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Collaboration in the workplace: Enabling innovation and increasing productivity

1. Introduction

Sharing information and expertise can be critical in driving both individual and organisational success, particularly in today's competitive environment. Working collaboratively is now a norm in many businesses and smart businesses are always looking for ways to connect communities of employees, partners, customers and others to create a world of new innovators.

2. What is collaboration?

Collaboration comprises "a process through which a group of people constructively explore their ideas to search for a solution that extends one's own limited vision". As businesses move at an increasing rate today, working in isolation puts companies at a disadvantage. Hence, visual meetings, which engage everyone in the room, are important. Collaboration leads to the innovative solutions and results that businesses need to succeed.

Collaboration today also goes beyond groups of people working together as teams and communities. Collaboration generates new ideas and new solutions that emerge from the interplay of these perspectives, experience and knowledge that help to get the work done, with the contributions from people both inside and outside an organisation.

3. Benefits of collaboration

People tend to innovate faster in a collaborative workplace and collaboration helps to keep up with the fast, global pace. Building a team of individuals with diverse strengths allows them to accomplish a variety of complex tasks. A competent team can accomplish much more than what any one person can accomplish alone – helping them keep up to a fast marketplace.

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Working in a team utilises many strengths and working in collaboration taps into abilities that go beyond job descriptions. The cooperation supports both team and individual goals. An added benefit to a teamwork culture is that staff members also develop cross-functional skills, such as critical thinking and negotiation.

Collaboration also uses resources to their fullest and improves employee retention. Successful team players create even greater success for the organisation. Successful teams naturally develop employee retention, as team work builds communication and an idea culture that helps retain valuable employees. As a team works together over time, the individuals in the team become more adept in that environment and the likelihood that they value their team increases with each success.

Here are some of the other benefits of workplace collaboration:

- The collaborative process combines different perspectives.

When individuals from various professional and technical backgrounds come together to work on a project, the result is that all angles are considered. This is a particularly attractive outcome, especially in situations where the project is expected to command a huge budget, because it eliminates the possibility of errors arising out failures and considers the effect of contributing elements.

- Workplace collaboration encourages creativity.

Bringing together several different voices from within an organisation helps to raise the profile of ideas that may never have come to the forefront if not for the collaborative effort. Teams that are well-structured consist of staff members from various levels of the company and these individuals naturally bring with them their outlook on the project. Creative solutions are often the result of simply looking at challenges from a different angle.

- Collaboration takes advantage of synergies.

The formation of collaborative teams often involves the separation of duties. Within the structure of the team, certain members may be asked to focus on particular elements and put forth a recommendation based on their expertise. This kind of separation of responsibilities helps to bring the benefit of synergy to the project because areas of overlap are more easily identified and the incidences of re-doing work can be eliminated.

- Workplace collaboration brings balance to decision making.

The influence of several different stakeholders that may comprise the overall team helps to ensure that the decisions made are ones that consider the effect of all the interested parties. This means that workplace collaboration can root out the occurrence of biased or partisan decisions because each stakeholder has a presence around the table.

- Collaboration may improve delivery times.

If the stakeholders are able to recognise their synergies and leverage the experience of all the parties represented, a project that is a collaborative effort has the potential to be completed on or even before schedule.

4. Types of collaboration

While older models of collaboration tended to focus on teams and formal, structured collaboration, more options are now available.

(i) Team collaboration

In team collaboration, the members of the group are known, there are clear task interdependencies, expected reciprocity, and explicit time-lines and goals. To achieve the goal, members must fulfil their interdependent tasks within the stated time. Team collaboration often

suggests that, while there is explicit leadership, the participants cooperate on an equal footing and will receive equal recognition.

An example is a six-member team working together to develop a new marketing strategy in a month, with a defined set of resources. Team collaborations can also occur with external partners, but there is always a clear mandate and defined roles.

