

Comparative Analysis of the Popular Websites used for Electronic Filing (E-Filing) of Taxes in India

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Abstract— The portals used for providing any e-governance service to the citizens are very crucial. They serve as an interface to provide and use the services. So, these portals need to be carefully designed and developed to meet the requirements of the users. Studies have been done to understand the factors which contribute to the successful adoption of e-governance initiatives. Some of the important constructs identified for this are navigation, design, content and information and responsiveness. In this paper, these constructs have been used to do a comparative analysis of some of the popular websites used for electronic filing (E-Filing) of taxes in India.

Key words: E-governance, E-Filing, E-Filing Portals, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Navigation, Responsiveness

I. INTRODUCTION

The interface used for any web based system is one of the most crucial aspects. In a virtual environment of this kind of a system, the users interact with the service provider only through this interface. So it is very important to develop and design an effective interface to meet all the requirements of the users. This holds true for any e-governance initiatives as well. When it comes to paying of taxes, it is one of the most dreaded obligations for the taxpayers. From the tax payers' outlook, filing of tax returns has always been perceived as a bane. This can mainly be attributed to the cumbersome process and systems in place since a long time. On the top of this, the stresses that the taxpayers have to go through to get the right paperwork done to fulfil the tax obligations are nightmarish. To make the experience of taxpayers hassle free, having an effective web portal to provide all required services is crucial. It is one of the critical success factors for any internet based system. Over a period of time, lot of modifications have been made to these portals to enhance and improve the features and make the experience of taxpayers better.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Even though e-filing of tax returns were introduced in 2006, the rate of adoption of this system has been quite slow as compared to some other parts of the world. One of the major reasons is that most of the tax payers are guided by some of the myths which still prevail in their mindsets¹. The Income tax Department (ITD) has created a centralised system to meet all the necessities of taxpayers. But the taxpayers don't need to restrict themselves to use only this portal of the department. Apart from the official website of the income tax department designated as web-based tax filing system, there are a couple of other registered intermediaries which can be used for fulfilling the requirements of e-filing. The look and feel of these e-filing portals and the services

offered by the intermediaries vary. These features affect the users' decision to use any of these systems. The objective of this study is to do a comparative analysis of some of the popular portals used for filing of income tax returns by the individual tax payers.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research conducted by Palmer reports on a series of three studies that develop and validate website usability, design and performance metrics, including download delay, navigability, site content, interactivity, and responsiveness².

The findings of these studies indicate that the success of a website success is a first-order construct. The success of website is significantly associated with web site download delay (speed of access and display rate within the Web site), navigation (organization, arrangement, layout, and sequencing), content (amount and variety of product information), interactivity (customization and interactivity), and responsiveness (feedback options and FAQs). The speed of access and the display rate within the website is used for determining website download delay. The way the website is organised, the arrangement of contents within the website, layout and sequencing are used for assess the navigation aspect of a website. How much of customisation and interactivity is provided in a website determines how interactive a website is. To make a website more responsive, feedback options and FAQs become quite significant. These features along with those developed by Turkish Court of Account (TCA) in 2006 were used to analyse the tax filing websites of South Korea and Turkey³. Trust is another aspect which is very significant in the e-governance systems⁴. This trust in e-government websites is positively related to information quality, system quality, and service quality. There are numerous menace and doubts in using any online system. Typical website features like quality of information, system quality, and service quality perceptions, are generally considered as key success factors which have impact on the ultimate goal of e-governance. This trust factor is also dependent on the trusting relationship between users and the government.

Based on the above past studies, four main constructs namely navigation, content, design and responsiveness have been used in this study to do a comparative analysis of five popular e-filing sites which includes incometaxefiling.co.in, cleartax.in, Taxspanner.com, Taxsmile.com and myITreturn.com were analysed. These five portals have been selected based on the search results of Google. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) has been used effectively by all these five service providers and they appear as the top five options based on 'e-filing India' Google search. Performance metrics have been

defined for each of these four constructs to evaluate the websites on specific parameters. Six performance metrics have been used to evaluate the navigation construct. Content and information being a very important construct, fourteen aspects have been used to assess this. Four metrics have been used for measuring responsiveness and ten have been used for evaluating the design. These five portals have been critically evaluated on these four constructs based on the personal experiences of the researchers.

