



# Agenda for UK STEM

A Prospect briefing



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Prospect  
New Prospect House  
8 Leake Street  
London SE1 7NN  
Tel: 0300 600 1878

[prospect.org.uk](http://prospect.org.uk)

## Foreword

Prospect is the leading trade union for scientists, engineers, technicians, and researchers in the UK.

We are proud to represent STEM professionals working across a range of R&D-intensive industries as well as in relevant Government departments and public sector research establishments. We are also pleased to represent other specialist staff, from legal and policy professionals to safety managers and support staff whom they work alongside and depend on.

The talent, expertise and dedication of these workers has enhanced all our lives in countless ways and will be critical to enabling our society to meet the challenges of the future – from keeping us safe and secure to meeting the climate emergency.

But to secure that contribution we need to make sure we respect, protect and develop our STEM workforce. This publication Prospect's vision for the future of UK STEM:

- **Valuing expertise**
- **Retaining talent**
- **Tackling inequality**
- **Nurturing the next generation**
- **Investing in every sector and region**
- **Building international collaboration**

This is the agenda that we work to win support for from politicians, policymakers, and the public, and that we seek to advance wherever we can, in the negotiations we have with employers and the workplaces where we have members.

We hope it is one that you too can support, and that you will join us to help make it happen.

## Why R&D and STEM matter

Research and STEM are central to meeting the challenges we face today as a society:

- managing Covid and other emerging risks to public health;
- responding to the climate emergency and preserving our natural environment;
- keeping us secure and building our influence in a time of global change and instability;
- informing and strengthening our democracy and improving public decision-making and delivery.

- BT is one of the most important centres for UK R&D, and the biggest in the tech & telecoms sector, at the cutting edge of advances in AI, 5G, machine learning, Quantum Key Distribution, and digital security. Its roll out of full fibre broadband is expected to boost UK productivity by £59bn.<sup>1</sup>
- The Diamond Light Source particle accelerator, a joint venture of the UK Government and Wellcome Trust, is estimated to have made at least £1.8bn-worth of economic impact since 2007, enabling industrial innovation as well as blue-sky science – and played a major role in the scientific response to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>
- Energy is a critical and fast-moving area of research and innovation today, with advances in fields such smart grids, energy efficiency, hydrogen fuels, batteries and storage, fusion energy and low-carbon power generation critical to meeting Net Zero targets and improving energy security.
- Research conducted at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory since 2005 has resulted in up to 585 new jobs, £75m-worth of exports and £118m of value to the UK economy.<sup>3</sup> Social benefits have included lifesaving responses to sepsis in NHS hospitals<sup>4</sup> and Ebola in West Africa.<sup>5</sup>
- BAE Systems research in areas such as aviation,<sup>6</sup> automation, autonomous vehicles, advanced materials, and digitally connected factories has generated countless civil as well as military applications.<sup>7</sup> Its munitions technology has been integral to Ukrainian resistance to the 2022 Russian invasion.<sup>8</sup>

Research and STEM is also fundamental to our economic resilience and future prosperity:

