Perceptions of organizational communication processes in quality management

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Language is a natural psychological phenomenon, indispensable to all humans in society. This article presents the theoretical foundations on communication in process quality management, bringing studies dealing with communication and ISO 9001:2000 management, aiming at investigating how these variables have been perceived in organizations. The importance of the steps that should permeate the communication process is highlighted through published research, concluding on the need for studies that demonstrate the importance of subjectivity in the communication process, a present phenomenon in any interpersonal relationship.
Keywords: Perception, communication, quality management.

Percepciones de los procesos de comunicación organizacional en la gestión de la calidad
El lenguaje es un fenómeno psicológico natural e indispensable para la sociedad humana. Esta investigación presenta los fundamentos teóricos para el informe de gestión de la calidad por procesos. Para ello, fueron rescatados estudios relacionados con el tema de la comunicación y la gestión por la norma ISO 9001:2000, con el objetivo de investigar cómo estas variables se han percibido en las organizaciones. Se busca poner de relieve la importancia de las medidas que deberían estar presentes en el proceso de comunicación a través de la investigación publicada y se concluye en la necesidad de estudios que demuestren la importancia de la subjetividad en el proceso de comunicación, fenómeno presente en toda relación interpersonal.
Palabras clave: percepción, comunicación, gestión de calidad.

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Language is a psychological phenomenon, essential to any human in society. For this reason, it is common that people have the illusion that they know this phenomenon without the need to go deeper in their study. However, one must consider that people have fragmented views of reality, most of them only see some of the details, sometimes complex, because the language in verbal communication is vulnerable to internal factors such as motives and emotions, and external factors, such as the influence of the environment in which the individual is inserted (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 2007). In today's business environment, effective communication becomes a fundamental requirement. In a competitive context, Cardoso (2006) and Schuler (2004) state that organizations rely on effective communication, where individuals are instrumental and impact the organizational culture[3].

Organizations' managers, directly involved in the communication process, have responsibility on the way information flows among people. Hence, the following question arises: Which is the more effective information flow that encompasses all organizational levels? How to transmit information, a notice in the clipboard, for example, so that everyone involved has the same understanding? What would be the employees' responses to a piece of information that could not be understood?

To answer these and other questions, it is important to notice that the term "communication" has many perceptions related to it. It can be anything from a phone call to the way a person communicates with others, among other more complex settings (Borba, 2002). Based on these meanings, communication serves, among other functions, as an essential element in the approximation and integration process of the essential purposes of an organization (mission and vision). That is, one

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[3]   Organizational culture is the set of habits, beliefs and values established through norms, attitudes and expectations shared by all members of the organization, i. e. refers to the institutionalization of thinking and acting of these members (Silva & Zanelli, 2004).

communication goal is to make workers in line with the values, mission and vision of the organization (Angeloni & Fernandes, 1999). The ISO 9001 quality management emerged in an attempt to align all workers in order to make organizations competitive and profitable, and "serves as a model for ensuring quality in design, development, production, installation and technical assistance" (França & Freitas, 1997, p. 106).

Managers then seek to improve quality and productivity, aiming to achieve sales growth and cost reduction. In this sense, quality management implementation through NRB ISO 9001:2000 standards might contribute to a higher performance. An organization manager "[...] a) needs to demonstrate his/her ability to consistently provide products that meet customer requirements [...], and b) aims to increase customer satisfaction through the system effective implementation [...]" (ABNT, 2000, p. 3). It is possible to notice that the focus is centered on customer satisfaction. But for the customer to feel satisfied, it is necessary, besides other factors, that the quality system is privileged, so that everyone in the organization knows the procedures to be adopted, understands the philosophy underlying the quality management system, and holds all information relating to the product or service.

In this competitive scenario, where an organizational communication ought to be effective, coupled with the need for quality products and services offered to customers, the possible interface between organizational communication process and ISO 9001:2000 quality management will be sought in this theoretical research.

Communication and management issues will be first brought up, followed by communication process perceptions, ISO 9001:2000 studies, ending with organizational communication perceptions in ISO 9001:2000 management.

