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Article

The Indirect Effects of Ethical Leadership and High Performance Work System on Task Performance through Creativity: Exploring a Moderated Mediation Model*

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The present study explores the interaction effects of ethical leadership (EL) and high performance work system (HPWS) on creativity and task performance in a Korean public sector firm. Data were collected in two stages, first from team members on the perceptions of EL and HPWS (Stage 1), followed by their leaders' evaluations of team members' creativity and performance (Stage 2). This study found the interaction effects of EL and HPWS, such that their effects are negative on creativity and positive on task performance. We argue that compensatory effects of HPWS and EL on creativity exist, such that HPWS is the most effective on task performance via creativity when EL is low. In the presence of a low EL level, creativity is significantly enhanced, mainly when HPWS is high, which leads to a high level of task performance. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: *Ethical leadership, high performance work system, creativity, task performance*

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Introduction

Over the years, ethical concerns in the work environment (Stouten, van Dijke, and De Cremer 2012) and the occasional exposure of corporate scandals have drawn attention to ethical leadership (EL). EL addresses how leaders use their social power by demonstrating personal morality and using communication and reward systems to guide ethical behavior (Brown and Treviño 2006; De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008).

Alongside leadership, which is an essential organizational procedure, high performance work system (HPWS) has become widespread, especially in the interactions between supervisors and subordinates. HPWS has appeared to be the most widely accepted human resource management (HRM) policy worldwide, although it originated in the United States and Great Britain (Lawler, Chen, Wu, Bae, and Bai 2011).

Most studies on EL and HPWS independently have reported their positive effects on organizational processes and outcomes (e.g., Boxall and Macky 2009; Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood 2015; Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, and Folger 2010; Harney and Trehy 2016; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009). However, as it seems likely that the effects of explicit (e.g., HPWS) and implicit (e.g., EL) organizational processes co-occur, knowledge about how their effects interact to influence employees' attitudes and behavior would be beneficial. Therefore, by integrating consideration of explicit (e.g., HRM) and implicit (e.g., leadership) organizational processes into a single analysis, this study provides insight into their interactive effects that may be detrimental to work-related attitudes and outcomes of employees. It challenges conventional wisdom that mainly highlights their individual (positive) effects.

This study contributes to HRM and leadership literature, both of which have emphasized contextual features of organizations. Although research shows that organizational processes affect employees most (Folger, Cropanzano, and Goldman 2005), studies that investigate HRM and leadership together have been somewhat limited, especially those concerning creativity and performance. The present study illustrates the importance of the context in which a negative interaction is likely to occur between EL and HPWS, despite the fact that they are perceived as positive organizational practices in general.

This study also complements the discussion on the substitute for leadership (Kerr and Jermier 1978) as our research shows that HPWS and EL

did not replace each other per se. HPWS and EL 'interact negatively' and HPWS 'compensates' rather than replaces EL, particularly when it comes to their effects on creativity. Finally, while our study was conducted using data from a Korean public sector firm, this study joins in the call for more research using non-US contexts to examine practices and theories developed mostly in the contexts of private corporations and individualistic culture (Aycan, Kanungo, Mendonca, Yu, Deller, Stahl, and Kurshid 2000).

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, we will examine the interaction effects of EL and HPWS on creativity and task performance in a Korean firm. Second, by adopting the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli 2001) as an overarching framework for the moderated mediation effects between EL and HPWS on task performance via creativity, we discuss whether the interaction patterns compensate or complement each other in leading to creativity and task performance. Third, we explore the feasibility of theories and practices first developed in private firms and/or individualistic culture in other contexts such as public sector firms and/or collectivistic cultural environments.