IV. A BRIEF ABOUT EACH OF THE FIVE SELECTED E-FILING PORTALS

A. Income Tax Department (ITD) E-Filing Website⁵

If someone has no clues of the website to be used for filing returns online, the easiest way is to use Google to search for Income Tax Department. This comes back with the home page of the Income Tax Department (ITD) on the top of the search results along with the quick link for filing returns online. Subsequently, home page of the e-filing website is available to take the user straight to the e-filing website and then to the login page. This shows that all efforts have been made to make best use of the concept of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) for the benefit of the users to make the website available even though the user might not be aware of the exact address of the page to file returns online.

The website of the department is developed and maintained by Taxmann Publications Pvt. Ltd. Once the user is on the home page of the ITD, the link to file returns online is available on the home page which cannot go unnoticed. As this link is used, the users are directed to <https://incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in/> which is a dedicated website separate to the home page of the department. The home page is presented as Fig 1. Apart from this, the other important links provided here are for PAN, TAN, TDS, Form 16A, Pay Taxes Online, View Your Tax Credit, Status of Tax Refund, Tax Return Preparer Scheme (TRPS) and others. Tax Return Preparer Scheme is a unique initiative launched in 2006-07 by ITD with an intention to assist small and marginal taxpayers in preparing and filing their tax returns by creating a pool of trained 'Tax Return Preparer (TRPs)'. The website has a link to the FAQs, quick link to other required services and a site map for easy navigation. High level of security is provided through this site and security certifications have been issued by Entrust. This ensures the identity of a remote computer. There is one single window for getting any kind of help which is very convenient for the users. The home page of this site is shown below.

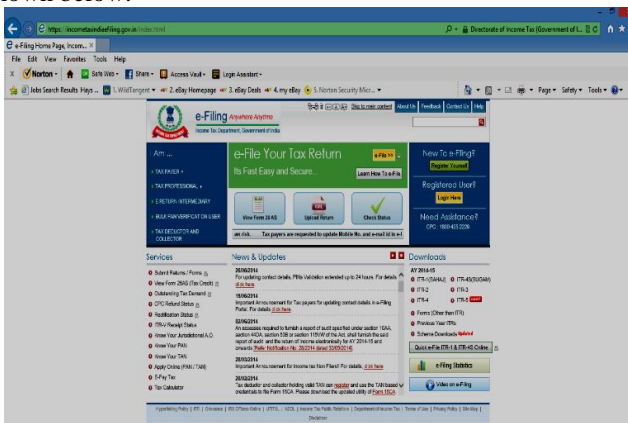


Fig. 1: Home Page of ITD E-Filing Website

B. ClearTax⁶

ClearTax.in, created by ClearSharp Technology Pvt. Ltd. is one of the private organisations authorised by Government of India for e-filing. They claim that the individual tax payers can prepare and file their Income Tax Returns in the shortest possible time while maximising their tax deductions. With the aim to delight their customers with simplicity, accuracy and getting rid of the notion that taxes are complex, they provide a host of tax filing services to their clients. They have partnered with Microsoft BizSpark in this effort. However, the design and layout of the site is quite confusing for the users and lacks proper structure. But in spite of this, as a result of search option with 'e-filing India' search, it is displayed as one of the top options to file returns online after the Income Tax Department. This shows that like ITD, even this organization has made best use of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and comes back with all direct links to the services most likely to be used. The website can be accessed at <http://cleartax.in/>.

ClearTax offers both free and paid services. The users have the choice to use this site to file their returns on their own without a need for any paid services. For this, the option of Free Self e-filing is available for the users. Alternatively, if the assesses do not want to go through the hassles on their own, they may opt for CA Assistant e-filing. Both these choices are highlighted on the homepage. The details of the plans and services are made available for the clients to make an informed decision for the required service. The users make use of the help and support options and tax tools to assist them in tax filing. Fig 2. Shows the Home Page of ClearTax is given below.

