

Patterns of Fun: An overview

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Abstract

Fun means different things to different people. These different perceptions of fun are based on demographic differences, hierarchy, role requirements and diversity among people. Dictionary definitions of fun reference elements of enjoyment, amusement, playfulness and pleasure and all of these elements may be relevant in modern workplaces. Fun is a “playful social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure. Drawing on recent literature and empirical data, the purpose of this paper is to use three different forms of workplace fun: managed, organic and task fun. organic, which emerges from employees; managed, which stems from managers; and task, which results from an interaction of employees with the tasks they are assigned. This tripartite division recognizes fun as a multifaceted concept (Tews et al., 2012), yet these three aspects of fun have not been extensively explored in previous research. The three types of fun may potentially compete or even result in misunderstandings that can negatively impact morale and workplace relationships. Hence this division reveals the underlying tensions of paradox inherent in workplace fun. This has implications for how fun is enacted, encouraged and even managed in organizations (Warren and Fineman, 2007a).

Introduction to Fun

There is little consensus regarding the meaning of “fun” (Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003), because what is fun (and/or funny) to an individual may be just as easily considered offensive, demeaning and/or silly to a different person. The term fun is often confounded with the concepts of humour, laughter, funny and joking, but is, in fact, a distinct but overlapping concept. For example, while humour is said to occur when amusing stimuli are contextually appropriate (Zillman and Cantor, 1976), and a reaction such as a smile or laugh occurs (Chapman and Foot, 1976), fun does not necessarily involve laughter or humour. Rather, definitions of fun comprise elements of activity, enjoyment, pleasure, frivolity (Fluegge, 2008), spontaneity, surprise, informality (Fineman, 2006) and even play (Costea et al., 2005; Dandridge, 1986). Ultimately, workplace fun can be seen as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment or pleasure” (Fluegge, 2008, p. 15).

Recently, several practitioners, books, articles, and consultants have recommended several ways and activities to make some fun surroundings at work. These embrace several activities like to share funny letters or e-mails with others, organizing an worker “Pet Show” wherever workers will get their pets to work, having “welcome to the company” parties for brand spanking new workers, managers prepare pan cake breakfasts or hamburgers when work for all workers on special occasions, holding “ugly tie”, “ugly sweater”, “ugly hat” or “ugly pants” days, having theme days (or weeks or months), organizing a best cookie contest, painting the common spaces like reception area, break room, conference room etc. so that bright colors will enliven the surroundings and having plants and flowers all around these areas to offer a way of aliveness, holding team sporting events - darts, baseball, bowling, something that gets everybody concerned, designating one section of the workplace because the “fun corner” and inspiring workers to post cartoons, jokes, fun activities schedule, fun committee member’s name or alternative materials that will please others, to rent a theater and take the full crew ad lib to the films, holding a family party wherever members of the family will tour the workplace and meet co-workers, holding a lottery wherever the winner gets driven to and from add the corporate by a machine, organizing a baby image contest wherever everybody brings their own baby picture and post them on bulletin board and have

contests see who can identify the most people from the pictures, to start a work choir, orchestra or band, to organize a fun committee, to charter a bus, sponsor a road trip to a popular concert or music festival for your employees, decorating your desk, your work space or your office, flying paper airplanes in the office, having a pool party at the manager's house with a potluck dinner, to take some time for a brainstorming for employees to come up with their ideas of fun, hiring a masseuse for employees to keep the stress level down from working long hours (Boydjian, 1999; Fry & Fischer, 2003, p. 10; Gostick & Christopher, 2008, p. 158; Kerr, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Podmoroff, 2005, p. 203; Putzier, 2001; Scott, 2008).

