



Effective Management of Workplace Change

A Comprehensive Guide

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Calder



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OVERVIEW

Business leaders and managers put increasing effort into creating office spaces where employees can work to the best of their ability, and where they also feel more motivated, happy and engaged. However, different people have different views about what an optimal work environment is like, and so making assumptions about what employees want and need in a workspace could be a mistake.

Seeking input from employees to inform the design is therefore an important step; however, this alone still does not guarantee that a workplace change project will achieve the desired results. When leaders and managers fail to involve employees in decisions about the new space, or to prepare them for the changes, they take the risk that the space won't work for their employees, or that employees won't 'work the space'.

The way communication is handled during the months, or sometimes years, leading up to the implementation date is critical to the project's success – whether it is a relocation, a major office overhaul, or a relatively small alteration of the interiors. Ineffective communication can make the change process very challenging, and can also damage the organisation's culture and performance. A well-thought-out and professionally implemented change management plan, on the other hand, can make the workplace change process smooth and enjoyable, while also strengthening the organisation by boosting employee engagement and stimulating collaboration between different teams and departments.





The period leading up to the workplace changes should be a time of heightened communication between decision makers and staff members

1

WHY SKILFUL COMMUNICATION IS VITAL

We all start with the best intentions

When company leaders embark on a workplace change project, they tend to be driven by the intention to bring out the best in their employees and the organisation. To provide the highest quality work environment for their teams, they often set aside a generous budget for the project, engage in extensive conversations with key stakeholders, and appoint highly reputable architects and workplace experts. With the support of the project team, they might also develop a workplace strategy that is aimed at improving the company's key performance indicators.

This is how so many companies, after a workplace relocation or upgrade, manage to end up with office spaces that look sleek and stylish, incorporate the latest workplace design trends, and are equipped with cutting-edge technology. We see an increasing number of workplaces being created which 'should' make work easier and more enjoyable for employees – at least on paper.

Everyone has different perspectives

Unfortunately, some of the common assumptions underpinning workplace change projects are misguided. Project leaders tend to believe, for example, that employees will immediately appreciate the qualities of the new space as much as they themselves do.

These leaders also expect that employees will easily adapt to the changes and learn to use the space as intended, once they start working in the new, improved environment.

The truth is that we all have different perspectives, and the values we see in certain solutions might not be apparent to everyone (we come across such differences of opinions in politics and in our personal relationships every day). Employees might also have unanswered questions, concerns and challenges decision makers are not aware of.

To eliminate any misunderstandings and to reach mutually beneficial agreements, the period leading up to the workplace changes should be a time of heightened communication between decision makers and staff members. As humans, we all possess a vast array of unconscious biases³ which can interfere with our judgement. Having open and honest conversations is perhaps the best way to cut through these biases and come to rational decisions.

³ Projection Bias is perhaps one of the most prevalent biases in workplace change projects. We tend to assume that other people think similarly to us, and so they understand our perspectives and see the same benefits and problems as we do. Confirmation Bias can also show up in these situations. According to this bias, we feel tempted to only converse with people whose opinions are similar to ours, because having our viewpoints challenged might make us feel uncomfortable or insecure. Neglect of Probability Bias might also play a role, as we tend to underestimate or overestimate certain risks associated with change, especially when venturing into the unknown.

It's important to start conversations early on – as soon as the workplace change project appears on the agenda of senior management

A workplace change project is uncharted territory for many leaders. Some are excited and optimistic, while others are a bit apprehensive, not exactly knowing how to proceed and what outcomes to expect. They have complex and important decisions to make, impacting the operations and finances of the company for years to come.

Feeling vulnerable in such a situation is natural; however, this should not stop leaders from openly discussing with their staff what their plans are for the new or refurbished workspace, and how the project is progressing. Leaders should not only share good news, but also some of their challenges and doubts. This level of transparency can not only enhance trust within the organisation, but invite staff members to contribute to problem solving. Experience shows that in workplace change projects staff members can offer valuable contributions, often in unexpected ways.

The price of poor communication

Once the executive team has decided to proceed with a workplace change project, investing significant time, money and effort, it would be a serious mistake to only do half the job. Building or upgrading a workspace without ensuring that it will actually support organisational performance, as sadly so often happens, could turn

out to be a real waste. The key driver of performance in any knowledge-based organisation is people. And if employees don't buy into the changes, or get frustrated by the change process, the organisation may come out weaker in the end despite the smart design.

