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Working from home: is technology a help or a hindrance in achieving work/life harmonisation?

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Introduction

“It is widely believed that technological innovations in microelectronics and telecommunication “could shift literally millions of jobs out of the factories and offices into which the Second Wave (Industrial Revolution) swept them and right back to where they came from originally: the home.” (Toffler, 1981, p. 204) cited by Shamir and Salomon (1985). This change is impacting on work organisations, employees, systems of transportation, energy consumption, air pollution and the labour market (Shamir and Salomon, 1985). Information technology constitutes a necessary element in the office environment and there has been a decline in the physical significance of the workplace (Nakrosiene et al., 2019).

Work and family could be said to be two of the most significant elements of human life (Toyin et al., 2016). Indeed, work/family balance is one of the most challenging issues facing families in the twenty first century (Walker et al., 2008). Friedman (2014, p. 12) highlights that to be effective one needs “to know what matters”. He recommends an exercise called “Four Circles” representing the four domains “work, home, community and self”. This helps reflect on the “values, goals, interests, actions and results” cultivated in each area and whether the latter are compatible or opposed to each other. When people engage in flexible working the relationship between work and home needs to be redefined and changes are made (Tietze and Musson (2003, 2005). In relation to the gendered division of labour Sullivan and Lewis (2001, p. 123) showed that divisions can be emphasized more as “teleworking can simultaneously enhance work/life balance while perpetuating traditional work and family roles”.

Referring to leaders, Groysberg and Abrahams (2014, p. 60) state that “ They’ve discovered through hard experience that prospering in the senior ranks is a matter of carefully combining work and home so as not to lose themselves, their loved ones, or their foothold of success. Zamagni (2018, p.134) refers to work/life harmony and points to the need to “provoke a radical rethinking of the organization of work in the modern day firm”.

Different perspectives on teleworking

Bloom (2014, p 28-29) claims that critics assert that employees who are not office-based are actually not working. IBM and Yahoo among others have both reversed their work from home policy (Useem, 2017, p. 27). Where collaboration is needed, “communications technology offering the fastest, cheapest, and highest bandwidth connection is still the office” (Useem, 2017, p27. If it is personal productivity that is required or jobs necessitating dealing with customers, or no interaction at all then it’s better to let people work remotely (Useem, 2017). Otani (2015) argues for flexibility and cites Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, as making the important distinction between seeming productive and being productive.

Timsal and Mustabsat (2016) in their abstract pose the question "why a perk or benefit is now being considered as an ethical issue". Establishments which support work from home claim that this latter opportunity results in greater productivity. In a study conducted by Tunyaplin et al (1998, p 183) the participants were asked if, given the opportunity, how they would divide their time between a home office and a remote job site i.e. how many days per week would they work from home? Over 75% of respondents regardless of where they currently work, suggested they would spend only two or three days per week in the home office.

Working from home and identity

According to the literature on working from home the results indicate that the success or failure of working from home is very closely linked to homeworkers’ identity. (Tietze and Musson, 2010). Working from home involves the challenge of dealing with different identities i.e. being at home and at work (Tietze and Musson, 2005). Tietze and Musson (2010, p. 154) argue that “ the shift of paid work into the home requires changes not only in conduct and behavior, but in the assumptions and values which underpin them i.e. it requires identity work to be done. Thus, from an organizational perspective the introduction of telework schemes should be viewed not purely as a technical rational project, but also as an emotive value-based enterprise which triggers “identity work” and which therefore can potentially realign the individual’s commitment to the work organization”. An understanding of the different identities employees engage in is necessary to understand the relationship between home and work and the meanings people give to home, work

and self. A restructuring of space is called for in the home where work and other activities involves some reorganizing of family relationships. (Richardson and McKenna, 2013).

The home has different actors and entails juggling roles and responsibilities. Technology has two sides. On the one hand there is the “always on” work culture being connected 24/7 where working from home augments work done for the employer. However, technology can enhance work/life harmony if appropriate boundaries are set. The purpose of this paper is to address the following question: Working from home: Is technology a help or a hindrance in achieving work/life harmony?

