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Building a Framework for Inclusive Talent Development in Platform-Based Work

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how platform-based workers develop skills and navigate structural, social, and algorithmic challenges to achieve inclusive talent development in the context of digital labor in Tehran. This qualitative research employed an exploratory design using semi-structured interviews with 25 participants engaged in various platform-based occupations, including freelance, ride-hailing, and delivery work. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring demographic and experiential diversity. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding procedures to identify main themes and subthemes related to skill development and inclusion mechanisms. Thematic analysis revealed four central categories: access to skill development opportunities, algorithmic mediation of opportunity, structural barriers to inclusion, and self-driven career navigation. Participants frequently relied on informal learning, peer support, and strategic adaptation to overcome limited access to formal training. Algorithmic visibility and reputational systems significantly influenced work opportunities, often reinforcing inequality and emotional labor demands. Structural constraints such as gender discrimination, digital exclusion, and socioeconomic disadvantage were identified as major obstacles to equitable growth. Nonetheless, participants demonstrated high levels of resilience, self-branding, and long-term planning in navigating fragmented work environments. Peer collaboration and emotional regulation were also key strategies for sustaining engagement and enhancing employability. Findings highlight that inclusive talent development in platform-based work is a multidimensional process shaped by individual agency, platform infrastructure, and broader socio-technical systems. Informal learning and strategic navigation are critical, yet insufficient without platform-level and policy-level reforms. A comprehensive framework for inclusion must address algorithmic transparency, accessible training, and community-based support to promote equitable growth in the digital labor economy.

Keywords: Platform-based work, talent development, algorithmic management, digital labor, inclusion.

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms has significantly reshaped the landscape of work, offering new forms of employment characterized by flexibility, autonomy, and decentralization. Platform-based work—also known as gig, freelance, or on-demand work—is mediated by digital technologies that connect service providers with consumers in real time, transcending traditional employment boundaries and labor structures. While these platforms promise accessibility and meritocracy, emerging evidence suggests that access to skill development and inclusive career growth within this ecosystem is uneven and often shaped by algorithmic, institutional, and social biases [1-3]. As the digital economy becomes increasingly central to labor market dynamics, it is crucial to examine how platform workers navigate opportunities for learning and development, and how inclusive frameworks can be constructed to ensure equitable access to talent cultivation.

The shift toward platform-mediated labor coincides with a broader transformation in employment norms, including the rise of portfolio careers and the decline of standardized progression pathways [4, 5]. This fragmentation of the labor market has prompted scholars and policymakers to rethink how talent is identified, nurtured, and deployed in digitally mediated contexts. While platforms often position themselves as neutral enablers of opportunity, they also exert considerable control over the visibility of workers, the flow of tasks, and the criteria used to evaluate performance [3, 6]. These algorithmic architectures mediate not just transactions but also access to reputation, income stability, and career advancement. Consequently, workers must engage in continuous learning, self-branding, and strategic navigation of platform logics in order to sustain employability [6, 7].

Amid these dynamics, the concept of employability has emerged as a central concern for both platform workers and researchers. Employability in the platform context extends beyond traditional credentials to encompass digital fluency, adaptability, and reputation management—qualities often cultivated informally or through self-directed efforts [8-10]. However, the availability of skill-building pathways is highly uneven. Workers from marginalized backgrounds—particularly those facing socioeconomic, geographic, or gender-based exclusion—often lack access to training, mentorship, or tools for professional development [11-13]. In such contexts, inclusive talent development requires more than providing access to tasks; it demands infrastructure, support systems, and platform policies that promote equitable learning and progression.

Recent literature emphasizes the importance of hybrid skill sets—combinations of technical, digital, and soft skills—as prerequisites for success in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) and the platform economy [14-16]. Yet, many platform-based learning ecosystems still prioritize transactional efficiency over capacity building. Training modules, where offered, are often superficial or optional, and rarely align with the lived realities of gig workers [7, 9]. In contrast, many workers cultivate their skills through informal networks, peer collaboration, or client feedback. These bottom-up strategies reflect both the ingenuity and the precarity of platform labor, where workers must continually adapt to algorithmic changes, market volatility, and limited social protections [2, 17].