(ii) Community collaboration

In community collaboration, there is a shared domain or area of interest, but the goal is more often focused on learning rather than on task. People share and build knowledge rather than complete projects. Members may go to their communities to help solve their problems by asking questions and getting advice, then taking that advice back home to implement in their teams. Membership may be bounded and explicit, but time periods are often open or ongoing. Membership is often on equal footing, but more experienced practitioners may have more status or power in the community. Reciprocity is within the group, but not always one to one.

An example might be a community of practice that is interested in the type of marketing mentioned in the team example above. A member of that team may come to her community and ask for examples of past projects.

Community collaborations may also give rise to more formalised team collaborations. As people get to know each other, they can identify good fits for team members and draw new talent into their teams.

(iii) Network collaboration

Network collaboration steps beyond the relationship-centric nature of team and community collaboration. It is collaboration that starts with individual action and self-interest, which then accrues to the network as individuals contribute or seek something from the network. Membership and time-lines are open and unbounded. There

are no explicit roles. Members most likely do not know all the other members. Power is distributed. This form of collaboration is driven by the advent of social media, ubiquitous Internet connectivity and the ability to connect with diverse individuals across distance and time. It is a response to the overwhelming volume of information we are creating. It is impossible for an individual to cope on their own. Hence, networks become mechanisms for knowledge and information capture, filtering and creation.

An example of network collaboration might be members of the team in the first example above bookmarking websites as they find them, using a shared or 'social bookmarking' tool. This benefits their team, and possibly their related communities of practice if they are also sharing bookmarks. But it also benefits the wider network of people interested in the topic. At the same time, team members may find other bookmarks left by network members relevant to their team work. This sort of network activity benefits the individual and a network of people reciprocally over time. The reciprocity connection is remote and undefined. You act in self-interest but provide a network-wide benefit.

5. Building a collaborative and innovative workplace

Many businesses want to innovate, however, not all understand the importance of collaboration to making innovation possible. Collaboration yields results through fostering innovation. Businesses need to understand that people can make themselves valuable by seeking opportunities to work with others and tapping into the expertise that others possess.

Here are the three components necessary in building a collaborative workplace:

(i) Co-worker collaboration within the workplace

Creating a workplace that fosters collaboration requires effective staffing initiatives, project assignments, and adaptable work environment. Building space is re-configured so that it is inductive for sharing information. Leadership

creates assignments that allow staff to construct innovative solutions through cooperative teams.

Collaborative work environments foster innovation. Employees who share knowledge with co-workers feel more inspired to come up with new and better ways of doing things. The energy level can increase with a greater number of people interacting in open work-spaces. Knowledge can be shared naturally through the flow of the day.

In building a business that thrives in this current economy, knowledge is more likely to be shared horizontally across departments through staff interactions which encourage the breaking down of barriers and silos.

A collaborative workplace enables workers to have a choice of where they work by providing a range of settings to support multiple team configurations. No longer bound by “assigned seating,” workers can switch where they work depending on the assignment and with whom they need to engage. This approach can build stronger networks among people, projects and ideas. The open settings allow people to work and make themselves accessible to others.

(ii) Strategic alliances between business organisations

Strategic alliances provide another type of workplace collaboration. Many businesses find that they have a specific area of expertise that could be enhanced by partnering with another organisation with a different set of expertise. Both parties need to identify areas of growth potential that will be served through this alliance. Together this alliance can better serve the client without either business needing to spend amounts of time broadening its set of capabilities.

However, strategic alliances need to be carefully designed for long-term success. A clear definition of expectations needs to be articulated from the start. What metrics will be tracked, measured, and reported to both companies to understand if the alliance is successful? Prepare a brief executive summary to review regularly the

progress and adjust the alliance as needed. Ensure the two entities easily fit together to better serve the customer. There needs to be obvious synergies between the two parties to sustain a successful working relationship.

(iii) Customer and business collaboration

When buying new products and services, customers do their homework. They research through the Internet and by word of mouth. A collaborative workplace includes the flow of information from the customer to the staff to provide vital information about consumer opinions and concerns. Customer collaboration with businesses is most beneficial when the feedback offered can inform future business development.

