



THE LEAD

Rodeos, trade machines and pick swaps: Inside Sachin Gupta's road to Minnesota

Jon Krawczynski (/author/jon-krawczynski/) Oct 10, 2019

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The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is the sprawling city's signature event, a 20-day, Mardi Gras-like phenomenon that attracts more than 2.5 million people annually in celebration of the region's country-western culture and roughneck roots.

It calls itself the largest indoor livestock exhibition and rodeo in the world and has played host to megawatt stars like George Strait, Beyonce, Cardi B and Garth Brooks for headlining concerts.

For employees of the Houston Rockets, many of whom are recruited from all corners of the country and the world to come and work and play for the team, attending RodeoHouston, as it is also called, can serve as a sort of crash course orientation to the city and its people.

So it only made sense for Sachin Gupta, a newly hired member of Daryl Morey's analytics team in 2006, to go get a heaping helping of Houston pie served up the only way they know how in Texas: extra large. Gupta was in attendance the night of the calf scramble, a popular portion of the festivities in which teenagers enrolled in 4-H or Future Farmers of America chase after calves, throw a lasso of sorts around their heads and try to pull them into a ring while the calves dig their heels into the dirt and fight them every step of the way. Those who are successful earn certificates that they can put toward purchasing their own cows.

Gupta is an Indian-American who grew up in sports-mad Boston, earned a computer science degree from MIT and later an MBA from Stanford. So the whole scene was certainly new to him. When he returned to the Rockets offices the next day, several of his new colleagues were sharing a laugh about watching the kids struggle to get the calves where they needed to go.

“It was interesting,” Gupta said, according to those who remember the exchange. “Why don’t they turn around and pull it the opposite way? The calf would pull against them and walk right into the ring.”

The room fell silent.

This story has nothing to do with basketball, but everything to do with Gupta’s rise from a software engineer at ESPN, where he helped create the NBA Trade Machine, to the vanguard of the league’s analytics movement in Houston and eventually to prominent front-office positions in Philadelphia, Detroit and now Minnesota, where he is the executive vice president of basketball operations and the No. 2 in command under new president Gersson Rosas.

Those who know Gupta best describe an uncanny ability to take complex problems and pull them apart thread by thread until the answers reveal themselves with a “why didn’t I think of that” level of simplicity. He was Morey’s trade wizard in Houston and figured prominently in the deal that landed James Harden. He was one of Sam Hinkie’s first hires in Philly and helped get “The Process” up and running. And now he is serving as Rosas’s right-hand man after working with him previously in Houston, quietly trying to solve one of the NBA’s longest-running riddles: How do you build a sustainable model of success in a market that spends five months of the year buried under ice and snow and has spent the last 15 years pelting a beleaguered fan base with losses and dysfunction?

“We’ve had a lot of good experiences in the past, in Houston,” Rosas said. “But the opportunity to challenge to do something here in Minnesota that’s special, it’s something that I know is important to him and is the reason why he’s here.”

Gupta may not have the same kind of name recognition that Morey or Hinkie have earned during their envelope-pushing tenures leading front offices, but chances are he has had a more direct impact on NBA fans than either one of his more well-known bosses.

Before he joined Morey in Houston, he was an engineer at ESPN.com and was assigned to work on parsing data for the NBA and college basketball that came in through third-party providers. While there he wrote the code for the Trade Machine (<http://www.espn.com/nba/tradeMachine>), the incredibly addictive online tool that synthesized a byzantine set of rules and regulations and helped make amateur GMs out of anyone with an internet connection.

Championed at the time by ESPN star Bill Simmons, the self-proclaimed “Picasso of the Trade Machine,” the project exploded into the NBA fandom’s consciousness during an era in which player movement and transactions started to evolve from appetizer to main course for the league’s news-starved followers.



