

crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations

A crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is an essential framework designed to navigate unforeseen events effectively, ensuring clear, consistent, and timely messaging across diverse work environments. In today's dynamic business landscape, where employees may be in the office, working remotely, or adopting a flexible hybrid model, a robust plan is paramount for maintaining trust, mitigating damage, and fostering resilience. This article delves into the critical components of developing and implementing such a plan, covering the unique challenges presented by hybrid workforces and the strategies for unified communication. We will explore the foundational elements, the importance of technology, stakeholder identification, message development, and the crucial aspects of training and ongoing evaluation, all aimed at equipping organizations to face any crisis with confidence and preparedness.

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Understanding the Hybrid Challenge

The rise of the hybrid work model, a blend of in-office and remote work, presents a unique set of complexities when it comes to crisis communication. Unlike traditional fully co-located or fully remote setups, hybrid organizations must contend with the potential for information silos, varying access to communication channels, and different levels of awareness among team members. A crisis event, whether it's a data breach, a natural disaster affecting a physical office, or a public relations nightmare, can spread rapidly, and if not managed effectively, can leave parts of the workforce uninformed or misinformed. This disparity can breed confusion, anxiety, and mistrust, undermining an organization's ability to respond cohesively. Therefore, a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations must be designed with this inherent duality in mind, ensuring no employee is left behind.

Consider the scenario of a sudden office closure due to an unforeseen environmental issue. Employees working from home might receive immediate updates via email or internal messaging apps, but those in the office might rely on physical announcements, direct manager communication, or even word-of-mouth. This fragmentation can lead to a chaotic information flow, where some individuals are privy to critical details while others are not. The plan needs to account for these differing touchpoints and ensure a unified message reaches everyone, regardless of their current work location. The goal is to create a single source of truth that is accessible and understandable to all members of the hybrid workforce.

The Dual Nature of Information Dissemination

The dual nature of information dissemination in a hybrid environment is perhaps the most significant hurdle. When you have team members dispersed across various locations, with some physically present in an office and others working from their home offices, the methods of communication can differ significantly. Internal memos that are posted on a bulletin board in the office will never reach remote workers. Similarly, an urgent email might be overlooked by someone engrossed in an in-person meeting. A successful crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations must bridge this gap proactively, utilizing a multi-channel approach that caters to both in-person and remote scenarios.

This means not only relying on digital tools but also considering how to effectively communicate with those who might be less digitally connected or are in a physical location where technology might be compromised during a crisis. The plan needs to specify backup communication methods, ensuring that critical alerts and updates can be disseminated through a variety of means, such as emergency text alerts, dedicated hotline numbers, or even designated team leaders responsible for cascading information to their dispersed teams. It's about building redundancy into your communication strategy.

Maintaining Employee Engagement and Trust

Beyond just disseminating information, a crucial aspect of any crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is maintaining employee engagement and trust. During times of uncertainty, employees look to their leaders for guidance, reassurance, and transparency. In a hybrid setting, this can be more challenging as leaders may not have the same level of direct, informal interaction with all their team members. The plan must outline strategies for leaders to connect with their dispersed teams, acknowledge their concerns, and provide empathetic communication. This could involve scheduled virtual check-ins, accessible Q&A sessions, and ensuring that communication from leadership is consistent and authentic, regardless of the channel.

Building trust in a hybrid model requires a conscious effort to ensure inclusivity and equity in communication. Employees need to feel that they are being treated fairly and that their well-being is a priority, regardless of where they are working. This involves being proactive in addressing potential communication disparities and demonstrating a commitment to keeping everyone informed and supported. A well-executed crisis communication plan can actually strengthen employee bonds and loyalty during challenging times, as it shows the organization is prepared and cares for its people.

Key Components of a Crisis Communication Plan for Hybrid Organizations

A comprehensive crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is built upon several interconnected pillars, each designed to address the unique demands of dispersed workforces. It's not just about having a list of contact numbers; it's about establishing clear protocols, responsibilities, and communication pathways that function effectively across different work arrangements. At its core, the plan needs to define what constitutes a crisis for the organization, outline the steps to be

taken, and identify the individuals or teams responsible for executing the communication strategy. This structured approach ensures that in the heat of the moment, there is no guesswork, only decisive action.