Literature review

Definition of Teleworking

“Telework occurs when Information Communication Technologies (ICT) enables work to be accomplished at a geographical distance from the location where the work results are needed, or would have been traditionally carried out in the past. Typically, telework takes place in the home” (Hynes, 2014 p281).

According to the Telecommuting Statistics for 2017, Global Workplace Analytics Research found that there are optimistic signs for teleworking with half of the US workforce holding a job that is compatible with at least partial telework and approximately one quarter of the workforce teleworks at some frequency. A further 80-90% of the US workforce say that they would like to telework at least part-time. 2-3 days weekly seems to be the optimum time that allows for a balance of concentrative work (at home) and collaborative work (in the office). Consequently, Fortune 1000 companies around the world are revamping their space around the fact that employees are already mobile. Repeated studies indicate that they are not at their desk 50-60% of the time.

<http://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statist>

Teleworking in Great Britain

The Office for National Statistics (2014) found that in the UK there were 4.2 million people working from home in the first quarter of 2014, which is 13.9% of the total workforce. Of those working from home, approximately 1.5 million (or 5% of the workforce) work within the home or

its grounds, while the balance of 2.7 million persons (8.9% of the workforce) utilized their home as a base, but worked in various locations.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105210705/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/characteristics-of-home-workers/2014/sty-home-workers.html>

Later in 2016, The Office for National Statistics found that more than half of British workers are satisfied with the balance of work and leisure time, while more than a quarter are dissatisfied. Some employers reported that 97% of employees find work/life balance challenging.

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2016/jan/02/work-life-balance-flexible-working-can-make-you-ill-experts-say>

Role of public policy and professional care work

Marcos and Bertolaso (2018, p.50..53) state that “Caring by being, not by doing, is the core feature of the domestic environment”. The home is a space for “caring for the human being”. In society providing care services is a significant element of social protection which aims to provide better quality of life together with educational and employment possibilities for EU citizens. The latter encompasses healthcare, childcare and long-term care. This is a significant question as more women are in paid employment while at the same time they are assuming responsibility for care in the family as well as household tasks. In December 2015 the European Parliament a Report on Creating Labour Market Conditions Favourable to Work Life Balance and a Resolution adopted on a European Pillar of Social Rights. These combined legislative and non-legislative measures aims to increase women’s participation in the work-force and address gender pay gaps and pension gaps. Also to give employees more opportunities to balance work and family, especially in the case of men. In addition the policy seeks to support member states with work family policies and to eliminate disincentives to work for second earners. In the EU it is mandatory to provide maternity and paternity leave. Ireland recently introduced ten days paternity leave when a child is born.

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/topic/care>

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1494930128433&uri=CELEX:52017DC0252>

According to Adema *et al.*, (2016, p.29) the United States provides basic support for children, fathers, and mothers in the form of unpaid parental leave, child-related tax breaks, and limited public child care. In contrast, the other member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) empower families through paid parental leave and comprehensive investments in infants and children.

Care and dependency

Davis and Lastra (2018, p.144, 156) state that “care and dignity in old age are fundamental challenges for the future of our society”. Pensions are not only important from the perspective of financial sustainability but especially “for ensuring that the care and dignity of the elderly is maintained within the context of the home”. According to Ulmanen and Szebehely (2015) family care has increased in all social strata with help being given by both daughters and sons. Family care was found to be more prevalent among older people with a lower level of education whereas privately purchased services were more a feature of those with higher education.

Marketization of care work

Du Roit and Van Bochove (2017, pp. 76,77) claim long-term care (LTC) in European countries has undergone two forms of marketization in the recent past. First, policies have explicitly fostered the outsourcing of professional services to private providers and the creation of (quasi) markets for social services. Second, often supported by cash-for-care benefits, people in need of care, and their families have started purchasing LTC directly from individual workers. In both forms of marketization migrant care work plays a critical role.

According to Anderson and Hughes (2010, p.381) women’s experience of care work is conditioned by their employment status, for example self-employed versus employee and the nature of care provided (direct or indirect). In their study they conducted interviews among a group of Canadian women engaged in providing direct care, for example childcare and indirect care (for example cleaning). It was found that the latter experienced great physical and emotional demand in their work. In comparison with childcare providers, cleaners reported more satisfaction with their

income and financial responsibility. Also the authors highlight the issue of independent contractors in care work and efforts to improve the economic security and status of care work.

