An improvement plan to enhance employee engagement using a needs assessment method: A case study of a company in Thailand

Yalun Li[1], Sirichai Preudhikulpradab[2]

Abstract

This research employed needs assessment research aims to co-create a development plan to enhance employee engagement. Five variables have been assessed: leadership, communication, collaboration, career advancement, and empowerment. The instrument employed is a structured 25-questions survey. The samples consist of full-time employees of the company (n=60) who are front-line workers and top-level managers. The research site is in Bangkok, Thailand. Key findings showed a significant gap between the current and expected situation on all five variables. According to the PNIModified value, the top three variables indicated the priority needs for improvement: 1). Leadership,2). Career Advancement, and 3). Communication. An improvement plan comprised five short-term and five long-term actions whereby the common focus is on reinforcing the participatory work environment and systems to strengthen connectedness and engagement between the organization, managers and subordinates.

1. Introduction

Employee engagement has recently been a prominent topic for many organization management researchers and organization development practitioners to investigate and explore ways to increase employee engagement effectiveness. Unavoidably, the concept and application of employee engagement become a part of the management and Organization Development disciplines. Some researchers have done similar studies on employee engagement, and the findings commonly revealed that many organizations continued investing in improving employee performance, where employee engagement is one of the influencing factors for long-term success. Nevertheless, the results of know-how about employee engagement improvement are still evolving until the present. Employee engagement is not primarily owned by human resource functions but also by the leaders, managers, and front-line employees (Gallup, 2019)

With the development of the economy and the market competition, organizations and companies have realized that talents are the core strength; thus, employee engagement has become a non-debatable challenge. Per Gallup survey's results published in 2019 indicated that only 15% of employees have engagement with their organization globally, 85% are not engaged or actively disengaged. The engaged and disengaged behaviors could be categorized as follows: 41% lower absenteeism, 58% fewer patient safety incidents, 59% less turnover, 10% higher customer ratings, 17% higher productivity, 20% sales, and 21% higher profitability. (Turner, 2020). Per the above facts, employee engagement still plays an important role in influencing the overall organization performance and productivity, and it becomes costly if the organization fails its pursuits.

In the Organization Development field, the practitioners conduct the internal organizational assessment and pursue some interventions to enhance employee engagement, creating an emotional connection between the employees and employer with the goals of re-arranging or transforming organization systems and processes, including the delivery of a vast

[1] MMOD Student, Graduate School of Business, Assumption University of Thailand
[2] MMOD Lecturer, Graduate School of Business, Assumption University of Thailand

majority of information related to the business (Estell & Davidson, 2019). According to the study of Shuck (2019), it also revealed that when the turnover is 50% lower, customer satisfaction is likely 95% higher. Meanwhile, Employee engagement affects personnel performance and strengthens profitability, revenue generation, and strategic growth (Shuck, 2019).

Muddle (2020) also insisted that employee engagement is ultimately connected with productivity, profit, and customer satisfaction. With the millennial generation joining the workplace, this group brings unique attitudes, knowledge, and skills, thus challenging many managers. Understanding the gap of mixed generations in the workplace is important for the managers to holistically adopt the appropriate activities to engage with them to ensure alignment with the overall organization goals for long-term success (S. Hong, 2019)

Coming to the Thailand context, the 20-year strategy of Thailand 4.0 is popularized among the Thai business community; it is the initiative from the government, aiming to transition the country from the heavy industry to the value-creation industry, leveraging the technologies to grow innovation. According to the study of (Jones & Pimdee, 2017), this strategy is kept growing and deploying within the industry, well-educated employees, and well-trained personnel among new generations face challenges in coping with the new era. There is a need for employee engagement in the context of Thailand 4.0. As the content mentioned in the study of (Phungphol, Tumad, Sangnin, & Pooripakdee, 2018), Thailand 4.0 has required the organizations to be ready for the change of use of technology and the style of leadership, the transition of employee development programs should now be on the agenda of top management. Considering this stage of Thailand 4.0 evolvement, the workforce will unavoidably transform from offline to online, from labor-intensive workers to skilled personnel and possibly robots to replace heavy-duty and high precision jobs. Such changing trends, talent development, and management are predicted to force the organization to transform its priorities and choices of actions

Statement of the Problem

Given the current situations from the lens of organization management, organization development, business management, and the Thailand 4.0 strategy, the study aims to identify the priority needs and propose an improvement plan for the participating company on how it could further enhance employee engagement to achieve both people and business results.

