Seizing Opportunities, Overcoming Productivity Challenges in the Virtually Collaborative Workplace

Social and virtual ways of working can dissolve the temporal and structural barriers that block the advance of individual and collective business performance. By following a few simple rules, organizations can overcome the common pitfalls of short-term thinking, as well as concerns of pervasive distractions, personal detachment and business disruption.
Executive Summary

Amid the prolonged global economic downturn, organizations are emphasizing cost containment initiatives that create new operational efficiencies without hampering their overall productivity. Luckily, a swath of new cloud-powered technology is enabling many organizations to create a “new workplace” that will help the business work more effectively and efficiently. In this new workplace, employees no longer need to toil exclusively in the office but can collaborate virtually wherever they want, inside and outside the organization, with a greater number of individuals than ever before.

This new virtually collaborative workplace clearly has much to offer businesses and individuals. At the societal level, its emergence is helping to ease traffic jams, reduce the carbon footprint and save money spent on infrastructure and energy. At the individual employee level, studies show it is improving work/life balance and job satisfaction.¹ At the company level, the new workplace is contributing to elevated business continuity, greater cost savings (e.g., on office space), wider access to a global talent pool and increased worker productivity.

But with every step forward, C-suite leaders are worried that overall worker productivity, and the business’s collective operational performance,² could suffer in the near-term. Senior executives, particularly those who experienced the dyspepsia caused by previous new waves of technologies (i.e., Web 2.0 and client/server computing) are particularly concerned. Many wonder if the influence of new cloud-powered technologies, in concert with ever-increasing globalization and process virtualization, as well as changing employee demographics (as embodied by the rise of the millennial generation), will wash across their enterprises like an unrelenting tsunami, causing workplace interruptions.
and information overload. At chip manufacturer Intel, for example, the annual cost of reduced efficiency (in the form of time lost to handling unnecessary interruptions and recovering from information overload) is estimated at nearly $1 billion.³

Successfully channeling the positive and negative effects associated with the new virtually collaborative ways of working requires a myriad of skills that touch on a variety of academic disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, information technology and economics, to name a few. To truly capture the benefits, and avoid productivity losses, organizations must take appropriate action, and quickly.

This white paper defines the new virtual and collaborative workplace, explains how it can lead to productivity loss, describes the best practices that can ameliorate the downsides and lays out the multi-pronged approach needed to achieve the upsides. It covers how organizations can:

• Ensure employees are outfitted with the right collaboration tools and devices.

• Set communications ethics and train the workforce in handling information overload.

• Stimulate regular face-time between knowledge workers.

• Re-allocate context tasks so knowledge workers can focus on core tasks.

• Manage the workforce based on results achieved rather than time spent.
The New Workplace

So what exactly is this new workplace that everyone is talking about? To start with, it is no longer one physical place. Today’s knowledge worker can work at any time, from anywhere and with anyone (see Figure 1). Three characteristics define this new workplace:

- As a result of new multifunctional mobile computing/communications devices, individuals are always connected.
- The mental distance between home, the office and the “third place” (e.g., satellite offices, hotels, trains, coffee bars, libraries) is disappearing.
- It is easier than ever for individuals across the global extended enterprise—company employees, business partners and customers—to collaborate using social networking tools and techniques.

Always Connected

Two billion people are connected via the Internet today, and their ranks are swelling, with an average predicted growth rate of 200 million per year.1 The introduction of smartphones and tablet computers, alongside PCs and laptops, has ushered in an era of ubiquitous connectivity for most knowledge workers. A typical knowledge worker turns to e-mail 50 to 100 times a day and spends an average of 20 hours a week managing it. Roughly 85% of professionals say they would take a laptop on vacation to stay connected; not surprisingly in today’s high-velocity, always connected work world, 11% of people surveyed say they check their e-mail while using bathroom facilities.2

It’s not merely individuals but entire organizations that suffer from Internet connectivity addiction. Organizations provide their employees with BlackBerrys to access e-mail pushed to them in real time; moreover, the advent of Apple’s iPad has set off a corporate feeding frenzy for tablets, a technological advance that was originally seen as primarily a consumer gadget. In a 2011 survey by Dimensional

All Together Now

The new workplace is defined by these three characteristics.
Enabled by new technologies, shifting company policies and a change of mindset brought about by the consumerization of IT, individuals are increasingly working from anywhere but the office.