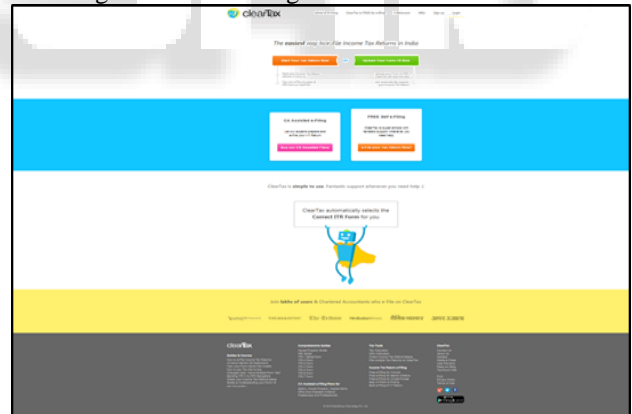


Fig. 2: Home page of ClearTax

C. Taxsmile⁷

Created by Taxsmile.com India Private Limited in 2007, this is yet another popular registered e-Return Intermediary. Taxsmile.com is authorized by Income Tax Department to electronically lodge tax returns to the Income Tax Department using web services they provide. Having served the clients since 2008, this is rated as one of the top three e-return intermediaries in India. The clients have the option of availing individual or corporate solutions as per their requirements. This organization is a part of eMudhra Consumer Services Ltd group of company which is a Licensed Certifying Authority under Ministry of Information & Technology, Government of India for issuing digital signatures. With this background in online security,

great care has been taken to ensure security while making use of this site, thus increasing confidence of the users of this site. It uses ‘Trust redefined’ as its punch line. They use 128-bit encryption Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) technology for data protection. Taxsmile servers are secured with firewalls and are monitored round-the-clock for any denial of service or intrusion attacks. Maintaining international quality security standards, Taxsmile servers are hosted at ISO27001. Besides, rigorous security policies are in place for data protection against unauthorized access and to maintain privacy. Most of the time, users are quite concerned about the security and this has been taken care appropriately by emphasizing on it in multiple ways.

The website can be accessed at <http://www.taxsmile.com/>. Fig. 3 below shows the home page of Taxsmile. The site has been meticulously planned to have included most of the features the users might look for. Right on the home page some of the striking support features have been added to entice the users and bring them back to the site repeatedly. This site comes as the next top option as a result of ‘e-filing India’ search, after ITD and ClearTax. Quick support features are available on this site with links to the most sought after services, for getting help and for post filing support. There is a knowledge centre with all possible details which may be helpful to the users. It claims to provide complete solutions for individual and corporate needs of the clients.

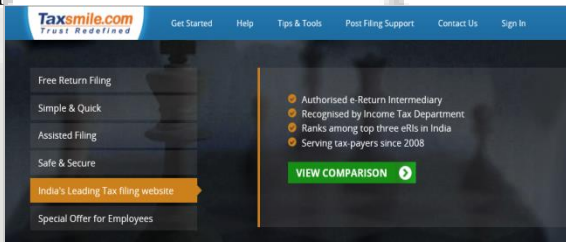


Fig. 3: Home page of Taxsmile

D. Taxspanner⁸

Established in 2007, Taxspanner has been authorized by the Income Tax department of the Government of India as an e-return intermediary. It operates from Delhi and Bangalore. Money Today and Mint have ranked Taxspanner as best online tax preparer in the year 2009 and 2010 respectively. This website can be accessed at <http://www.taxspanner.com/>. Fig. 4 below shows the home page of Taxspanner. Some of the top employers recommend this to their employees based on the benefits of compliance, confidentiality and ease-of-use. Employees of 1000+ companies use TaxSpanner services. The list includes most of the Fortune 500 companies operating in India, as well as top IT/ITES companies in India. As far as the security and confidentiality is concerned, the organisation uses SSL encryption to ensure that all information is highly secured. As mentioned by them, TaxSpanner.com is the only tax website certified by the Cert-in empanelled consultants. They say their servers are locked down and guarded. They use 256-bit encryption and automatically back up all your valuable data. These are highlighted right on the home page of the site. The company also claims to make the filing of tax returns easy and hassle free in ten ways. Links are available for all types of e-filing options. The Help and Demo options which gives details like FAQs, Product tours and Glossary of terms. There are links to different types of

calculators, vast pool of information and live chats. Getting the e-mail and mobile updates related to IT department tax records is one of the unique features of this site.