The platform economy also raises critical questions about the governance of work and the role of technology in reinforcing or mitigating labor inequalities. Algorithmic management systems, designed to enhance efficiency and scale, can inadvertently entrench existing power imbalances by embedding opaque decision-making rules and reinforcing reputational hierarchies [1, 3]. Workers are often left without recourse when penalized by rating systems or excluded from task allocation due to algorithmic misclassification or customer bias. This lack of transparency undermines trust and fosters dependence on the platform, as workers have little control over how their performance is interpreted or rewarded [5, 6].

Moreover, the flexibility of platform work often masks deeper structural exclusions. For example, women and other vulnerable groups may face barriers related to safety, mobility, and cultural expectations, limiting their participation or progression within certain platform sectors [11, 12]. In many cases, platform design fails to accommodate diverse needs, leading to de facto exclusion through user interface choices, rating mechanisms, or language accessibility. This reinforces the argument that inclusion must be an intentional design principle rather than an incidental by-product of technology deployment [3, 18].

To address these challenges, scholars have proposed integrating inclusive pedagogical principles and digital equity frameworks into platform design and governance. For example, leveraging open-access learning technologies, digital certification systems, and community-based learning ecosystems has shown potential to democratize skill acquisition among

marginalized populations [7, 13, 19]. However, these approaches require support from platforms and policy ecosystems that prioritize long-term worker empowerment over short-term efficiency. Industry-level interventions, such as cross-platform portability of credentials and the promotion of digital rights, are also essential to ensure fair access to development pathways [8, 9, 15].

In this context, inclusive talent development is best understood as a multi-layered process involving individual agency, platform affordances, and systemic supports. At the individual level, workers exercise resilience, creativity, and strategic agency in navigating fragmented work conditions and building personal brands. At the platform level, design choices—such as task visibility algorithms, training access, and performance evaluation criteria—profoundly shape opportunities for skill development. At the systemic level, labor regulation, educational infrastructure, and digital inclusion policies intersect to influence the broader context of employability [18, 20, 21].

Although existing studies have explored various aspects of skill development in the digital labor market, relatively few have focused specifically on how inclusive frameworks can be constructed from the bottom up—based on the lived experiences and strategies of platform workers themselves. This study addresses this gap by examining how platform workers in Tehran develop their skills, navigate structural and algorithmic constraints, and conceptualize inclusive career growth.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study employed an exploratory design to investigate the mechanisms and practices that support inclusive talent development within platform-based work settings. The research focused on eliciting in-depth insights from individuals actively engaged in various forms of digital labor in Tehran, where platform work is rapidly expanding in scope and complexity. The study targeted a purposive sample of 25 participants who were selected based on their diverse experiences in different platform-based occupations, including ride-hailing, freelance digital services, and delivery platforms. The participants represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds, gender identities, and career trajectories to capture a comprehensive view of inclusion-related dynamics in platform-based work. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights related to the research questions.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore emerging issues in depth. An interview guide was developed to cover core themes such as access to learning opportunities, barriers to advancement, the role of platform algorithms in skill recognition, and personal strategies for career growth. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet locations chosen by the participants, ensuring comfort and privacy. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual cues and non-verbal information. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. The analysis followed a multi-step process beginning with open coding, where initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments of the transcripts. This was followed by axial coding, through which codes were organized into categories that reflected emerging patterns in the data. Finally, selective coding was used to refine core themes and construct a conceptual framework that illustrates how inclusive talent development occurs in platform-based work. Credibility was enhanced through iterative peer debriefing and ongoing memo writing to document analytic decisions throughout the process.