Literature Review

The Importance of Interaction Effect between EL and HPWS

HRM and organizational culture/leadership are two leading practices influencing human factors, and it is suggested that HRM is, at least in part, determined by a leader's values and behaviors (Blakeley and Higgs 2014). Over and above psychological attitudes (e.g., well-being), employees' creativity, and task performance are discretionary behaviors that require skill, motivation, and effort. Therefore, by adapting the JD-R theory (Demerouti et al. 2001), which suggests that certain work contexts are associated with job stress demanding (personal) resources, we argue that the contrasting interacting effects of EL and HPWS could demand or protect employee's resources. In the present study, we look at perceptions of HPWS, in line with the view that performance does not stem from HR practices per se but rather from how they are perceived by employees (Jiang, Takeuchi, and Lepak 2013).

Creativity and Task Performance in Public Sector Firms

Looking at the relationship with creativity and performance, research has shown that HPWS or EL has positive direct effects on them. Creativity refers to the generation of new and useful ideas by individual workers (Amabile 1983). Job performance describes the individual's activities in the organization over a defined period (Borman and Motowidlo 1993).

Creativity is said to be the source of innovation that facilitates competitiveness (Liu et al., 2017). In today's world, organizations, including public firms, compete in a dynamic and uncertain environment where creativity is highly valuable (Zhou and Hoever 2014). Previous studies have suggested that leadership and HRM influence the creative behavior of employees (Zhang and Bartol 2010). Skills (e.g., actual competence and belief in one's ability) and attitudes (e.g., motivation and psychology safety) were suggested to be crucial in the link between HRM and leadership to creativity and performance.

When it comes to skills and beliefs, for example, ethical leaders' altruistic behavior and credible feedback can facilitate growth and confidence in employees' job-related skills (Brown et al. 2005; Walumbwa, Mayer, Wang, Wang, Workman, and Christensen 2011). Ethical leaders also influence followers' behaviors through a role-modeling process (Brown et al. 2005) and create an environment where individuals can actively offer new ideas to improve performance (De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008). Moreover, trust in a supervisor produced by EL (Chughtai et al. 2015) can reduce burnout and deviant behavior (Mo and Shi 2017), strengthen a sense of self-efficacy (Renzl 2008), and improve work engagement (Chughtai et al., 2015), all of which further influence task performance (Mo and Shi 2017). In a similar vein, HPWS, such as training, can develop broader competencies, including novel thinking, problem-solving ability, and divergent thinking skills in employees, which could further increase their self-efficacy to perform (Evans and Davis 2015).

Individuals' behavior within a public organization is critical and has a high magnitude of consequence, and public sectors are becoming more sensitive to ethical issues (Stouten et al., 2012; Zhang, Fletcher, Gino, and Bazerman 2015). Research has found more substantial effects of EL in public sector organizations than their private sector counterparts (Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green 2016). However, some argue that bureaucracies such as political control, red tape, and low levels of managerial autonomy (Boyne 2002) would make leadership (i.e., transformational leadership) less effective in public

sector organizations than private sector organizations (Moynihan, Wright, and Pandey 2012). On the other hand, public service motivation literature argues that HPWS with performance pay could be detrimental to public sector employees who are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (Alonso and Lewis 2001). It may cause a crowding-out effect on employee motivation, resulting in perceived stress, demotivation, or even burnout (Kellough and Nigro 2002). Some have also found negative attitudes toward performance appraisal by supervisors and employees (Kim and Rubianty 2011) with low confidence in its efficacy, integrity, and fairness (Kellough and Nigro 2002). These studies and the discussions earlier (about EL and HPWS) suggest that the possible boundary or interactive systems would be even more complex in public organizations where the relationships between leadership or HPWS and employee outcomes are not straightforward.

The Interaction Effect of EL and HPWS on Creativity

In proposing our first hypothesis, we consider the interaction effects between EL and HPWS on creativity. As creativity is cognitively demanding and time-consuming (Shalley and Gilson 2004), psychological resources become crucial as described in the broaden and build theory (Fredrickson 2001). The broaden and build theory further emphasizes the importance of expanding and building capacities and resources that are required for creativity. Connecting it with the JD-R theory, work environments that protect individuals' resources would contribute to creativity, whereas work environments that demand resources would undermine creativity. Therefore, environmental factors such as pressure could negatively influence the creativity process (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Heandrron 1996) as it drains psychological resources.

