Sort of Content?

Modern intranets have come up with a growing number of new features and supported use cases. While intranets have traditionally been used to store frequently accessed documents, news and company communications were soon added. The next step was to establish employee portals that focused especially on self-service employee processes—aka Employee Self Services. The latest step involves the adaption of communities and project rooms, where teams can work together and all important documents can be stored.

The four main use cases (information, communication, processes, and teamwork) build the basic framework for modern intranets and provide a starting point for addressing the following question: Which use cases and related contents should be made accessible on mobile?

Based on our experience, the first step is to enable communication that reaches all employees. The second step is split between information (manuals, phone directories, menus, contact information) and processes (surveys, vacation days available, and timesheets). Teamwork is to be provided for only a small number of employees, making it more safety-critical in general.

STRATEGY

Information
Employee Directory
Knowledge Base
SOPs

Communication
Management Blog
Corporate News
Local News
Team News

Collaboration
Projects
Communities
Working Groups

Services
Employee Travel
Services
Meeting Room
Availability
Absence Manager

Desk Employees

Non-Desk Employees

Mobile Intranet – What Exactly Should Be Mobile?

What New Features Does a Mobile Channel Need?

First of all, it is important to realize that an app alone is not enough. You need an easy way for filling it with content, which includes having more than one single administrator maintaining an app kit but also full and part-time writers, who can create content easily and maintain it continuously with minimal training efforts. This covers the need for a so-called Content Management System (CMS). CMS systems have been in existence for many years, having been initially used for websites and later for intranets. Due to their increasingly diverging requirements, the CMS used for intranet and the Internet are nowadays hardly the same.

A mobile app demands further specialization of an intranet CMS. One of the most important features is push functionality.

Apps are able to display a so-called push notification on the home screen of a smartphone, actively informing and leading the user directly to the app. Push notifications are a powerful tool and, as always, with power comes responsibility. Users should not be overwhelmed by push notifications, because the effect would soon diminish, let alone employees completely disable the feature on their device. A mobile app CMS should, therefore, make push notifications accessible only to a specific target group and a selected number of writers.

Learn more about the management of push notifications
from our T-Systems case:

How T-Systems Cuts Through the Noise with an Employee App

STRATEGY

How to Keep Users Up to Date?

This question has been raised in particular regard to all other company-related IT applications. The remarkable thing is that the target group of an employee app also includes non-desk employees who often are not recorded in any sort of IT system or user directory. In most cases, these employees are only listed in a company's payroll account. Thus, the CMS system needs to provide an easy method for importing employee lists that include more than just a name and a clear characteristic (e.g. ID #), but further personalization (location, area).