Findings and Results

The study involved 25 participants engaged in various forms of platform-based work in Tehran. Among them, 14 were male and 11 were female. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 46 years, with the largest age group being 26–35 years ($n = 12$), followed by 36–45 years ($n = 8$), and the remaining 5 participants were between 22 and 25 years old. In terms of educational background, 10 participants held a bachelor's degree, 7 had completed an associate degree, 5 had a high school diploma, and 3 had postgraduate qualifications. The occupational distribution included 9 individuals working in freelance digital services (e.g., graphic design, translation), 8 in ride-hailing platforms, and 8 in courier and delivery services. Participants' experience with platform-based work ranged from 6 months to 5 years, with 15 individuals having more than two years of experience. This diversity allowed for a rich exploration of the structural and experiential dimensions of inclusive talent development within the platform economy.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from Qualitative Interviews

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Access to Skill Development Opportunities	Informal Learning Channels	Peer mentoring, Online tutorials, YouTube learning, Self-paced exploration, Trial-and-error learning
	Barriers to Formal Training	Cost of certification, Lack of time, Absence of employer support, Training not aligned with job, Digital literacy gaps
	Platform-Facilitated Learning	In-app training modules, Platform-led webinars, Skill badges, Task simulations
	Learning Through Client Feedback	Feedback-driven learning, Revising based on ratings, Iterative improvement, Negative reviews as triggers
	Community-Based Knowledge Sharing	Telegram groups, Social media forums, Local meetups, Shared resource libraries, Mentorship among peers
2. Algorithmic Mediation of Opportunity	Visibility and Task Allocation	Task ranking, Rating system bias, Preference for fast responders, Visibility decay, Time-window algorithms
	Perceived Fairness of Algorithmic Decisions	Lack of transparency, Inconsistent task flow, Bias toward high-volume workers, Sudden rating drops
	Gaming the System	Multiple account strategies, Keyword optimization, Strategic login timing, Task selection tactics, Profile inflation
	Impact of Reviews and Ratings	Review anxiety, Rating pressure, Emotional labor, Customer satisfaction over skill, One-star trauma
	Trust and Dependency on Platform	Algorithmic loyalty, Risk of deplatforming, Blind reliance on platform logic
3. Structural Barriers to Inclusion	Digital Literacy and Algorithm Navigation	Learning the system, Understanding task flow, Reading between algorithmic lines, Platform navigation skills
	Gender-Based Exclusion	Fear of harassment, Gendered task assignment, Mobility restrictions, Biased customer behavior, Platform indifference
	Socioeconomic Constraints	Limited device access, Cost of mobile data, Urban-rural gaps, Need for multiple jobs
	Lack of Institutional Support	No HR contact, Absence of grievance mechanisms, No health benefits, No upskilling pathways
	Discriminatory Customer Behavior	Accent bias, Age bias, Appearance-based rejection, Gender stereotyping
4. Self-Driven Career Navigation	Platform Neglect of Marginalized Groups	Lack of inclusive features, Ignoring accessibility needs, No profiling for diverse talent, Tokenism
	Strategic Task Selection	High-reward targeting, Avoiding risky tasks, Skill-aligned choices, Platform-hopping

Personal Branding	Optimizing profile, Highlighting credentials, Leveraging testimonials, Visual branding, Storytelling in bios
Emotional Resilience	Managing frustration, Coping with rejection, Self-affirmation, Positive self-talk, Avoiding burnout
Long-Term Planning	Vision setting, Goal-directed tasking, Saving for courses, Parallel career development, Building a portfolio
Networking and Collaboration	Peer alliances, Joint gigs, Referrals, Informal support groups

Access to Skill Development Opportunities

Participants widely described relying on informal learning channels to enhance their capabilities. Many emphasized learning through peer experiences, trial and error, and online resources. “I watched YouTube videos at night to learn how to edit faster,” shared one participant (P12), while another mentioned, “A friend taught me how to use a shortcut that doubled my speed” (P7).