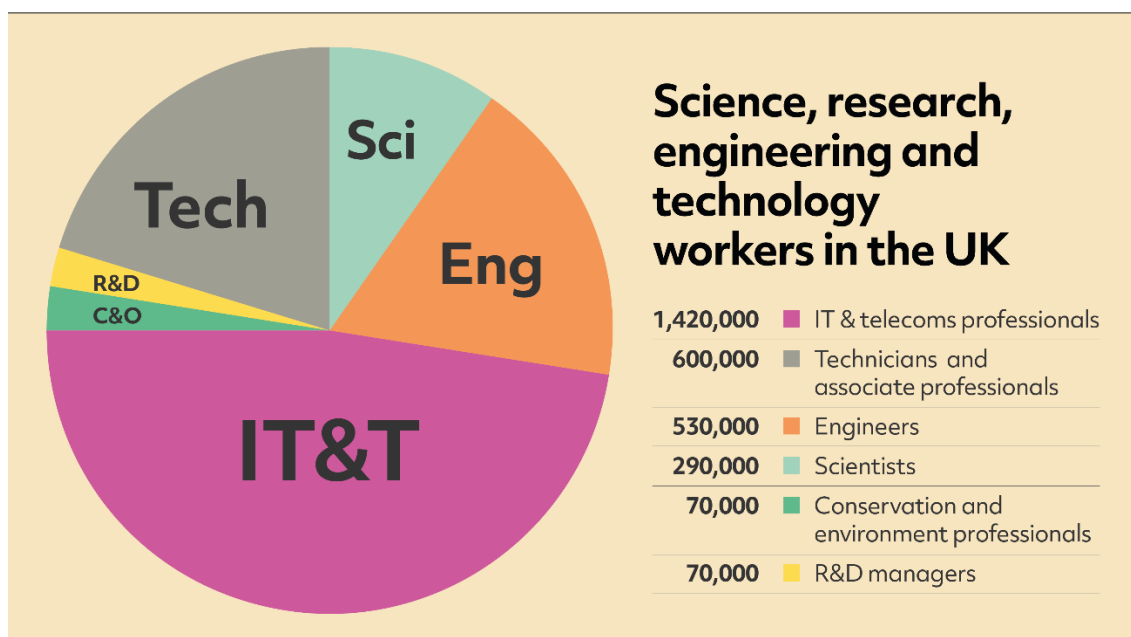
- economic evidence shows investment in R&D has positive “multipliers” effects, stimulating growth and job creation, with every £1 invested in public R&D generating another £1.96 to £2.34 in private investment<sup>9</sup>
- R&D can also play a critical role in “levelling up” growth and quality job opportunities through every region and nation of the UK<sup>10</sup>
- R&D- and STEM-driven innovations and advances are the key to raising the long-term productivity of the UK economy, driving up future wages, tax revenues and living standards.<sup>11</sup> Two-thirds of the UK’s private sector labour productivity growth between 2000 and 2007 was the result of innovation<sup>12</sup>

This is why the Government has declared an ambition to make the UK a “science and technology superpower”, promising to increase levels of public and private sector R&D investment and boosting innovation across the economy.<sup>13</sup>

The people who will be essential to delivering these ambitions, and the great economic, environmental, and social benefits we all want to see, are the research and STEM workers themselves.

## The UK's R&D and STEM workforce

Official statistics suggest there are a total of around 300,000 workers driving forward R&D in the UK,<sup>14</sup> part of a wider group of around 3 million “science, research, engineering and technology” workers across the private and public sectors.



Source: Prospect analysis of Annual Population Survey data<sup>15</sup>

R&D and STEM-led innovation in the UK is carried out in a wide variety of settings by workers with a broad range of roles and skills. Often discussions of R&D and STEM focus on the university sector but other key components of this workforce include:

- hundreds of thousands of engineers and technologists working at world-leading industrial R&D centres and clusters, such as BT's Adastral Park, “cyber valley” in the Midlands,<sup>16</sup> the North West nuclear arc, new tech start-ups from London's “silicon roundabout” to Bristol's “silicon gorge”, and agri-tech hubs in Midlothian
- around 15,000 members of the Government Science and Engineering Profession in key departments such as Defra and the MoD, among 80,000 science, research, engineering, and technology professionals working across the civil service, arms-length bodies and the wider public sector
- around 25,000 technicians, support staff and on-site specialists enabling the operation and availability of the UK's hundreds of unique and world-leading experimental and research infrastructures, such as the Joint European Torus in Oxfordshire, the Met Office Unified Model code used for weather and climate research and the National History Museum ore collection<sup>17</sup>

A key aspect of research and STEM workers' daily lives is collaboration across boundaries – disciplinary, professional, institutional, sectoral, and national borders. Scientists work closely with technicians and policy or corporate professionals; those in private firms with public or third sector partners; project teams and peer networks span countries and continents.