“One, I didn’t know it would become this big thing,” Gupta, now in the Timberwolves’ front office, says of developing ESPN’s Trade

Machine. "But two, I didn't know it would become my job." (Courtesy Minnesota Timberwolves)

The machine not only incorporated the rules of the CBA, but also included instant analysis from John Hollinger, at the time an ESPN NBA writer and the inventor of PER, the Player Efficiency Rating that served as one of the first well-known numerical measures of a player's value. Each deal has Hollinger estimating how many wins the transaction would add or subtract from each team involved.

"The funniest thing is people would see me and say, 'Oh, I love your Trade Machine,'" said Hollinger, who would go on to join the Memphis Grizzlies front office and was recently hired by *The Athletic*. "I'd be like, 'Well, actually, that's Sachin's Trade Machine.' I felt bad because people associated it with me, but I would just say, 'Thanks, but Sachin did all the work.'"

It started as a side project for Gupta but would eventually become his claim to fame, though he quickly dismisses the notion that he "created" the trade machine. He says that ESPN.com NBA editor Chris Ramsay came up with the idea and several others were involved in designing the actual page. Gupta, he said, wrote the code on the back end to make sure it all worked.

Whether Gupta is being excessively humble, as he is often accused of being, or not, he looks back on those tedious days coding logic as the first steps toward a professional life spent in an NBA front office.

"One, I didn't know it would become this big thing," Gupta said. "But two, I didn't know it would become my job."

Just like his breakdown of the calf scramble in Houston, the Trade Machine served as a slick cheat sheet for anyone who didn't have the time or the wherewithal to delve into an arcane set of rules to see if it was realistic or not. In short, it made the CBA accessible and birthed a new movement in the NBA Twittersphere: "Who says no?"






Riley McAtee

@RileyMcAtee

who says no?

This Trade is Successful!

Start Over
Adjust Trade
Save Trade

New Orleans Pelicans			Cap Room	Over Tax Line	Sacramento Kings			Cap Room	Over Tax Line
Player	Salary	PER			Player	Salary	PER		
 Z. Randolph	\$11,692,308	N/A			 A. Davis	\$25,434,263	31.0		
PF	1 Year				PF	3 Years			
 Kosta Koufos	\$8,739,500	12.5							
C	1 Year								

1,259 10:29 AM - Jan 28, 2019

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Before he got involved with the Trade Machine, Gupta had only a rudimentary understanding of the league's bylaws and timelines that governed the trade market. Making a trade in the NBA isn't always as simple as swapping one player for another. The collective bargaining agreement is a labyrinth of legalese, almost 600 pages of ifs and buts designed to try to cover every scenario under the sun. Salaries have to match up, certain time elements have to be met depending on when the player was acquired and so much more.

When Gupta set out to help his ESPN brethren construct the Trade Machine, he immersed himself in the CBA to gain the understanding he needed to visualize the concept. The more he dived into the document's minutiae, the more fascinated he became with it all and the more enamored he was of how much an impact a trade can have on an organization's fortunes. When the process started in 2006, Gupta was a software engineer who was also a sports fan. By the time it was over, he had earned a PhD in deal-making and set a course to join an NBA front office.

"When he went to Houston, I tried to make trade offers to Daryl to get him back to ESPN," Hollinger said, only half-joking. "We were pissed when we lost Sachin."

Gupta first met Morey at, surprise surprise, the Sloan School of Management at MIT. Morey was a member of the Boston Celtics front office at the time and Gupta sought him out after listening to Morey speak about the methods the team was beginning to employ.