However, several participants cited barriers to formal training, such as unaffordable costs, time limitations, and low relevance to their actual tasks. “I can’t afford any course that costs more than two million tomans, and they don’t even cover what we actually do,” said one respondent (P3). Others noted that formal platforms rarely considered the practical needs of gig workers.

A number of workers acknowledged the existence of platform-facilitated learning but criticized its superficiality. “There’s a badge for finishing the training, but it doesn’t really mean anything for customers,” stated a participant (P18). These learning modules were mostly described as basic, optional, and unrecognized outside the platform ecosystem.

Several interviewees highlighted the value of learning through client feedback, especially when detailed reviews helped them refine their approaches. “A client once gave me a two-star review and explained everything. I actually improved because of that,” shared one freelancer (P6). Others, however, described this feedback loop as emotionally taxing.

A strong theme was community-based knowledge sharing. Participants commonly participated in local Telegram groups or WhatsApp chats. “In our freelancer group, someone always has a tip or a template to share,” explained one interviewee (P14). These spaces helped compensate for the lack of structured learning offered by platforms.

Algorithmic Mediation of Opportunity

The way platforms managed visibility and task allocation was a critical concern. “If you’re not online at just the right moment, you miss all the good gigs,” one participant (P5) lamented. The system was often described as unpredictable, creating anxiety about earning potential.

Participants frequently questioned the perceived fairness of algorithmic decisions. Many believed the algorithm favored high-volume workers and penalized minor mistakes. “I had one bad week, and suddenly I didn’t get any offers for days,” reported one participant (P16), reflecting a lack of transparency in task distribution.

Several participants admitted to gaming the system to gain visibility or protect their ratings. Strategies included optimizing profiles, manipulating availability status, or using multiple accounts. “I figured out which words to put in my title to appear more,” said a participant (P20), revealing a layer of strategic self-presentation shaped by the algorithm.

The impact of reviews and ratings emerged as a major pressure point. Workers described living in fear of one-star reviews that could “kill your profile instantly” (P9). One participant confessed, “I sometimes overpromise just to make sure they leave five stars” (P22), highlighting how emotional labor was often deployed to meet rating expectations.

Many expressed a mix of trust and dependency on the platform. Although they critiqued the system, most still relied on it entirely for their income. “I hate how it works, but I can’t risk leaving it,” said one freelancer (P11). This reliance fostered a sense of resignation and algorithmic submission.

Finally, digital fluency played a significant role in how well participants navigated algorithmic structures. Those with higher digital literacy and algorithm navigation skills reported better performance. “You need to learn how the system thinks to survive,” one experienced platform worker explained (P2).

Structural Barriers to Inclusion

Several women in the study described experiences of gender-based exclusion, especially in ride-hailing and delivery work. “Some clients cancel when they hear a woman’s voice,” said one participant (P8). Others shared fears of harassment and noted that platform support in such cases was “non-existent.”

Participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds discussed socioeconomic constraints that limited their platform engagement. “I had to borrow a phone to sign up,” said one respondent (P17). Others highlighted the cost of mobile data or needing to work multiple jobs to cover basic expenses.

Interviewees reported a general lack of institutional support, with no HR contact, benefits, or legal protection. “When I had a payment issue, there was no one to talk to,” noted one participant (P21). The absence of formal recourse left workers feeling invisible.

Many described discriminatory customer behavior, particularly bias based on gender, age, accent, or physical appearance. “I lost gigs because I have a rural accent,” said one platform worker (P15). These biases often went unchecked by platform policies.

Another barrier was the platforms’ neglect of marginalized groups. Features were not designed with inclusion in mind. “There’s no option for users with disabilities. Everything assumes you’re young, mobile, and tech-savvy,” remarked one interviewee (P10). Others described attempts at diversity as tokenistic and performative.

Self-Driven Career Navigation

Despite the challenges, participants employed strategic task selection to optimize their performance. Many avoided tasks with high conflict potential or prioritized those that matched their skillset. “I don’t take express jobs anymore. Too much pressure and little payoff,” one respondent shared (P13).