Research Objective

1. To examine the organization's current and preferred conditions to identify the priority needs of employee engagement.
2. To propose an improvement plan, utilizing the survey results and interview findings to enhance employee engagement.

Research questions

1. What are the current and preferred situations of Company A Co. Ltd. regarding the priority needs of employee engagement?
2. What could improvement plan for employee engagement be proposed for future implementation?

2. Literature Review

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement commenced as early as the 20th century, as (Kahn, 1990) systemically described employee engagement as the engagement between the employees and the organization. Likewise, these are an influencing factor for engagement from the psychological conditions, improving the relationship between individuals and the company (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Principally, organizations are invariably looking for a unified team to achieve a higher goal, and employees are looking for a place where their abilities and talents are recognized from the view of the organization and management's image. Morgan (Morgan, 1998) first introduced the field of Organization Development, stating that the metaphor is a way to describe the organization's life cycle's substantive condition. The engagement between the organization and employees is thus inter-connecting as if a wheel comprising a hub and spokes, and the wheel itself represents a complete condition of employee engagement. Turner (2020) further suggested that several elements are influenced by employee engagement, including collaboration, leadership, communication, career advancement, and empowerment.

In terms of the positive-based organization development approach, organizations could support employees, value their lives, and engage the employees to inspire one another, leading to positive emotions and social bonding. The organization should

highly value employees' voice, as (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) emphasized, including shared direction and company strategy that links personal goals and organization goals; and with these, employees are far more willing and motivated (Sharma, Chaudhary, & Singh, 2019).

The studies of (Pongton & Suntrayuth, 2019); (Lin & Kim, 2020), and (Luo & Barnes, 2020) revealed that employee engagement affects all parts of the organization systems where human resource management also plays an essential role in sustaining and improving employee behavior, communication, and employee satisfaction for long-term success.

Collaboration

Collaboration refers to individuals, groups, or organizations that share common goals and directions to achieve them. Collaboration requires both employees and organizations to compromise and master conflicts of expectation while remaining supportive of others and the company (Zulfikar, 2020).

Collaboration requires the organization members to share common goals, identify ways of achieving results, and connect relationships and ideas. Collaboration is a substantive condition in which organization members could perceive and observe the appreciation and interaction as they co-create and nurture their relationship. Additionally, collaboration is often perceived as a supportive workplace culture, where the organization encourages the employees to collectively pursue the company's improvement activities (Swensen, Kabcenell, & Shanafelt, 2016).

The studies of (Kochar, Watson, & Ouyang, 2019), (Sawhney et al., 2017), and (Sengupta & Sonawane, 2020) revealed that the component that defines the long-term success competitiveness of the organization are organization productivity and employee self-achievement. By growing the productivity and innovative-execution mindset, employees and other stakeholders could achieve their organization's common goals. At the individual level, facilitating co-creation for a particular task, decision, or solution could fuel internal competitiveness, agility, and collaboration and invariably enhance satisfaction.

Leadership

The researchers have studied leadership, concluding that it is directly impacting many factors of employee engagement effectiveness (G. Hong, Cho, Froese, & Shin, 2016), and the causes of successful employee engagement varied, such as employee turnover, employee motivation, organization culture,

and growth (Sahu, Pathardikar, & Kumar, 2018). Some analysis of employee engagement and leadership development revealed that both factors are interdependent, bolstering the understanding between the employee's and the organization's direction (Sloan, Buckham, & Lee, 2017). Leadership could help employees perform better in their tasks and understand their strategic goals (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016).