Kittay (2011) referring to the most significant theories of justice states personal dignity is closely related to independence. Human beings undergo periods of dependency in their lives. Rather than perceive assistance as a limitation, Kittay (2011) asks that the aforementioned be regarded as a resource at the basis of a vision of society that is able to account for inevitable dependency relationships between “unequals”. The latter guarantees a fulfilled life for both the carer and the cared for. Also Kittay (1999) researches the importance of dependency, work and care. She engages in a study of John Rawl’s liberal theory and examples of public policy in the US. The author seeks to show that both theory and policy fail women when they miss the critical relationship between dependence and issues of justice. Kittay (1999) underlines that for a truly inclusive feminism it is necessary to take human dependency and its consequences into account.

Teleworking and theoretical framework

According to Nakrosiene *et al.* (2019, p.88), citing Bailey and Kurland (2002, p. 394), there is a complete dearth of organizational theories in telework research which has been emphasized as the main obstacle to “identifying and explaining what happens when people telework”. In order to theoretically categorize factors related to telework as potential job resources or demands affecting telework outcomes, similar to Nakrosiene *et al.*, (2019, p.88-92), the author used the job demands-resource theory (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). The model consists of job demands namely physical workload, time pressure, recipient contact, physical environment, shift work and job resources consisting of feedback, rewards, job control, participation, job security and supervisor support (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001, p. 502). Higher job demands have an adverse effect on health and increasing resources lead to higher levels of performance (Parker *et al.*, 2017).

Job demands

Physical workload

Technology has had a significant impact on work, making work from home and other locations possible (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Work has turned into an “unbounded activity” to be carried out “anytime and anywhere” (Kurland and Bailyn, 1999). According to Toffler (1980, pp 204-17), the present forms of flexibility have the capacity to convert the pre-industrial cottage into a post-

industrial electronic cottage, where people can achieve a balance between work and home. “The supposed reason for introducing technology to the workplace is to shorten the time to do certain tasks and free up the worker’s time for other projects. But that hasn’t really happened. Technology has just changed the way we work. Modern work is much more frenzied, with a constant flood of information and endless interruptions from phone calls, email and text (Killeen, 2018, p. 8, 9). It is often challenging for employees to achieve a work/home balance (Kreiner et al, 2009; Mayo et al., 2011). Health issues and family difficulties can result from conflict between work and home (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2011). For employers the consequences of work-home demands can manifest itself in higher levels of employee turnover, absenteeism and less productivity (Allard et al, 2011, Ford et al., 2007).

Ojala et al, (2014) highlight that while home working can be portrayed as a great advantage for work/home balance, there is contradictory research about whether working from home strengthens or weakens work/family harmony. When work and home activities take place in the same physical space, physical, temporal and psychological boundaries between work and home can become blurred. There is some research which indicates that teleworkers work longer hours (Harker and MacDonnell, 2012).

Time pressure

The advent of technology with its potential to turn the pre-industrial cottage into a post-industrial electronic cottage cradles a new system of production where individual agents are enabled to achieve a precious balance between the demands of work and home (Toffler, 1980,pp. 204-217). Domestic relationships are affected and work values such as control are introduced into the home (Brocklehurst, 2001; Hochschild, 1997).

Recipient contact

According to Nytimescion (2013) and Bayt com (2015) the following are disadvantages of working from home:

- The difficulty in separating work from home
- The difficulty in separating home from work
- Self-imposed pressure of working endlessly and

- The feeling of being alienated from a company's major decisions and sometimes promotions.

In addition to work infringing on the physical space of home, work also impacts on the emotional and psychological space of home (Baines and Gelder, 2003). There are mixed results regarding the benefits of teleworking. According to Hartig et al, (2007) remote e-workers may experience an overlap between work and home which consequently lessens the restorative benefits of home.

Conversely the negative effects include

- work intensification with access to technology 24/7 leading to long hours, with little respite from work.
- Sitting behaviors many increase with the temptation to work for longer hours at the computer thus causing physical problems.