How an organisation uses customer feedback can determine the future health of the organisation and benefit its products and services. Examples of commonly used customer collaboration methods include social media, network based recordings and analytics, video feedback and web-based collaborations through Customer Relationship Management (CRM). The anecdotal information gained from listening to customers allows for a partnership to develop between the business and the public.

6. Fostering the collaboration culture

The role of leadership

Leadership is key in establishing supportive collaboration cultures, particularly in teams and communities. This is based on how leaders mainly “embed their beliefs, values and assumptions in the fabric of their organisation”. There are six main behaviours that leaders display that mould the organisation’s culture.

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis – are they paying attention to collaborative strategies and behaviours from team, community and network perspectives?

- How leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises – are they sacrificing long-term goals for short-term fixes which sabotage collaboration? Does fear of connecting to the larger network keep them from tapping into it?
- How leaders allocate resources – are they investing in the collaboration capability? Is it attentive to all three types of collaboration?
- How leaders express their identity through deliberate role modelling, teaching, and coaching.
- How leaders allocate rewards and status – are the leaders rewarding individual or collaborative behaviours? Or both?
- How leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate – are collaborative talents sought and nurtured?

To create a culture that supports collaboration, leaders must understand, create conditions for, and model collaboration for teams, communities and networks. The best way to foster a value is by example.

Team culture

Team collaboration requires a culture that values and supports specific interdependencies between people. The organisation's teams need to have clarity around the following:

- Priorities – team success over or in alignment with individual performance
- Targets – delivering outcomes on time, to budget and to specification
- Learning – learning from within and across teams; honest, constructive feedback, knowledge sharing
- Explicit team processes – communications, working and work flow, identity-focused role clarity, decision making

Community culture

Much community collaboration is voluntary, thus the issues of status and reputation carry a different weight

than within teams and formal organisational structures. Communities can be challenged because they do not have the 'stick' of 'do this work or you will not get paid', and the status of organisational role may not be relevant. Hence, community leaders often lead from their own passion. They either gain the support of members, or they are rejected. Members engage and build their own reputation through contribution, which may later indirectly reflect back in their rise within the organisation. Some things to examine in the organisation's community collaboration culture include:

- Are there incentives or rewards for participation in communities or in addition to one's team roles? Are there disincentives?
- Do people have time to participate in communities or are they only 'on your own time'? If the latter, how do you convert that knowledge and participation back into the organisation's goals?
- Is there clarity about what information can be shared from teams to communities?
- Is the community there to support people who wish to enhance their craft, or is it merely an organisational initiative for sharing knowledge that people are instructed to attend?

Network culture

Networks are reliant on stimulation of various points or nodes rather than centralised leadership. A need is expressed and, somewhere, someone in the network who can respond to that need replies. Some factors to consider in supporting network collaboration in the organisation include:

- Network collaboration is reliant on the sending and noticing of signals around issues of shared interest. How do employees attend to this sending and receiving in ways that are useful to the organisation?
- With information overload, the ability to filter and scan the messages that fly across a network is critical, from both a tool and a skill perspective. Have those who are good at this in the organisation been identified? Are they given time and support to play this role?
- Identity and trust manifest differently in networks, where identity is more about what you know than

who you are, and trust is about consistent delivery and quality rather than a personal sense of trust and one-to-one reciprocity. In other words, you can trust someone without getting to know them. Are employees in the organisation aware of and using this distinction to best participate in relevant networks? Are they rewarded for participation that builds their network reputation?

- Networks can raise the profile of employees and so create a perceived or real threat of their being poached by other organisations. Are key employees being rewarded so they do not want to leave?
- Networks can make leaders feel as though they have nothing to lead. Individuals can easily bypass nodes in the network that they do not care to interact with, making one person a leader to some and irrelevant to others. Hence, leadership becomes distributed and embodied in the actions of each individual. How does the leadership culture work with this distributed leadership style in network culture?