The plan should also encompass risk assessment, identifying potential crises that an organization might face and how they could impact a hybrid workforce. This foresight allows for the development of tailored communication strategies for different scenarios. Furthermore, the plan must include provisions for continuous review and updates, recognizing that the hybrid work landscape is constantly evolving, and so too must the communication strategies within it. Without these foundational elements, even the most well-intentioned communication efforts can fall short.

Defining Crisis Triggers and Scenarios

The first step in developing any crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is to clearly define what constitutes a crisis. This involves identifying potential scenarios that could disrupt normal operations, damage reputation, or pose a threat to employee well-being. For a hybrid organization, these scenarios might include traditional threats like natural disasters impacting an office building, cybersecurity breaches affecting remote networks, or product recalls. However, they can also include issues more specific to hybrid work, such as significant IT infrastructure failures that disproportionately affect remote workers, or union disputes that impact different employee groups in varying ways.

Documenting these triggers and scenarios helps to create a framework for response. For each potential crisis, the plan should outline the initial steps to be taken, who should be notified, and what initial information needs to be gathered. This proactive identification allows for the pre-development of holding statements or key messages that can be adapted quickly when a crisis actually occurs. It's about anticipating problems so you're not caught completely off guard when they arise.

Establishing a Crisis Communication Team

A dedicated Crisis Communication Team (CCT) is the backbone of any effective crisis response, and this is especially true for hybrid organizations. This team should be cross-functional, comprising individuals from various departments such as communications, HR, legal, IT, and operations, ensuring a holistic perspective. Crucially, the team itself needs to be structured to operate effectively in a hybrid environment. This means having clear communication protocols within the team, ensuring all members have access to the necessary tools and information regardless of their location, and designating a clear leader. The team's responsibilities should be meticulously documented, including roles for message approval, media relations, internal communication, and social media monitoring.

The CCT's mandate extends beyond just reacting to a crisis. They are responsible for the ongoing development, maintenance, and testing of the crisis communication plan itself. This includes regularly reviewing potential risks, updating contact lists, and ensuring that communication tools are functioning optimally. For a hybrid organization, the CCT must also consider how to reach and engage employees who may not be actively connected to their work devices at all times, such as those on leave or working non-traditional hours. Their preparedness is the organization's preparedness.

Roles and Responsibilities in a Hybrid Setting

Clearly defining roles and responsibilities is non-negotiable when crafting a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations. In a dispersed workforce, ambiguity can lead to missed communications or duplicated efforts. The plan must delineate who is responsible for issuing official statements, who handles media inquiries, who monitors social media, and who ensures internal dissemination. This includes identifying spokespeople who are trained to handle media interactions, and importantly, establishing a chain of command for decision-making and message approval.

For hybrid organizations, it's also vital to assign responsibilities for cascading information within teams. This often falls to managers, who play a critical role in relaying information to their direct reports. The plan should provide managers with the tools and talking points they need to effectively communicate with their dispersed teams, whether through virtual meetings, dedicated team channels, or one-on-one conversations. Furthermore, the plan should outline how to reach and support employees who may be more vulnerable during a crisis, such as those who work alone or in less connected environments. Every individual needs to know who to turn to and what to expect.

Identifying Stakeholders in a Hybrid Environment

A critical step in formulating a robust crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is the meticulous identification of all relevant stakeholders. In a hybrid model, the spectrum of individuals and groups who need to be informed or engaged during a crisis expands and diversifies, reflecting the blended nature of the workforce and the organization's external connections. Understanding who these stakeholders are, their potential concerns, and the most effective ways to reach them is fundamental to a coordinated and empathetic response.

Failing to adequately identify and engage all key stakeholders can lead to fragmented messaging, missed opportunities for support, and a breakdown in trust. Therefore, a proactive and thorough stakeholder mapping exercise is an indispensable part of the planning process, ensuring that no vital group is overlooked during times of significant disruption. This comprehensive approach is what separates a reactive scramble from a strategic and effective crisis response.