- specialists at the Animal and Plant Health Agency pooled expertise with colleagues at Public Health England and the NHS to enable the rapid development of tests, tracing systems and vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>18</sup>

- scientists at the Buildings Research Establishment have worked with a range of partners including BT, Telefonica and EDF to explore innovations in digitally connected, energy-saving “smart” homes and buildings<sup>19</sup>
- engineers at Rolls Royce, Atkins are working with the National Nuclear Laboratory and UK Research and Innovation to develop plans for Small Modular Reactors which could be a key energy source and export opportunity<sup>20</sup>
- the National Laboratory Alliance enables specialists at key Public Sector Research Establishments including the National Physical Laboratory, the Atomic Weapons Establishment, and the Health and Safety Executive to share equipment and expertise<sup>21</sup>
- researchers at Babcock contributed polymer manufacturing capabilities to produce PPE for the local air ambulance and have opened an Additive Manufacturing Centre at Plymouth Science Park to develop new applications of 3D printing technology.<sup>22</sup>

The next few years will need to see a major expansion of the research and STEM workforce if key goals are to be met:

- The Institute for Engineering and Technology has identified a shortfall of 173,000 STEM workers that is already costing the UK economy £1.5bn a year<sup>23</sup>
- Recent research for DCMS estimated that the UK now needs to find 17,500 new cybersecurity professionals every year to meet growing demand<sup>24</sup>
- The nuclear industry needs to recruit up to 40,000 new staff by 2030 to operate Hinkley Point C, Sizewell C and Bradwell B, and up to 60,000 to return to previous levels of nuclear power output<sup>25</sup>
- The Government has identified a need for an additional 150,000 R&D workers by 2030 to deliver its goal of making the UK a global “science superpower”<sup>26</sup>

But to achieve this, we need to tackle the problems and barriers that research and STEM workers face.



## Challenges

The UK's science and STEM capability is one of its greatest social and economic strengths. But preserving and capitalising on this advantage requires facing up to some significant challenges. These include

*Public understanding* – surveys suggest that the UK electorate respect evidence and value expertise.<sup>27</sup> But this is threatened by political misuse and media misrepresentation, which we saw too often during the Covid pandemic.

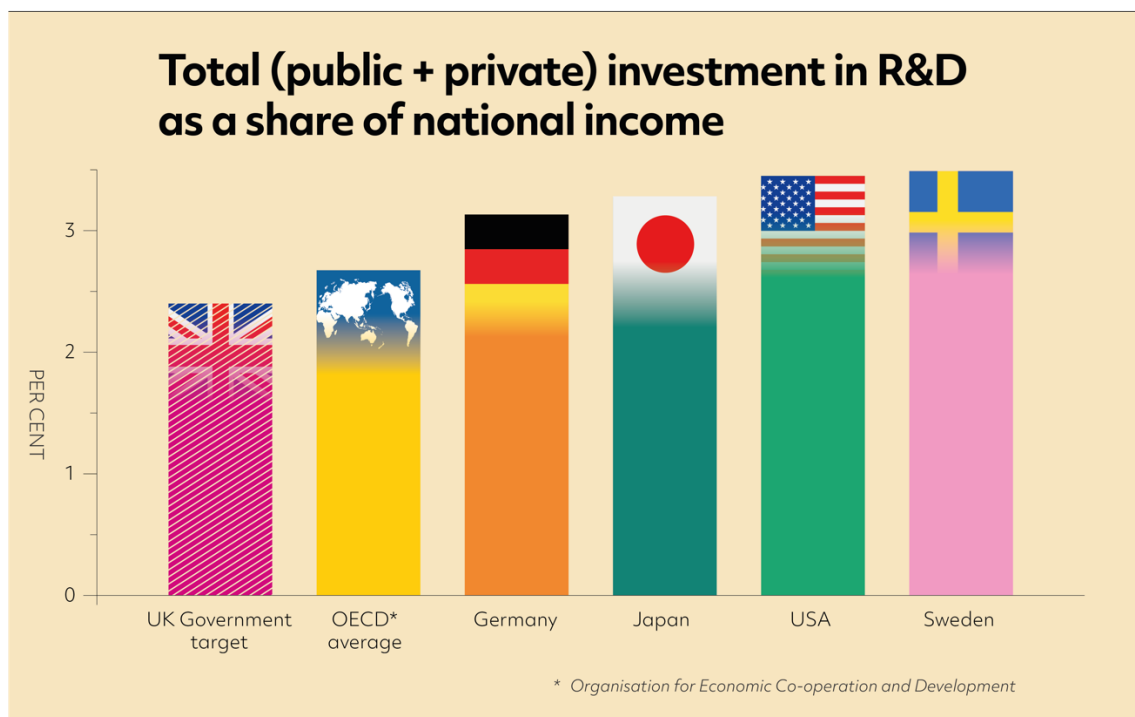
*Diversity and inclusion* – not enough is being done to tackle structural disadvantages and discriminatory working practices and cultures.<sup>28</sup> This is not just a moral imperative, but a business and scientific one: UK STEM *needs* more diverse perspectives as well as more people to make progress with problems, discoveries and applications.