7. Collaboration tools

New tools can help support all three types of collaboration. The key here is to identify what collaboration activities the organisation wants to support, and then match the tools to them. However, organisations must be careful to start simply and not go overboard.

Here are the basic technologies that might be useful for collaboration, but which will be doubly important for people who are geographically dispersed:

- Telephone and conference-call capability, including call recording, can support teams and communities to focus work and make decisions;
- E-mail and relevant email distribution lists are good for information dissemination, though be cautious about volume and make sure content is relevant to the recipient for any kind of collaboration;
- A place to share electronic documents;

- Ways to share ideas and create content together (e.g. shared document editing, blogs and wikis);
- People directory with photos of your collaborators at the team and community levels;
- Instant messaging to see when someone is available for a chat (presence) or to ask a quick question;
- Directory of relevant networks;
- Social bookmarking to share Internet treasures; and
- Tools to aggregate content from the 'outside world', such as RSS readers.

Many of the above features have been combined in commercial and open source collaboration software tools. They often also include features like group calendar, discussion threads, and photo and video sharing.

In terms of network collaboration, many people in organisations are unaware of how network collaboration tools work or understand their value. Hence, the starting point is to make these tools available and help people to use them. Start with social bookmarking and show early adopters some tools like '[Delicious](#)', which enables people to bookmark and tag web-pages. Unlike individual bookmarks or 'favourites', anyone can see everyone else's bookmarks.

Case Study

Pixar

Pixar has created “acclaimed animated feature and short films” for over 25 years. In the early 1990s, Pixar was known as “the leading technological pioneer in the field of computer animation”. Their years of research and development culminated in the release of Toy Story in 1995, the world’s first computer-animated feature film. They have since also released other films such as Finding Nemo, Cars and Ratatouille, which also have been blockbusters. Unlike most other studios, Pixar have never bought scripts or movie ideas from the outside. All of their stories, worlds, and characters were created internally by their community of artists. And in making these films, they have continued to push the technological boundaries of computer animation, securing dozens of patents in the process. In 2006, Pixar was acquired by Disney, a strategic alliance that expanded the creative potentials of Pixar to further heights. The success of the company has been termed as dramatic and inspirational for other firms in the creative industry segment. The much talked about Pixar culture provides an interesting insight into how an organisation can nurture the creative talents of its employees across different levels.

The success of Pixar and Disney is derived from culture – the shared attitudes, language and behaviour that consistently produce excellence in a given endeavour. Pixar and Disney provide a model for engaging and energising employees by making culture a competitive advantage.

The company encourages self-expression, collaboration and diversity of thought. For example:

- Office design that encourages community and conversations

Pixar’s office design builds community and contributes to developing informal ties and the flow of knowledge across the organisation. The cafeteria, meeting rooms, employee mailboxes and restrooms are centralised to make it more likely employees will interact with one another. They have even replaced an expensive, long rectangular conference room table made by a famous designer because it kept people on the ends of the table from contributing to the conversation.

- Open communications

During the making of “Toy Story,” production managers tried to force artists and technologists to communicate by following the chain of command. The artists and technologists rebelled and started acting disrespectful to production managers. It was so bad that production managers no longer wanted to work at Pixar.

Employees were later gathered and the company and made it clear that, going forward, decisions made needed to respect the chain of command, but “anyone should be able to talk to anyone else, at any level, at any time, without fear of reprimand ... people talking directly to one another then letting the manager find out later was more efficient than trying to make sure that everything happened in the ‘right’ order and through the ‘proper’ channels.”

- Constructive feedback mechanisms

Pixar’s “Braintrust” is where directors, writers and heads of story come together every few months to review a film’s progress. Following a screening of the film in progress and comments from the director, his or her peers provide feedback about what they liked and what needed to be improved. Candor is expected, as is a spirit of helping one another to make great films. The director is free to act on the feedback or ignore it. The sessions are described as being characterised by “frank talk, spirited debate, laughter and love.”