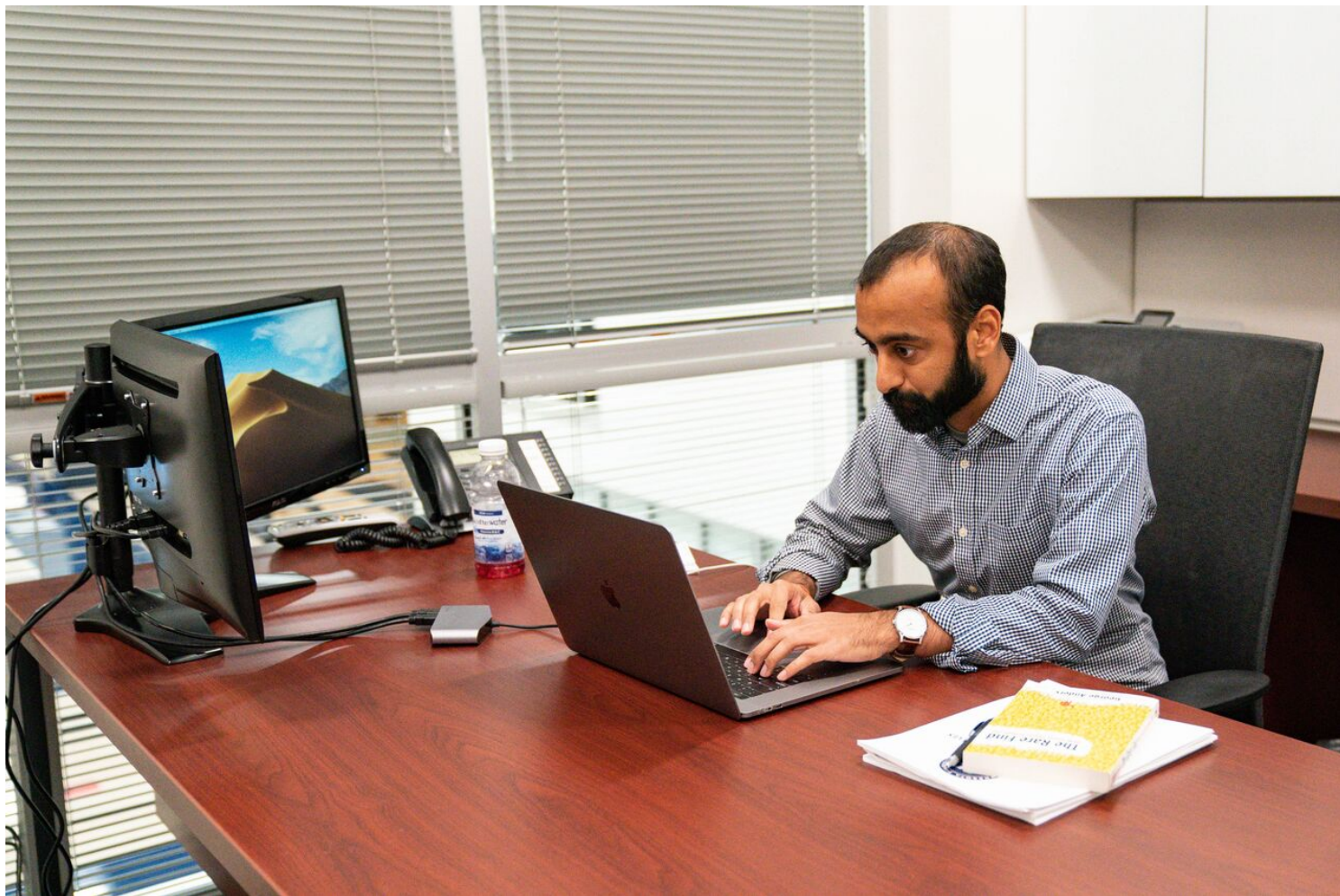
"He was talking about Moneyball for basketball," Gupta said. "I was like, 'Oh my God, this is it.'"

The two kept in touch, and when Morey was hired to run the Rockets basketball operations in 2006, he hired Gupta to help build out the analytics department. There he teamed with Morey and Hinkie to completely revamp the way NBA front offices were structured and to introduce a new way of evaluating players that incorporated empirical data derived from complex computer models into the traditional scouting process.

There was, of course, some skepticism in the approach, especially when the old school coaches and scouts walked into a room and saw an Indian-American standing around 5 feet, 6 inches tall who had never played basketball in high school, much less college or the pros.

“He’s not an NBA Hall of Famer. He’s not 6-10,” one of Gupta’s colleagues said. “That hurts him in a league of tall people that he’s not.”