TECHNOLOGY

01
User Onboarding

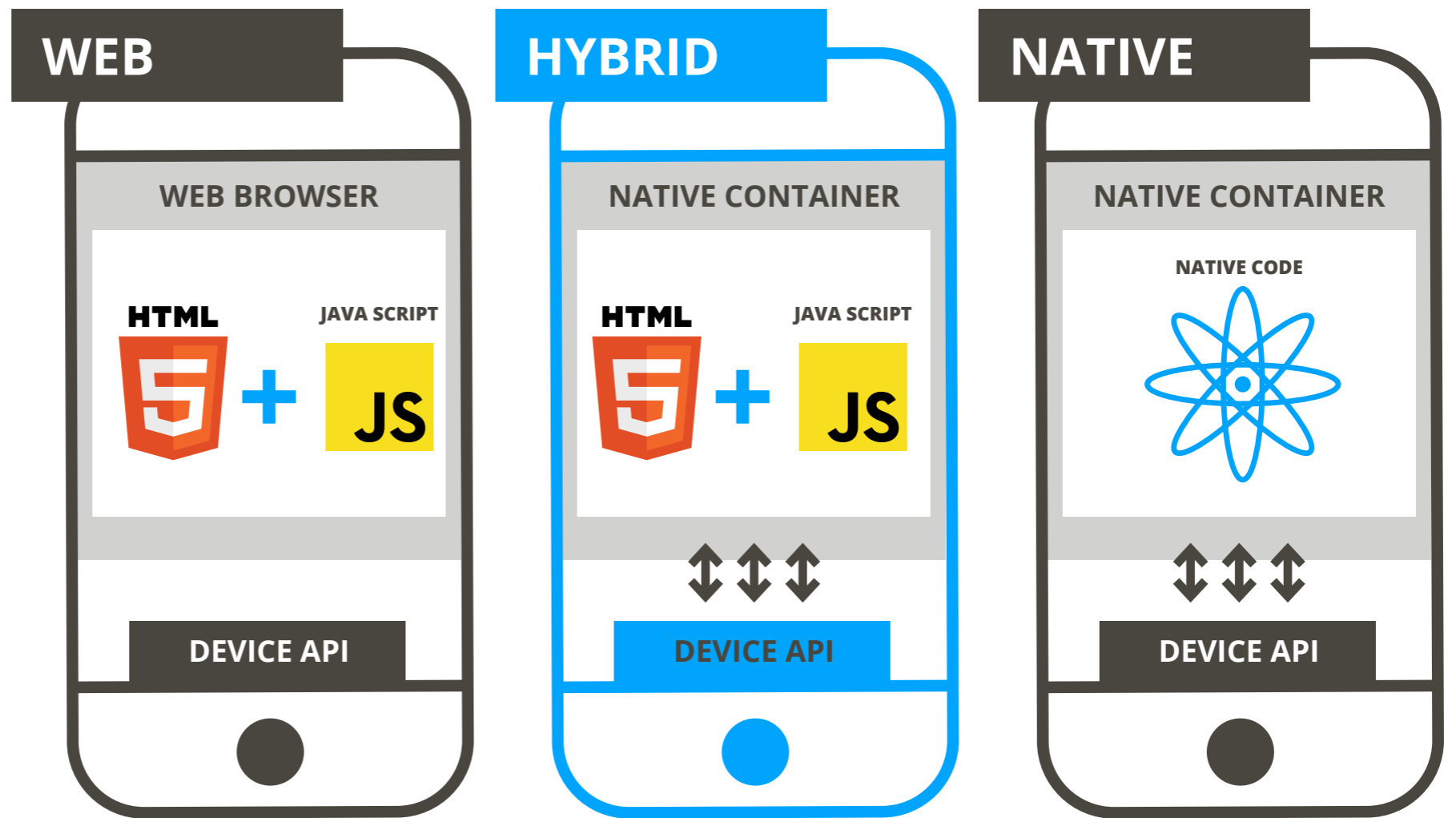## 02
User Maintenance

03
User Deletion
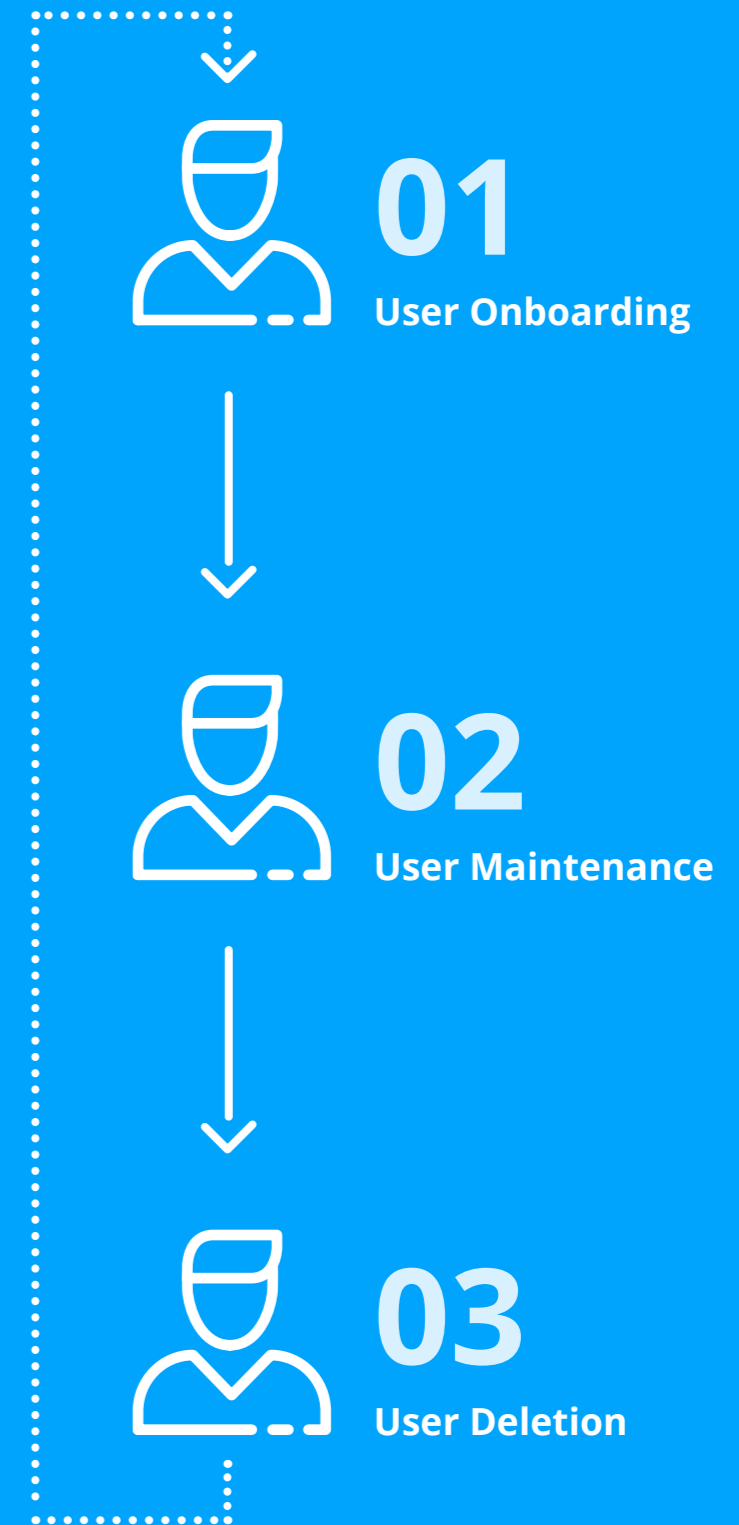
For all the details about user onboarding and manangement of an internal app check, out this blogpost: **How to Onboard Employees to an Internal Communications App**