Here, we should note that what differentiates EL from other leadership styles (e.g., transformational and authentic leadership) is the hands-on approach that characterizes the moral manager dimension emphasizing compliance (Brown et al., 2005; Piccolo et al. 2010). Taken EL and HPWS together then, we also note that HPWS tends to recommend high levels of employee involvement (Tzafrir 2005), leading to increased workloads and reduced quality of work-life (White et al. 2003). When HPWS is seen to enhance workers' demands without increasing their sense of empowerment (Macky and Boxall 2008), work practice may be perceived to focus on managerial compliance, and employees will experience HPWS as coercive and punitive (Wouters and Wilderon 2008). Such perceptions of HPWS lead

to emotional exhaustion or the lack of work engagement (Zhang, Zhu, Dowling, and Bartram 2013) and lower creativity-related intrinsic motivation (Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman, and Peterson 2012).

Therefore, the interaction effects of EL and HPWS would produce a stressful context that reduces attention and lower intrinsic motivation, which limits individual creativity (Avey et al. 2012). Their interaction effects would impose physiological and psychological costs (JD-R theory: Demerouti et al. 2001) and increase employee pressure, stress (Yang 2014), and emotional exhaustion (Lawler et al. 2011), which further reduce creativity. Moreover, along with HPWS, a signal by EL emphasizing compliance with rules and procedures would lead employees to contain their acts within set-boundaries. That is, they think inside the box rather than outside of the box, which is detrimental to creativity. Thus, EL's potential for creativity can be activated among individuals with low HPWS because they are not strongly constrained by normative pressures to comply with current practices. Thus, HPWS will negatively moderate the relationship between EL and individual creativity, such that the relationship will be stronger when HPWS is low than when it is high. Based on the discussion so far, we present the first hypothesis for the negative interaction effect between EL and HPWS on creativity as follows:

Hypothesis 1. HPWS will moderate the relationship between EL and creativity such that the relationship is stronger when HPWS is low than when it is high.

The Effect of EL on Task Performance through Creativity

The Mediating Role of Creativity

Researchers have shown that employee creativity is critical for organizations' competitiveness, innovation, and success (Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou 2014). It is also positively related to various work outcomes, such as overall job performance (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Zhang and Bartol 2010; Zhou and Hoever 2014). Previous studies' findings revealed that creativity can improve task performance (Liu, Gong, Zhou, and Huang 2017; Zhu, He, Treviño, Chao, and Wang 2015). Based on earlier theoretical arguments and empirical findings, we propose that creativity mediates ethical leadership's effects on task performance. EL may engender high-level task performance

by inducing employees to refine existing procedures and to discover improved methods to deliver services and products. Ethical leaders encourage their followers to incorporate novel and beneficial ideas, eventually leading to creativity and innovation (Chen and Hou 2016; Gilson 2008; Humphrey et al. 2007). This increased level of creativity may facilitate the path towards the successful performance of a task.

The Moderating Role of HPWS

This study presents HPWS as a moderator of the EL–creativity–performance relationship. For employees who perceive a low level of HPWS, EL may stimulate their creative minds to a greater extent than those who sense a high level of HPWS. Employee creativity can foster the individual learning process through which employees grasp new skills, make fewer mistakes, and improve routine tasks (Bandura 1997).

Given such differences in achieving creativity and task performance, we consider how the interaction effects between EL and HPWS affect task performance. Contrary to their impact on creativity, we suggest that the impact of EL on task performance will be stronger when HPWS is high than when it is low. Looking back to our earlier discussion about EL and HPWS, their interactive effects would further 'reinforce and converge' employees' behaviors toward set requirements.

