

Quality of working life research: I. Quality of life, happiness and meaning of life

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Abstract: Good work is an activity that creates a strong sense of personal meaningfulness because it is directly connected to the project of our personal development, what we want from life. We all want to become complete. To this end, we have to grow and achieve fulfillment. Good work challenges us to go beyond our limits and confront new and exciting aspects of life. Work should be a direct manifestation of life. Life is a simple and clear expression of what you do. Our love of life is revealed in what we do. The fine art of working and the secret of working are to be found in the intimacy of the intersection between our lives and the world around us. The secret of the extraordinary working life is the blossoming of all our human talents. Most interestingly, it seems that we all have great gifts to give to the world, but only after many years of dedicated practice will these gifts reveal themselves fully.

Keywords: Quality of Life, QOL, quality of working life, QWL, philosophy, human development, public health

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have through all ages been occupied with the immense questions and seemingly unsolvable problems related to the quality of human life. As life for most people has consisted of a professional and a private life, both have been subject to consideration. For half a century grand thinkers have been reflecting on the meaning of life and how to improve it and quite surprisingly, a sign of our time is that these problems are starting to soften up on the thinkers (1-3). It is only natural, that we take these general solutions and apply them in relation to our worklife, and for that purpose we have constructed the word working-life quality or the quality of working life (QWL).

For more than a decade, the Quality of Life Research Centre in Copenhagen, Denmark and its scientific inter-national coworkers have walked the path to try to understand quality of life (QOL) and QWL, publishing books (4-11) and scientific papers (12-29) on the good life and the good work. Except for a few books (4,5) and papers (12,30-37), our works have often been discussing philosophy related to the concept of QOL

and QWL, but without addressing the philosophical questions directly.

But, as philosophy is the basis of science, this is not wise. We need an explicit discussion of the philosophy behind the major aims and developments in our medical science and the related sciences making it possible for us to deliver the service to our patients and clients that we want; especially when it comes to large health care units, with all their well-known problems related to QOL and QWL. We need a specific research line in QWL also.

In our series of papers on QWL philosophy we take our offset in the Danish Quality of Life Survey, where we asked 10,000 people about their quality of life with the validated SEQOL questionnaire (16,17) with more than 300 questions on their quality of life, and the subsequent work done on QWL and the related 100 questions QWL-questionnaire, SEQWL. How did they feel? How content were they with their lives? How happy were they? Did they feel their needs were fulfilled? These are part of the many questions asked. We asked the questions we believed to be important for the

QOL. The results (8-11,22-27) forced us to contemplate deeply on the following philosophical questions, like what is QOL and QWL, what is human talent, and how is it supported, what is personal mastery, fellowship and true creation of value?

To argue that these philosophical questions, both related to QOL and QWL, are actually related to medicine and the providing of high standard health services, we had to look at the consequences of patients and co-workers being taught the philosophy laid out here.

Quite surprisingly, it seems like just assimilating the QOL and QWL philosophy already makes things feel better and more meaningful. When we work with patients, we call this QOL as medicine (28,29), and this improvement of the patient's personal philosophy of life seems to be the essence of holistic medicine, helping the patient to assume responsibility for his or her own life (30). When we work with leaders and coworkers, the principles are not very different, but the focus is on using all their talents and obtaining joy of work and proficiency, heartfelt relationships at the working place, and the experience of creating real value to the community. Our series of QWL philosophy papers will address these items one by one.

The quality of our QWL reflections are soft and general—pretty vague, if you are accustomed to the “hard” quality of natural science—as much philosophy is and even vague if you are accustomed to medical QOL science. Nevertheless, we find such general perspectives of utmost importance, as all scientific and systematic action is built on such general considerations of values, perspectives on reality, interpretations of life and production goals, and preferences of focus. So please bear with this vagueness and look for the abstract, QWL-supportive perspective that materializes in our papers on QWL philosophy, as we believe that such a positive interpretation of life and reality can help many leaders and coworkers in the modern health service organization.

TO WORK IS TO THRIVE AND PROSPER—OR TO DIE SLOWLY

The worst thing he knew was to wake up in the morning and go to work. He felt that his eyelids fought him on days like this and refused to open. He forced himself out of bed and got dressed. The day had started and he was already busy, trying not to be late for work.