Fig. 4: Home page of Taxspanner.com

E. myITreturn⁹

Started in year 2006, myITreturn is India's foremost provider of tax filing and related services for Individuals, Professionals and Small Businesses. It is a subsidiary of Skorydov Systems Private Limited with the expertise in providing software related to tax, compliance and office solutions. With 8, 88,193 (accessed on May 11, 2015) users of their services, myITreturn claims to be India's largest e-return intermediary. Like other e-return intermediaries, myITreturn also offers free and assisted filing service, which is offered at a price. The home page of myITreturn and its product offerings are given in Fig. 5.

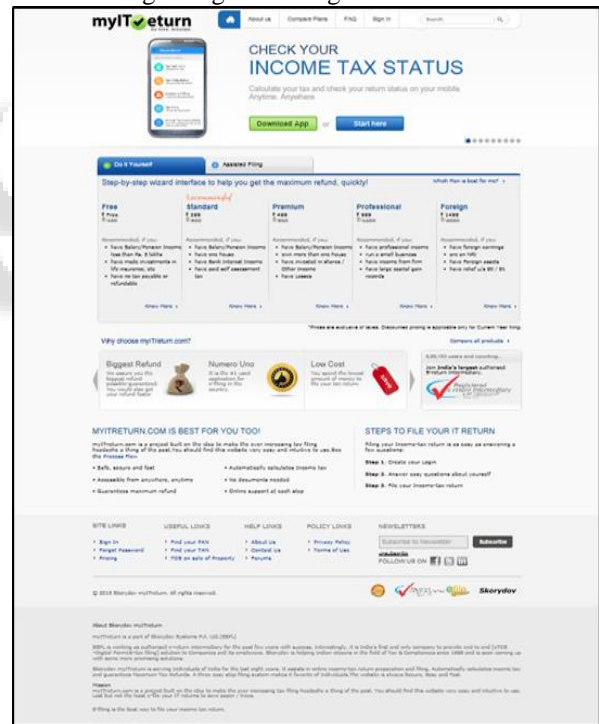


Fig. 5: Home page of myITreturn

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FIVE TAX FILING PORTALS

As has been mentioned above, four main constructs have been used to compare the five chosen web portals. This section presents the comparative analysis of these portals on each of these four constructs.

A. Navigation:

Having a site map on any website helps the users in navigating through the site. So it is an important feature. Out of the five websites, only IT department e-filing website and

Taxsmile had the site map on their websites. Having a link on each page to get back to the Home Page is another important feature for easy navigation. Only IT department e-filing website and Taxspanner have this feature. Menu/submenu structure on all the sites provides easy navigation except for cleartax.in. There is no problem in navigating across the pages using the backward and forward in all the five portals. The IT department portal provides link to other relevant sites like UTI and NSDL to apply for

PAN/TAN. MyITreturn.com provides link to the site of IT department for details. The links of all the five portals were checked many times during the research and all the links worked fine for all the portals every time. Based on the six performance metrics used to measure the construct of Navigation of the five portals, <https://incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in/> comes out to be the best. The details of this analysis is presented next in Table 1.

Performance Metrics/ e-filing website	incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in	cleartax.in	taxsmile.com	taxspanner.com	myITreturn.com
Main page contains the site map	Yes. It is at the bottom corner of the page.	No. There is no site map.	Yes. It is at the bottom corner of the page.	No. There is no site map.	No. There is no site map.
Every page has a link to the home page	Yes. Comes right on top left on all the pages	No. There is no option to go to the home page.	No. There is no option to go to the home page.	Yes. Comes on top right on all pages.	Yes. Comes as an icon at the top on all pages.
Menu/submenu structure provides easy navigation	Yes. Navigation using menus and submenus quite convenient to use. They come as quick, easy drop-down list.	No the navigation is not easy.	Yes. Navigation using menus and submenus quite convenient to use. They come as quick, easy drop-down list.	Yes. Navigation using menus and submenus quite convenient to use. They come as quick ribbon.	Yes. Navigation using menus and submenus quite convenient to use.
The user can navigate easily within pages by the back and forward arrow keys	Yes. It is quite easily navigable.	Yes. The arrows work.	Yes. It is quite easily navigable.	Yes. It is quite easily navigable.	Yes. It is quite easily navigable.
There are sufficient number of links to other relevant sites	Yes.	No. Links not available.	No. Links not available.	No. Links not available.	Yes. Link to website of ITD
The links are accessible most of the times	Yes. Most of the time.	Yes. Most of the time.	Yes. Most of the time.	Yes. Most of the time.	Yes. Most of the time.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Websites on Navigation