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<p>Module 2: Productivity Tools, Techniques & Management Systems (Duration: 3 days)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Excellence • Productivity Measurement & Analysis • Process management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cost of Quality ▪ Lean Six Sigma ▪ Process Mapping & Analysis • Integrated Management Systems 	<p>Module 2: Productivity Tools, Techniques & Management Systems (Duration: 3 days)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering Service Excellence • Productivity Measurement & Analysis • Process management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cost of Quality ▪ Lean Six Sigma ▪ Process Mapping & Analysis
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Dec-14		
Date	Module	Time
Monday, 24 November 2014	Module 1	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 25 November 2014	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Monday, 1 December 2014	Module 2	9-5 pm
Wednesday, 3 December 2014		9-5 pm
Monday, 8 December 2014	Module 3	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 9 December 2014		9-5 pm
Monday, 15 December 2014		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 16 December 2014	Module 4	9-5 pm

Jan-15		
Date	Module	Time
Monday, 22 December 2014	Module 1	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 23 December 2014	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Monday, 29 December 2014	Module 2	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 30 December 2014		9-5 pm
Monday, 5 January 2015	Module 3	9-5 pm
Wednesday, 7 January 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 13 January 2015		9-5 pm
Wednesday, 14 January 2015	Module 4	9-5 pm

Jan-15 (Mandarin)		
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Monday, 12 January 2015	Module 1	9-5 pm
Thursday, 15 January 2015	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Monday, 19 January 2015	Module 2	9-5 pm
Thursday, 22 January 2015		9-5 pm
Monday, 26 January 2015	Module 3	9-5 pm
Thursday, 29 January 2015		9-5 pm
Monday, 2 February 2015		9-5 pm
Thursday, 5 February 2015	Module 4	9-5 pm

Feb-15		
Date	Module	Time
Tuesday, 20 January 2015	Module 1	9-5 pm
Friday, 23 January 2015	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 27 January 2015	Module 2	9-5 pm
Friday, 30 January 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 3 February 2015	Module 3	9-5 pm
Friday, 6 February 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 10 February 2015		9-5 pm
Wednesday, 11 February 2015	Module 4	9-5 pm

Mar-15		
Date	Module	Time
Tuesday, 24 February 2015	Module 1	9-5 pm
Wednesday, 25 February 2015	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Monday, 2 March 2015	Module 2	9-5 pm
Wednesday, 4 March 2015		9-5 pm
Monday, 9 March 2015	Module 3	9-5 pm
Wednesday, 11 March 2015		9-5 pm
Monday, 16 March 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 17 March 2015	Module 4	9-5 pm

Apr-15		
Date	Module	Time
Tuesday, 24 March 2015	Module 1	9-5 pm
Thursday, 26 March 2015	Module 1 & 2	9-5 pm
Tuesday, 31 March 2015	Module 2	9-5 pm
Thursday, 2 April 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 7 April 2015	Module 3	9-5 pm
Thursday, 9 April 2015		9-5 pm
Tuesday, 14 April 2015		9-5 pm
Wednesday, 15 April 2015	Module 4	9-5 pm

Core Faculty Members

MR. LAM CHUN SEE

B. ENG IN INDUSTRIAL & SYSTEMS ENGINEERING (UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE)

Chun see manages his own consultancy practice, Hoshin Consulting and is also an associate consultant/trainer to the PSB Corporation and Singapore Productivity Association. Prior to running his own practice, he has had years of experience as an industrial engineer with Philips, and trainer and consultant with the then National Productivity Board, APG Consulting and Teian Consulting, He was conferred the Triple-A Award in 1989 for helping to transfer Japanese know-how, particularly in the area of 5S, into local programmes and packages. Throughout his years of consultancy experience, Chun See has assisted many businesses in analyzing their productivity and quality objectives and performance; primarily through the application of the PDCA technique and basic QC tools.