*The “brain drain”* – uncompetitive pay and unattractive working conditions (including, in too many areas, cultures that tolerate bullying and harassment) mean we are not attracting or retaining the experience and talent we need in both the public and private sectors.

*Underinvestment* – public sector science has been neglected for too long,<sup>29</sup> while at the same time the in-house R&D capacity and skills-base of many key industries has been eroding.<sup>30</sup> Threatened or actual takeovers and restructures have too often put pressure on staffing or research budgets, most recently at BT and semiconductor and software firm Arm Holdings.

*International collaboration and influence* – outside the European Union the UK faces new challenges to maintaining and developing our global role. Cuts to overseas development funding have compounded the issue, damaging vital projects and relationships in areas such as antimicrobial resistance, food security and responses to the climate emergency.<sup>31</sup>

*Ethical and social responsibility* – unchecked commercial or political imperatives can result in the misuse of science and technology – for example, in ways that infringe human rights or damage the natural environment.



Source: Prospect analysis of OECD data<sup>32</sup>



*I'm just not feeling it – the STEM equalities work. They bring me out for these schools' events and photo opportunities, then I get back to my desk and I'm treated like s\*\*t. I was the only woman and the only person of colour in my intake, and all the rest of them have mentors, they get the projects that lead to progression, while I go out and tell girls that there's a great career for them in engineering."*

**Anonymous Prospect member**



*Failure to retain staff who have had a financial motive in their decision to leave puts the teams that they leave behind at a major disadvantage. The majority of the production teams now have crippling backlogs which delay our information promulgation by three-plus months, tarnishing our international standing."*

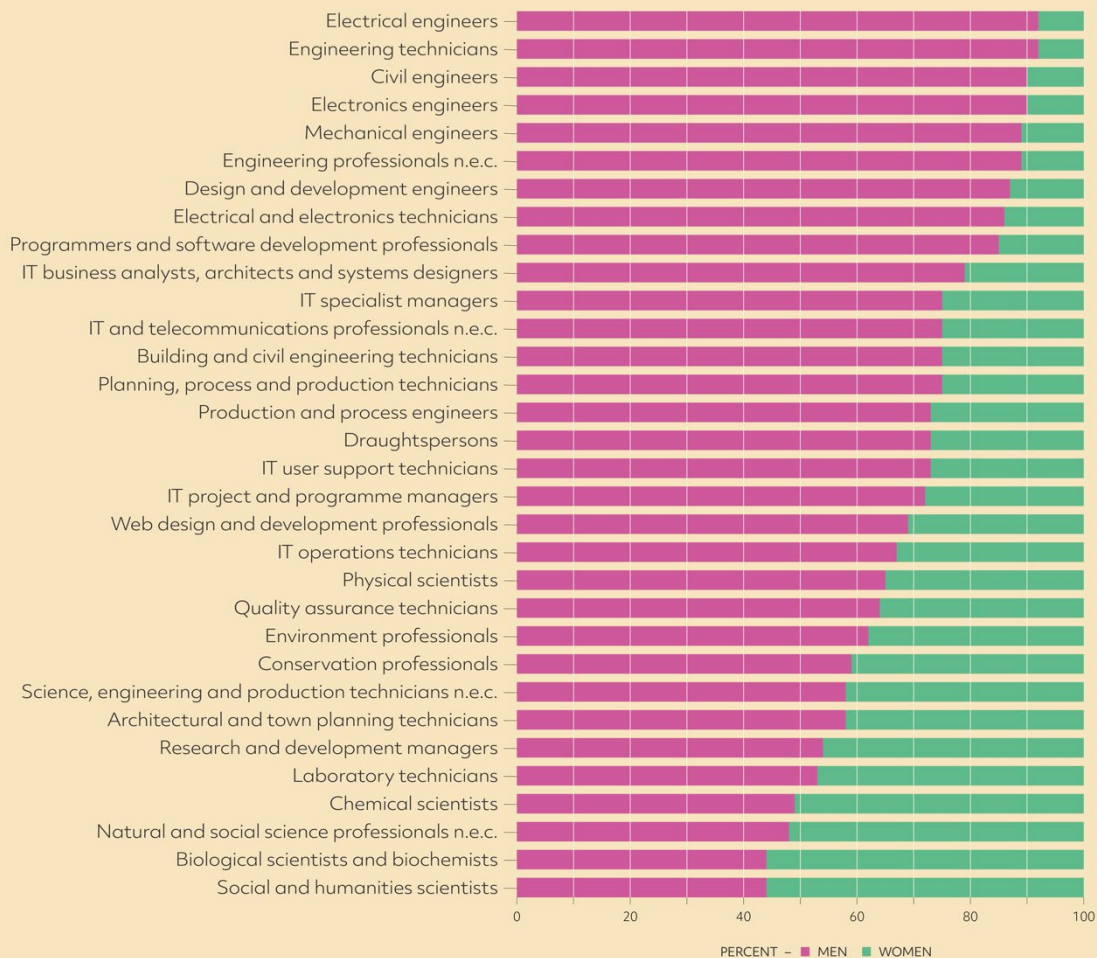
**Senior Geospatial Information Specialist, UK Hydrographic Office**