Furthermore, leadership could create inspirational motivation for employees by concentrating on their emotional needs (Teymournejad & Elghaei, 2016). A motivational environment could lead employees to achieve higher performance and, more importantly, to believe the organization and management value them (Saleem, Aslam, Yin, & Rao, 2020). Leadership is invariably recognized as the key factor in its overall success (Mishra & Pandey, 2019). Change leadership could be understood as the force that could encourage the followers to engage with its vision and strategy to complete the change and bring the team into a better stage (Mutungi, Njoroge, & Minja, 2019)

Communication

Communication is about exchanging information, negotiation, discussion, connection, and relations between employee and Organization (Gherardi, 2019). Communication acts as a channel for the employees to connect and clarify their strategy and direction; it is also a means of gathering people's ideas and strengthening an understanding of creating a path for achieving the goals (Hidayat & Hanisha, 2019)

From the lens of organizational climate, organizational communication encourages the employees to carry out their works as per the guidelines. Likewise, the workplace atmosphere predicts the impact of an organization's communication and performance and productivity and team energy (Lueg & Lueg, 2020).

According to several reviews on communication, the basic components based on the result of the studies of (Phunthasaen & Chungviwatanant, 2020), (Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2019), and (Cooren & Seidl, 2019) suggested that organizational communication should be conducted as a daily routine, and it should be oriented as a whole-level strategy. Communication shall be set up by sharing knowledge, experience, and even conflicts, which is part of the learning and improving the process. On the same token, a positive communication atmosphere could also enhance productivity and support personnel to achieve a significant goal and influence employee job

satisfaction and job retention that defines the organization's long-term success competitiveness.

Career Advancement

Every individual has his/her own goal, each achievement is one more step closer to advancement, and any recognition and award provided by the organization can enhance the engagement, as articulated by(Tănăsescu & Leon, 2019). The practice of clarifying career opportunities stimulates employees to fuel motivation to get jobs done and the willingness to pursue self-improvement initiatives, which is, in turn, to develop the company (Ewing, Men, & O'Neil, 2019). Employees look forward to displaying their ability and talent and advancing opportunities to be creative to support the company strategy and the direction (Soares & Mosquera, 2019).

Career advancement could encourage employees' creativity and productivity, which employees could fulfill and enrich the company's business strategy and development while being re-enforced by organizational leadership and provision of training initiatives.

The result of the studies of (Lin & Kim, 2020), (Bowles, Thomason, & Bear, 2019), and (Appiea, Ndletyana, & Wilson-Prangley, 2020) suggested that the key component that defines the long-term success competitiveness of the organization consisted of creativity and productivity of employees, the equalization of all personnel and the satisfaction in terms of word recognition and encouragement. Employees are the element that contributes to a positive and healthy organization connected with the organization development.

Empowerment

The organization serves as a venue for collective wisdom, transparency of information, managerial and leadership skills, and a learning organization that allows everyone to pursue self, team, and the organization's goals. (Naqshbandi, Tabche, & Choudhary, 2019). Empowerment could be employed as a platform to grow imagination and creativity, in which employees could discover their potential and use their skills and knowledge to complete their tasks (Abdullah & Tarí, 2017). As Kaur, Singh, & Singh (2020) & (Van Bogaert et al., 2018) elaborated that when employees understand their organization and recognize their spans of control and levels of authority, they work with self-confidence and a positive attitude, which, in return, motivate them to become more responsible for their ideas and decisions.

The studies of (Rattanaparinyanon & Tantasanee, 2019); (Mpherwane, April, & Barnardo, 2019); and (Al-Omari, Alomari, & Aljawarneh, 2020) revealed that the key component that defines the long-term success on the competitiveness of the organization includes an increase in responsibility and self-learning process, where employees are encouraged to upgrade the knowledge and develop themselves to support their daily tasks while ensuring the deployment of the empowerment-based internal processes could save the cost of management and reduce the redundant processes. More importantly, as a system of the organization, empowerment encourages employees to make appropriate decisions to a particular situation and indirectly increases customer satisfaction.

Organization Development and Change Management

Organizational development is a growing field of practice regardless of industry. Many definitions may be different in words but similar in character and goals. (Pavez, 2019). Organization development is a planned practice conducted by the organization development practitioners or consultants to increase organization effectiveness and create positive engagement, embracing the body of knowledge of employee behavior and psychological knowledge (Coghlan, Shani, & Dahm, 2020).