B. Content and Information:

Of all the five service providers studied, only the portals of IT department and myITreturns.com are secured site using secured Hyper Text Transfer Protocol (HTTPS) making them more secure. However, Taxspanner uses SSL encryption to ensure that all information is highly secured. Contact information is quite prominently visible on the home page of the IT department portal and under the contact option. These details are easily accessible under support and contact options in myITreturn.com and taxspanner.com on taxsmile.com, the contact details are available on each page.

The option to use another language is available only on IT department portal. Others just have the offer details in English. All the five portals have the agency's logo and provide details of organisational activities. The option of in-site search engine is there in all the portals except cleartax.in and taxsmile.com. On the basis of fourteen performance metrics used to measure the Content and Information construct, <https://incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in/> appears to be the best of all five portals. Detailed comparative analysis is given in Table 2

Performance Metrics/ e-filing website	incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in	cleartax.in	taxsmile.com	taxspanner.com	myITreturn.com
Security of site	Secured site using HTTPS protocol.	No HTTPS	No HTTPS	No HTTPS	Secured site using HTTPS protocol
There is a contact number's to report problems and to get support	Yes. Three separate toll free numbers for different types of support	No. It is available only when user registers.	Yes.	Yes.	No.
Contact e-mail address is available for support	No.	Yes. Separate one for regular and premium support.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Live chat option to get support	No.	No.	Yes. Available on each page.	Yes. Available on each page.	No.
It is easy to locate contact information on the website	Yes. Details are quite prominently visible on the home page and also as a option on the top right corner on home page under Contact.	No. It is only at the bottom corner.	Yes. Available on each page.	Yes. Comes under the Support and Contact options	Yes. Comes as Contact us.
The site contains relevant legislation details	Yes. Available as News Updates and also has link to the ITD for further details	No.	Yes. To a great extent through Tax FAQs.	Yes. To a great extent under Help and Demo option and under Tax span.	Yes. To a great extent through Tax FAQs.
The site provides details of organisational activities	Yes.	Yes. Through the link About us. But not much details provided.	Yes. Under Company heading.	Yes. Through the link About us.	Yes. Through the link About us.
The site contains the agency's logo	Yes. On all the pages.	Yes. But not on all the pages	Yes. On all the pages.	Yes. On all the pages.	Yes. On all the pages.
There is an option of using another language	Yes. Apart from English, option to use Hindi is available	No. It is available only in English.	No. It is available only in English.	No. It is available only in English.	No. It is available only in English.
The relevant documents are available in more than one file format	Yes. Available as Excel Utility and Java Utility	NA	NA	NA	NA
The site provides the option for user registration	Yes. Most of the services requires registration of user.	Yes. Most of the services requires registration of user.	Yes. Most of the services requires registration of user.	Yes. Most of the services requires registration of user.	Yes. Most of the services requires registration of user.
The site has in-site search engine	Yes. Comes in the top right corner on all the pages.	No.	No.	Yes. Comes in the top right corner on all the pages.	Yes. Comes in the top right corner on all the pages.
The site has training videos and materials to help the users	Yes. Has a detailed YouTube video and a step by step instruction	No videos. Step-by-step slide show to explain the process	Yes. Help video provided along with step by step instruction.	Not as a video. But as screen shots to show the steps.	No video. Just a process flow to help users.
The last update time is available on the site	Yes. The last update date was July 3, 2014*	No	No	No	No

* Last accessed on July 4, 2014

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Websites on Content and Information

C. Responsiveness:

Using four performance metrics to measure responsiveness, Taxspanner.com comes out be most responsive with the facilities of providing feedback, FAQs for quick and easy reference, providing mobile and e-mail alerts to registered

users and presence on all major social networking sites. IT department does not have presence on any of the social networking sites. Details of comparison of the portals are given in Table 3.

