Success & Motivation

from Joe Schmo to The Benefactor

continued ▶

by Mark Cuban

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

I did it, too. I drove by big houses and wondered who lived there. What did they do for a living? How did they make their money? Someday, I told myself, I would live in a house like that. Every weekend I did it.

I read books about successful people. In fact, I read every book or magazine I could get my hands on. I told myself one good idea would pay for the book and could make the difference between me making it or not.

I worked jobs I didn't like. I worked jobs I loved, but had no chance of being a career. I worked jobs that barely paid the rent. I had so many jobs, my parents wondered if I would be stable. Most of them aren't on my resume anymore because I was there for so short a time, or they were so stupid I was embarrassed. You don't want to write about selling powdered milk or selling franchises for TV repair shops. In every job, I would justify it in my mind — whether I loved it or hated it — that I was getting paid to learn and every experience would be of value when I figured out what I wanted to do when I grew up.

If I ever grew up, I hoped to run my own business someday. It was exactly what I told myself every day. In reality, I had as much doubt as confidence. I was just hoping the confidence would win over the doubt and it would all work out for the best.

I remember being twenty-four years old, living in Dallas in a three-bedroom apartment with five friends. This wasn't a really nice place we had all kicked in to move up for. This place has since been torn down. Probably condemned. I didn't have my own bedroom. I slept on the couch or floor, depending on what time I got home. I had no closet. Instead, I had a pile that everyone knew was mine. My car, a '77 FIAT X19, had the usual hole in the floorboard and burned a quart of oil that I couldn't afford every week.

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To make matters worse, because I was living on happy hour food, and the two beers cover charge, I was gaining weight like a pig. My confidence wasn't at an all-time high. I was having fun; don't get me wrong. I truly was having a blast. Great friends, great city, great energy, pretty girls. Okay, the pretty girls had no interest in my fat and growing ass at the time, but that's another story…

I was motivated to do something I loved. I just wasn't sure what it was. I made a list of all the different jobs I would love to do. (I still have it). The problem was that I wasn't qualified for any of them. But I needed to pay the bills.

I finally got a job working as a bartender at a club. A start, but it wasn't a career. I had to keep on looking during the day.

About a week later, I answered a want ad out of the newspaper for someone to sell PC Software at the first software retail store in Dallas. The ad was actually placed by an employment agency. The fee was to be paid by the company, so I gave it a shot.

I put on my interview face and, of course, my interview suit, which just happened to be one of my two polyester suits that I had bought for the grand total of 99 dollars.

I put on my interview face and, of course, my interview suit, which just happened to be one of my two polyester suits that I had bought for the grand total of 99 dollars. Thank God for 2–fer, 2–fer, 2–fer madness at the local mens' clothing store. Grey pinstripe. Blue pinstripe. Didn't matter if it rained, those drops just rolled down the backs of those suits. I could crumple them. They bounced right back. Polyester, the miracle fabric.

I wish I could say the blue suit and my interview skills impressed the employment agency enough to set up the interview with the software store. In reality, not many had applied for the job, and the agency wanted the fee, so they would have sent any–one over to interview. I didn't care.

I pulled out the grey for my interview at Your Business Software. I was fired up. It was my shot to get into the computer business, one of the industries I had put on my list!

I remember the interview well. Michael Humecki, the Prez, and Doug (don't remember his last name), his partner, double–teamed me. Michael did most of the talking to start. He asked me if I had used PC software before. My total PC experience at the time was on the long–forgotten TI/99A that had cost me $79. I used it to try to teach myself Basic while recovering from hangovers and sleeping on the floor while my roommates were at work. They weren't impressed.

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I was trying to pull out every interview trick I knew. I went through the spiel about how I was a good salesperson, you know, the part of the interview where you are basically begging for a job, using code phrases like "I care about the customer," "I promise to work really, really hard," and "I will do whatever it takes to be successful." Unfortunately, I was getting that "Well, if no one else applies for the job, maybe" look from Michael.

Finally, Doug spoke up. He asked me, "What do you do if a customer has a question about a software package and you don't know the answer?" All of the possible an–swers raced through my mind. I had to ask myself if this was the "honesty test ques–tion," you know, where they want to see if you will admit to things you don't know. Is this some trick technology question and there is an answer everyone but me knows?