Gupta could sense the skepticism when he first arrived and immediately set out to disarm it. He had beers with scouts to build relationships, asked questions of executives with more traditional basketball backgrounds and used a genial, humble demeanor to connect with people like Rosas, whose background was rooted in scouting, not spreadsheets.



"He was talking about Moneyball for basketball," Gupta recalls of a meeting with now-Rockets GM Daryl Morey that set him on his path. "I was like, 'Oh my God, this is it.'" (Courtesy Minnesota Timberwolves)

"Ultimately it's humility," Gupta said. "I think that's where a lot of people have issues, particularly if a new analytics person comes in guns blazing. 'This is what the numbers say, this is what the model says. You're wrong, this is right.'"

"First of all, you're not a very good analyst if you have that much confidence. The models don't know anything about personality or fit and all that. I think just having humility, asking questions, trying to figure out the scout's process. Trying to figure out ways we can help in that process. Not with just adding data and helping with an evaluation but helping them with their workflow, helping make things more efficient for them."

Humility is a recurring theme for those who know Gupta well.

“I feel like a lot of humility is faux-humility,” said Ben Falk, who worked with Gupta in Philly and now runs the basketball analytics website Cleaning The Glass (<https://cleaningtheglass.com/>). “We’ve learned that we don’t like arrogant people. And therefore we find ways to be self-deprecating or just don’t say things that are arrogant, generally in society. He has a deep-rooted humility.”

“He’s incredible at all these different things, but he truly doesn’t believe that he is. It’s an incredible quality because it shields him from errors of overconfidence.”

The approach worked with longtime Rockets scout Brent Johnson, a dyed-in-the-wool scout’s scout, the kind who values the eye test in evaluating a player’s potential.

“He’s the kindest person ever,” Johnson said. “He’s got a great heart. And he’s so freaking smart that when you’re around him, you don’t even know it.”

Gupta’s quiet nature and unwillingness to shout above the noise has been known to be confusing in his early days in an organization. In packed conference rooms before a draft or a trade deadline, he has been known to say very little while he gauges the rest of the room and listens to the views of others.

Will Weaver, a former assistant coach with the 76ers who now coaches in Australia, recalled a meeting with Hinkie, Gupta and scouting director Vince Rozman, that was discussing a major hire that needed to be made. One by one, each person in the room offered up his thoughts on the right path forward. Then Gupta chimed in.

“It was far and away the best idea,” Weaver said. “So obviously the best idea. We all just sat there dumbfounded and Sam’s like, ‘You never get to go last again. We just wasted 45 minutes with our average ideas. You go first and we can move on to other stuff.’”

Hinkie has often said the majority of his best ideas were influenced by Gupta. “He was the driving force behind all the good ones,” Hinkie told *The Athletic*. “He’s so well respected, you wouldn’t think of doing something without asking what he thinks.”

Sam Hinkie



eat article, but I'd change the title -- Meet Sachin Gupta, The Driving Force Behind *All* of Sam Hinkie's Trades
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Last night the #sixers and #kings met in the Pick Swap Bowl. Meet the architect of that trade: Sachin Gupta. #sixers bit.ly/SachinGuptaSix...

2,338 2:53 PM - Jan 31, 2017

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If anything, Morey and Hinkie found themselves prodding Gupta to speak up more often.

“If you have worked with Sachin for any extended period, you know how good he is and you know you should listen to him a lot,” Falk said. “If you haven’t worked with Sachin, it’s not just that you typecast him as a numbers guy, but he’s not one to jump in, interrupt someone in a conversation or pound the table.”

Gupta said he never faced any overt resistance from scouts or coaches because Morey and Hinkie followed the mantra “good ideas can come from anyone,” encouraging dialogue and debate. Even though he was hired to build the Rockets analytics department, it wasn’t long before he was pitching trade ideas, giving input on roster decisions and getting involved in all parts of basketball operations.

“After a while we would just say, ‘OK, Sachin’s gonna figure this out,’” Johnson said with a laugh.

While Gupta had input into all facets in Houston and Philly, from the draft and free agency to personnel and player development, those early days at ESPN meant that he had a special affinity for the art, and the science, of the trade.