Internal Stakeholders: Employees and Leadership

Internal stakeholders, primarily employees and leadership, are at the forefront of any crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations. For employees, this encompasses everyone, whether they are working from the office, remotely, or on a flexible hybrid schedule. The plan must detail how to ensure all employees receive consistent, accurate, and timely information, addressing potential concerns about job security, safety, or operational continuity. This includes frontline workers, administrative staff, and remote specialists alike.

Leadership, too, is a vital internal stakeholder. This includes executive management, department heads, and team leaders. The plan should outline how leadership will be kept informed, how they will be equipped to communicate with their teams, and how they will present a unified front to the

organization. Their role in demonstrating calm, confidence, and empathy is paramount in guiding the workforce through uncertain times. Clear communication channels between leadership and the crisis communication team are essential for effective decision-making and message dissemination.

External Stakeholders: Customers, Partners, and the Public

Beyond the internal sphere, a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations must also meticulously address external stakeholders. This broad category includes customers, who rely on the organization for products or services; business partners and suppliers, who are integral to operations; investors and shareholders, who have a financial stake; and the broader public, including media and community members, whose perception can significantly impact the organization's reputation. Each of these groups will have different questions and concerns during a crisis, requiring tailored communication strategies.

For instance, customers might be concerned about service disruptions or product availability, while partners may need assurance about ongoing business relationships. The media will be seeking factual information and official statements. The plan needs to specify how to engage with each of these groups, who will be the designated spokespeople for external communications, and what channels will be used to disseminate information. This ensures that the organization's narrative is controlled and consistently communicated to all external parties, safeguarding its public image.

Vulnerable Groups and Special Audiences

In the context of a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations, identifying and planning for vulnerable groups and special audiences is a crucial, often overlooked, element. These can include employees with disabilities who may require specific accommodations or communication methods, employees in regions experiencing the crisis directly, or even those who have recently joined the organization and may be less familiar with established protocols. The plan must consider how to reach these individuals with sensitivity and ensure their needs are met, fostering a sense of inclusion and support during difficult times.

Furthermore, depending on the nature of the crisis, certain employee segments might be more directly impacted. For example, if the crisis involves an IT system failure, employees heavily reliant on that system for their remote work might experience greater disruption and anxiety. The plan should outline specific outreach strategies or support mechanisms for such groups. This proactive consideration demonstrates an organization's commitment to the well-being of all its members, reinforcing trust and mitigating potential escalations.

Crafting Effective Crisis Messages for Diverse Audiences

The ability to craft clear, concise, and empathetic messages is a cornerstone of any successful crisis

communication plan for hybrid organizations. In an environment where employees, customers, and partners are dispersed, a one-size-fits-all approach to messaging will invariably fall short. Messages must be carefully tailored to resonate with the specific concerns, needs, and communication preferences of each identified stakeholder group, ensuring clarity and minimizing the potential for misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

The goal is not just to inform but also to reassure, guide, and maintain trust. This requires a deep understanding of the potential impact of the crisis on each audience and the development of language that is both accurate and sensitive. Effective messaging during a crisis is an art and a science, demanding strategic foresight and a genuine commitment to transparent and compassionate communication.

Key Principles of Crisis Messaging

When developing messages for a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations, several core principles must be adhered to. Firstly, accuracy and truthfulness are paramount; misinformation, even unintentional, can be devastating. Secondly, timeliness is critical; information should be shared as soon as it is verified, avoiding prolonged periods of silence that can foster speculation. Thirdly, consistency across all communication channels and spokespeople is essential to avoid confusion. Fourthly, empathy and concern for those affected should be evident in the tone and content of the message, demonstrating that the organization values its people and stakeholders.

Finally, clarity and conciseness are vital, especially for hybrid workforces where attention spans might be divided. Messages should be easy to understand, avoiding jargon, and directly addressing the most pressing concerns. For hybrid teams, this often means ensuring that key information is presented in multiple formats and easily accessible, recognizing that not everyone will be consuming information at the same time or through the same channels. The objective is to provide actionable information and reassurance effectively.