Organizational development is concerned with designing the content and change process to achieve a common goal: what and how to pursue organizational change efforts. (Shimoni, 2019) Organization Development Intervention (ODI) resulted from organization diagnosis and assessment initiated by consulting or top management team, who desire to upgrade how things could be done differently. (Chotikamankong & Preudhikulpradab, 2017)

Change management is a process of managing the implementations of organization development interventions, from restructuring organization systems, operational processes to reframing the organization behaviors, to transition from the current state to the new states, where change invariably involves upgrading the business model (Imberman, Lopez, & Troper, 2017). Additionally, change management is also viewed as a managerial process used to facilitate the communication and interaction between the change manager/agent and employees to ensure the sustainability of the successful implementation of organizational change efforts (Keyuraphan & Preudhikulpradab, 2016).

3.   Improvement Plan

According to (Khan, Badar, & Alzaabi, 2020), (Belcher, Kaldas et al., 2018), and (Soundararajan & Reddy, 2020) suggested that the creation of an improvement plan should begin with the identification of the current problem and expected target, the analysis of the current situation, the creation or design of the improvement plan for courses of actions, and lastly,   the monitoring and evaluation of the consequences.   The underlying assumption of the aforementioned authors viewed an improvement plan as a systematic approach in root cause investigation to ensure the proper resolutions. The approach is congruence with the quality management cycle: plan, do check, act (PDCA) by William Edwards Deming in 1950s who originally invented the PDCA as the method.

Meanwhile, according to (Kaipunlert, 2021), the improvement plan can be carried out as a qualitative intervention for the organization; it allowed the organization practitioners to engage with organization members to design continuous improvement plans upon a common understanding of the current situations and future envisioned. More (2011) employed the Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR analysis as the tools and processes to explore the present's strengths and future possibilities to itemize how the organization members could support and strengthen their management processes to satisfy key stakeholders such as customers or clients. Lastly, the research findings of Preudhikulpradab et. al. (2020) on Leadership development in the context of higher-education institutional development also suggested that continuous improvement essentially needed to embed in the whole-system management and development whereby continuous improvement is a part of change management activities.

Conceptual Framework

The illustration below is the conceptual framework of the study. The Conceptual framework is drawn from the literature review and the qualitative analysis of 7s McKinsey, derived from a generative conversation with the managing director, managers, and supervisor.
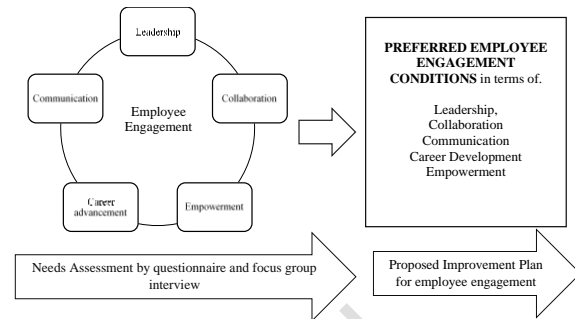

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework starts from the left side, whereby the main variables, comprising leadership, collaboration, communication, career advancement, and empowerment, are the subsets of employee engagement. The conceptual framework also represents the study's focus system. The study employed two research instruments to identify the priority needs using a needs assessment questionnaire and then a focus-group interview to explore the key informants' qualitative insights on a possible improvement plan for employee engagement.

The diagram presented in Figure 1 flows from the left to right; it is a continuous process, from needs assessment analysis of priority needs, qualitative analysis to a proposal of an improvement plan.

Research Design

This study aims to assess the current situation and explore the respondents' expectations of the selected variables related to employee engagement. The quantitative data from the online structured questionnaire was used to understand the needs gaps between the current situation and the expected situation and make strategic recommendations for improving employee engagement.

The Respondents

The participated respondents comprised full-time employees (n = 60). The sampling method is purposive sampling. The respondents' nature was homogeneity who worked at the same organization, including front line operators, leaders, engineers, office admin personnel, and managers, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Respondents

Level	Number of Respondents
Manager	3
Office admin	3
Engineer	2
Leader	8
Front line Operator	44
Total	60

The Instrument

This research used a structured questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire contained five variables: collaboration, leadership, communication, career advancement, and empowerment. The total number of questions in the structured questionnaire was 24. The respondents were asked to rate the 24 questions using two-side 4-Likert scales. (4. Strongly Agree; 3. Agree; 2. Disagree; and 1. Strongly Disagree).