While people perform better in response to their workload when they believe that they have been rewarded fairly for their efforts (Colquitt, Wesson, Porter, Conlon, and Ng 2001), and employees work on the norms of reciprocity with HPWS (Hansen and Alewell 2013), high EL signals that such expectations will be met. That is, EL magnifies the influence of direct incentives and rewards that help employees to work toward specific work roles by HPWS (Lepak, Liao, Chung, and Harden 2006) and extensive training to increase the knowledge and skills of employees contributing to task performance (Jiang et al. 2013). Such interactive forces would focus and protect employees' resources toward task performance (Demerouti et al. 2001).

Although there may be different mechanisms for creativity and task performance, especially in the short term, we expect that creativity will have positive influences on performance. Prior empirical research supports the connection between engaging in the creative process and task performance with significant correlations between them assessed by co-workers and supervisors (e.g., Gong et al. 2009; Ng and Feldman 2009).

Specific antecedents such as domain-relevant skills could determine what employees can do in the creative process (Amabile and Pillemer 2012) and task performance. Also, the removal of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear by EL and HPWS is associated with promoting innovation and increased outcomes (e.g., Agarwal and Farndale 2017; Detert et al. 2007; Ng and Lucianetti 2016). Therefore, there is a direct connection between creativity and task performance. We consider the interaction effects between EL and HPWS on task performance through creativity. Thus, we present the second hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 2. HPWS moderates the relationship between EL and task performance through the mediating effect of creativity. EL influences task performance through creativity; the indirect effect will be stronger when HPWS is high rather than it is low.

Methods

Data and Sample

Data were collected from a public sector firm in Korea, one of the largest electric power companies. The survey was carried out in two stages. In Stage 1, individual team members were asked to fill out an online questionnaire about their perceptions of EL and HPWS. In Stage 2, a month after the survey of team members, team leaders were asked to fill out two sets of questionnaires, one for evaluating their team as a whole and the other for assessing individual team members' performance. A total of 177 individual team members filled out the questionnaire. As some leaders did not evaluate the performance of their team members, and some teams consisted of less than two members, these cases were excluded, leaving 106 dyads for analysis. The mean age of team members was 35.64 (s.d. = 9.59) years, with an average team tenure of 4.16 (SD = 3.42). Males comprised 90.4% of the sample. Education levels were high school (12.3 %), two-year college (8.5%), bachelor's degree (70.8%), and graduate degree (8.5%).

Measures

Ethical leadership (EL): A ten-item scale (α = .98) assessing the team members' perception of EL by Brown et al. (2005) was adopted in our study. A sample item includes the following: "Our team leader disciplines

employees who violate ethical standards."

High performance work system (HPWS): Five different HR practices were conceptualized and measured using Delery and Doty's (1996) method. The five dimensions are training programs, results-oriented appraisal, profit sharing, staffing, and employee participation. Since there is little consensus regarding which HPWS practices should be included, previous research has provided several theoretical and methodological arguments for why a systems approach is preferable in HPWSs research (Delery 1998; Huselid and Becker 1997). This paper adopts the notion of a "unitary index" used in Way's (2002) research. The unitary index was created by adding the standardized scores of the five equally weighted components of the HPWSs by team members' ratings.

Creativity: Creativity was assessed by team leaders using four items (α = .96) from Zhou and George (2001). A sample item is: "This team member comes up with new and practical ideas to improve team performance."

Task performance: Team leaders measured task performance with a two-item scale (α = .79) adapted to Williams and Anderson (1991). Team leaders completed items such as, "This team achieves its goals."

Control variables: Studies show that age and team tenure are essential factors that influence individual outcomes, such as creativity (Seong and Choi 2019). Therefore, they were used as control variables in the analyses.

Results

We first performed confirmatory factor analyses to examine our scales' distinctiveness for EL, HPWS, creativity, and task performance using AMOS 23.0. To reduce the number of parameters, we used the item parceling method recommended by Bagozzi and Edwards (1998) on two variables: EL and HPWS. We compared this four-factor model with plausible alternative models. Overall, these results demonstrated that the expected four-factor model provides substantially improved fit over these relevant alternative models ($\chi 2$ (df = 98) = 188.06, $p < .001$; comparative fit index = .96, Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = .95, Standardized root mean squared residual = .069).