The Paradox

Our focus is on workplace fun and we are examining this using paradox theory. Paradox involves opposites (Clegg et al., 2002), with the key feature being “the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements” (Cameron and Quinn, 1988, p. 2). Paradox can be viewed as two opposite poles that are the “extremes of a continuum” (Clegg et al., 2002, p. 485). Paradox is a common occurrence in many aspects of organizational life, operation and social relations (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Clegg et al., 2002; Cameron and Quinn, 1988; Eisenhardt, 2000). Organizations are key sites for paradox since their quest to be ordered and controlled (“organized”) conflicts with elements of freedom, creativity and human autonomy (Clegg et al., 2002). Hence although on first glance paradox may be viewed as dysfunctional, in fact paradox can create tension that supports creativity and innovation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Eisenhardt, 2000). Therefore Clegg et al. propose that a relational approach is optimal as it seeks to find a synthesis between the opposite positions, rather than trying to solve or eliminate paradox.

The duality view of paradox is expanded on by Smith and Lewis (2011). They create a pluralistic perspective that places the tensions created by paradox at the centre of complex systems, calling this the “dynamic equilibrium model”. They state that “tensions are integral to complex systems and that sustainability depends on attending to contradictory yet interwoven demands simultaneously” (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 397). They outline competing tensions that create differing issues for organizations; such as tensions between collaboration and control, individual vs collective approaches, and profit vs social responsibility. These divergent demands create complex and contradictory problems, and paradox occurs at the intersection of these “tensions”.

Based on earlier works (Lewis, 2000; Luscher and Lewis, 2008) Smith and Lewis categorize organizational paradoxes into four groups: belonging, learning, organizing and performing. Rather than treating competing tensions as a dilemma involving an “either/or” choice they suggest that acknowledging the paradox and approaching it from a “both/and” perspective allows an “ambidextrous” approach (see Raisch and Birkenshaw, 2008). Smith and Lewis propose that tensions exist within prevailing organizational systems and are also created through social construction among organizational actors. These tensions remain latent “until environmental factors or cognitive efforts” (p. 390) emphasize oppositional perspectives and thus the latent tensions become salient and are experienced by organizational members.

A dynamic approach to managing paradox allows leaders to support opposing organizational forces, harnessing and repeatedly balancing the competing tensions to create continuous improvement. The dynamic equilibrium model has three key features: first, paradoxical tensions (latent and salient); second, responses that involve confronting the tensions using iterative responses of “splitting and integrating”; and third, outcomes of strategies that involve embracing paradoxical tensions to achieve “short term peak performance that fuels long-term success” (p. 389). Smith and Lewis contend that adopting a “dynamic equilibrium” enables learning and creativity, fosters flexibility and resilience and allows people to achieve their potential. Thus success can be achieved through paying attention to the “often competing needs of shareholders, customers, employees, communities and suppliers” (p. 389). When linking paradox theory to the concept of fun, adopting this notion of “dynamic equilibrium” can allow us to encapsulate a pluralistic perspective of fun and we can then include varying ideas of fun experienced by people with different demographic attributes and across different levels in organizational hierarchies. This offers flexibility in conceptualizing the concept of fun and allows us to consider fun from perspectives, such as fun that is organized and controlled by management alongside creative and autonomous expressions of fun occurring spontaneously. Together paradox theory and the dynamic equilibrium model offer complementary alternative perspectives into how organizations can deal concurrently with competing demands, and we adopt these perspectives to explore the complexities and tensions of organizational fun.

Smith and Lewis' (2011) dynamic equilibrium model of paradox suggests that organizations can embrace multiple and pluralistic conceptions of organizational dynamics and their model offers us a way of understanding the

competing views of fun expressed by our participants. Using this model, we contend that workplace fun creates competing tensions within individuals and organizations and thus is inherently paradoxical and pluralistic in nature. Tensions arise through different perceptions of what constitutes fun; pressure to participate in so-called “fun” activities;

work demands competing with fun times; and even the tension of leaving a work task that one is enjoying and experiencing as fun for a managed or social “fun” activity. Therefore, the dynamic equilibrium model allows us to recognize and explain the competing tensions created by different types of fun. Our findings show that the pluralistic experiences of fun are significant to participants and therefore we have synthesized three types of fun into a tripartite model that clearly articulates how the paradoxical conceptions of fun can operate and flourish simultaneously in the studied organizations.