Communication and management

Why are there so many managers arguing that communication in their organizations is inefficient? Why is there so much conflict, so

many misunderstandings in organizations? To answer these concerns, one must agree on what communication is as a concept. The term communication is dynamic, both in content and, especially, in meaning, since the word communication has many meanings, depending on the area that studies the phenomenon. For example, a Public Relations specialist, works to adjust communication objects to the interests of various organization stakeholders; a journalist or press officer works with today's information and its dissemination, promoting an organization or product to the public; an advertising manager works by stimulating the potential demand of a given market, seeking the motivation and the purchase decision by a consumer on a product; a psychologist, whether clinical, organizational, educational, among others, works establishing connections between people and their environment. But a manager has basic functions such as planning, organizing, directing and controlling people and processes in organizations, all this through communication, with an ultimate goal: greater productivity and profitability. Finally, all professions depend on communication processes and use them as a key factor for work performance.

Communication is not a technical term exclusive to one particular area, but a word of public domain. It is therefore necessary to determine the various dimensions of its meaning, so it can be used properly.

According to Berlo (2003), Dubois et al. (2004), Dubrin (2006), Robbins (2005), Tomasi and Medeiros (2007), and Torquato (2004), communication has a functional and operational definition, understood as a common process (sender, receiver, channel flow and level) of relationships involving humans in a corporate environment.

However, communication can be understood not only in a functional way, but also from the theoretical perspective known as symbolic interaction. From this perspective, Casali (2006) proposes another kind of understanding for organizational communication, inspired by the School of Montreal, defined as:

> "A social process that triggers objective and subjective worlds in creating an atmosphere that is both stable and changing. The organizational communication takes place in conversations, texts and

translations that meet the objective definition that communication occurs in organizations and the subjective definition that communication produces organizations" (Casali, 2006, p. 55).

Based on Casali's idea, organizational communication process and ISO 9001 management are considered socially constructed and unfinished realities. This is mainly due to the rapid change in technology (new software, advanced information management programs, among others), which causes these virtual processes' users to learn new ways to communicate, and pass and store information or data, building a social reality in a day-to-day basis.

Technology, in turn, has made an impact in the workplace with fax machines, electronic mail (e-mail), Internet and cell phones that reduce the need for travel and transportation. The choice of e-mail, for example, is so new that all its advantages and disadvantages are not fully known and documented (Dubrin, 2006; Wagner III & Hollenbeck, 1999). As these authors conclude: it is not the medium that will ensure effective communication, but the way communication process it built among stakeholders.

Studies that could explain this concern were then sought. Mello, Silva, Turrioni and Souza (2008) argue that in small organizations there is probably only one way of doing things, and this way, in most cases, is not documented. Medium and large organizations involving many people, in turn, have greater possibilities of having procedures, instructions, forms or documented records, so there is an order in how managers conduct business.

The question is: Is there a correct way to build the communication processes in an organization? Or, as there are several ways of communicating, it is necessary (or possible) to standardize the communication processes? Following Mello et al. (2008), managers through these management system standards can implement a model based on state of the art organizational practices. However, although Melo et al. (2008) contribute to the understanding of the communication process, it is also possible to verify that the functional/operational character of communication in work organizations remains, given that

in the organizational environment most administrative functions are permeated by norms and procedures to be followed.

Whereas the communication management in work organizations is still predominantly operational, according to Torquato (2004), it can be inferred that the management only focuses on the importance of communication. However, it does not privilege the importance of perceptions in order to improve or help maintain good levels of organizational communication.

Organizations' internal communication processes

Studies on organizational communication presuppose the existence of flows, that is, the information should flow through the organization in such a way that it reaches all levels, to achieve the goals originally proposed.

For Katz and Kahn (1999, p. 245), communication is much more than simply the flow of information, being an "exchange and transmission of meaning - the very essence of a social system or organization". Hence, any work implementation depends on communication between people at each organizational level. They also argue that "communication is a social process of broader relevance in any group, organization or society operation" (Katz & Kahn, 1999, p. 245), and emphasize the information process structural aspects. But more importantly, they argue that attention must be spent on the motivational bases for the transmission and reception of messages, idea supported also by Casali (2006), arguing that communication is a social process that triggers objective and subjective worlds in creating a stable and changing environment.