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables.

Since crucial study variables were measured by different sources (i.e., EL and HPWS by team members and creativity and task performance by team leaders), we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush and Bryk

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

	Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Age	35.64	9.59	-					
2	Team tenure	4.16	3.42	.18	-				
3	Ethical leadership	5.28	1.40	.29**	-.09	(.98)			
4	HPWS	4.67	1.43	.22*	.02	.62**	(.95)		-
5	Creativity	6.56	.65	-.08	-.16	-.06	.02	(.96)	
6	Task performance	6.72	.53	.01	-.14	.04	-.00	.31**	(.79)

Notes.— n = 106. The alpha internal-consistency reliability coefficients appear in parentheses along the main diagonal. HPWS = High performance work system. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Table 2
Hierarchical linear models: individual-level relationships between ethical leadership, HPWS, creativity, and task performance

	Creativity			Task Performance			
Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Intercept	6.56***(.07)	6.56***(.07)	6.56***(.07)	6.72***(.05)	6.73***(.02)	6.72***(.05)	6.73***(.05)
Age	.03(.01)	.03(.02)	.03(.02)	-.01(.01)	-.01(.01)	-.01(.01)	-.02(.02)
Team tenure	-.01(.03)	-.02(.03)	-.01(.03)	-.01(.02)	-.01(.02)	-.01(.02)	.00(.01)
Ethical leadership (EL)		-.09(.12)	-.22(.13)		-.05(.05)	-.05(.05)	.03(.07)
HPWS		.04(.12)	.04(.12)		.11(.06)	.11*(.06)	.10 (.06)
EL × HPWS			-.15*(.07)			-.01(.02)	.03(.03)
Creativity							.54***(.10)
σ^2	0.41	0.42	0.40	0.28	0.28	0.28	0.19
Peudo R^2 change		Δ.02	Δ.04		Δ.00	Δ.01	Δ.30

Notes.— n = 106. *$p < .05$. HPWS = High performance work system. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors in parentheses.

2002) to remove the leaders' effect for testing hypotheses, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 provides a summary of the HLM results for testing all the hypotheses simultaneously. The results of our analysis using the Preacher, Ruker, and Hayes (2007) macro are shown in Table 3. Table 3 shows the indirect effect of EL on task performance through creativity at high and low levels of HPWS. In testing Hypothesis 1, as shown in Table 2, after controlling for age and team tenure, EL and HPWS interacted with each other ($\gamma = -.15$, p

Table 3
Conditional indirect effects of ethical leadership on task performance at the level of HPWS

Path	Moderator	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Simple path for low HPWS	3.24	-.02	.0273	-.0839	.0312
Simple path for high HPWS	6.10	-.08	.0389	-.1780	-.0174

Notes.— 95% bias-correlated CI.

< .05). Creativity was, in turn, positively related to task performance ($\gamma = .54$, $p < .001$). These findings meet an important condition for Hypothesis 2, which predicts a moderated mediation effect (Preacher et al. 2007). The interactive effect of EL and HPWS is indirectly related to task performance through creativity.

Therefore, we proceeded to test the conditional indirect effects of EL through creativity on task performance at different levels of HPWS (Hypothesis 2). We used a bootstrapping procedure to probe the indirect effect to varying levels of the moderator variable, such as HPWS. As shown in Table 3, when HPWS is high, EL had an indirect effect on task performance (b = -.08, boot SE = .039). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval around the bootstrapped indirect effect excludes zero [CI = -.178, -.017]. When HPWS is low, EL did not have an indirect effect on task performance (b = -.02, boot SE = .027). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval includes zero [CI = –.084, .031]. Thus, Hypotheses 2 was supported.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the interaction effects between EL and HPWS on creativity, which indirectly influence performance. A leader is closely involved in HPWS processes, which can be ambiguous; having a more objective HPWS should benefit both employee creativity and performance. This study suggests that an organization should pay attention to the HR system and leadership at the same time to develop and preserve employees' resources. The study illustrated the importance of considering interaction effects between EL and HPWS since both are fundamental work contexts for employees concerning organizational processes, including creativity, which requires psychological resources. In this study, we found a negative interaction effect of EL and HPWS on creativity.