Performance Metrics/ e-filing website	incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in	cleartax.in	taxsmile.com	taxspanner.com	myITreturn.com
There is an option to provide feedback	Yes. Link provided on top right corner as Feedback	No	No	Yes. Link provided at bottom as Feedback	Yes. Comes on the right side in each page.
List of FAQs are available for quick and easy reference	Yes. Provided under Help option on top right corner	Yes. Provided at the bottom right corner.	Yes. Provided under Help option	Yes. Comes under Help and Demo	Yes. Provided under FAQ option
Option of getting alerts	No	No	No	Yes. Can get registered for Mobile and e-mail alerts.	No
Presence on social networking sites	No	Yes. Facebook, Twitter and Google+	Yes. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Taxsmile Blog, Pinterest and Google+	Yes. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Slideshare	Yes. Own forums, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Websites on Responsiveness

D. Design:

In terms of design, once again the portal of IT department seems to meet almost all the criteria. It has a neat home page which is clear and understandable. The layout is quite consistent across pages of all the five portals except for cleartax.in satisfactory information is available in all of them and every window opens with a title. None of them

have unnecessary objects and links in pages except Taxsmile.com which has links for commercial purposes. Details are presented in Table 4 given below. Regarding the background colour, font size of text, most of the sites need to work on them to improve the readability. This aspect is much better in the website of IT department and Taxsmile.com.

Performance Metrics/ e-filing website	incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in	cleartax.in	taxsmile.com	taxspanner.com	myITreturn.com
Home page is neat clear and understandable	Yes	No. Not very clear	Yes	Yes	Yes
There are moving texts that user cannot stop	Yes. Partly	No moving texts on the site	No moving texts on the site	No moving texts on the site	No. Is in the control of the users.
There are no unnecessary objects and links in pages	No unnecessary links.	No unnecessary links.	Yes. There are many commercial links.	No unnecessary links.	No unnecessary links.
Layout (menu header, logo, etc.) are consistent across pages	Yes. Quite consistent all across	No. Not consistent	Yes. Quite consistent all across	Yes. Quite consistent all across	Yes. Quite consistent all across
Every window has a title	Yes	Yes	Yes.	Yes	Yes
There are satisfactory information to fill in forms, if any	Yes. Adequate information and guidance provided	Yes. To a great extent	Yes. To a great extent.	Yes. To a great extent	Yes. To a great extent.
Texts have appropriate font size and type for easy readability	Yes. Option to increase decrease font also provided.	Not too good	Yes. It is okay.	Yes. It is okay.	Yes. It is okay.
The background of the texts contain colour and format that prohibits easy readability	No. Has good light background and has text with dark background to highlight important aspects.	The font colours at places are quite light making it difficult to read.	No. Has good light background and has text with dark background to highlight important aspects.	To a great extent it is fine. Except the text for Chat option is not quite visible because of dark background	No. Has good light background and has text with dark background to highlight important aspects.
Name of the webpage is clear and easy-to-remember	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Expressions are neat	Yes	Not really.	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Websites on Design

VI. CONCLUSION

In spite of being most eco-friendly consumers in the world as per a survey conducted by the National Geographic Society, large Indian masses still prefer the physical route to file their income tax returns as against filing electronically. Apart from other reasons for the slow uptake of this system, the belief that e-filing is not safe, it is not easy to use and there is no help and support around the system are some of the myths which needs to be dispelled. Service providers need to make best use of technology to make the systems more user-friendly and easy to navigate. Myths around the e-filing system need to be removed by making use of the

social networking sites. Having demonstration videos and other reference materials to educate the tax payers can be very beneficial. The layout and design of the webpages are also very critical and need to be worked on to improve the experience of tax payers in using the e-filing system.

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