After who knows how long, I blurted out that "I would look it up in the manual and find the answer for them." Ding, ding, ding…Doug just loved this answer.

Michael wasn't as convinced, but he then asked me the question I was dying to hear: "Would you not go back to the employment agency at all, so when we hire you we don't have to pay the fee?" I was in.

MOVIN' ON UP

So my career in Dallas began. I was a software salesperson with Your Business Software in Dallas. $18,000 per year. The first retail software store in Dallas.

I had to sweep the floor and be there to open the store, but that wasn't a bad thing. When I told my future ex-girlfriends that I sold software and was in the computer biz, I wasn't going to mention the sweeping the floor part. Plus, I had to wear a suit to work, and the 2-fer madness specials looked good at happy hour after work. Better yet, the store didn't open till 9:30 a.m., which meant if I had a fun night, I had at least a little time to sleep.

I bet right about now you are questioning where my focus was. Where was my commitment to being the future owner of the Dallas Mavericks? Please. I was stoked I had a good job. I was stoked it was in an industry that could turn into a career. At twenty-four, I was just as stoked that the office was close to where the best happy hours were, and that I might finally have more than twenty bucks to spend for a night on the town.

Since I'm talking about partying, I do have to say that my friends and I were very effi-cient in that area. Beyond living off bar food and happy hours, we literally agreed that none of us would bring more than twenty bucks for a weekend night out. This way we all could pace each other. At least that was the way it was supposed to work, and it did, until we figured out the key to having a great night out on the cheap. The key was buying a bottle of cheap, cheap champagne. I can't even spell the name, but it was a full bottle and it cost twelve bucks. Tear the label off and as far as anyone knew it was Dom. Each of us would grab one, and sip on it all night. It was far cheaper than buy-ing beers or mixed drinks all night, and we never had to buy a drink for a girl — we just gave her some champagne! Of course, the next day was hell, but since when was I responsible enough to care about a hangover?

I had to sweep the floor and be there to open the store, but that wasn't a bad thing.

But I digress. Back to business. As fired up as I was about the job, I was scared. Why? Because I have never worked with an IBM PC in my life. Not a single time, and I was going to be selling software for it. So what did I do? I did what everyone does: I ratio-nalized. I told myself that the people walking in the door knew as little as I did, so if I just started doing what I told my boss I would do, read the manuals, I would be ahead of the curve. That's what I did. Every night I took home a different software manual, and I read it. Of course, the reading was captivating. Peachtree, PFS, DBase, Lotus,

ACCPAC…I couldn't put them down. Every night I read some after getting home, no matter how late.

Of course, it was easy on the weekends. After drinking that cheap champagne, I wasn't getting out of bed 'til about 9 p.m., so I had tons of time to lie on the floor and read. It worked. Turns out, not a lot of people ever bothered to RTFM (read the frickin' manual), so people started really thinking I knew my stuff. As more people came in, because I knew all the different software packages we offered, I could offer honest comparisons, and customers respected that.

It was the first time in my adult life that I was able to have more than a thousand dollars in the bank.

Within about six months, I was building a clientele, and, because I had also spent time on the store's computers learning how to install, configure and run the software, I started having customers ask me to install the software at their offices. That meant I got to charge for consulting help: twenty-five bucks an hour that I split with the store. That turned into a couple hundred extra bucks per month and growing. I was raking it in, enough that I could move from the hotel (that was what we called our apartment) where the six of us lived, into a three-bedroom apartment across the street, where instead of six of us, there were only three. Finally, my own bedroom!

I was earning consulting fees. I was getting referrals. I was on the phone cold-calling companies to get new business. I even worked out a deal with a local consultant who

paid me referral fees, which led to getting a $1500 check. It was the first time in my adult life that I was able to have more than a thousand dollars in the bank.

I hadn't known if this was going to be a job that would work for me, or that I would even like, and it turned out I was lucky.