Tailoring Messages for Internal Audiences

For internal audiences within a hybrid organization, messages need to be crafted with a nuanced understanding of their varied working environments and potential anxieties. When communicating with employees, the focus should be on providing clear guidance regarding safety protocols, operational changes, and any impact on their work. For those in the office, this might involve instructions for evacuation or shelter-in-place. For remote workers, it could mean information on IT support or secure remote access issues. The tone should be reassuring and supportive, acknowledging the disruption and offering resources for assistance.

It's also important to address the emotional impact of a crisis. Leadership messages should convey a sense of unity and shared purpose, emphasizing that the organization is navigating the challenge together. This might involve encouraging employees to support one another and providing access to mental health resources. For hybrid teams, ensuring that managers are equipped to deliver these messages effectively to their dispersed teams is a critical component, bridging any communication gaps and fostering a sense of collective resilience. This personal touch, even virtually, can make a

significant difference.

Tailoring Messages for External Audiences

Crafting messages for external audiences, such as customers, partners, and the public, requires a different strategic approach within a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations. The primary goals here are to maintain trust, mitigate reputational damage, and provide necessary information about service continuity or impact. For customers, messages should be transparent about any disruptions to products or services and outline the steps being taken to resolve the issue. They need to know that their needs are still a priority, even amidst a crisis.

For business partners and suppliers, communication should focus on business continuity and maintaining operational relationships. Reassurance that commitments will be met, or clear communication about necessary adjustments, is key. Media communications should be handled by designated spokespeople who are trained to provide accurate, concise, and factual information, adhering to legal and ethical guidelines. Social media monitoring and engagement are also critical, allowing the organization to address public concerns directly and manage its online narrative. Each external group needs to feel informed and valued, reinforcing the organization's commitment to transparency and responsibility.

Leveraging Technology for Hybrid Crisis Communication

In the age of hybrid work, technology is not just a tool; it's a critical enabler for effective crisis communication. A well-defined crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations must integrate a robust suite of technological solutions to ensure that information can be disseminated rapidly, reliably, and reach every member of the dispersed workforce. Without the right technological infrastructure, even the most meticulously crafted messages can fail to reach their intended audience, leading to confusion and delays during critical moments.

The challenge lies in selecting and implementing technologies that can bridge the physical divide, accommodate different levels of connectivity, and provide multiple avenues for communication. This ensures that in the event of a crisis, the organization can maintain a connected and informed workforce, regardless of their location or current work setup. From emergency alert systems to collaborative platforms, technology plays an indispensable role in modern crisis preparedness.

Emergency Notification Systems

Emergency notification systems are indispensable components of any crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations. These systems are designed to send out urgent alerts to large groups of people simultaneously, across multiple channels, ensuring that critical information reaches employees no matter where they are. This can include text messages, emails, push notifications to mobile apps, and

even automated phone calls. For hybrid teams, where some employees might be at their desks and others on the go or with limited internet access, the ability to use a variety of communication methods is crucial for widespread dissemination.

When selecting an emergency notification system, organizations should consider its reliability, scalability, and the range of communication channels it supports. The system should be user-friendly for both administrators issuing alerts and employees receiving them. It's also important to have a clear protocol for who is authorized to send out alerts and under what circumstances. Regular testing of these systems is vital to ensure they function correctly when needed most. This technology acts as the first line of defense in ensuring immediate awareness of a crisis event.

Collaborative Platforms and Communication Tools

Collaborative platforms and communication tools have become the digital lifelines for hybrid organizations, and their role in crisis communication is invaluable. Tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Google Workspace facilitate real-time communication, document sharing, and virtual meetings, enabling teams to stay connected and coordinated even when physically apart. During a crisis, these platforms can be used to provide ongoing updates, facilitate discussions among the crisis communication team, and allow managers to check in with their dispersed teams.

The crisis communication plan should clearly define how these platforms will be utilized during an emergency. This might include establishing dedicated crisis communication channels, outlining protocols for response times, and ensuring that all employees know how to access and use these tools effectively. It's important to have backup communication methods in place in case a primary platform becomes unavailable due to the nature of the crisis, such as a widespread internet outage affecting remote workers. Redundancy in communication tools is key.