Several respondents emphasized the importance of personal branding. They customized their profiles to attract better clients. “I put my certificates in the profile picture and changed my username to sound more professional,” said one freelancer (P24). This kind of branding was seen as essential in standing out.

To endure the stresses of gig work, participants described building emotional resilience. “You need thick skin. If a client is rude, you move on,” said a seasoned worker (P1). Others spoke of using affirmations or support from family and peers to stay grounded.

Some had clear long-term planning strategies. They pursued skills or side projects to escape platform dependency. “This is temporary. I’m saving to build my own app,” shared a participant (P19), expressing both ambition and a desire for autonomy.

Finally, many emphasized the power of networking and collaboration. “I team up with a friend for big gigs. We split the money and the stress,” explained one participant (P4). Informal alliances helped reduce uncertainty and fostered a sense of solidarity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study reveal the complexity of inclusive talent development within platform-based work ecosystems, emphasizing that workers rely on informal learning strategies, algorithmic navigation, and personal resilience to pursue career advancement in the absence of formal institutional support. Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis: access to skill development opportunities, algorithmic mediation of opportunity, structural barriers to inclusion, and self-driven career navigation. These themes reflect a multi-layered reality in which talent development is shaped not only by individual effort but also by the technological, social, and institutional architectures embedded in platform work.

Participants’ reliance on informal learning channels—such as peer mentorship, online tutorials, and community groups—underscores the insufficiency of formal upskilling mechanisms within most platform environments. Workers adapted to platform demands by watching instructional videos, learning through feedback, and sharing tips in peer forums. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the prevalence of self-directed learning among digital laborers, particularly in resource-constrained contexts where formal training is scarce or misaligned with job tasks [7, 9]. The lack of structured training provided by platforms reflects a broader disconnect between platform architecture and human capital development, as platforms often prioritize operational efficiency over workforce investment [5, 6]. Furthermore, the fact that many workers improved their skills based on client feedback or social media tutorials resonates with the notion of distributed, experience-based learning in gig economies [8].

Despite these efforts, participants encountered several barriers to accessing formal or platform-led training opportunities, including high costs, limited relevance, and lack of visibility for training credentials. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that platform-based work systems rarely incentivize continuous education or reward formal skill acquisition [1, 3]. As noted in global studies of digital economies, platform workers are often caught in a paradox: they must constantly upgrade their skills to remain competitive, yet receive little institutional support or recognition for doing so [15, 22]. The resulting dependence on informal channels reflects not only worker resilience but also the structural precarity of platform employment.

The role of algorithms in shaping access to opportunities emerged as a particularly salient theme in this study. Participants expressed frustration over opaque decision-making processes, unpredictable task visibility, and the pressure to maintain high ratings under emotional stress. Several respondents described strategic behaviors—such as adjusting their login times or curating their profiles—to increase task flow, effectively “gaming the system.” These behaviors echo findings from earlier research showing that algorithmic management introduces new forms of labor discipline and reputational control, which workers must navigate through constant vigilance and digital literacy [3, 6]. In addition, the perception of algorithmic bias and performance volatility resonates with critiques of platform governance that emphasize a lack of transparency and accountability in task allocation [2, 18].

Participants also highlighted how review systems, while positioned as quality assurance mechanisms, often served as sources of anxiety and reputational fragility. Workers described instances where a single low rating could significantly impact

their visibility and income, regardless of the quality of their work. These findings support earlier observations that customer ratings can act as both a motivator and a constraint, disproportionately penalizing marginalized or less digitally literate workers [1, 5]. As the findings indicate, managing emotional labor and engaging in performative self-presentation became essential survival strategies—echoing broader critiques of precarity in platform work environments.

Structural exclusion also emerged as a major theme, with gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status frequently cited as barriers to participation and growth. Female participants described instances of harassment, cancellation of tasks based on gender, and limited mobility, while others pointed to cost-related barriers, such as device access and data affordability. These findings are consistent with research on digital labor segmentation, which shows that structural inequalities are often reproduced in platform work through unequal access to tools, support, and algorithmic treatment [11, 12, 20]. Moreover, platform infrastructures rarely accommodate users with disabilities or those in remote areas, which exacerbates marginalization in ways similar to exclusionary practices seen in traditional labor markets [3, 4].