Physical environment

Tietze and Musson (2010) warn of values of industrial production invading one's personal life. In their study involving three case studies, all of the protagonists had to find practical solutions to working from home such as the setting up of routines and tasks for carrying out home tasks as well as work tasks. In the case of Tom (case study) his identities were challenged both as a father and a manager. In Deirdre's case, her identity becomes more forged in the domestic environment, where she develops new routines and the professional practices which had been her main priority now have become less important. While Deirdre does not leave aside her identity from the world of work, she "discovers" new aspects of "who she is" or "who she might become". In her case we see changing identities where the domestic element of Deirdre's sense of self come to the fore (Tietze and Musson, 2010, p153). Carrying out paid work from home offers not just the possibility of work/home balance but there are questions of identity "which are central to understanding the mutually, constitutive relationship between domestic and professional spheres of life" (Tietze and Musson, 2010, p154).

Job resources

Space is perceived as fluid and in it actors carry out a performance by means of life's experiences and the significance they give these experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Richardson and McKenna (2013, p. 734) argue work and home have never been entirely separate spaces. The aforementioned authors perceive space as a “constructed rather than a fixed entity” in particular referring to “the processes of social action and interaction undertaken in relation to the connection between a space designated as *home* and a space identified as *work* (Richardson and McKenna, 2013, p726). Flexible workers constantly engage in the reorganisation of spaces of work and home “to meet their practical, psychological and structural needs”... “What was previously done at work is now done in the home: what was done outside the workplace (socializing) is now a main reason for going there”. Associations are reconstituted by actors trying “to keep ties in place” through ways of ordering time priorities etc. Flexible workers change their spaces and lives responding to “demands that surround them” (Goffman, 1971, p. 116).

Rewards

Some of the benefits for employees are:

- A flexible environment in which you get to decide your own working hours (in agreement with your employer)
- Fewer distractions and stress
- Proximity to home and family members
- Reduced travelling time
- Better health and better work/life balance and
- Greater productivity and creativity (Timsal and Mustabsat, 2016).

Furthermore, Kossek et al (2006) in a study of teleworking professionals found that greater autonomy through teleworking led to less frequent occurrence of depression in women. Kossek et al (2006) were of the view that teleworking may provide women with more flexibility to manage their work, resulting in greater levels of well-being as a consequence of being present in both work and family lives.

Richardson and McKenna (2013, p. 732) found that working from home created “emotional distance” from colleagues. Those who engaged in flexible working gave more care to creating and maintaining relationships than when they worked in the office. Engaging in “high quality” social relations with colleagues was a priority for all working flexibly. People wanted to stay visible, in order to achieve career goals and performance goals.

Teleworking helps to recruit and retain talented workers by providing people with the ability to reduce commuting time and fit other activities around their work tasks, thus contributing to a diverse workforce (Beauregard et al, 2013). According to Grant et al (2013, p532) the positive aspects of remote working can be summarized as

- increased productivity
- the ability to work flexibly and from different locations, within the temporal restrictions of office-based hours, and in some cases,
- reduced stress levels and greater well-being.

Working from home requires personal control over working hours, the organization of the home space, as well as, negotiations among family members over the distribution of time and space (Felstead et al, 2005).

Research shows that employers who have introduced flexible work have

- environmental benefits
- improvements in employee morale
- increased productivity
- lower employee turnover and
- lower absenteeism (Thomson, 2008, Lapierre et al, 2008, Poelmans et al., 2005).

Wheatley (2012) found that, in the case of women, remote working can result in saved time but this time is not always spent on leisure activities but on housework or paid work.

Job control

The challenge is the traditional management mindset which is control focused, believing employees have to be in view for productivity reasons. The office setting offers opportunities for collaboration which is important for effectiveness. It is claimed that working from home reduces work output and quality of work. Google, Yahoo and Hewlett Packard try to reduce work from home (Pathak et al, 2015, p12).

A full 76% of respondents to a recent FlexJobs survey said that when people need to get important work done, they avoid the office. A home office was a more popular choice than a coffee shop, library or conventional office outside of normal work hours. Some 75% of employees claim that they are more productive at home due to fewer interruptions from colleagues and less distractions. A majority of employees prefer to work from home as a result of freedom from office politics and reduced stress from commuting (Grevstad, 2016).