Native App or Web App?

Native apps are known from private smartphone use: small programs downloaded from an app store. The huge benefit is that only native apps are able to deeply affect a devices' features, such as the ones which enable push notifications. On the contrary, web apps are nothing more than websites accessed through a smartphone's mobile browser. While they may be easier to create, they cannot be distributed through an app store and are therefore incapable of enabling push notifications. Even though developing and maintaining native apps is costlier, the functional benefits outweigh those of web apps.

A good solution that combines the best of both worlds is a Hybrid App, which is a native app with a web app inside.

	WEB	HYBRID	NATIVE
	WEB BROWSER	NATIVE CONTAINER	NATIVE CONTAINER
	HTML5 + JAVA SCRIPT JS	HTML5 + JAVA SCRIPT JS	NATIVE CODE
	DEVICE API	DEVICE API	DEVICE API
Distribution	Web	App Store	App Store
Push News	✖	✔	✔
App Icon/ Home Screen	✖	✔	✔
Effort	Medium	Medium	High
Development Speed	Fast	Fast	Slow
Extensibility	High	High	Medium

TECHNOLOGY

How to Distribute the App?

An internal communications app is best distributed through a public app store. Employees are already familiar with this process from having installed other apps on their personal devices. App store distribution also ensures that the app is updated on a regular basis. Only registered users with a login will gain actual access to the app. This ensures that only a target group can access specific content. General information can be displayed on a public site in the app, helping to greatly increase the potential target group.

Alternatively distributing an app outside an app store is possible, but the process often limits access and easy installation, and is therefore only suitable for a very limited number of users.

How Does an App Fit the Intranet Strategy?

An employee app can be viewed as a channel that displays the intranet. In this scenario, the already mentioned CMS is therefore nothing more than the intranet itself. Most of the challenges in this scenario result from information security and two related yet competing requirements.

On the one hand, intranets are hosting a growing pile of projects, documents, and business-critical information, which must be reliably protected from unauthorized access. On the other hand, as many employees as possible should be able to access communication through their private devices—preferably without having to enter login data with every use. Out of this results a dichotomy (at the very least) of modern intranets. Company communication apps with their own CMS stand apart from the actual intranet and only offer mobile displayable content to employees. "Best of breed" approaches will therefore prevail for future intranets.

Mobile Intranet CMS - A Look into Key Requirements

How to Get Management Support?

Given the ever growing digital revolution, many companies are driven by one question: How can we reach decisions quicker and implement them faster? An employee communications app represents an ideal tool for quickly and manageably building up an interactive channel for all employees. This argument is well understood and is supported by a large number of managers.

STRATEGY

SOCIAL

NETWORKING
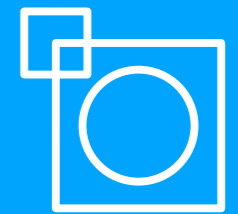
KNOWLEDGE SHARING

DISCUSSION

MOBILE

TRANSFORMATION

MOTIVATION

SPEED

The Costs of an Internal Communications App

The initial development of an easy app based on a kit is financially manageable. Adding specific features and keeping up maintenance makes this solution costlier. App kits cannot compare to the highly specialized functionality of a mobile intranet CMS and are only suitable for functionally basic apps such as those featuring in-house publications. Providing an app for the various app stores and keeping it up-to-date requires continuous effort that most companies are not used to in comparison to past intranet projects—budget planning rarely takes the cost of these efforts into consideration. The conflict between high costs and increased functionality demands can only be settled with standard solutions. The costs are calculated on the basis of the number of users and include the continuous maintenance of the app and further development of its functions.

Read more on this topic:

Mobile Intranet CMS - A Look into Key Requirements

2015 + Smartphones = Paving the Way for Employee Communication

Yammer vs. EmployeeApp – Information Creation vs. Distribution

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