In contrast, the indirect interaction effect of EL and HPWS on task

performance was significantly positive through creativity. That is, EL, together with HPWS 'cost and reverse' individuals' resources on creativity and 'protect and magnify' individuals' resources on task performance at the same time. With the findings in this study, we point out the paradoxical effects of EL and caution against the universalistic approach toward EL or HPWS, which has emphasized each system's positivity without considering the possible interactions they have with each other.

Regarding our finding that the effects of EL are conditional upon HPWS, we suspect this is because stand-alone-well-functioning EL may not be apparent to employees as it may pass undetected by employees. This is because EL with integrity and morality are some of the fundamental elements of a leader (Brown et al. 2005), which is one of the employees' basic needs at work (cf. Hygiene factor: Herzberg 1964) and is taken for granted (e.g., like the air we breathe). One may only notice it when the expectation of fairness is violated (cf. Yang 2013). This may be even more the case for employees of public organizations as they are less vulnerable to the influence of leadership directly (with a high level of job security). Our stand is reflected in studies showing that relations between EL and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) disappear when perceived organizational politics (POP) is low for a state government (Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, and Zivnuska 2011).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study's longitudinal research design answers the call in HRM research to collect data at different time points to test better causal effects (e.g., Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, and Allen 2005). However, while using supervisors' judgment is an accepted approach in creativity research (Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham 2004), future research may want to measure creativity and task performance using more objective data.

Despite its strengths, this paper has several limitations. First, the data used in this study were collected from a Korean public sector firm. To test whether the negative interaction effects of EL and HPWS on creativity can be generalized across different cultural and organizational contexts, we need further comparative studies (Detert, Treviño, Burris, and Andiappan 2007; Ng and Feldman 2015; Piccolo et al. 2010; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009). High power distance or power centrality in Korean culture and rule-based HPWS, which are different from traditional relations-based HRM in Korea, may have amplified the burden from EL and HPWS on Korean employees (Ng and Feldman 2015).

Second, as the methods adopted in this study are based on the JR-D theory, the negative interaction effects between EL and HPWS on creativity may not be culturally or organizationally specific. Also, firm ownership (state versus private) could be fundamental to a firm's operations and moderate the impact of HR systems, including performance-oriented HR systems (Liu, Gong, Zhou, and Huang 2017). With a growing appreciation for EL and HPWS across different cultures and organizations, more studies are needed to examine subtle nuances and variations in recognition of them.

Third, the small sample size of the teams used in this study inhibits bold generalization. An extensive research design expanding the number of sample teams is needed in future research. The use of small samples for testing hypotheses may create some interpretative problems (e.g., Caldwell and O'Reilly 1990). Prior research has also reported problems of linking small sample size to more elaborated statistical tests (Hollenbeck, DeRue, and Mannor 2006; Mone, Mueller, and Mauland 1996; Peterson, Smith, Martorara, and Owen 2003).

Fourth, this study has cross-industrial and cross-cultural implications in that it focuses on a public sector firm in Korea. It is generally believed that Koreans are more collectivism-oriented than Westerners. Scales based on individualism versus collectivism as people's traits have been used to measure societies' cultural dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Christie, Kwon, Stoeberl, and Baumhart 2003). In general, collectivist culture stresses the interdependence between people, while individualist culture emphasizes the independent roles and functions of individuals (Triandis 2001). Our study found significant interaction effects of EL and HPWS on creativity and task performance. These interactive relationships might be more likely to be an essential factor in determining creativity and task performance in private sector firms. Stated in this way, we conclude that EL and HPWS are highly influential among employees in other cultures, such as individualistic Western cultures. We suggest that future studies conduct comparative research so as to encompass other industrial sectors (e.g., manufacturing, service, etc.) and other cultural contexts to verify the tentative conclusion drawn in this study.

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