Conceptions of fun

Researchers recognize the ambiguity created by differing perceptions of fun (Owler et al., 2010) and suggest that fun should not be investigated as a “unitary concept” – rather the multidimensional aspects of fun must be considered (Tews et al., 2012, p. 111). Organizational tensions in defining fun reside in the contrast between fun as a marvel that occurs naturally between organizational members (organic fun; Plester et al., 2015), and the idea that fun can be consciously and even tactically organized by managers to fulfil some organizational objectives (managed, official or packaged fun; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Although it seems positive and aspirational when organizations attempt to create fun activities or events in workplaces, such contrived (managed) fun can result in cynicism and employees may feel patronized and demeaned (Fleming, 2005; Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Contrastingly, organic fun that is spontaneously generated by organizational members and occurs naturally, often in small interactions such as jokes, horseplay and even physical interactions (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Plester and Orams, 2008; Plester and Sayers, 2007) is usually preferred and perceived as genuine.

The third, emerging perspective on workplace fun suggests that for some organizational members, fun is experienced within actual work tasks (Gropner and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Plester et al., 2015). This final construction of fun suggests that work itself is a form of fun and some workplace responsibilities are “personally enjoyable” (Tews et al., 2012, p. 108). This third conception of fun is paradoxical to popular assumptions that assume fun and work are separate and distinct from each other. Recent research (Tews et al., 2012, Plester et al., 2015) challenges the traditional dichotomy between work tasks and fun activities suggesting that for some people they can be synonymous. This notion of fun experienced within work tasks suggests that such an experience of fun constitutes what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) termed flow – related to the concept of engagement (Fluegge, 2008) and considered to be a short-term experience of engagement (Albrecht, 2010; Moneta, 2010).

Types of Fun

In our study we identify three forms of fun: organic, which emerges from employees; managed, which stems from managers; and task, which results from an interaction of employees with the tasks they are assigned. This tripartite division recognizes fun as a multifaceted concept (Tews et al., 2012), yet these three aspects of fun have not been extensively explored in previous research. The three types of fun may potentially compete or even result in misunderstandings that can negatively impact morale and workplace relationships. Hence this division reveals the underlying tensions of paradox inherent in workplace fun. This has implications for how fun is enacted, encouraged and even managed in organizations (Warren and Fineman, 2007a).

Using current conceptions of workplace fun, we can begin to uncover some specific tensions that create paradox when exploring the notion of workplace fun. This paradox resides in the tensions between three types of fun. The first type is “organic fun” which occurs naturally between organizational members through interactions that arise spontaneously. A second form is “managed fun” (also termed “official” or packaged fun; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009) which is consciously and even strategically organized by managers to fulfil organizational objectives. Third is “task fun” which employees experience in work tasks and this third dimension in particular, is not extensively examined in the extant research. We also invoke Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 2000) concept of “flow” to help understand how our participants experience a level of enjoyment and absorption in their work tasks that they then construct and perceive as a form of workplace fun. In exploring the underlying tension inherent in the notion of fun

we find significant implications for managers in regards to creating fun events, and fostering fun in the everyday organizational context.

Organic fun

organic fun refers to forms of naturally occurring fun and is characterized by casual or spontaneous initiation (Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Plester and Orams, 2008, Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990). This type of fun is generated by organizational members often in small interactions such as banter, joking and horseplay (Plester and Sayers, 2007). In order to encourage organic workplace fun the popular press has endorsed companies that seek to create a work climate conducive to fun (Tews et al., 2012). Companies such as Southwest Airlines, IBM, Google and PikePlace Fish Market have been applauded for deliberately making fun a part of their corporate cultures (Collinson, 2002; Karl et al., 2008). However, it is also possible that once a company has been identified as being “fun” (particularly in the media) true organic fun may be reduced in favour of managed imperatives and endorsements to have fun. Such requirements would then risk fun becoming a managed organizational component; having a specific objective of fun collides with spontaneous and unguided organic fun.