Torquato (2004), for example, states that organizational communication effectiveness will depend on the behavior of those involved in the communicative process, and that the manager is the most significant source of information in organizations, as he or she is usually positioned in an intermediate line, transmitting information to subordinates and superiors.

To explain the communication levels that occur within organizations, Beal (2004) proposes that the information flow has three complexity levels: strategic, tactical and operational. Communication at the strategic level occurs when the information is designed as a decision bearer in the long term, and is oriented towards the executive levels. Tactical level is the information at a management strategic level, i. e. medium-term management. Operational level is communication for controlling and performing tasks in the short term. This is the main source of information generation that should flow in organizations.

Torquato (2004) proposes four other communication levels, ranging from intra, inter, group, and collective levels. Intra level is related to the ability that people have to internally encode communication, in other words, is related to the physical and psychological conditions that determine communication effectiveness. At the inter level there is the communication between two parties, which is called direct or bilateral communication. The group level of communication encompasses meetings, lectures, in which a speaker presents a set of information/ arguments to a group of people. The last level, the collective one, is used by managers through written and oral communication to convey messages for specific or general audiences.

It must be noticed that the levels proposed by Beal (2004) and Torquato (2004) depend on basic psychological phenomena such as emotion, perception, attention/memory, thinking and language, motivation, learning, among others, that involve communication. In order to be able to understand communication it is important to understand how these phenomena take place in individuals.

Communication processes, according to Beal (2004) and Torquato (2004), when described as hierarchical levels (direction, management, supervisors and subordinates), can be understood as a continuous chain of stimuli and responses, triggering types of behavior required for organizational purposes. When it comes to communication levels, it is possible to realize the importance of symbolic language in interpersonal relationships. This symbolic process relates to the way in which it is transmitted to another individual, thoughts, desires, emotions,

feelings, either through sign or body language, among other factors involving communication.

Wagner III and Hollenbeck (1999) explain that managers need to identify the various factors affecting people, when they work together. They further argue that communication process is what unites and integrates workers in organizations, because there is a variety of inter-relationships for the post a person occupies.

Using the concepts cited earlier, it seems possible to perceive the complexity of the communication process in organizations. Casali (2006), for example, defines organizational communication as a means of integrating functional and symbolic character aspects. The latter is understood by Manning (1992) as an interactive process of meaning production, whereby the individuals working together create, maintain and generate meanings through symbol and verbal signs, nonverbal in a particular context.

To account for the symbolic nature of organizational communication, Barichello, Pozzobon and Ribeiro (2003) developed a study at the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM) in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, that aimed at identifying relationships between informal communication and culture aspects, in order to assess their influence on daily organizational practices. The researchers concluded that "it is through informal communication that individual perceptions are externalized as well as interaction ways among groups or subcultures that make up an organization culture" (p. 8). This was concluded because 70% of the managers surveyed believe that communication takes place informally through the organization. From this study, it is possible to realize the importance of the interactionist-symbolic model to explain organizational communication processes in order to consider the perceptions of those involved. This is because informal communication is constituent and an important part of the organization, representing subjectivity modes that lurk in the speeches of employees, and that can lead to the understanding of organizational communication as a meaning production collective process and not just as a simple system of transferring information. It is important to consider that subjectivity also permeates established formal communication within the organization.

Barichello et al. (2003) state that the study carried out by Melo et al. (2008), previously mentioned, is concerned only with how to make up the internal processes within organizations in its state of the art of organizational practices, not prioritizing, therefore, the subjectivity of the participants in this process.

However, Pizani (2008) shows that offering information of quality fulfills the expectations of workers and external users in order to achieve the organizational goals. Therefore, the quality of the information should be determined by the perception of those involved, whether internal or external customers to the organization.

Therefore, communication processes in organizations are closely related to the subjectivity of those involved, as well as the symbolic process being used. From this observation, the perception of people in the communication process must be considered, for what they think or feel affects considerably how they interact with the organizational environment.