“A lot of the stuff we do and tools we build and information we provide we hope provides small advantages along the way, and over time hopefully that builds up,” Gupta said. “But trades are like big decisions that can have up and downside, but have a big impact.”

He still remembers the first one.

It didn't take long for Morey to realize that Gupta's background gave him a unique ability to see the chessboard and conceptualize more of the moves and counters than most. Gupta would bring ideas to Morey, who quickly became known as one of the most aggressive general managers in the game.

"At first they were maybe surprised that they were actually reasonable ideas," Gupta said. "I remember the first time that Daryl was like, 'Oh yeah, I'll call them.'

"I was like, 'Wow, you're going to call a team based on an idea that I had? That's so cool.'"

That deal, like so many offers in the NBA, didn't go through. But it opened the door for Gupta to be an integral part of the brainstorming and deal pitching as the Rockets chased star after star with an unapologetic thirst that bordered on obsession. Back then, the All-Star break was before the trade deadline on the NBA calendar, meaning the league's showcase weekend doubled as the breeding ground for blockbuster deals that would change the league's landscape.

"I remember I would stay up for two days straight before each All-Star break just combing through each team and coming up with several ideas for each team so Daryl was prepared," Gupta said.

The ideas would come from all angles. He once told Morey of one that jumped into his head while he was taking a shower. The GM liked it so much he told him "to go get back in that shower."

Gupta followed Hinkie to Philadelphia, where they embarked on an ambitious, and polarizing, plan to revive a once-proud franchise. They bottomed out, stockpiled as many future assets as they could in an effort to have as many chances to acquire a star, or stars, as possible.

Gupta was in the middle of it all, advising Hinkie and pushing the margins as much as possible. One of the most notable deals came in 2015, when the Sixers took Nik Stauskas, Carl Landry, Jason Thompson and the right to swap picks in two drafts from the Kings for two second-round picks.

He was also part of the decision-making process to trade reigning Rookie of the Year Michael Carter-Williams in his sophomore season for future draft assets, all part of a plan to strategically evaluate what they had and what they still needed.

The brazenness of it all rubbed some in the league the wrong way. They didn't play some of the same political games with agents, other executives and the media to curry public favor. They were criticized for a soulless view of players as assets and allegedly didn't pay as much attention to chemistry and continuity as they should have.



"The opportunity to challenge to do something here in Minnesota that's special ... is important to him and is the reason why he's here," Wolves president Gersson Rosas says of Gupta. (David Sherman / NBAE via Getty Images)

Morey's Rockets took similar arrows, and members of both organizations dispute the characterization. Everyone has a role, and Gupta's role was to be the dispassionate evaluator, one part of decision-making teams filled with varying perspectives.

"I think the ultimate decision-maker, Daryl or Sam or Gersson, they understand both sides," Gupta said. "And so to some extent there's maybe some value to having someone who is thinking coldly rationally just to be able to get that pure input and then you can get the other pure inputs and then the decision-makers can take all that in."

While the group took heavy criticism in the moment for a seemingly audacious plan, and Hinkie stepped down at the end of his third season in charge as ownership courted Bryan Colangelo, history has smiled on the process. The Sixers are now among the favorites to win the Eastern Conference, with Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons leading the way, and the stockpile of assets the group assembled in their time leading the way is a big part of it. That is of little solace to the group that wasn't able to finish the job, but the experience has only prepared Gupta even more for the Timberwolves.

"I'm proud of what we did. I think maybe we were so focused on making the right decisions, which I think is right, but maybe we could have done more to build some more of those relationships within the media and externally in general," Gupta said.

Rosas brought Gupta to Minnesota to continue that development and help him turn around a franchise that has just one playoff appearance in the last 15 years and is still recovering from the way it disintegrated last year.

He is part of a diverse front office that includes a former agent (Joe Branch), another Indian-American sports science expert (Robby Sikka), an Italian scouting director (Gianluca Pascucci) and Manny Rohan, who has been with the Wolves since 2010. Gupta oversees analytics, but just like in Houston and Philly, his responsibilities and input extend far beyond that designated area.