Their second dimension of friendly social interactions aligns with our conception of organic fun, although our notion of organic fun is broader including a wider range of activities and experiences. Organic forms of fun such as small joking interactions, horseplay and even mild pranks seem to offer short releases from workplace pressures and occur naturally throughout the day for these employees. It seems that such spontaneous, momentary forms of fun do not contain the implied compulsion to experience fun and enjoyment and this allows employees the freedom to engage with the fun or ignore it if they are busy or just not in the mood. The freedom from coercion and the element of personal choice appears to be an important component of the experience of fun that is integral to organic fun but mostly absent in managed fun.

Managed fun

Managed fun incorporates formal fun activities such as games, sharing food and drinks, outings, gift exchanges and light-hearted competitions (Ford et al., 2003; Karl et al., 2005, 2008; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Managed fun occurs when organizations attempt to create activities or events in workplaces with the specific purpose of encouraging fun and engagement (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Intentionally attempting to create workplace fun runs the risk of backfiring, chasing fun away and creating instead discomfort, ridicule and dismay – again highlighting the complex and paradoxical perceptions of fun. Although fun creation is seemingly an innocuous and aspirational objective, researchers warn that such contrived fun creation can cause cynicism in employees who may feel patronized by management (Fleming, 2005; Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Moreover, the term “managed fun” in itself appears to contain a paradox in the juxtaposition of two such competing terms, to the point where “managed fun” can be considered an oxymoron (Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Thus, if fun needs to be managed and introduced, this suggests that it does not emerge spontaneously from tasks or organically within the work environment. There is one study that explores sources of workplace fun (Tews et al., 2012) and these are formal fun activities; co-worker interactions; and fun job responsibilities.

Tews and colleagues’ research examines fun as a predictor of applicant attraction and does not specifically focus on developing or categorizing sources of fun but rather uses dimensions of fun to predict how individual perceptions of fun influences the quality of applicants for organizational roles. Their formal fun aspect incorporates fun at work that is officially organized (akin to Bolton and Houlihan’s “packaged fun” and what we call “managed fun”). A “managed fun” workplace event may offer the opportunity for organic, spontaneous fun to occur in a relaxed atmosphere (as suggested by Jazmin and Mark). Although managed fun is often enjoyable for employees, our data highlight that sometimes fun that is arranged by the organization, with the best of intentions, can actually create the opposite effect to what was intended. This is particularly poignant when employees feel obligated to participate in an activity

that makes them feel uncomfortable or even foolish (see Fleming, 2005).

Task fun

Task fun, the final conception of fun that adds to our pluralistic and paradoxical conceptions of workplace fun, is the notion of fun being experienced within actual workplace tasks (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Gropper and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Peluchette and Karl (2005) define “experienced fun” as the “extent to which a person perceives the existence of fun in the workplace” (p. 269) and link this to increased energy and motivation for workers. However, the common element among earlier studies is that fun “experiences” focus on the notion of infusing fun into the working environment so that people experience fun alongside, but not within, their work activities and tasks (see Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Karl and Peluchette, 2006a; Baldry and Hallier, 2010). These

studies emphasize the work environment as important to the experience of fun and sample items from scales used show that this categorization of “experienced fun” arises from the wider workplace climate (e.g. “This is a fun place to work”; “we laugh a lot at my workplace” cited in Tews et al., 2012, p. 107). Therefore although these prior conceptions of fun incorporate the notion of experiencing fun in the workplace, they do not specifically propose that fun may be experienced in work tasks and could just as well refer to organic or managed fun (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b; Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Tews et al., 2012).

The third dimension used by Tews et al. (2012) suggests that some job responsibilities are fun due to the enjoyment and fit with a person’s personal interests. This third dimension of fun is tested by Tews et al., with them asking participants to evaluate work tasks in scenarios which provided the basis for their ratings of their attraction to the job and organization. The jobs being evaluated had tasks that were described as “personally enjoyable, meaningful and a solid fit with one’s personal interests” (p. 108). This is useful in showing that some work tasks can be considered fun and their findings show that although fun is “fundamental” in the workplace, job responsibilities have a stronger impact on applicant attraction than specifically created fun activities.