A study conducted by Lourenco and Lourenco (2016) demonstrated that women working in a cooperative exercised self-management in relation to flexible working hours. The women were allowed to organize their workday with full control over their working time, although they still followed the terms of their collective contract (Lourenco and Lourenco, 2016 p. 580).

Teleworking challenges boundary management because the usual physical and time-based boundaries of the office space are absent. A study of a large public sector organization in the UK shows how their long-standing teleworking programme results in above average productivity for teleworkers compared to their office counterparts. Forty in-depth interviews were carried out with occasional teleworkers, partial teleworkers (20-50 per cent of teleworkers) and full teleworkers who work the majority of the time away from the office. The interviews yielded evidence that teleworkers employ physical, time-based, behavioral and communicative strategies for managing boundaries between work and home. In relation to physical activities, it was found some employees had an office space in their home while others create separate space for work activities and for relaxation. In relation to time-based activities, although most people worked beyond contracted time, many had strategies in place e.g. to walk the dogs at 5pm, children returning from school. Commitments to other people appears to produce stronger boundaries than being accountable only to oneself. The behavioral strategies employed relate mainly to information technology such as switching the phone off when business time finishes, logging off computer systems, shutting down the laptop, thus removing the temptation to check messages.

Communicative strategies included getting family members to knock before entering the work space. According to Kreiner (2006) boundary management is a question of individual preferences, but the ability to manage preference can result in reduced work/life conflict and stress as well as higher job satisfaction. Research shows that the danger lies in work spilling over into home time.

Kreiner et al (2009) propose four divisions to manage boundaries between work and home namely: physical, behavioral, home-based and communicative tactics. Behavioral tactics are social practices that are used to decrease work/home conflicts (Kreiner et al, 2009). In a study conducted by Von Borell de Araujo et al (2015, pp. 570-576) applying the boundary tactics of Kreiner et al (2009). Three types of behavioral tactics were found i.e. using other people who filter undesired demands from work and home, using technology such as use of two cell phones and setting priorities in advance e.g. involving others in which items to filter and which to allow pass the boundary.

Temporal tactics involve managing work home time and some mothers were found to change routines and block off time to attend to work or family issues, finding respite such as taking a break and synchronizing tasks.

Physical tactics include manipulating physical boundaries e.g. turning off cell phone, manipulating physical distance between domains e.g. some mothers chose to live close to work while others chose to live far away and managing physical objects e.g. choosing not to do anything related to work after 5pm.

Communicative tactics involve setting expectations e.g. not working late, renegotiating expectations e.g. when an unexpected problem arises and confronting violations e.g. if the boss calls on Sunday (Von Borell de Araujo et al, 2015, pp 570-576).

Gorham (2006) calls for women to exercise management skills in the home such as delegation of responsibilities, efficient use of time and resources and coordination of activities. According to Mellner et al (2016, abstract) employees now have more work flexibility and are more adept at organizing their work in time and space i.e. boundaryless work. The authors highlight the need to manage effectively the boundaries between work and personal life, so as to renew one's energies and get adequate sleep. In a study carried out among Swedish professional workers (N=3,846) the

results showed that working boundlessly in time i.e. spread out over the whole day and week, was directly linked to long weekly work hours and lack of psychological detachment. In contrast, working boundlessly in space i.e. at various locations was inversely associated with weekly work hours and had no association with psychological detachment.

Participation

Richardson and McKenna (2013) found that flexible workers developed customized rules to enable interactions with work colleagues and members of family which, in the majority of cases, led to better results. Even though teleworkers can generally develop strategies that align boundaries to their preferences for segmentation or integration, employees with greater job autonomy and control are better able to do so (Basile and Beauregard, 2016). The limitation to the study conducted by the aforementioned authors, is that it lacks generalizability to teleworkers in organizations with “always on ” cultures who may experience greater pressure to allow work to permeate the home boundary (Basile and Beauregard, 2016). Hayman (2010) in a study of 336 employees found that flextime was more helpful in decreasing role overload and work/life balance issues than teleworking.