Perception of the communication process

Atkinson (2002) states that studying the perception of the communication process involves knowing how humans integrate sensory information to perceive objects in order to move in the world in which they live. For Morris and Maisto (2004) perception can be defined as the process of "organizing, interpreting and giving meaning to [...] information in order to understand what happens around someone" (p. 120). Dubrin (2006) states that people interpret what happens around them based on previous experiences rather than as they actually are. He proposes that "perception is about the various ways in which people interpret things in the outside world and how they act based on those perceptions" (p. 60). The perception of five members of a team, for example, may be differentiated for a 4% salary increase. For this reason, workplace perceptions are important because workers can realize his/her position as challenging and interesting or not. This fact is reflected in the motivation, satisfaction and job performance.

Morris and Maisto (2004) proposed the existence of three factors that influence every human being's perceptive capacity: motivation (desires and needs shape the perception of the individual that is in need for something), values (definitions about what is considered important to achieve goals) and expectations (pre-conceived ideas can make the individual delete, insert, transpose or change the perceived reality).

Many studies on perceptual skills, especially on communication, were produced in the health field (Corniani, Galvão & Sawada, 2000; Gullo, Lima & Silva, 2000; Pereira, 2005; Santana, Figueiredo, Ferreira & Alvim, 2008), mainly related to Nursing (Santos & Silva, 2006).

There are factors that influence perceptual skills and can lead to distortions. This also refers to perceptions based on relationships with other people, that is, one can "see" people in a different way than they really are. The devices that influence how human behavior and social interaction can be interpreted or understood are called perceptive groups by Bowditch and Buono (1992). These clusters are composed of three trends: a) Stereotyping – the process of using a standardized information for a particular group of people determining that these features are common to all persons participating in this group, regardless of the individual. In relation to organizational behavior, Bowditch and Buono caution that occupation and gender stereotyping are usually the cause of conflicts between groups. b) Halo effect – this trend involves letting a noticeable characteristic for an individual or group, whether positive or negative, hide the other characteristics of that individual or group. Finally, c) expectation – this trend can influence social perception, since the individual can "see" what he expects to "see" and not what is actually happening.

Dubrin (2006) lists five groups, called mental processes, which are: information denial (when it is painful), stereotyping, halo effect, projection (projecting the faults in others instead of making an objective assessment of the situation), and selective perception (people come to a conclusion with no explanation from a nebulous situation). Yet, for Dubrin (2006), two aspects are important in organizations, namely: a) perceptual distortions and problems, and b) how people attribute

causes to events. As to perceptual distortions and problems, under ideal conditions, people perceive information as it exists, however, stimulus characteristics introduced and people's perceptual processes can lead to distortion. Perceptual problems, in turn, occur when the stimuli to be perceived affects the perceiver's emotional state. The perception of a stimulus depends on the emotions, needs, attitudes and motives of people.

Schuler (2004), in his communication studies, argues that it is crucial to have an idea of how the other might receive the information, that is, how the transmitted message is interpreted by the receiver. This author argues that the issuer's representation differs from the speaker's representation (different symbolic universes).

In Information Science, studies are turning mainly to the attributes of quality information, as in a study conducted by Oleto (2006) on the quality of information passed on to people in real estate administration, because it has some attributes and concepts focusing on the product or user. These attributes can be comprehensiveness, accessibility, current events, reliability, objectivity, accuracy and validity. Oleto concluded that the perception about information quality was not clear and mingled with the popular knowledge or common sense and not with the scientific knowledge about the specified attributes, perhaps because of the lack of clear concepts that underpin misinterpretations of quality information. In other words, the distinction between common sense and scientific production, by means of perception, was not clear to information system users.

In the organizational area, many studies on perception psychology turn to the culture and context of organizational power, such as the studies of Coelho Júnior and Borges-Andrade (2004) and Neiva and Paz (2005). The first ones studied the empirical main national accounts on organizational culture perceptions from 1996 to 2001 and the second ones discussed the distinction between organizational power and personal influence. However, no studies were found, especially in psychology, which focused on understanding the communication processes through workers' perceptions in organizations.

ISO 9001:2000 processes

The goal for the managers of an organization, with the implementation of quality management through ISO 9001:2000, is to raise their quality standards and become more competitive in domestic and foreign markets. These standards are intended so that the effective quality management system can meet the requirements or customer demands (Andrade, Rietow & Moraes, 2008).