Do you look forward to going to work in the morning? Or is it a necessary evil? Does your work draw you or must you force yourself to leave home? Would you continue working if you had enough money?

Or would you do something quite different—change professions, for instance, travel around the world, study, become an artist or make yourself comfortable and take it easy all day long?

Many people daydream about not having to work. But, one day, they realize that maybe a lot of freedom and time off is not sufficient—maybe there was something special about working after all. Something that goes deeper than money, status, and personal identity, which cannot hide the fact that human beings need to work.

It is the meaning of life that we use ourselves for a purpose. It takes a lot of pain to experience life as a gift, if we consider ourselves useless creatures. And that is the secret of work: work is where our efforts can make a difference—and where our contribution can help to make this a better world to live in. The core of work is very close to our soul. We have to work simply because we cannot help it. It is in our nature as human beings to be active and creative.

This, of course, does not mean that all work is good. Only work close to our soul is good, since it fulfils our need to develop ourselves to be useful and valuable. Consequently, using ourselves in constructive and useful ways gives us great experiences. Other ways will make us suffer from the wrongs we do. Work can build up something in life or tear it down. It can make us happy and healthy or it can corrode our souls and jeopardize everything.

Most people feel fine on the job, even though it is rarely superb. But, this may be the essence of the problem: if you do not make further demands of your work, you will end up with a merely 'bearable' job and never obtain really rewarding work. According to statistics (Danish Working-Life Quality project), only one in three workers feel very much at ease with their job. Thus, there are great possibilities for progress.

What can we do to find a better job or improve our job? First of all, stop being so content because we are content with far too little. We are too tolerant. A job that we do not really want is just not good enough. We really must make demands to feel fully alive at work. Life is too short for boring work.

Get your fantasies going. What would you like to do? What do you feel like? What are your interests? What possibilities are offered by your present employer to get you where you want to be? Imagine that your physician has just passed you your death sentence: about three years left to live. Would you keep the job you are in? What would you do differently? To what would you say no? If you would not keep your job in this situation, maybe you should quit tomorrow.

There is no guarantee that we will grow very old. We may die tomorrow. Life is far too short for meaningless work. It is important to understand that our body cannot endure the strain of doing things we consider meaningless. We must be alive on the job; we must be eager and keen and go full speed ahead!

You will not become more alive from doing work that you consider routine, boring, monotonous, and exhausting. This is not to say that all physical work—washing, cleaning up, or sewing—is bad work. If you like it and you have good colleagues and if you consider it useful, then it might be the right job for you. But, work that you do not consider good for you is not worth having. Do not take it for the sake of money. The world has grown too rich for that. To those people who insist on arguing that many people still have to work for their daily bread, we can only say that their attitude may be wrong. Of course, it is necessary to work to maintain a good standard of living—but is that standard necessary? Happiness does not depend on a car or a mobile telephone and electric toothbrush—nor the good claret and sirloin. Basically, happiness comes from your own well-being, your surroundings, and from doing what you really like to do. If you can achieve such a state of well-being, there is no reason to be unhappy about a life without material goods. In that case, you are far better off than the average person is. Indeed—and this comes as something of a surprise—according to the previously mentioned study on quality of life, people with jobs they do not really like generally feel worse about life than those who are unemployed. The same research also showed that it is not unusual to be happy without a job. According to the survey, 55% of the jobless persons stated that they were happy or very happy, compared with 66% of persons with jobs, although those on social benefits were on average less happy.

It is your own responsibility to get on with your life if you are in a job that you do not like. Nobody will do the work for you. Your working life is your responsibility. You are the only person, who really knows what is good for you, and you are the only one who can change things.

Our greatest enemy is resignation, indolence, and laziness. Apathy flowing sluggishly through the veins and listlessness causing heavy eyelids all day long result in an almost dead person, who seemingly will not take the initiative in his or her own life. A person without dreams of life is a person who is only half-alive. To find out what to do with our working life is the great opportunity to do something about it.

To what extent is our health endangered when we

are bored on the job? We do not know all the consequences yet, but we can assume that there is a severe health risk. As living creatures, we are made for a whole range of lively activities. When we are wrapped up in old habits and comfortable wealth, we lose our need to be alert and do our best. We so easily lose our clarity, our freshness, and connection to life.