Job security

Castellano (2015) referred to a survey by Dell and Intel which showed that 52% of people think that employees working from home are just as, or more, productive than those in the office. However, some people are of the opinion that a disadvantage of remote working is that it results in less promotion opportunities for employees. According to the aforementioned survey, nearly a quarter of employees think remote work limits their career growth.

Supervisor support

Women are often being told that they must choose between the domains of work and family (Bailyn and Fletcher, 2003) and they can be under pressure to manage the demands of work and family without any help (Lourenco and Lourenco, 2016). Self-employment or business ownership has been proposed as a way for women to balance family and work responsibilities (Daniel, 2004,

Walker and Webster, 2006). Strategies to be used by HR to regulate the interaction between work and home include:

- Building autonomy into teleworkers jobs, along with
- Greater control over their work schedules,
- Empowering employees to create or maintain boundaries that fit their personal preferences for integration or segmentation of work and home activities.

A "good fit" will help organizations benefit from increased productivity increase and staff retention (Harker and MacDonnell, 2012).

Implications for society

There is a need for employer guidelines for working virtually as well as infrastructure to support virtual work. Technology has many benefits if used appropriately but the caveat is that it can lead to working 24/7. Before embarking on telework practices it is necessary to “fully understand the environmental and social consequences and impacts of working from home for individuals, organizations and the environment.....It is only then that a true assessment of the practical benefits of the practice of working from home can be made and we can decide if indeed it is a goal worth pursuing” (Hynes, 2014, p596). Remote working and more flexible technology may have helped to improve job effectiveness, flexibility and to some extent well-being, however, the more negative issues also need to be explored in more detail (Grant et al., 2013, p.532).

Implications for policy

The digital revolution is creating new working models. There are increased opportunities for working from home as well as from any location thus enhancing flexible work and work home harmony. Zamagni (2018,p. 135) has highlighted how many work/life harmonization policies are aiming to help women adopt to the working cycle and to increase family income as well as women’s participation in the labour market. However he draws attention to the fact that if the

latter policies are “pursued to the detriment of intra-family and inter-family relations, then the net, long-term result will inevitably be a negative one”. In Europe there are variations in uptake of teleworking but there is a lack of clarity as to why this is so. There is a need for substantial, in-depth empirical research in this particular area, to identify the key indicators and conditions that permit the practice to flourish or fail (Hynes, 2014, p596). A greater insight into the latter will assist policy makers going forward. HR needs to be aligned to the company’s overall strategy. For companies seeking radical innovation requiring a lot of collaboration, it may be beneficial to be office-based. However, for most companies pursuing incremental innovation, working from home contributes to keeping real estate and operational costs low. Furthermore, offering employees flexibility increases motivation and reduces turnover, thus increasing profitability (Pathak et al, 2015, p12,). The aforementioned authors recommend that HR managers need to contribute at two levels:

1. At the level of setting a clear, coherent and logical work-from-home policy that is aligned with the company’s strategy; and
2. In ensuring that operational decisions are without favoritism and prejudice and align to the best interests of the employees and the company (Pathak et al, 2015, p14). HR has an important role to play to ensure teleworking is a good experience for employees and staff need to be prepared to work in the home environment (Basile and Beauregard, 2016).

Implications for practice

In terms of working from home, it is important to consider the nature of the work involved. Some activities call for more collaboration, where the office offers a beneficial environment for this, while many other tasks can be done from home. Home is needed to recover ones energies and to renew oneself, thus contributing to health and well-being. Managing one’s home life effectively is linked to effectiveness and job satisfaction in one’s work role. The home plays a very crucial role in society from the perspective of a healthy home life being essential for a healthy work-life and a healthy society. Millennials make up the largest part of the US workforce and they aspire to more flexible work and better work/life harmony than previous generations. Isolation can be a challenge

for those working from home. Argandona (2018, p.11) states that the concept of the home focuses on three internal elements: the person, the inner community or family, and shared living space with an intention of continuity. But there is also a fourth external element which cannot be excluded: the external social and material environment. These elements work together; the person is at the center but the unifying concept is the home. It is important to find meaning in work and to replenish resources through physical, spiritual, social and community renewal.

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