It's very common that after a poorly managed workplace transformation project staff can't see how they can personally benefit from changes, and therefore lack the motivation to change their work habits. Instead of using the space as intended, they often try to hold on to old ways of working. When people don't appreciate their new environment, or feel that the changes have been imposed on them, morale can also drop significantly, and some people may even leave.

To get people on board, it's important to start conversations early on – as soon as the workplace change project appears on the agenda of senior management, and well before starting discussions about the design. Employees do sense when change is in the air. Being at the receiving end of a workplace change project is not easy, especially when communication is scarce. Even if employees fully trust management and the decision making team, dealing with a great level of uncertainty in relation to the impending changes can create significant stress and anxiety, which also take a toll on work performance and engagement.

Dealing with fearful people and a bombardment of questions about the upcoming changes can also make life increasingly difficult for managers who are trying to concentrate on the intricacies of the project while also attending to their normal managerial duties.

When employees are not sufficiently informed about what to expect, their curiosity or anxiety will often drive them to fill in the details themselves. Rumours⁴ may start circulating in the workplace; even if completely unfounded and contradictory, these can create toxicity and add to stress.

Employees might also make wild assumptions about what their roles are in the change process, and what preparations they should make. This is why we see employees sometimes packing up their work tools, files and belongings too early, throwing away fitout items that were meant to be reused, and acting as well-intended self-appointed project managers, confusing the actual project team.

⁴ It's worth looking at unconscious biases again to understand how rumours spread in organisations. Due to Negativity Bias, most people pay more attention to bad news than to good news, and interestingly, also give them more credibility. For this reason, a couple of naysayers in a team can infect everyone with negativity. This problem is amplified by the so-called Bandwagon Effect, the human tendency of going with the flow of the crowd. Once people start opposing a certain idea, turning everyone's opinion around can be especially difficult.

HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

During one office relocation project, where management completely withdrew from communicating with staff (and in which we got involved very late), we saw people finding 'answers' to their unheard questions in the most peculiar ways.

At one point a junior staff member overheard some senior level discussions about the new floor plan, and decided to draw his interpretation of the floor layout on a whiteboard. At this point he also put his name and his friendly colleague's name on the two desks closest to the window.

Soon afterwards, another staff member saw the drawing and became distraught, thinking that she had missed out on sitting at one of those desks. Having no other information to rely on, she took the whiteboard drawing literally.



One-way communication also creates tension. When employees have no opportunity to have their perspectives heard or to offer input, even those who were initially excited about the changes can lose interest, while those who started out with reservations or concerns can spiral further downwards.

JUST DEAL WITH IT

On another occasion, in a poorly managed change project, one of the senior managers had to be dragged from her office as construction was taking place. She lost her private office when the organisation moved to open plan, and since there was no prior consultation by decision makers, this was a sudden and unexpected change to her work environment.

While this was a traumatic experience for her, decision makers perceived her response as severe overreaction and expected her to 'just deal with it', in line with the attitude imposed by facility management. After the transitions the productivity of this senior manager significantly declined due to constant interruptions she hadn't yet learned to screen out, and to being severely upset about the situation.

Employees have a lot to offer

Apart from earning employees' buy-in, there are many good reasons for engaging them in conversations about the proposed workplace changes. Although employees are not workplace experts, they know the organisation better than any external consultants, and can share valuable insights about how work could be done more effectively. They have different perspectives from leaders and managers, and can often see opportunities and challenges not apparent to decision makers.

Conversations with employees can reveal what holds them back from performing at their best in the current space, and in what kind of environment they could work better. There are many questions only employees can answer which are critical to informing the design, such as: What inspires and motivates employees? What kinds of distractions and difficulties do they face on a daily basis? What makes them feel uncomfortable or stressed? What kinds of environments energise them and spark their creativity?

In our experience, many employees understand the role of the work environment very well, and are able to think creatively about improving the space, or the way it is used.