We are able to renew our lives by demanding everything. Or, we can let go and give up and gradually grow tired, sad, weak, old and desolate. Today we know that human beings who have lost their joy in life are, in fact, people suffering from a wide range of weaknesses and health defects. It is as if we cannot live without feeling alive. Our body needs a commitment that is alive. It needs to feel excitement, fear, happiness, and hope.

If you feel that you are moving downhill, so to speak, and this feeling is accompanied by a symptomatic and increasing number of days lost through sickness, forgetfulness, and a rather poor performance in your job, you must give thought to what is wrong. Is it possible that your way of living is causing your deterioration? If we do not thrive and our body keeps telling us that we are unbalanced, then it is obvious that we suspect our working life of being too uninspiring, exhausting and destructive simply because work takes up such a big part of our life. Of course, your problematic relationship with your partner is worth a thought, and if you have no close friends that will not help you either, if you are to renew yourself. But, everything in life fits together. If there is no commitment on your part toward your work, then there will not be any enthusiasm either for your spouse, your children, your friends, or your hobbies. Maybe there is no fire in you at all?

If you can make a change by quitting a boring and monotonous job in favor of what you see as the challenge of your life, then you have made an excellent bargain. And no matter whether you get half your former salary, your spouse gets infuriated, or the whole world laughs at you, do not take any notice. Life is short and the chances are few, so take a chance while it is there. Today you may be young and vital; tomorrow you may be trying to recover from a cerebral hemorrhage. Life is shorter than you think. You have no time for fiddling about. A good job is one chance in a lifetime. Take the chance and go for it, be good to yourself. Create a job for yourself—get a job that you really care about.

Good work is an activity that creates a strong sense of personal meaningfulness because it is directly connected to our personal development project, i.e. what

we want from life. We all want to become complete. To this end, we need to grow and achieve fulfillment. Good work challenges us to go beyond our limits and confront new and exciting aspects of life. Work should be a direct manifestation of life. Life is a simple and clear expression of what you do. Our love of life shows in what we do. The fine art of working and the secret of working are to be found in the intimacy in the intersection between our lives and the world around us.

WHAT IS GOOD WORK—HOW TO YOU ATTAIN IT? **The bad blacksmith**

The work in the forge is hard. The hammers are heavy, the forge is hot, and the noise from his constantly hammering the anvil is at times insufferable and always fatiguing. The work is grubby and the air inhaled is far from pure. At the end of the day, which anyway is much too long, the blacksmith always sighs a little. I should have done otherwise. But you have to stay alive and becoming a blacksmith was no problem.

The mediocre blacksmith

He shows a certain pride when delivering the finished product. The product is quite well done, and the customer is usually content with what he gets. The work is good and the pay is not bad. Of course, the forge is very hot and dirty but he was lucky to get two apprentices to do the heavy work. One has to be flexible, he thinks. He always sees to it that the apprentices measure up to the professional standards. It is important to avoid too many errors, even though things move fast at times. He is quite content with being a blacksmith, even though he takes no pleasure in handling the hammer.

The good blacksmith

The hammer hits the red-hot iron. The blacksmith is one with his hammer. The perfect mastery of the tool, the complete understanding of the qualities and properties of the iron, the right material, the perfect temperature, a total confidence in the red-hot iron, its workability as well as the slowness, and the precise movements of his body in full harmony with the purpose of his work. He has constant visions of the finished product, masters the creative process, and is fully present in the situation. Of course, customers come from all over to ask for this blacksmith when they want the best because this blacksmith's work is superb.

Work was less complicated in the old days, before the computer. But, imagine a modern open-plan office. Will you not find someone here mastering the forge hammer (the keyboard) with perfection and discipline,

while others just fumble with the tool of their trade? Is it not common experience that under exactly the same conditions, some thrive and prosper, whereas others wither and fall into decay? Why is it that human beings reach such different degrees of mastering their work, and why do human beings display such different talents?

Work can be a fantastic experience and a potential peak in a person's life. Such a state may be reached, when work is considered as a great personal fulfillment. You do the work because it fits you perfectly; it is vital for you, and just the thing to do. And, you do the work not for the sake of others but for your own sake. You do it for the sake of the work itself, not as a means of obtaining something else, for instance money, prestige, and identity. You do it because you cannot help doing it.