Digital Dashboards and Information Hubs

For a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations, establishing digital dashboards or centralized information hubs is a powerful way to create a single source of truth during a crisis. These platforms can aggregate all relevant information, updates, FAQs, and resources in one easily accessible location. Employees, customers, and other stakeholders can visit these hubs to get the most up-to-date information, reducing the need for repetitive inquiries and ensuring that everyone is working with the same set of facts.

These digital hubs can be hosted on the company intranet, a dedicated microsite, or even a secure portal. They should be designed for intuitive navigation and be accessible from any device, accommodating the varied technological setups of a hybrid workforce. The crisis communication team can use these dashboards to publish official statements, post links to important documents, and even host live Q&A sessions. This centralized approach ensures consistency and transparency, which are crucial for maintaining confidence during uncertain times.

Training and Drills for Hybrid Teams

Developing a comprehensive crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is only the first step; ensuring its effectiveness hinges on thorough training and regular drills. For hybrid teams, this presents a unique challenge as you need to engage individuals across different locations and work arrangements. Without adequate training, even the best-laid plans can falter when faced with the pressure and chaos of an actual crisis. Therefore, investing time and resources in preparing your hybrid workforce is not optional, it's essential for resilience.

These training sessions and drills serve multiple purposes: they familiarize individuals with their roles and responsibilities, test the efficacy of communication channels, identify potential weaknesses in the plan, and build confidence among team members. By simulating crisis scenarios, organizations can ensure that their hybrid teams are not only aware of the plan but are also capable of executing it effectively, minimizing confusion and maximizing preparedness.

Developing Training Modules for Dispersed Teams

Creating effective training modules for a dispersed hybrid workforce requires adaptability and a focus on accessibility. For a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations, these modules should cover various aspects, from understanding crisis triggers and roles to utilizing specific communication technologies. The training should be delivered through methods that cater to remote and in-office employees alike, such as interactive webinars, e-learning courses, and accessible digital resources. It's crucial that the content is engaging and easy to digest, recognizing that employees may be juggling multiple responsibilities.

Key elements to include in training modules are clear definitions of what constitutes a crisis, how to report a potential issue, the established communication channels for alerts and updates, and the designated points of contact. For hybrid teams, specific modules might focus on how to maintain communication continuity if office-based systems are affected, or how to ensure remote team members receive critical information promptly. The goal is to equip every individual with the knowledge and confidence to act appropriately and contribute to a coordinated response.

Conducting Realistic Crisis Simulations

To truly test and refine a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations, conducting realistic crisis simulations is indispensable. These simulations should mimic potential crisis scenarios, forcing teams to activate the plan and practice their response in a controlled environment. For hybrid teams, simulations can be designed to present challenges specific to their working model, such as testing the effectiveness of emergency notification systems across different locations or practicing how to manage communication if remote connectivity is compromised. This hands-on experience is invaluable for identifying gaps in the plan or areas where training needs to be reinforced.

Simulations should involve all key stakeholders, including the crisis communication team, leadership, and representatives from different employee groups. Post-simulation debriefs are critical for analyzing

what worked well, what didn't, and what lessons can be learned. This iterative process of simulation, analysis, and refinement ensures that the crisis communication plan remains dynamic and effective, preparing the hybrid workforce for real-world events. It's like a fire drill for your communication protocols.

Ongoing Evaluation and Plan Updates

The dynamic nature of hybrid work necessitates a commitment to ongoing evaluation and regular updates of the crisis communication plan. A crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations should not be a static document; it must evolve with the organization and the changing landscape of work. After any incident, whether a drill or a real event, a thorough post-crisis review is essential. This involves gathering feedback from all involved parties, analyzing the effectiveness of communication strategies, and identifying areas for improvement.

Furthermore, regular reviews should be scheduled, perhaps annually or semi-annually, to assess potential new risks, update contact information, and ensure that technological tools are still fit for purpose. As hybrid work models themselves evolve, the plan must be re-evaluated to ensure it continues to address the unique communication challenges and opportunities presented. This continuous improvement cycle ensures that the organization remains prepared and adaptable, building greater resilience over time.