Employees can often see opportunities and challenges not apparent to decision makers

When employees have the opportunity to work closely with designers or decision makers, together they often come up with original ideas to solving workspace-related issues. In fact, collaborative design appears to be the most effective way of creating win-win solutions.

CREATING WINS

During one project, we consulted with a senior employee who had been working in the same enclosed office for 30 years, and had developed her work style and processes around having her own private and confidential space. When the company transitioned to open plan, meaning that she would lose her office, she was concerned that she would not be able to operate effectively anymore.

We discussed this issue with the CEO, who had championed the workplace change. With his approval, the employee received full control over one of the meeting rooms; essentially, she got the privilege of using it as her own private meeting space.

After a few months the senior employee realised that she didn't need a private space as often as she had previously thought, and agreed to other people also using the space. She just needed to adjust her work style at her own pace, and this intermediate workplace solution allowed her to do that.





2

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

What employees most want to know

Most employees have similar questions, hopes and fears around workplace change, regardless of industry, job role or personality. So starting off conversations on the right track should not be too difficult – people simply want to know how the changes will impact on their lives.

Relocations raise some of the most pressing questions, such as: Where will I need to travel, and what modes of transport will I need to take? How will I need to rearrange my life outside of work? Will I still be able to maintain my routine and drop my kids off to school in the morning?

In any workplace change project, people are eager to know what their work life will look like, asking questions like: How will I need to change the way I get things done? Where am I going to sit? Will I have daylight and views? Where will I put my belongings? How noisy is my new spot going to be? And will I have the opportunity to find privacy and quiet?

Answering these questions early on – by disclosing the scheduled date for the changes, the location of the new office, the floor layout and other important details of the design – should prevent much of the tension and anxiety around workplace change.

Employee and manager archetypes in change management projects

It's important to acknowledge that different people have different priorities, and also express their needs and opinions differently. The roles they choose to play in workplace change projects therefore vary, depending on their personalities, cultural conditioning and past experiences.

We have identified six common archetypes, or types of behaviour that employees and managers demonstrate when facing workplace change. Understanding these archetypes can help you to communicate with your staff members and fellow decision makers more effectively, and to give people whatever support or encouragement they need in order to move the project forward.

The 1st archetype: Resisters

'Resisters' tend to say 'no' to almost any proposed changes, often without thoroughly thinking through the consequences. They can therefore be challenging to work with, at least initially. It's important to acknowledge that employees tend to oppose change for legitimate reasons; for example, they might have had negative experiences in the past.

Very often, the people who resisted the most at the start of the project become the greatest advocates for the new space

However, once their concerns are addressed, ‘Resisters’ usually become more open for collaboration³. In a well-managed change process spectacular personal transformations can occur. Very often, the people who resisted the most at the start of the project become the greatest advocates for the new space.

The 2nd archetype: Quiet people

‘Quiet people’ have little involvement in change projects, and seemingly don’t mind where they will end up. They don’t see themselves playing a role in or adding value to the project. Since these people don’t say a lot, it’s hard to know what’s on their minds – whether they are content with the changes or, on the contrary, feel powerless and disengaged. This can be a real issue, as some of these employees might leave because of the changes before management has the chance to address their unspoken problems.

Similar to ‘Resisters’, as soon as ‘Quiet people’ start to visualise the new space, they usually get more excited (some people just cannot grasp how great the new workplace will be until they can see it with their own eyes).

³ Being apprehensive about change is an ingrained human tendency. Being subject to Status Quo Bias, many of us prefer to maintain the current conditions as opposed to risking trying something new. We don’t want to fix things that are not broken, because the changes could potentially make things worse.

The 3rd archetype: Optimists

‘Optimists’ are enthusiastic about almost any kind of change⁴. They know what’s wrong with their current office space and what a great work environment can look like, having seen attractive and inspiring workspaces elsewhere. They see the opportunities and benefits presented by workplace change, but not so much the downsides, as many ‘Optimists’ are younger people who have never experienced the difficulties of a workplace transformation or relocation before. They are keen to contribute their time and skills to help out, and to volunteer as change ambassadors – a role they are usually really good at.

However, their unbounded positivity can have drawbacks. As a cohort of happy employees (e.g. the group of change ambassadors) keeps raving about the benefits they will enjoy in the new space, other people can become demoralised, worrying that they might be missing out on something, or that their concerns aren’t being heard.