Good work attracts you—not as a relaxing experience but rather an intense one. And, even if it is experienced as really good, it will not be regarded as comfortable. Good work entails much joy and happiness but also many challenges, problems, and struggles. It may be a painful and difficult experience because it will take you right to your limits where you must make all your best efforts to handle the challenges. But still, it is not stressful, fatiguing, or unpleasant. Stress in your life is when you cannot cope with external demands. It is the feeling of being burdened in a very unpleasant way. However, to be burdened in this way is being a mule on which others load their burdens. In good work, your own inner demands direct you, not external demands.

Even though your work is fine, there may still be lots of trouble. It takes time. Often you are quite tired when you get to the end of a job. But, if you think that this specific piece of work just must be done and that you are the one to finish it, then it does not matter that you get tired.

Think of your work. Does it really suit you? Do you feel like doing it? Are you given the freedom to carry out the work the way you want to? Are you good at your work? Is your working performance improving? If you can answer yes to these questions, then maybe you are one of those in a good job. That is what counts, even though other people perceive your job at the machine or the computer as mere routine. Please remember that what is important is your personal experience of doing your job. If you do not like your job, it does not help you to feel better about it, even though your social environment deems it a good job.

A strange and interesting feature about work in general is that it develops. The piece of work that is felt as good and meaningful one day may very well be outworn and obsolete the next. For instance, how long

will it be before sweeping, cleaning, and floor-washing will be carried out by crawling, electronic night-time tortoises? Such robots may still have difficulties in observing the dirt as well as maneuvering past doorsteps, but someday they will not. It will not be long either before a small scanner registers what is in your shopping basket to draw money from your bank right away, thus replacing the cashier in the supermarket.

When the day comes, when electronic and mechanical devices can do the job just as well as human beings, work will lose its meaning. That is why there is no point in occupying the unemployed and receivers of social benefits by making them dig holes or produce pegs and pins.

What if you are not the right person in the right place? Well, in that case you must get on with your life. It may be wise to change things right where you are or start looking for a new job. To be stuck in a place where you are not meant to be is quite dreadful. It is not to your advantage. Yet many people remain stuck where they are and do not look for alternatives. They do not make any demands. They do not start changing things and they do not complain about anything. They do nothing. They are fatalists and gradually they become almost unnoticeable; they are going downhill. Year by year it goes from bad to worse—human relations, self-esteem, love life, and health.

How can you endure spending 7 to 8 working hours every single working day without feeling alive? How can you accept that what you are doing in your life does not make you happy? Do you seriously believe that you can return to your home after a long day of doing meaningless work and still be happy, enthusiastic, and inspiring to your spouse, your children, or your friends?

THE GOOD WORK—HOW TO GET THERE?

To feel at ease at your work, understanding which components in working life may contribute to improving your situation and which will not is necessary.

Surprisingly enough, according to surveys carried out, pay is less important than job satisfaction. Similarly, it looks as if the social status derived from work is of less importance, as long as one's pay covers one's basic needs, and the social status is not of a debasing nature.

One likely explanation is that the salary and status may comfort you in your personal life, but while on the job—working—your pay does not really matter because you do not use your money there. In most of the western world, few people worry about whether they can afford a pair of shoes for their children, unless their mortgage

is far too high. Nor is anyone likely to be attacked because his father is a garbage collector or a receptionist.

The quality of life survey showed us that managers do not feel better than the man-in-the-street, and that professionals do not feel better than lower wage earners. It seems as if the common denominators of good work such as education, status, money etc. do not apply when it comes to the actual experience of the work, as well as life as a whole. In this respect, your relationship to your own self and your environment is far more important, which means that material comforts are given the lowest priority as compared with a good life and a good job.

If we consider working life, there are four relevant conditions to be prioritized. These are your relationship to your own self, your relationship to what you are doing (the job/work), your relationship to the people with whom you work (your company), and your relationship to those you service (customers, clients, society, your environment).

Your relationship to your own ego has to do with quality of life. Quality of life means that you like being the person you are and that, in general, you are a positive, constructive, and well-balanced human being. In most everyday matters, we operate only on the surface of life, and we operate in depth when we are in contact with our potential and talents while trying to fulfill our dreams.