That was a special moment, believe or not, and what did I do to celebrate? Nope, I didn't buy better champagne. I had these old ratty towels that had holes in them and could stand on their own in the corner; they were so nasty I needed a shower from drying off after a shower. I went out and bought six of the fluffiest, plushest towels I could find. I was moving on up in the world. I had the towels, life was good. Business was good and getting better for me. I was building my customer base, really start–ing to understand all the technology, and really establishing myself as someone who understood the software. More importantly — no, most importantly — I realized that I loved working with PCs. I had never done it before. I hadn't known if this was going to be a job that would work for me, or that I would even like, and it turned out I was lucky. I loved what I was doing. I was rolling so well, I was even partying less…during the week.

Then one day, about nine months into my career as a salesperson/consultant, I had a prospect ask if I could come to his office to close a deal. 9 a.m. No problem to me.

Problem to my boss, Michael Humecki. Michael didn't want me to go. I had to open the store. That was my job. We were a retail store, not an outbound sales company. It sounded stupid to me back then, too, particularly since I had gone on outbound calls during the day before. I guess he thought I was at lunch.

Decision time. It's always the little decisions that have the biggest impact. We all have to make that "make or break" call to follow orders or do what we know is right. I followed my first instinct: I closed the sale. I guess I could have rescheduled the appointment, but I rationalized that you never turn your back on a closed deal. So I called one of my coworkers to come in and open up, and closed the deal. Next day, I came in, check in hand from a new customer, and Michael fired me.

IN BUSINESS OF MYSELF

Fired. Not the first time it's happened, but it reinforced what I already knew: I'm a terrible employee. I just had to face facts and move on. So rather than getting back on that how–the–hell–am–I–going–to–find–a–job train, the only right thing to do was to start my own company.

My first act of business? Pile into my buddy's 1982 Celica, nicknamed Celly, and drive to Galveston to party. Of course, we stayed in only the best $19.95–a–night, plug–the–hairdryer–in–the–wall–and–the–circuit–blows motel. Nothing but the best, as I prepared for my journey into entrepreneurial territory again. I could say that I was preoccupied with how to get my new business off the ground, that while my friends got drunk, did stupid tourist tricks, and ate at greasy spoons, I sat by the pool on the

one chaise lounge chair with rust on the clean side and wrote up my business plan. I didn't. I got just as drunk and ate the same disgusting food. Then we faced the road trip terror that everyone knows exists, but refuses to admit, the ride home. It wasn't until we pulled up to the apartment that it hit me. No job. No money. No way to pay the bills. But I did have nice towels.

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Fortunately, the hangover didn't last too long, and I realized I had to get off my ass and make something happen. First day, first task: come up with a name. This was the start of the microcomputer revolution, and I wanted a name that said what the company was going to do, which was sell personal computers and software, and help companies and individuals install them. I was going to offer microcomputer solutions. So after strug-gling with different names for about 30 minutes, I chose MicroSolutions Inc.

Now came the hard part. I had to call all the people with whom I had done business at my last company, let them know that I had been shitcanned, and ask them if they would come do business with me at MicroSolutions. I expected certain questions. No, I didn't have an office. No, I didn't have a phone yet, other than my home phone. Yes, it was just me. No, I didn't have any investors. The only question I dreaded was whether I had a computer with which to work. I didn't. Fortunately, no one asked.

I made a lot of calls and got some decent response. "We love you, Mark, we want to give you a chance." A lot of "Let's stay in touch." I got two real bites. One from a company called Architectual Lighting, and the other from a company called Hytec Data Systems.

This was my "no money down" approach to starting a business. They said yes. I had a business.

Architectual Lighting was looking for a time and billing accounting system to allow them to track their work with clients. I don't remember the name of the software package I told them about; I think it was Peachtree Accounting. After going out to meet with them, it came down to this: I offered to refund one hundred percent of their money if the software didn't work for them, and I wouldn't charge them for my time installing and helping them. In return, they would put up the 500 bucks it would take for me to buy the software from the publisher, and I could use them as a reference. This was my "no money down" approach to starting a business. They said yes. I had a business.