⁴ Some of these people might be subjected to so-called Positive Expectation Bias, the tendency to assume that life will get better when things change (often this biased thinking is responsible for people hopping from job to job, or from one relationship to the other). While these people are supportive of change, they have limited patience when reality kicks in. Therefore their enthusiasm should not be seen as a confirmation that a proposed idea for change is actually a good one.

In addition, when these positive people don't get enough fuel – such as new information and opportunity for engagement – they can quickly lose their energy and enthusiasm, spiralling downwards and bringing others down with them.

The 4th archetype: 'Seen It All' employees

Some people, especially senior staff members, have experienced many office upgrades and relocations in their careers, and know that a workplace change project is not always a walk in the park. They might have had negative experiences in the past, and in this case they are naturally apprehensive.

However, these experienced people can be great partners in conversations about the project, as they have valuable experiences and insights to share, and can help find solutions to problems. Once they see that their concerns are being addressed, they will likely get on board and actively support the project.

The 5th archetype: Disengaged senior managers

Senior managers sometimes feel sceptical about workplace change, especially when they face the prospect of losing their private office (which they may see as a symbol of their status and success), and being forced to radically alter the way they work. Others don't seem to care much about what's going

to happen to the office space – for them the office is just an office – or are disillusioned after failing to gear the project towards their preferred direction. Managers with such attitudes can quickly bring others down with them, sapping their team's energy and morale.

Senior managers have a fundamental role in change management, and empowering and engaging their team members in the change process is part of their responsibilities. If senior managers have concerns about their abilities to work effectively in the new space, these should be addressed through conversations with designers, workplace strategists and key decision makers. Once they start to see the benefits of the proposed changes, it becomes easier for them to support their teams through the change process.



The 6th archetype: Pioneering leaders

Some leaders are enthusiastic about workplace change, and choose to lead from the front. These leaders see the power of the work environment, including its potential to enhance individual and organisational performance. They are passionate about new, state-of-the-art workplace solutions and innovative ways of working. They also know that organisations today need to embrace change in order to remain competitive and to offer an attractive and dynamic workplace culture that top employees seek.

Supporting these leaders will give the organisation the best chance to complete the workplace change project with great success, while making the organisation stronger and more resilient along the way.



Every coin has two sides

As these observations suggest, essentially all members of an organisation – leaders as well as support staff – have something valuable to add to a change project, once they receive the attention and support they need. In every organisation, there tends to be a lot of internal talent that can be leveraged. However, when people's concerns and suggestions fall on deaf ears, they can easily disengage or become sceptical, and may even hinder the project.

People bring different qualities and challenges to the change process. Whichever personalities you deal with, you can bring out the best or the worst in them, depending on the way you communicate. To ensure the success of the project, you need to understand people with different job roles, backgrounds and personalities, and work with them as partners.

It's important to acknowledge that the vast majority of people actually want to contribute to the company to the best of their ability. If they are fearful or resistant to change, what they are most likely concerned about is the threat of not being able to work effectively in the new space.

3

HOW TO MANAGE CHANGE EFFECTIVELY

Demystifying change management

Open and honest communication, respectful relationships, and the commitment to working together as a team are the cornerstones of good change management. It's also essential to have a plan in place that outlines how people will receive information and provide input, how challenges will be addressed, and how decisions will be made.

Everyone should have the opportunity to express their views and ideas, as well as their needs and emotions. It's equally important to genuinely listen to what people have to say, acknowledge their input and provide meaningful responses. Seeking feedback from people and then ignoring them is perhaps even more damaging than shutting them out of the change process completely.

People want to learn about the rationale behind decisions. Even if some of their wishes cannot be fulfilled, employees are much more appreciative of the changes if they are told the full story. They do understand if there are financial or spatial limitations, or if some compromises need to be made.

If you are already well into a workplace transformation project when reading this paper, and perhaps realising that your change process has some deficiencies, it's still worthwhile to alter course.

Even if the new workspace is fully designed, there's a lot that can be done. You can always consult with your employees to identify improved work practices, for example, how the various work areas could be used differently to improve people's wellbeing and productivity. It's also not too late to send out a message to all employees somewhere along the lines of, 'Thank you for your ideas. We have listened to your requests and suggestions, and wherever it was possible, we incorporated them into the design'.