Importantly, the study also revealed how participants engaged in self-driven career navigation through personal branding, emotional resilience, strategic task selection, and long-term planning. These behaviors demonstrate a high level of agency among platform workers, who, despite systemic challenges, remain invested in their growth and stability. This aligns with prior work emphasizing the importance of hybrid skill sets—blending soft, technical, and entrepreneurial competencies—as key assets in navigating the gig economy [14, 16, 22]. Several participants described creating visually appealing profiles, leveraging client testimonials, and even collaborating with peers for larger tasks—strategies that align with findings on informal professionalism and self-marketing in flexible labor systems [17, 23].

One notable dimension of this study is the extent to which peer collaboration and digital communities substituted for institutional support. Telegram groups, social media collectives, and informal mentorship networks became essential venues for sharing knowledge, offering emotional support, and co-developing strategies. These findings reinforce existing research suggesting that community-based learning plays a critical role in digital labor settings, particularly where formal scaffolding is absent [7, 13]. However, these networks are also fragile, dependent on voluntary engagement and mutual trust, and often fail to reach the most marginalized workers, such as those without consistent digital access or social capital.

The results of this study also shed light on the psychological dimensions of platform work. The need for emotional regulation, resilience, and self-affirmation was frequently mentioned by participants as central to sustaining engagement. Workers described the importance of coping mechanisms, peer validation, and self-directed goal setting. These insights correspond with recent theories that emphasize the cognitive and affective labor embedded in gig economies—particularly under conditions of algorithmic surveillance and reputational risk [6, 8]. While such resilience reflects individual strength, it also signals systemic failure: workers are forced to internalize responsibility for structural inequities beyond their control.

Taken together, the findings of this study point to the urgent need for inclusive frameworks that recognize the diverse ways platform workers develop talent. Talent development in platform-based work cannot rely solely on individual initiative or passive exposure to digital tools. Rather, it requires intentional interventions that address systemic inequities, platform design flaws, and the absence of transparent governance mechanisms. This study contributes a grounded understanding of these issues from the perspective of platform workers in Tehran, offering empirical evidence for the global debate on the future of inclusive work in digital economies [10, 18, 21].

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative sample of 25 participants from Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or platform economies with different structural, cultural, or regulatory contexts. Second, while efforts were made to ensure diversity in participant backgrounds, the sample may still underrepresent certain worker demographics, such as individuals with disabilities or those working on highly specialized platforms. Additionally, the use of self-reported data introduces the potential for bias in participant narratives, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as discrimination or income. Finally, as the data were cross-sectional, the study does not capture the long-term evolution of talent development strategies or platform policies over time.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies that trace the evolution of skill development trajectories and platform engagement over time, particularly in light of changing technologies and labor regulations. Comparative research across different countries or types of platforms could also yield insights into how local governance structures or cultural norms mediate inclusive talent development. Furthermore, mixed-methods designs incorporating both qualitative and quantitative elements could enrich understanding by triangulating workers' experiences with platform-generated data or employer perspectives. Research might also explore platform design interventions—such as rating system reform, learning pathway integration, or credential portability—and their impact on worker outcomes.

Policymakers, platform developers, and labor advocates should collaborate to embed inclusion directly into platform design, governance, and support systems. This includes creating accessible, context-sensitive training opportunities; ensuring algorithmic transparency; and providing fair grievance mechanisms. Platforms should also facilitate community-building tools and peer mentoring features to amplify worker agency. Employers and educational institutions can partner with platforms to recognize informal learning and provide stackable credentials. Ultimately, inclusive talent development requires a shift from extraction-based models of labor toward ecosystems that foster growth, dignity, and equity for all workers.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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