Table 2. Questionnaire Items

No.	Variable	No. of Question	Measurement
1	Leadership	Q1-Q4	Four Likert Scale
2	Collaboration	Q5-Q9	Four Likert Scale
3	Empowerment	Q10-Q14,	Four Likert Scale
4	Career Advancement	Q15-Q19	Four Likert Scale
8	Communication	Q20-Q24	Four Likert Scale

Scale and Qualitative Rating

The researcher treated the data with Cronbach alpha coefficient to ensure the questionnaire's reliability, using the SPSS. Also, IOC validity was done by three organization experts and academia. Below is the summary of Index Objective Congruence (IOC) results as shown in the table below:

Table 3. Cronbach's Alpha Co-Efficient and IOC Results

Variable	Total No. of Question	Cronbach's Alpha by each main variable	IOC
Leadership	4	1.00	0.91
Collaboration	5	0.63	1.00
Empowerment	5	0.87	0.80
Career Advancement	5	0.71	0.66
Communication	5	0.87	0.66

Results and Discussions

This research's findings are described by the quantitative analysis of full-time employees of 60 people who completed the survey. These 60 actual responses came from Managers, Admin officers, Engineers, Leaders, and Front-line operators.

According to the results of $PNI_{Modified}$ indicated that the priority of needs. The value of $PNI_{Modified}$ indicated the top three ranks comprised, Rank 1 Leadership and Carer Advancement, Rank 2 Communication and Empowerment, and Rank 3 Collaboration.

The result of the average mean, standard deviation, $PNI_{Modified}$, and ranking are presented in the table below:

Table 4: Means of Current and Expected Situation, $PNI_{Modified}$ and Rank

Variable	n	Current (D)		Expected (I)		PNI	Rk
		M	SD	M	SD		
Leader-ship	60	2.81	0.34	3.09	0.20	0.09	1
Career Advance-ment	60	2.78	0.40	3.04	0.14	0.09	
Communi-cation	60	2.88	0.28	3.08	0.24	0.06	2
Empowe-rment	60	2.90	0.36	3.09	0.26	0.06	
Collabo-ration	60	2.91	0.55	3.05	0.14	0.04	3

Note: $PNIModified = (I-D)/D$

Looking into each question statement in the structured questionnaire, the more detailed presentation of the lowest means of the current situations and expected situations were close, resulted in a small gap when reporting the $PNI_{Modified}$. Nevertheless, specific question statements found to have obtained the lowest average means as follows:

Rank 1: Leadership variable, the statement found to have obtained the lowest mean was "Q3. My manager respects my opinion and decision" (M=2.66, $PNI_{Modified}$= 0.13)

Rank 1: Career Advancement variable, the statement found to have obtained the lowest mean was "Q6. The company provides a total benefit (e.g., salary, bonus, uniform, and insurance) similar to other industries" (M=2.59, $PNI_{Modified}$=0.16)

Rank 2: Communication variable, the statement found to have obtained the lowest mean was "Q11. The company gives attention to talented employees (M=2.81, $PNI_{Mofidied}$=0.12)

Rank 2: Empowerment variable, the statement found to have obtained the lowest mean was "Q15. The company allowed the different voice to come out". (M=2.71, PNI_Modified=0.15)

Rank 3: Collaboration variable, the statement found to have obtained the lowest mean was "Q20. My workload is moderate".(M=2.63, PNI_Modified=0.17)

4. Proposed Improvement Plan

Based on the findings and review of Keyuraphan & Preudhikulpradab (2016), Organization Development could complete the operation, and Organizational change shall lead the employees to achieve the organization's changes. Therefore, this Holistic Improvement Plan for Employee Engagement could be made possible based on the data analysis, findings, ranking, and supporting literature.

Figure 2. The holistic improvement Plan for Employee Engagement

Figure 2 presented a Model employee engagement improvement plan drawn from the findings. According to the findings, each factor's significant gaps are detected: leadership, career advancement, communication, empowerment, and collaboration.

Communication and collaboration play important roles in activating and supporting the employees' contribution, although the results from the PNI_Modified indicated the fourth and fifth ranks, respectively. From the long-term development and employee engagement improvement lens, both communication and collaboration supplement leadership, career advancement, and empowerment, emphasizing creating an equal and synchronous atmosphere.