*The Government has recently cut its provision of funds to official development assistance (ODA) ... This cut is not only affecting developing countries, but also UK institutions that collaborate with developing countries to assist with research towards achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals."*

**Prospect member, Natural Resources Institute**

### Analysis of Office for National Statistics annual population survey – Men v Women



Source: Prospect analysis of Annual Population Survey<sup>33</sup>



# Prospect's plan of action

Prospect celebrates and supports the contribution that researchers and STEM workers make to our economy, our society, and the world as a whole. Securing improvements to their working lives and careers will deliver a better future for us all.

This is our agenda for UK STEM that we work to win support for from politicians, policymakers and the public, and that we seek to advance wherever we can in our negotiations with employers and our organising in workplaces.

We hope it is one that you too can support, and that you will join us to help make it happen.

## 1. Valuing expertise

- Wherever they work, researchers and STEM workers need to be consulted and involved in planning and decision-making, so they can contribute insight and expertise into what works and what needs to change – as well as check the commercial or political imperatives that can threaten professional integrity and public legitimacy.
- In the public sector, STEM skills and expertise need to be at heart of policy formation, delivery, and evaluation. This needs to be more than just “technical” advice and leadership, but instead encompassing a full share in setting goals, shaping strategies and overseeing progress, working alongside policy “generalists”.
- In Government there must be transparency and clear lines of accountability for politicians around how they use scientific evidence and advice to inform or justify their decisions. Scientific advisors must be independent and heard, but never used as shields or scapegoats.

## 2. Tackling inequality

- Action and ambition, with clear targets and transparent measures of progress, is needed to eradicate workplace cultures and structural disadvantages that constrain and deter women, ethnic minorities, LGBT+, disabled and neurodiverse workers, and other groups at risk of exclusion.<sup>34</sup>
- This requires robust, accessible mechanisms for reporting and redressing bullying and harassment; investigation and reform of working practices, pay systems and career structures that entrench inequality and exclusion; and a shared responsibility for calling out prejudice and promoting allyship.
- Trade unions have a key role to play in facilitating workforce engagement and involvement, redesigning working practices and pay systems, and playing their part in embedding inclusive cultures in which all workers have a strong individual and collective voice.

## 3. Retaining talent

- All employers need to value and invest in STEM expertise and experience, recognising and engaging with unions to ensure that pay and pensions are fair and competitive, workplace cultures are supportive, and careers are reliable and attractive.
- Pay systems need to reward and incentivise specialist experience and deep expertise, allowing appropriate paths of progression that enable continuous professional development without requiring switches into generic managerial or leadership roles.
- Public sector research establishments, research institutes, and other public employers of researchers and STEM workers, must be freed from crude pay caps and controls so that they can develop and implement the remuneration strategies they need to build capability.