Other concepts exist which can inform our conceptualization of task fun, particularly flow and engagement. Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2000) explored the notion of what makes activities enjoyable and why people persevere at tasks that may have no specific extrinsic reward. He found that people enjoy tasks due to the following key factors: the use of skills; the pattern and actions experienced in tasks; the development of personal skills; friendship associated with the task; the chance to measure oneself against others and against one’s own ideals; emotional release; and prestige or regard from others. He coined the concept “flow” as the state where people act with total involvement and claimed that such an experience creates enjoyment. He deemed that although play activities allowed the greatest experience of flow, flow could occur at

work also. Csikszentmihalyi concluded that the challenge and utilization of one’s skills, and the sense of control over one’s environment, can create great enjoyment that makes work similar to play.

Some work tasks are experienced as “fun” by our participants (see Kent, Jim, Marjorie, Natalie and Mike above). Each of these participants claims to enjoy some of their work tasks and the fun that may be generated from these. Kent clearly articulates that the challenge of solving legal issues is a form of fun to him and this links to elements in Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 2000) model of flow such as using personal skills and measuring the self-against ideals.

Although Tews et al. (2012) have briefly discussed the notion of task fun by suggesting that some job responsibilities are fun and therefore attractive to new recruits, task fun has not been comprehensively investigated as a significant element in overall conceptions of workplace fun or as an extension to the concept of flow. There is little literature that suggests that task fun is prevalent within organizations but our findings suggest that this previously underexplored form of fun is important to most participants in our study. Although we have theorized this form of fun using the concept of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010) we propose that this category of fun is worthy of further research and theoretical development. Such development could be undertaken within studies on engagement (see Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2008) or as part of more in-depth organizational investigations of fun and humour.

Fun in its different forms

Three types of workplace fun have been identified. This reveals it to be a multifaceted construct and increases the complexities inherent in the phenomenon. The first kind of fun is labeled as “organic”. This is defined as fun that occurs naturally among employees. Casual joking around can brighten up the working day and nurture a stronger sense of togetherness. Many workers tend to regard impulsive fun in a favorable light because they can usually choose whether or not to join in. However, Plester *et al.* (2015) report some negative sentiments towards organic fun. Respondents from companies in New Zealand expressed concerns that fun can sometimes be:

- inappropriate, when it emerges at a time when employees should be acting in a more serious manner;
- undesirable, making people reluctant to participate; and
- unproductive, as it can hinder the completion of important tasks.

The notion of fun being “risky” was also voiced. Maybe the risk lies in the supposedly harmless nature of playing a few pranks at work. A fine-line exists between banter and bullying, and it does not take much to cross that particular divide. This further illustrates the paradox that exists with workplace fun. Some respondent concerns will undoubtedly be driven by traditional views deeming work and fun as mutually exclusive. Times are changing though. Managers realize that workplace fun can have a positive impact and are consequently placing it much higher on their agendas.

One significant consequence of this shifting perspective is the growing propensity for employers to arrange fun activities for the workforce. The gamut of events includes birthday celebrations, performance awards and fundraising. Team building is also a motivating factor. Events frequently take the guise of social outings but can also be manifest in the shape of competitions, games and gift exchanges. Compared to the organic type, enthusiasm for this more formal brand of fun is noticeably lower. Many workers consider it to be artificial and contrived. More worryingly are comments about:

- feeling that activities and events are imposed upon employees;
- strong pressure to participate to the point of managers being coercive; and
- likelihood of individuals feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed when forced to join in activities like karaoke singing.

But, yet another contradiction is that some employees experience a sense of feeling excluded if they do not attend certain events. Resistance to what Plester *et al.* term “managed fun” is extreme in certain cases. One respondent stays off work when fun days are on the menu. Constant demands to join in made another employee hand in his resignation. These examples illustrate how workplace fun can have the opposite effect than intended if ill thought out. Managed wrongly, fun has the potential to damage morale and workplace relationships. That in itself is something of an irony.