Every person and every team has a role

The ultimate purpose of a workplace transformation project is not to create a new physical environment, but to enable people to work to the best of their abilities, or in other words, to optimise human resources. The time leading up to implementation can have a massive impact on staff productivity and morale, as people face significant changes to their work lives. The project team should therefore give employees the attention and support they need, as opposed to exclusively focusing on the logistical aspects of the project.

Human Resources, Facility Management, IT, Finance, as well as department leaders and managers all have integral roles in change management. If any of them chooses to take a passive position, or to work in isolation, the whole project will suffer.

A workplace change project is a unique opportunity to bring people and teams together who otherwise rarely talk to each other

Workplace change affects everyone in an organisation. This kind of project is hence a unique – perhaps ‘once-in-a-lease-term’ – opportunity to bring people and teams together who otherwise rarely talk to each other. A workplace change project can therefore be a precious time of relationship building, collaboration and innovation. Working in diverse, multi-disciplinary teams helps people to gain understanding and empathy for each other, and to break down stereotypes.

Well-managed change projects tend to boost employee engagement, strengthen relationships between departments, and make the organisation stronger.

How a change manager can help

Managing workplace change is a complex task. It requires coordination between many parties – including organisational leaders, employees, company stakeholders, designers, facility managers, real estate professionals, suppliers, contractors, authorities, and so on – while adhering to budgets and timelines.

To create a high-performance work environment, decision makers also need to consider short- and long-term business strategy, business model and branding, workplace culture, technological development, as well as industry and social trends.

In the age of change, making choices about an organisation’s future is not easy, even when all the options are thoroughly researched and analysed. The human factor adds another element of unpredictability, since the purpose of the work environment, after all, is to promote specific behaviours. Amongst such uncertainty, employees’ willingness to support the changes can be a deciding factor.

Employing a talented change manager can bring structure into the change process and help maximise staff engagement while optimising the design, significantly increasing the chance of success. Workplace change managers perform a broad range of tasks. User engagement is a central part of their role, which involves listening to employees’ questions and providing them with answers from the start of the project until the very end. Change managers are there to make people feel looked after and to address their concerns as they come up, before anxiety can rear its head. They manage expectations and outcomes, ensuring that people’s needs are met, but nobody nurtures false hopes.

On smaller projects, change managers tend to talk to employees directly, building close relationships with them. On larger projects, on the other hand, it is more feasible to appoint an internal change manager (for example, a skilled Human Resources representative) to facilitate internal communication.



In this case, the professional change manager's role is to write communication plans and to provide guidance to the internal change team as well as senior managers. Good change managers also tend to maintain positive work relationships with architects, designers and builders. By liaising with key players, they are able to assist project participants to find common ground.

Clients often assume that the designers or architects they work with are able to fill the role of the change manager. However, design requires a vastly different skill set from change management.

Change managers understand different personalities and communication styles. In addition, they have exceptional listening skills, and the ability to read body language. They notice, for example, if someone is reluctant, fearful or battles with internal conflicts, and can respond accordingly. Change managers also have in-depth understanding of an organisation's internal systems and processes, how teams operate and collaborate, and how communication flows within the organisation. Talented change managers can work with established internal relationships, ensuring that workplace politics do not hinder the progress of the project.



SUCCESS STORIES

Turning enemies into friends

One of our non-profit clients, specialised in environmental preservation, was dedicated to creating a new and highly sustainable office environment. However, the project team was assembled by the landlord, who chose to appoint his preferred suppliers, including a design and construct company that knew little about sustainable design. This company had never worked on environmentally focused projects before, and were even dismissive about best practice standards.

The client, in collaboration with our change manager, put a lot of energy into educating the design and construct company, and got deeply involved in material and product selection, along with the resolution of design issues. Their efforts were fruitful; the new office fit-out had outstanding environmental qualities, so much so that it even won a sustainability award. What's perhaps most heart-warming / inspiring about this story is the fact that the design and construct company has also transformed, continuing its operation with a strong commitment towards the environment. These results probably wouldn't have been achieved without a skillful change manager smoothing out the initially fragile relationship between clients and designers.