#### **4. Investing in every sector and region**

- The UK economy needs to significantly increase investment in R&D, technology and infrastructure across critical industries including IT and telecoms, energy and transport, manufacturing and agriculture. Long term productivity and sustainability must not be sacrificed to corporate short-termism and cost-cutting.<sup>35</sup>
- Government has a vital role to play in incentivising and stimulating private sector investment, as well as contributing directly to scientific and technological advances through public sector research establishments and research-intensive departments and agencies.<sup>36</sup>
- R&D activity, and investment in STEM capabilities, needs to be levelled up across the UK to raise productivity and create quality jobs outside London and the South East. Geographically dispersed industries, such as energy, manufacturing, telecoms, and public sector laboratories have a key role to play here.<sup>37</sup>

#### **5. Nurturing the next generation**

- Broadening engagement with STEM subjects at all levels of education, including close working between employers and Higher Education providers, must be complemented by visible improvements to workplace cultures and career structures that will attract the broadest possible range of people to STEM specialisms
- Employers and Government should work with trade unions to design and deliver in-work training and lifelong learning that helps organisations “grow their own” specialists and enables and rewards professionals to stay at the cutting edge of fast changing fields.

#### **6. Building international collaboration**

- In the wake of Britain’s exit from the European Union, there is an urgent need to secure access to, or fully replace, Horizon funding while protecting and developing collaborative networks.<sup>38</sup> This includes establishing fair and appropriate rules and processes for researchers and STEM workers from outside the UK.<sup>39</sup>
- Cuts to funding for development-related research must be reversed.<sup>40</sup> These are damaging the UK’s international standing and influence as well as the humanitarian and development goals that depend on its progress.

- Prospect reps work with employers on initiatives to tackle inequality in many STEM workplaces, such as an action plan to end the gender pay gap at the UK Intellectual Property Office.<sup>41</sup> Where necessary we challenge failures – for example, ensuring a disabled scientist at a major research institute wasn't unfairly forced into early retirement,<sup>42</sup> or supporting an economist at the Office for National Statistics win compensation for sex discrimination.<sup>43</sup>
- Prospect lobbies government and employers to protect vital investment and jobs in R&D and high-tech industries, as seen in recent debates around UK defence capabilities,<sup>44</sup> low carbon energy generation,<sup>45</sup> cuts to jobs and investment at BT,<sup>46</sup> and the fate of UK chip and software designer Arm Holdings.<sup>47</sup>
- Prospect established RegTech to better recognise and develop the skills and expertise of technicians working in science, engineering and IT, and encourage employers to register their technicians with relevant professional bodies.
- A high-profile campaign, including two days of strike action, carried out by Prospect members at Science Museum sites across England won a commitment to payment of the real Living Wage and a proper salary rise for all workers.<sup>48</sup>
- Prospect has a wide-ranging Partnership Agreement with BT, ensuring a strong voice for researchers, engineers and other professionals working at the company on issues such as workplace culture, flexible working, pay and pensions, plans for full fibre rollout and ambition to be a fully circular business by 2030.
- Legal cases brought by Prospect exposed serious equal pay problems affecting meteorologists and other specialists at the Met Office. A major campaign including strike action generated negotiations that resulted in substantial improvements in pay and a plan to close disparities.<sup>49</sup>
- Prospect campaigned vocally and visibly for the protection of UK access to European funding and research networks in the wake of Brexit,<sup>50</sup> and provided practical support and legal guidance for EU nationals seeking to obtain settled status.<sup>51</sup>

## Get involved

Prospect is the leading union for scientists, engineers and STEM workers across the private and public sectors.

Our campaigning and lobbying prioritise members' concerns and draws on their experience. We are politically independent and speak without fear or favour on behalf of members.

If you're not already a member, join Prospect today at <https://prospect.org.uk/join/>

If you are already a member, make sure you connect with your branch and your dedicated full-time organiser. If you are not sure how to do this, then contact Senior Organiser Sam Gipson on [sam.gipson@prospect.org.uk](mailto:sam.gipson@prospect.org.uk) and she will help you make contact. Connecting with your branch will enable you to share your issues and get involved with local campaigns and negotiations.

You can also find out how you could get more involved in campaigning and organising at local and national levels at <https://prospect.org.uk/get-involved/>

If you would like to become a Prospect rep we offer comprehensive training and support in many different reps roles so speak to your dedicated organiser about what we can offer to help you progress your workplace interests and amplify your voice at work.

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