Managers who organize fun events have the best of intentions. It would be wrong to claim otherwise. Such activities afford employees an opportunity to relax. Fun gives them a release from the pressures of serious work. Many welcome these distractions with open arms. Others clearly do not though. Tension is the inevitable result of these differing perceptions of fun. Task fun is the least recognized form of workplace fun and has not been attracted much research attention. It is arguably the most important though. Aristotle seemed to realize this when stating that “pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work”. Employees, currently, evidently share the sentiments of the ancient Greek philosopher. Enjoyment gleaned from actual job tasks is their idea of workplace fun. For some people, having an interesting job brings them happiness. The impact is magnified in circumstances where they perceive that job responsibilities are congruent with their personal interests. Equating work tasks and interactions with fun is likelier still when workplace conditions and organizational culture are conducive to such a mindset.

The concept of “flow” helps to elucidate why task fun is so significant. Advocates contend that enjoyment results “when people act with total involvement”. Such individuals become immersed in their job activities to a degree that the distinction between work and play becomes blurred. The positivity associated with engagement generates similar effects.

Conclusion

Fun is important to people at work, influencing turnover, attraction to different roles and industries, affecting personal enjoyment, and impacting upon personal relationships (Tews et al., 2013). In exploring the concept of workplace fun, we make two main contributions to the literature. First, by combining earlier research and our empirical data, we re-conceptualize current conceptions of workplace fun and we adopt the term “task fun” as we further investigate the idea that fun is experienced within actual work tasks. We then synthesize the extant literature and our data to conceptualize workplace fun as a tripartite model including: managed; organic; and task fun. Second, our use of the dynamic equilibrium model of paradox (Smith and Lewis, 2011) as our theoretical framework is novel in fun research. This framework allows us to work with the plurality of competing and overlapping experiences of fun discussed by our participants. Our suggested model of fun encapsulates a clearer pluralistic framework that offers future researchers an updated theoretical platform from which they can further extend the popular and emerging focus on workplace fun.

This initial review of fun at work suggests three – potentially competing – conceptions of what is and is not fun, namely organic, managed and task fun. This illustrates how the simple idea of workplace fun starts to emerge as complex, paradoxical and problematic. With such complexity, ambiguity and paradox beginning to become apparent, we seek to extend both research and current popular assumptions about the so-called “simple” concept of workplace fun and the effects it may produce. Tews et al. (2012) strongly argue that fun should not be investigated as a “unitary concept” (p. 111) but that the multidimensional aspects of fun must be explored to further understand the organizational fun phenomenon.

From our review, we suggest three conceptions of fun: experiences that occur organically in the workplace; managed fun that is planned and organized by management; and task fun that we position as an extension to the concept of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010). We use the notion of paradox and, within this, the

dynamic equilibrium model (see Smith and Lewis, 2011) to build upon existing conceptualizations of fun and present a clear, unified model of fun.

With the three identified types of fun, our findings emphasize that the concept of workplace fun is a paradox experienced by organizational members who have simultaneously competing views of what constitutes workplace fun, as well as some synthesized views where they agreed upon facets of the concept which they link to enjoyment, humour and relaxation. The latent tensions experienced in workplace fun involve assumptions that fun is positive and should be encouraged and enjoyed by all. Deal and Kennedy's (1982) influential claims that fun, play and humour should be a part of western workplaces may even cause managers to feel that they should be implementing fun in their organizations and that this is an expectation of modern employees (Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Indeed, the recent trend to focus on engagement to drive performance (Harter et al., 2010), and managers' measurement against their teams engagement (Xu and Cooper-Thomas, 2011), generate imperatives to construct fun. Once fun initiatives are created, such as a dress-up day, then the inconsistent nature of fun is revealed and the very individualized nature of the concept becomes apparent. While some organizational members enjoy and encourage organized fun and they experience and construct these experiences as fun, others disdain the experience and consider it "not fun". For some individuals, they perceive various aspects of such experiences as concurrently both fun and not fun. This brings to light the latent tensions surrounding fun, making them salient and obvious (see Smith and Lewis, 2011).

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