My second call, Hytec Data, was run by Martin Woodall. I met with Martin at the S&D Oyster House on a beautiful June day. I remember sitting there and him telling me, "I graduated in computer science from West Virginia University. I have 50k in the bank and I drive a brand new Cadillac. I know technology better than you. We can work together." I had a customer, and now, with Martin's help, I had some hope. Hytec Data

sold multi-user systems. The old kind that used dumb terminals. He bundled it with accounting software, and he and a contractor named Kevin would make modifications to the Cobol source code. They were the hardcore geeks who could help me when I needed it. I was still just ten months from my first introduction to PCs, and had zero clue about multi-user systems. If I came across prospects that could use their system and software, I would get referrals. That was good.

People…trusted me, not because I was the most knowledgeable about computers, but because they knew I would do whatever it took to get the job done.

Even better was Martin's offer of office space. He and Kevin shared office space with the distributor of the computer systems he sold. They had this one office that, when the distributors' CEO's son wasn't using it to study his Spanish, I could use to make calls and keep my folders and paperwork. Still no computer, but hey, I had an office and a phone. I was bonafide…

At some point, I'm going to have to go back and look at my appointment books that I kept from those days, to remind myself of who my second, third, and on from there customers were. They were small companies that I got to know very well. People who took me under their wing and trusted me, not because I was the most knowledgeable about computers, but because they knew I would do whatever it took to get the job

done. People trusted me with keys to their offices. They would find me there when they got in the morning and I was there when they left. I made 15,000 dollars that first year. I loved every minute of it.

I had to sell Scott…on how learning all of this would be a career move, compared to working at the steakhouse. Unfortunately, I couldn't pay him as much.

As time went on, my customer base grew. I got my friend and former roommate, Scott Susens, to help with deliveries. Scott was working as a waiter at a steakhouse at the time. I remember asking him over and over, "Would you please help me out? I have a customer that bought a bunch of Epson dot matrix printers from me." I had to sell Scott on how it wouldn't be hard to learn how to hook a parallel cable between a PC and a printer, and how learning all of this would be a career move, compared to work–ing at the steakhouse. Unfortunately, I couldn't pay him as much as the steakhouse could. Fortunately, Scott worked nights and weekends and decided to take some time in the afternoons to help me out. Not long after that, he was working full–time, in–stalling PCs and learning whatever he had to learn before an install.

Martin also began to play a larger and larger role. His company was growing, and he was watching my company grow. I would get the PC–based stuff, he would get the accounting system stuff. It was a nice split. The better part of the relationship

was based on Martin being the most anal-retentive person I had ever met in my life. While I covered my mistakes by throwing time and effort at the problem, Martin was so detail-oriented he had to make sure things were perfect so problems could never happen. We could drive each other crazy. He would give me incredible amounts of shit about how sloppy I was. I would give him the same amount back because he was so anal that he was missing huge opportunities. We complemented each other perfectly. It would only be a matter of time before we both knew we had to be partners and work together instead of separately.

I would get so involved with learning a new piece of software that I would forget to eat.

That first year in business was incredible. I remember sitting in that little office 'til 10 p.m. and then still being so pumped up I would drive over to the gym I belonged to and run five to ten miles on the treadmill, going through that day and the next in my head. Other days, I would get so involved with learning a new piece of software that I would forget to eat, and look up at the clock, thinking it was 6 or 7 p.m., and see that it was 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. Time would fly by.

It's crazy the things that you remember. I remember when my accounts receivable got up to $15k and telling all my friends. I remember reading the PC DOS manual (I really did), and being proud that I could figure out how to set up startup menus for my customers. I remember going to every single retail store in town: BusinessLand,

NYNEX, ComputerLand, CompuShop, all those companies that are long gone, and introducing myself to every salesperson, to try to get leads. I would call every single big computer company that did anything at all with small businesses: IBM, Wang, DEC, Xerox, Data General, DataPoint (remember them?), and set meetings, asking to come to their offices since I couldn't afford to take them to lunch. I didn't need a lot of customers, but my business grew and grew. Not too fast, but fast enough that by the time MicroSolutions had been in business about two years, I had $85,000 in the bank, a receptionist/secretary, Scott helping me out, and a four-room office that I moved into, along with Martin and Hytec Data Systems.

You never quite know, in business, if what you are doing is the right or wrong thing.