"It's a sense of questioning and wanting to understand," Rosas said. "And I think he embraces what he doesn't know, as much as what he does know."

The only time Gupta's humility subsides is when he is asked about being pigeonholed as the computer wizard who plugs a bunch of numbers into an algorithm and waits for the answer.

"To be relegated to just being an analytics guy in the sense that you're just creating models or creating reports and not having an impact on decision-making, that I definitely rail against," he said, "and not just for myself, but I don't want our analysts to feel that way either. I think good ideas can come from anywhere."

In some ways, the Timberwolves present Gupta's biggest challenge yet. They have a franchise player in Karl-Anthony Towns, but a capsheet that is stuffed with bloated salaries that make finding a path back to relevance in the loaded Western Conference anything but easy.

Constructing a winner in Minnesota has proven to be a daunting, complicated endeavor. On the scale of difficulty, it probably lies somewhere between pulling a calf into a ring in the middle of a football stadium and constructing an online trading tool from scratch.

Like he always does, Gupta will look at the problem and try to simplify it as much as possible. In Rosas, he has a leader he trusts and admires. In Ryan Saunders, he has found a coach open to collaboration, so much so that Saunders has a member of the analytics staff behind the bench this season. In Towns, he has a perennial All-Star who hasn't yet reached his prime.

It doesn't guarantee success. But it's a start.

"Every place I've worked, I've loved it and it's been great people," Gupta said. "But the alignment here is pretty special in a way that I haven't seen before. I'm really excited about the integration we're going to have with the coaching staff. It's been special."

(Top photo: Courtesy Minnesota Timberwolves)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

Jon Krawczynski ([/author/jon-krawczynski/](#)) is a Senior Writer for The Athletic Minnesota covering the Timberwolves, the NBA and the Vikings. Jon joined The Athletic after 16 years at The Associated Press, where he covered three Olympics, three NBA Finals, two Ryder Cups and the 2009 NFC championship game. Follow Jon on Twitter [@JonKrawczynski](#) (<https://twitter.com/JonKrawczynski>).



11 COMMENTS

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Corey H. 20h ago

Gupta was my favorite Timberwolves hire after Rosas got the President job. Excited to see how he can help navigate out of the Thibs-era "win right now" mantra into a more sustainable model.



13

**Emet L.** 20h ago

and Andrew Wiggins will be his biggest challenge yet.



2

**Scott S.** 20h ago

@Emet L. *trading Andrew Wiggins

FTFY



5

**Tim G.** 19h ago

Great read, I can't wait to see how these first couple years play out. We're going to need every bit of cap magic from Gupta! Thankfully the cap is going to keep rising the next few years so maybe we aren't 100% doomed.



1



Deepak N. 18h ago

Wonderful article about a fascinating and generally unrecognised (or undervalued) individual. Loved the subtle prod in the direction of Bill Simmons, a man against whom accusations of humility are not often levelled.

 1 

James P. 17h ago

So great to read about all the smart people who no longer work for the Sixers. Awesome. So happy. Please kill me.

 9 

Louis Q. 17h ago

One of your best articles Jon. Regardless of the current roster, the Timberwolves' front office, particularly people like Gupta, are raising this franchise's floor for success in the future. Being a Wolves fan hasn't felt this good in a long time.

 8 

Greg K. 16h ago

It's great that they have this kind of voice in the room. It's as big of a challenge as any when factoring in the current lack of potential and abundance of doubt about the long-term future, so it's refreshing to see the shift between this and the reports of Layden's tone-deaf approach to the Butler trade.

 3 

Ryan C. 15h ago

I wish he was still in Philly. A genius.

 8 

Billy V. 10h ago

As a sixers fan and big Sam guy, this is a terrific read. Thanks for this



Symon P. 4h ago

I think that the hires of Rosas & Gupta mean that the Timberwolves will be a team to watch into the future. I'm glad that Gupta is being given the recognition he deserves



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