MR. LEE KOK SEONG

M.SC. IN CHEMICAL ENGINEERING (IMPERIAL COLLEGE, LONDON UNIVERSITY), B.SC. IN CHEMICAL ENGINEERING (NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY)

Kok Seong has accumulated vast experience in the areas of productivity training and management consultancy throughout his 30 years of experience with the Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board (SPRING). He has provided consultancy assistance and training for numerous organisations both within and outside of Singapore in the areas of Productivity Management, Operation and Production Management, total Quality Management, Total Productive Maintenance, Shopfloor Management, Occupational Safety Management, Industrial Engineering Applications and Supervisory Management. He has also been greatly involved in the pinnacle Singapore Quality Award (SQA) initiative since its inception in 1993. his track records include the assessments and site visits of award recipients like Micron Semiconductor (formerly Texas Instruments), Motorola, Baxter Healthcare, Philips Tuner Factory and Teck Wah Industrial Corporation Ltd. Mr. Lee is currently a certified SQA Senior Assessor, as well as a resource person for Basic and

Advanced Training Courses for Productivity Practitioners, a position he has taken on since 2007.

MR. LOW CHOO TUCK

M.SC. IN INDUSTRIAL ADMINISTRATION (UNIVERSITY OF ASTON, UK); B.SC. IN PHYSICS (NUS); DIP IN QUALITY CONTROL INSTRUCTORS (INTERNATIONAL QUALITY CENTRE, NETHERLANDS); CERTIFICATE IN PRODUCTIVITY DEVELOPMENT (JAPAN PRODUCTIVITY CENTRE); CERTIFICATE IN ADVANCED MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT (INSEASD)

Choo Tuck currently provides training and advisory services in productivity and quality management to businesses and government in the Asean region and Middle East. He was previously the Executive Director of the Restaurant Association of Singapore as well as the Singapore Productivity Association, and was also the Director for Strategic Planning in SPRING Singapore. During his many years of service with SPRING Singapore, he gained wide experience in productivity training, management consultancy and productivity promotion, and has helped more than a 100 businesses in improving productivity, quality control and business excellence, including organisations such as Cycle & Carriage, Motorola, PUB and DBS. On top of that, he has also served as an Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) expert on Productivity for several APO member countries, and was part of a team of experts engaged by the Singapore cooperation Enterprise to provide productivity expertise to the Government of Bahrain in 2007 and 2008.

MR. QUEK AIK TENG

B.ENG (HON.) IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING (UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD); DIP. IN BUSINESS EFFICIENCY (INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING_ (PSB-ACADEMY); CERTIFIED MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT (CMC); PRACTISING MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT (PMC); MEMBER, INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS (IMC) SINGAPORE

Aik Teng currently manages his own consultancy, AT Consulting Services. One of his most recent projects includes being the LEAD Project Manager for the Singapore Logistics Association. Prior to running his own consultancy, he has been with SPRING Singapore for 20 years, and was the Head of the Organisation Excellence Department from 2004-05. He was also

SQA Lead Assessor and Team Leader up till 2008 and has been involved in the SQA initiative since its inception in 1993. tasked to start up the consultancy unit within the then Productivity & Standards Board (PSB) to provide training and consultancy services to organisations, his consulting team assisted close to 30 organisations during that period. He was also involved in a project coordinated by the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise (SCE) to assist the Bahrain Labour Fund in their Labour Reform strategy, which included helping the Bahrain government to initiate a Productivity Movement as well as develop the productivity of the local enterprises. In addition, he was appointed as Project Manager to assist the Government of Botswana to implement a national Productivity Movement, from 1994 to 2003. Botswana is currently held as a model of Productivity in the Pan-Africa region.

MR. WONG KAI HONG

MBA IN STRATEGIC MARKETING (HULL), BSC (NUS)

Kai Hong is a business consultant, management trainer and company director. He has spent almost 2 decades in the consumer products industry, having worked with retailers like Isetan, Metro, Royal Sporting House, The Athlete's Foot and Sunglass Hut; brands like Reebok and Doc Martens; and technology group Wearnes Technology. He has been involved with various functions including operations, business development, project management, human resource, training, marketing, logistics, budgeting and general management. He has developed businesses in Singapore and many Asian cities such as Seoul and Beijing.

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