Our relationship to the job is all about mastery—meaning that you are doing your job excellently and show true commitment, as well as being the right person in the right place, improving, and developing with the relevant challenges. Real life-mastery may be quite problematic as most of us are tempted to keep doing what we are good at. The development of mastery demands from us that we continue our process of learning by jumping into deep water.

Our relationship to those we work with is about joint efforts. You may be part of a very creative team, be it as an expert or as a group manager. It is crucial that you understand your part and function and that you are where you want to be.

Your relationship to customers, clients and so forth, to whom you give attention, is about genuine added-value. It goes beyond just making money for your company. A certain amount of profit is a prerequisite for your company's survival, like the oxygen and blood sugar needed by your body. But, earning money is just as little the true meaning of work as metabolism is the true meaning of your life. A brain-dead person can also earn



Fig. 1: Coherence between working-life quality and annual income. In a quality of life survey 2,500 Danes were asked to state their annual income as well as their level of job satisfaction. The height of each column corresponds to the average measured well-being at work (90% = 'very good', 70% = 'good', 50% = 'neither good nor bad', 30% = 'bad' and 10% = 'Very bad'). The diagram illustrates that well-being at work is unrelated to annual income, as all income groups feel equally well at work except for the highest income group, which shows an insignificantly higher degree of well-being than the other income groups.

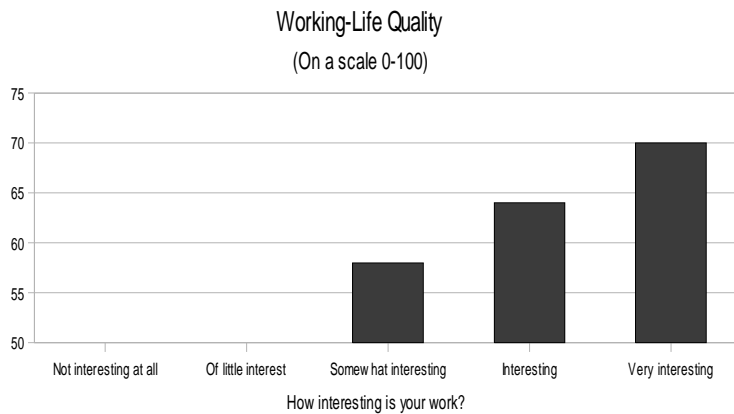


Fig. 2: The correlation between working-life quality (well being at the job) and interesting work. In a pilot study of six medium-sized companies, 60 employees filled in a questionnaire on their working-life quality ('How do you feel at work?') Answers: 90%: 'Very good' to 10%: 'Very bad', and how interesting they found their work (from 'very interesting' to 'very uninteresting'). Each column shows varying degrees of interesting or uninteresting work. The study included only three people who found their work uninteresting or very uninteresting, so we have not shown their two averages. The height of the columns shows the average working-life quality. It shows that working-life quality is closely correlated with how interesting the work is, as persons with interesting jobs show significantly greater working-life quality than those not indicating an interesting job.

money. Life is about being valuable to yourself and to one another, and enterprises are created to make products or render services as a joint effort complying with the real needs of the environment. This requires employees who are genuinely valuable to their surroundings.

JOB SATISFACTION—RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT FACTORS

Work could be something we love to do together with people we are fond of in a situation where we use our joint efforts to create something that is highly valuable. It is not that difficult to imagine good work. It is difficult to get there, but not impossible. To get there requires confrontation with the issues that we normally associate with work. How would you for instance answer the following 12 questions in connection with a new job?

Is it important for you that:

- Your salary is good?(Yes/No)
- Your occupational status is attractive? (Yes/No)
- You have short working hours? (Yes/No)
- The job description matches your qualifications? (Yes/No)
- The job implies status at work and in society?(Yes/No)
- There are good possibilities of continuing education? (Yes/No)
- The prospects of promotion are good? (Yes/No)
- You have job security? (Yes/No)
- You are content with your work? (Yes/No)
- You have freedom to make your own job schedule? (Yes/No)
- There is no stress in the job? (Yes/No)
- You are not confronted with tasks that you cannot handle(Yes/No)

Did you mark all 12 with a “yes” response? At first sight, most people might think that if the above-mentioned issues are in order, then the job must be a good one. The interesting thing is that these 12 issues are likely to have very little influence on working life quality. With regard to titles, salary and excellent opportunities for further training, it seems obvious that there is a poor correlation with job satisfaction (see figure 1 showing an inconsistency between annual income and job satisfaction).