Quality management was standardized by the ISO, which is the abbreviation for the International Organization for Standardization, which normalizes (or regulates) worldwide and creates standards in different segments. This standard was popularized by the 9000 series, i.e. the rules that deal with Management and Quality Assurance Systems in business. More specifically, NBR ISO 9001 is the Brazilian version of the international standard ISO 9001 which sets out requirements for the Quality Management System (QMS) in an organization (ABNT, 2000), having as a distinctive feature the organization management, governed by principles such as customer focus, leadership, involvement of people, systemic approach, continuous improvement and process approach, also setting strict criteria for improvement in reducing errors and customer complaints. Thus, ISO 9001, among other benefits, has provided improvements in communication, due to uniformity in management, explained in a clear and objective quality policy (Zacharias, 2004).

Implementing ISO standards in an organization is based on the PDCA cycle principles (ABNT, 2000; Ciclo PDCA, 2008; Deming, 1990; Melo et al., 2008), which stands for: Plan (P) – to establish objectives and processes necessary to achieve outcomes for clients with a focus on the organization's policies; Run or Do (D) – to implement the processes; Check (C) – to monitor and measure processes and products in relation to the goals and requirements for the product, registering the results; and to Respond appropriately or Act (A) – to act to continuously improve process performance.

From the PDCA, it is possible to identify some benefits that an organization will have, such as: improved consistency in the performance

of products or services with higher levels of customer satisfaction, improved customer perception regarding the organization's image, culture and performance, as well as improved productivity and efficiency. Such factors lead to cost reduction, improved communication, morale and job satisfaction – staff members understand what is expected of all of them and of each other, and competitive advantage and greater opportunities for marketing and sales.

From the NBR ISO 9001:2000 (ABNT, 2000, pp. 4-26) it is possible to notice that some specific items deal with communication and control of records and documentation in the organization. However, they are of a functionalist/operational character, in order to control information and register it for support and process monitoring, whether in internal and external audits, resulting from the organization's quality system.

Some studies were found that dealt with quality management. For example, Fertonai, Batistuti, Hojo, Oliveira and Pastre (2002), Machado Junior and Rotondaro (2003), Correia, Mélo and Medeiros (2006), and Pinto, Carvalho and Lee Ho (2006), which deal respectively with introducing total quality management concepts, quality service measurement and ISO 9001:2000 implementations reports, and continuous improvement in environmental ISO 9001:2000. No studies were found that address on communication perception in quality management systems.

Communication in ISO 9001:2000 management

As explained earlier, few empirical studies show the relationship between ISO 9001:2000 and communication processes. Three articles were found showing this relationship, two empirical and one theoretical, as can be seen below in an analysis of published research.

The paper by Kopf and Hortale (2005) brings matusian management[4] contributions to communicative management in health organizations.

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[4] The matusian management system designed by Carlos Matus has three systems that integrate the so-called Iron Triangle, namely: Manager Schedule System (related to the manager's use of

This study was inspired by Habermas' Communicative Action, i. e. the need for greater integration and communication through a dialogical action between departments involved in health organizations, which are called Interunities (Habermas, 1987). Quality lies on developing skills for interaction and collective reflection, allowing dialogue, a requirement for intersubjective understanding. "Communicative action is centered on life world discussion as the horizon within which communicative actors move, which is limited and changed with society structural changes" (Kopf & Hortale, 2005, p. 3). An approach can be made to the concepts previously seen by Wagner III and Hollenbeck (1999), Barichello et al. (2003), Torquato (2004) and Casali (2006) that perceive communication as a factor for the interaction between people.

Silva and Ribeiro (2005) investigated communication challenges in ISO 14001 certified organizations, specifically dedicated to the Environmental Management System. They developed a survey of 211 certified organizations in Brazil through e-mail with questions about certification form, communication process, significant environmental aspects, performance indicators and environmental management system evolution. Of the 211 questionnaires sent, only 55 were returned, representing 35% of the total. It was concluded that certified organizations are not able to successfully establish communication with interested parties, unless it is to disclose about positive results in relation to environmental issues. Although conclusions were made with a small number of responses, it must be considered that certified companies in Brazil have communication problems, given that most ISO standards are in process/procedures and do not consider communication as a relevant factor for the interaction between departments.