Finding the middle way

Many workplace change projects these days involve transitioning from a fixed-desk model to flexible working. While flexible work practices present important benefits, such as improved connectivity between employees and teams, these change projects also tend to have their own challenges. Employees need to give up their personal workstations, store all their belongings in a locker, find a different location to work in every day (or several times a day), and sit next to different people all the time. Many employees find all this a great sacrifice. However, we have seen an example where, with the assistance of the change manager, the organisation managed to develop a workplace model that made the best of both worlds.

Employees work in neighbourhoods which stay in the same location for three months, and then the neighbourhoods rotate. While this model would not suit every business, it has certainly helped this organisation bring new dynamism into the way they operate, while increasing productivity and satisfaction.



When employees are involved in the creation of their work environment, their productivity tends to increase significantly

CONCLUSION

The role of the change manager is to plan and implement effective consultation and communication strategies, with the aim of maximising staff engagement and avoiding the potentially damaging consequences of disconnection between employees and decision makers.

Embarking on a relocation or an upgrade without a professional change management plan in place, and instead reacting to issues as they come up, can lead to catastrophic outcomes, as shown by our experience. Poor communication can lead to stress, anxiety and a steep decline in morale, which are further amplified when toxic rumours start circulating in the workplace, and employees attempt to take matters into their own hands. It's not uncommon that a large number of employees leave the organisation during or after a poorly managed change project.

The essence of good change management is not complicated. Most workplace change projects present similar issues, and people seek answers to similar questions. When the answers are provided to people even before the questions are raised, they will more willingly support the project, and even contribute with their talents, as opposed to standing as obstacles to the changes.

People respond to workplace change differently; however, their needs and behaviours follow certain patterns, which we have described earlier as the six archetypes. It's imperative that decision makers, as well as the Human Resources team, understand people's reactions, and support them through workplace change. It's important to acknowledge that most employees are driven by the intention to work well, and that facing changes to their work environment can be challenging to them.

Effective workplace change management presents multiple benefits. Frequent, open and honest conversations in the lead-up to a workplace transformation project prepare employees for the upcoming changes, informing and empowering them to make the most of the features of the new space. Employees tend to become more invested in the changes, and more willing to adapt the way they work. Studies show that when employees are involved in the creation of their work environment, their productivity tends to increase significantly.

Consultations with employees can also help identify win-win solutions. Listening to employees' hopes and needs, and giving people what they ask for, can significantly increase engagement.

And even when some requests cannot be fulfilled, people will appreciate that their wishes have been considered, and will become more supportive of the change project. In workplaces designed with the employee experience in mind, people naturally tend to be happier and more satisfied.

Inviting employees to shape their work environment to their own needs and taste can turn out to be a pivotal experience for many of them, redefining their relationships with their work and the company. When employees feel that management cares about their experience at work and works with them as partners, people feel inspired to reciprocate the support and trust.

During this experience, many employees realise that how well the space serves them is in part their own responsibility, and when they face issues that hinder their performance, it's in their hands to find a solution. Employees also learn to consciously think about the relationship between the physical environment and their work outcomes, and to use the physical space as one of their work tools.

At the conclusion of a well-managed workplace change project, the organisation is left with a highly functional, attractive and future-proof work environment, well-informed, motivated and loyal employees, strengthened relationships between work teams and departments, as well as a positive and resilient organisational culture.



Calder Consultants are specialists in strategy, concept development, implementation and change management and have delivered some of the world's best performing workplaces. Our team of experts are highly skilled and focused on each client's unique business. Our clients include National Australia Bank, Macquarie and Atlassian, where we have assisted to develop some of the most innovative workplaces in Australia and the world.

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Anetta understands people, places and performance; she has training and experience in architecture, building engineering, evidence-based design research, sick building syndrome, psychology (neuro-linguistic programming) and business leadership.

Before specialising in workplace strategy, Anetta worked in Europe, New Zealand and Australia for over a decade as an architect and environmental consultant. During this time she observed that many workplaces conform to an old concept of an 'office' which is no longer relevant today as business and technology evolve. This motivated her to grow and share her knowledge about this subject; her recently published book 'Create a Thriving Workspace' presents powerful tools for designing spaces where work communities and businesses flourish.

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