Then I learned a very valuable lesson. Martin had done a great job of setting up our accounting software and systems. I got monthly P&L statements. I got weekly journals of everything coming in and everything going out, payables and receivables. We had a very conservative process where Martin would check the payables, authorize them, and then use the software to cut the checks. I would then go through the list, sign the checks, and give them to Renee, our secretary/receptionist, to put in the envelope and mail to our vendors.

One day, Martin came back from Republic Bank, where we had our account. He had just gone through the drive-through and one of the tellers, who he saw every day dropping of our deposits, asked him to wait a second. She came back and showed him a check that had the payee of a vendor **WHITED OUT** and Renee Hardy, our secretary's name, typed over it. Turns out that in the course of a single week, our secretary had pulled this same trick on $83k of our $85k in the bank. As Martin delivered the news, I obviously was pissed. I was pissed at Renee, I was pissed at the bank, and I was pissed at myself for letting it happen. I remember going to the bank with copies of the checks, and the manager of the bank basically laughing me out of his office, telling me that I "didn't have a pot to piss in." That I could sue him, or whatever I wanted, but I was out the money.

I got back to the office, told Martin what happened at the bank, and then I realized what I had to do about all of this. I had to go back to work. That what was done, was done. That worrying about revenge, getting pissed at the bank, and thinking all those I'm-going-to-get-even-and-kick-your-ass thoughts were, basically, just a waste of energy. No one was going to cover my obligations but me. I had to get my ass back to work, and do so quickly. That's exactly what I did.

LESSONS LEARNED

You never quite know, in business, if what you are doing is the right or wrong thing. Unfortunately, by the time you know the answer, someone has beaten you to it, and you are out of business. I used to tell myself that it was okay to make little mistakes,

just not to make big ones. I continuously searched for new ideas. I read every book and magazine I could. Heck, three bucks for a magazine, twenty bucks for a book. One good idea that led to a customer or a solution, and it paid for itself many times over. Some of the ideas I read were good, some weren't. In doing all the reading, I learned a valuable lesson.

The same information was available to anyone who wanted it. Turns out most people didn't want it.

Everything I read was public. Anyone could buy the same books and magazines. The same information was available to anyone who wanted it. Turns out most people didn't want it.

I remember going to customers, or talking to people in the industry, and tossing out tidbits about software or hardware. Features that worked, bugs in the software. All things I had read. I expected the ongoing response of, "Oh yeah, I read that, too, in such-and-such." That's not what happened. They hadn't read it then, and they haven't started reading yet.

Most people won't put in the time to get a knowledge advantage. Sure, there were folks that worked hard at picking up every bit of information that they could, but we were few and far between. To this day, I feel like if I put in enough time consuming all the information available, particularly with the 'net making it so readily available, I can get an advantage in any technology business. Of course, my wife hates that I read

more than three hours almost every day, but it gives me a level of comfort and con‑fidence in my businesses. At MicroSolutions, it gave me a huge advantage. As a guy with little computer background, I could compete with far more experienced guys just because I put in the time to learn all I could.

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I learned from magazines and books, but I also learned from watching what some of the up‑and‑coming technology companies of the day were doing. It's funny how the companies that I thought were brilliant then are still racking it up today.

Every week, a company called PCs Limited used to take a full‑page ad in a weekly trade magazine called PC Week. The ad would feature PC peripherals that the com‑pany would sell. Hard drives. Memory. Floppy drives. Graphics cards. Whatever could be added to a PC was there. What made the ad so special was that each and every week the prices got lower. If a drive was $2000 last week, it was $1940 this week. For the first time in any industry that I knew of, vendors were passing on price savings to customers.

The PC Limited ads became the market price for peripherals. I looked for the ad every week. In fact, I became a customer. I was in Dallas. They were in Austin.

I remember driving down to pick up some hard drives that I was going to put into my customers' PCs. I had no idea, until that point, that they had just moved from the owner's dorm room into a little office/warehouse space. I was so impressed by this young kid (I was a wise, old twenty–five at the time), that I actually wrote a letter thanking him for the great job he was doing, and, I'm embarrassed to say now, I told him that if he kept up what he was doing, he was destined for far bigger and better things.

I kept on doing business with PCs Limited, and Michael Dell kept on doing what he was doing. I don't think he really needed my encouragement.

but I have since told him that I think his weekly full-page ads with ever–declining prices changed the PC industry, and were only the first of many genius moves on his part.