A paper produced in 1997 by França and Freitas states that "in order to achieve a communication certification, that is, to establishment a quality process that works within the expected goals, something to be

time and focus); Operations Management System (involving the direction and management by objectives, which form an action and sub-actions plan linked to the budget, incorporating a management activity organized at all levels); and Application and Accountability System (responsibility rules that transform a neutral demand in management results) (Kopf & Hortale, 2005).

certain is that communication does not work naturally to produce results" (França & Freitas, 1997, p. 106). To achieve quality communication there must be a top rank administration commitment, considering communication as a strategic resource of quality improvement.

Finally, there is an article by Andrade et al. (2008) that addresses the importance of the communication process for ISO 9001 quality management and implementation, through the account of an employee subjected to unquestioning obedience to the rules and procedures implemented by quality management system. It is argued that to shape the employees for the purposes of quality management, they must understand and stop all behaviors that lead to alienation, for if they cannot see the relationship between what they do and their work's final results, there will be nothing to be considered their own work.

Andrade et al. (2008) warn that quality management alienates human beings with the sole purpose of mechanizing a plan implementation, arguing that communication serves as a link in quality management, through the perception that the organization (represented by top rank administration) and its members (represented by its employees) have the construction of organizational identity, considering the search for quality a relevant factor for all involved. For this to occur, Andrade et al. report on the need for the management team to delegate and to share power with the group, aiming at decentralizing decisions and participative leadership.

According to Andrade et al. (2008) quality management is alienating, since managers should consider the implementation of these processes from a symbolic interactionist view of communication, linking it to the concept that quality management is a tool for developing critical thinking through dialogue and interaction, as well as some skills, for example, learning to learn in the organizational environment.

The standard ISO 9001:2000, besides ensuring a product's specific features or service in compliance with requests from customers, requires the development of internal capabilities to meet customer's needs. Thus, the larger quality philosophy is that communication processes should be adopted by all stakeholders in order to develop products or services that can help people have a better life.

Discusion

Each person perceives a situation from his or her experience, values and beliefs. In Linguistics, for example, organizational communication is not studied as interaction but as speech by means of language. In turn, in Psychology language is studied through concepts such as perception, dialogue, interaction and subjectivity. In this light it is possible to get a better understanding of the communication process.

In Psychology, the perceptual phenomenon is understood as the process of organizing, interpreting and giving meaning to information, in order to understand what happens, from the experiences lived by the individual. It is important to explore communication from the psychological viewpoint, not as an end in itself, but as a first step, so that one can produce communication studies on a psychological basis, since many phenomena that have to do with communication have to do with Psychology.

Regarding managers and perceptions on the communication process in ISO 9001:2000 management, no reports or empirical studies were found linking these subjects. Many studies only discuss the statement in its linguistic aspects, such as grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and standards used to make writing more in touch with the business world, and not related to psychological phenomena. These studies include Third Sector organizations, public and private health units and private and mixed economy organizations.

Communication is approached as a tool that is linked to various areas. And so it is with organizational communication scholars, who deal with flows, levels, and the Portuguese language, which must be flawless in messages, text cohesion, polite norms to be followed, among other items.

Studies should focus on communication as a means to understand the different areas that work with humans in interaction, given that communication is a continuous process of creation, transformation and maintenance of the collective. Likewise, studies should not be restricted to construction, description and classification of what is spoken by people.

The study of communication, as proposed by Casali (2006), should be expanded beyond the transmitter and receiver analysis. Functional and symbolic aspects should also be considered, as well as psychological aspects of the persons involved in the communication, individuals with feelings, sensations, beliefs, etc.

Data collection and analysis methods must be improved, so further studies are able to expand the analysis on communication and the individual that communicates. Analyzing the communication process is not enough; it is necessary to analyze how the subjectivity of those involved in the communication process influences the perception process.

Communication should be better understood by managers because, as some state, it is one of the leading management tools. Linguistics, on the other hand, emphasizes the issued text without the necessary attention to the individual sending the message.

The challenge is set for professionals who need a good communication to perform their work, because communication can be analyzed by biases that despise, in most cases, the individual with his or her emotions and motives, as part of the interaction process. There is, therefore, a need for studies that demonstrate the importance of subjectivity in the communication process, which underlies any interpersonal relationship.

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