Regarding the company's next steps to improve employee engagement, utilizing the study's findings,

First, company A focuses its contribution as a service providing company for the employees. Human resources (Lueg & Lueg, 2020) produce all the productivity and competitiveness, with improved organizational communication embedded in the workplace atmosphere that links the organization's performance.

Second, company A creates an effective and open communication atmosphere to strengthen its working environment and activate a sense of empowerment. From the questionnaire's results, the communication gaps caused a misunderstanding between organizations and employees. Gherardi's (2019) and Hidayat & Hanisha's (2019) studies also supported it, where they mentioned that communication is the platform for the understanding between employees and organization. Furthermore, the employees expected the organization to accept their ideas, supporting them in their daily works. As the front-line operators are the actual service providers, they could be the source of first-hand information on customer satisfaction; hence, the company should encourage the employees to come out with different voices, which might be useful for strengthening the competitiveness of those who mentioned that organization communication could affect competitiveness, and the study of Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong (2019) also mentioned that a positive communication atmosphere could enhance productivity and support both organization and personnel to achieve their goals.

Third, company A creates a supportive and collaborative atmosphere as the facilitating means to the achievement of employees and the organization, strengthening the leadership and empowerment.

According to the survey result, the employees looked forward to improving their performance with support from the organization. This result was also congruent with Zulfikar (2020), stating that collaboration is a two-sided work for employees and the organization, and both parties are required to remain supportive.

Considering the nature of their business, Company A is to conduct different projects daily, and each project requires specific training to create an informative workplace and systemic working instruction that could support the employees to have a better understanding of their on-hand and in-coming tasks as they improve their ability to achieve a higher goal with the organization. This finding was congruent with Swensen, Kabcenell, & Shanafelt (2016), stating that collaboration is a culture of support and encouragement; employees should appreciate the

organization and return with self-improvement and inspiring others. Supportive collaboration requests the clarification of organization regulation and structure, which could direct employees' path to understand their work and encourage them to improve their ability. This point has also been mentioned in the study of Kochar et. al.(2019), in which they stated that employees could improve their competitiveness and be more satisfied during work by collaborating with the organization.

5. Summary of Finding

Based on the PNI$_{Modified}$ value in both factors and questions, 1) employees recognized that those factors impacted their works. 2) the rankings of PNI$_{Modified}$ represent the gap between the current and expected situations comprised leadership (0.09), Career Advancement (0.09), communication (0.06), Empowerment (0.06), and Collaboration (0.04). However, the rankings a systematic approach to identify the priority for the next step improvement. Substantively, the five factors are essential for improving the action plan and strategy. According to the questionnaires, the five factors do not individually exist; the top 2 questions in each factor are related to other factors. The improvement of employee engagement shall not be a single factor development; rather, it shall be an organizational structure change and development.

Lastly, one set of the questionnaire could not effectively identify the employee engagement to understand how this can be improved in the long run, considering the ever-changing marketplace and industry. Nevertheless, the proposed improvement plan could be made based on the data set as follows:

For the immediate action:

1. The organization should gather all the employees for monthly training and collect feedback on their works and opinions.
2. The managers should set up weekly meetings with their team for problem-solving and in-time communication for any difficulties during operation.
3. The organization should immediately create a channel for employees to submit their ideas and give feedback on time.
4. The team leaders should submit the weekly performance report about their team members to create a useful training program.
5. The managers should keep their promise about renovation and company improvement.

For the long-term action:

1. The organization should create an annual training plan emphasizing communication and skill.
2. The organization should create a complete and sustainable reward and punishment system.
3. The organization should create a path of career advancement within organization.
4. The organization should reorganize its organizational structure with more positions that could direct employees to achieve their goals.
5. The organization should listen to the employees to gather important information that could support future improvement.

For further study, the attention could be on a face-to-face interview with employees to find out more details about their needs and create a comprehensive framework for its development.

On the other hand, as Thailand 4.0 is undergoing, the change of industry from human resources to digitalization is imminent. Therefore, a remarkably interesting and timely topic for further research/study is how to reduce the unemployment rate of low educated employees; how to engage the front-line operators; how to improve the accountability of the organization to the front-line employees; and how to welcome the changes brought about by Thailand 4.0 with a win-win action plan with current employees.

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