Job satisfaction cannot be salvaged by course programs or prospects of promotion. Job security may be fatal if it blunts the professional nerve necessary to ensure your best efforts to make your own future.

Besides, you might easily be in a fine job that is well paid and seemingly satisfactory but which bores you in the depths of your being. The freedom to do meaningless senseless things when you choose to do them is not likely to make for much pleasure. Who wants a job that does not demand quality or deadlines, which cause stress if we cannot cope adequately with their demands?

Another questionnaire can be compiled based on questions focusing more on the actual experience of work and including a number of factors related to feeling alive on the job. Please try to answer the following 12 questions in relation to a new job.

Is it important for you to:

- Feel commitment to what you are doing?(Yes/No)
- To experience your job as the challenge of your life? (Yes/No)
- To feel that you create true value in the work? (Yes/No)
- To feel that you are applying yourself wholeheartedly with all your talents when on the job? (Yes/No)
- That your work is quite interesting to you, after all? (Yes/No)
- That you relate well to your surroundings through your work? (Yes/No)
- That you feel part of an entity - the joint efforts of your company?(Yes/No)
- Have a good working environment - physically and mentally? (Yes/No)
- To be so good at your job that you master it as well as being able to express yourself fully and creatively in the working process? (Yes/No)
- To forget yourself while working? (Yes/No)
- Be able to become deeply absorbed and concentrate so much that the distance between yourself and your work almost disappears? (Yes/No)
- Experience the degree of intensity, presence and attendance at work that you consider vital to feel really alive? (Yes/No)

How did you answer these 12 questions? These questions are related to our existence and devotion to our work. Various studies revealed that questions of this kind are far more important to working-life quality than the pay, for example (see figure 2). These questions concern the correlation between what we do at present and what we really want from our deep inner selves. When we are truly fit and adjusted to our inner life at work, we have the possibility of experiencing a genuine

Comment [vb1]: Fig 1

Comment [vb2]: Fig 2

and thorough commitment. Good work is a natural extension of our true wants. This profound harmony is the only way of ensuring that our efforts will provide us with good and meaningful experience.

DISCUSSION

The major critique that our philosophy of working-existentialism could invite is the argument that by focusing on jobs and work, we are strapping the human being to the production form of the industrial society. The informational society presumably coming in a few years will need people who are not working in the classical sense of this word but continuously engaging themselves in all kinds of activities that will help them to develop and bring them joy. Another big problem with the presented view is that unemployed people are doomed not to develop or blossom; this means that when we have this kind of idealizing idea about work in society, we will keep a certain fraction of the citizens in the dark—forcing them into risk behaviors to survive.

How we collectively conceive work is to a very high degree giving birth to our collective values and understanding of the whole world—actually our whole consciousness as already noticed by Karl Marx in his book *“Das Kapital”*. How we today organize the creation of value (money) in our society is determining which kind of behavior will be rewarded and which type of personality will be seen as heroic. Today most people in the western world see work as the primary route of personal liberation, but that might lead to an unbalanced focus on action and materialistic wealth, and a lack of focus on being and spiritual wealth, which might give serious backfiring on the citizens of society—and perhaps this will even lead to serious damage of the global ecosystem. To preserve the planet it might be that we collectively should abstain from work, moneymaking and all activities that transform the surface of planet earth and destroy nature. So maybe the whole focus on work also presented in this paper is leading mankind to Armageddon. These questions should be thoroughly explored as they might be of extreme importance. But, this is not our mission here; our intention was to show that work can be great fun and of huge value, if developed consciously.

Very few people know what they want from their working lives. Most people focus on the surface and miss the whole point of their working life. It is curious that human beings rarely have the courage to dream life differently from that defined by our materialistic and superficial culture. It is startling how many end up having an awfully meaningless, grey, and boring working life.

The questions above link up with the four conditions that are decisive for the quality of our working life. In the following papers we shall take a closer look at these four topics: the quality of life, mastery, joint efforts and creating true incremental value.

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