The Strategic Imperative of a Crisis Communication Plan for Hybrid Organizations

In conclusion, the development and implementation of a well-defined crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations is no longer a discretionary item but a strategic imperative. The inherent complexities of managing a workforce that spans physical and virtual spaces demand a proactive, integrated, and adaptable approach to crisis preparedness. By understanding the unique challenges, meticulously identifying stakeholders, crafting targeted messages, leveraging appropriate technologies, and investing in continuous training and evaluation, organizations can build a robust framework that safeguards their people, their reputation, and their operational continuity.

The ability to communicate effectively and empathetically during times of disruption is a hallmark of resilient and forward-thinking organizations. For those operating in a hybrid model, this capability is magnified in importance. A strong crisis communication plan not only mitigates risks but also fosters a culture of trust, transparency, and mutual support, ultimately strengthening the organization's ability to navigate any challenge it may face and emerge stronger on the other side.

FAQ: Crisis Communication Plan for Hybrid Organizations

Q: What makes developing a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations different from a traditional plan?

A: The primary difference lies in the complexity of reaching a dispersed workforce. A hybrid plan must account for employees working from different locations, potentially with varying levels of access to technology and communication channels. This requires a multi-channel approach, redundancy in communication methods, and specific strategies to ensure no employee is left uninformed or unsupported, bridging the gap between in-office and remote work environments.

Q: What are the most critical communication channels to include in a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations?

A: A robust plan for hybrid organizations should incorporate a mix of channels, including emergency notification systems (for immediate alerts via SMS, email, and app notifications), collaborative platforms (like Slack or Microsoft Teams for ongoing updates and team communication), internal company intranets or dedicated crisis portals (as a central repository for information), and leadership check-ins (virtual or in-person, depending on the scenario) to ensure direct engagement.

Q: How can organizations ensure consistent messaging across different teams and locations in a hybrid crisis scenario?

A: Consistency is achieved through clear protocols for message approval by a designated crisis communication team, using pre-approved templates and talking points, and empowering trained spokespeople. Managers play a crucial role in cascading approved messages to their dispersed teams. Regular training on the plan helps all employees understand their role in maintaining message integrity and avoiding the spread of misinformation.

Q: What role do managers play in a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations?

A: Managers are vital conduits of information in hybrid environments. They are responsible for relaying official communications to their teams, ensuring that remote and in-office employees receive the same information, and acting as a first point of contact for employee concerns. The crisis communication plan must equip managers with the necessary training, resources, and talking points to effectively lead their teams through a crisis.

Q: How can organizations test the effectiveness of their crisis communication plan with a hybrid workforce?

A: Testing involves conducting realistic crisis simulations that account for hybrid work dynamics. This could include simulating an office-wide disruption affecting only in-office staff, or a widespread IT failure impacting remote workers more severely. Drills should test the effectiveness of emergency notification systems, the speed of information dissemination across various channels, and the ability of managers to connect with their dispersed teams during a simulated event.

Q: What is the importance of empathy in crisis communication messages for hybrid organizations?

A: Empathy is crucial because crises can create significant anxiety and uncertainty for employees, regardless of their work location. Messages that acknowledge the human impact of the crisis, express concern for well-being, and offer support are more likely to foster trust and a sense of community. For hybrid teams, demonstrating empathy helps bridge the physical distance and ensures that all employees feel valued and cared for by the organization.

Q: How can technology support the rapid dissemination of information during a crisis in a hybrid environment?

A: Technology is the backbone of rapid dissemination. Emergency notification systems can send instant alerts to all employees simultaneously across multiple devices. Collaborative platforms allow for real-time updates and discussions, while digital dashboards provide a centralized, accessible hub for all critical information. These tools ensure that even when employees are not physically together, they can remain connected and informed efficiently.

Q: What are some common pitfalls to avoid when creating a crisis communication plan for hybrid organizations?

A: Common pitfalls include relying on a single communication channel, failing to identify and plan for all stakeholder groups (especially vulnerable ones), insufficient training for employees and managers, not testing the plan regularly, and having unclear roles and responsibilities. Another significant pitfall is assuming that communication strategies that worked for fully co-located teams will automatically translate to a hybrid model without adaptation.

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