Michael wasn't the only smart one in those days.

One of the PC industry's annual rituals was the Comdex trade show in Las Vegas. Every November, it was the only three days I knew I would get a break and get away from the office. It was work during the day: visiting all the new technology booths, trying to get better pricing from vendors, trying to find out where the best par–

ties were. If you can believe it, back in those days, the number one party was the Microsoft party. I sold some Microsoft products, so I could get in.

One particular year, I was on my way to having a memorable night. I had met some very, very attractive women (I swear they were). Got them some tickets to come with me to the big party. All was good. I was having fun. They were having fun. Then we saw him. Bill G. As in Bill Gates, dancing up a storm. I'm a Bill Gates fan, so I won't describe his dancing, but he was definitely having fun.

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At that point in time, Microsoft had gone public and Bill Gates was Bill Gates. If you were in the business you knew him or knew of him. The girls I was with were in the business. Long story short, I went to the bar to get some drinks for all of us. I came back, they weren't there. Came to find out the next day, Bill stole my girls. As I would learn later in life, money does make you extremely handsome. :)

Bill G. also taught me a few things about business. Put aside how he killed IBM at their own game by licensing PC DOS to anyone that wanted it. What Microsoft did to knock Lotus 1–2–3 and WordPerfect off their thrones was literally business at its best.

At that point in time, software was expensive. WordPerfect and Lotus 1–2–3 both sold for $495 and their publishers were proud of that fact. In order to be able to sell Lotus 1–2–3, you had to go to special training to become authorized. How crazy does that sound now — going to a special class to be able to sell a spreadsheet? WordPerfect wasn't quite as bad, but they had their own idiosyncrasies as well. Meanwhile, Microsoft was on the outside looking in. Excel, Word, and PowerPoint were all far down the list of top sellers — until lightning struck.

No product is perfect and if there are good competitors in your market, they will figure out how to abuse you.

Microsoft decided to go against industry protocol and package those three programs as a suite and offer them as an upgrade to competitors' products for the low, low price of $99. Of course, you needed to have and use Windows for it to work, but in a time when people were buying new PCs with every dramatic increase in power and decrease in price, it was a natural move for us at MicroSolutions to sell the bundle. It made the effective price of the PC and software together far, far lower. We loved it. It also taught me several big lessons.

Always ask yourself how someone could preempt your products or service. How can they put you out of business? Is it price? Is it service? Is it ease of use? No product is perfect and if there are good competitors in your market, they will figure out how to

abuse you. It's always better if you are honest with yourself and anticipate where the problems will come from.

The second lesson is to always run your business like you are going to be competing with Microsoft. They may not be your direct competitor. They may be a vendor. They may be a direct competitor and a vendor. Whatever they may be to your business, if you are in the technology business, you have to anticipate that you will in some way have to compete with Microsoft at some point. I ask myself every week what I would do if they entered any of my businesses. If you are ready to compete with Microsoft, you are ready to compete with anyone else.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Mark Cuban purchased the Dallas Mavericks on January 14, 2000, the face of the organization began to change immediately. Cuban was not only successful at instilling a sense of pride and passion into Mavericks fans by presenting himself as the ultimate role model, but he also became the first owner in team sports to encourage fan interaction through e-mail on his personal computer. Cuban's whatever–it–takes attitude and commitment to winning has everyone's attention. Cuban has promised to do everything in his power to improve the team.

Prior to his purchase of the Mavericks, Cuban co-founded HDNet, an all high-definition television network on DIRECTV channel 199 which launched in September 2001. Cuban also co-founded Broadcast.com, the leading provider of multimedia and streaming on the Internet, in 1995, selling it to Yahoo! in July of 1999. Before Broadcast.com, Cuban co-founded MicroSolutions, a leading National Systems Integrator, in 1983, and later sold it to CompuServe. Today, Cuban is not only an active investor in leading and cutting–edge technologies and a highly sought–after speaker, he is also a co–producer and the star of the ABC reality show, "The Benefactor," which appears on Monday nights at 8pm. http://abc.go.com/primetime/benefactor/

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