Work Location Convergence

The locations where knowledge workers perform work are converging. The mental distance between home, the office and any other place (e.g., satellite offices, hotels, trains, coffee bars, libraries) is disappearing. Enabled by new technologies, shifting company policies and a change of mindset brought about by the consumerization of IT, individuals are increasingly working from anywhere but the office. According to Forrester, 6% 76% of North American and European firms report that at least some of their employees work outside a corporate office full-time, and 98% report having employees who work outside of a corporate office part-time or occasionally. For many, the office has become a place to not necessarily perform actual work but rather to catch up and interact with senior leaders and colleagues. Many companies recognize this development and have started to recast their offices from work factories to meeting points. Some are also reducing their physical footprints using a reservation-style “hoteling” system that allows employees to reserve a workspace when they require one. Other organizations use smart offices (that can be flexibly rented on demand) or eliminate their offices altogether.

Global Collaboration

Global project teams are becoming increasingly prominent as individuals across the world collaborate both inside and outside conventional organizational structures. Many large organizations nowadays have a global footprint that enables individuals to collaborate with co-workers, contractors, partners and customers across multiple time zones in real time.

For example, a product manager of a global telecom company in Paris can set up a videoconference in the morning with an external delivery manager in India to propose changes to the way his company’s order management processes are handled. In the afternoon, the same product manager can conduct a workshop on the department’s new product portfolio with 15 colleagues spread across the U.S. over WebEx, after which the presentation is made available to the whole company through Salesforce.com Chatter.

As China and India continue to deliver more engineering graduates than the U.S. and Europe combined, organizations will look eastward to fortify their ranks with new knowledge worker talent. Although a share of these workers will commute around the globe, new technologies allow work to be partially allocated or outright dispersed to any location. Current technological developments and functional advancements in process coordination tools will result in more virtual collaboration among newly globalized project teams. These global teams (partly external to the organization or not) have the potential to be vastly more productive than their localized counterparts for numerous reasons:

- No longer are they restricted to commuting times and local resources; they can tap into talent “wherever it lives.”
- Subject matter experts can easily be involved in multiple projects concurrently, ensuring their specific skills are exploited to the fullest extent possible.
- Geographic spread and associated time zones can be availed to the organization’s advantage.
Employee Productivity Loss

Without a doubt, the new workplace has increased knowledge worker productivity tremendously. The benefits it delivers have been center-stage for some time now, and most organizations are slowly but surely initiating programs to capitalize on them. At the same time, the three aforementioned attributes of the new workplace introduce a few downsides to worker productivity, as well.

Always Connected

Organizations are continuously pummeled by vast amounts of information that land on individuals’ desks, digital inboxes and always-on smartphones. Any portion of this information may be required for employees, partners or customers to properly and effectively conduct their work, and supplementary details are often just a few mouse clicks away. The problem is twofold: There is just too much data, causing information overload, and it is presented in ways that distract knowledge workers from the tasks at hand.

A much revered knowledge worker skill is the ability to filter through vast amounts of information rapidly, yet accurately. Based on personal experience, we know that most knowledge workers do not possess this skill to the extent required by today’s workplace. They drown in a tidal wave of information overflowing their inboxes and cognitive capacities, requiring many to dedicate additional hours to complete work-related activities. This can upset work-life balance, cause physical or mental exhaustion, depress morale and stress or burn-out key players across the value chain.3

With new information flowing in frequently through e-mail, RSS feeds, BlackBerry Messenger chats, managers tapping shoulders and ad hoc meetings, knowledge workers spend a large majority of their work days multi-tasking through a flood of distractions. Multi-tasking is often considered an inefficient way of coping with information overload, as it has the unintended consequence of undercutting productivity, creativity and sound decision-making.9 A study by Microsoft reveals that once one of the software giant’s employees is interrupted by an e-mail notification, it takes, on average, 24 minutes to return to the suspended task.3

Work Location Convergence

Many knowledge workers enjoy the luxury of working from a location other than the office. But as with all matters in life, too much of a good thing can be harmful. Research by Timothy Golden10 shows that telework may be associated with:

• Social and professional isolation, leading to reduced morale and productivity.
• The feeling among remote employees of feeling left “out of the loop,” leading to a psychological separation mimicking the physical distance.
• Difficulty collaborating with remote employees because they are not physically available when needed.
• Tendency of managers to struggle with remote worker performance measurement and deem them as less critical to the corporate mission.

As teleworkers are not present at the office, they are unable to learn by watching colleagues perform their work tasks.11 The teleworker is also deprived of chance encounters on the work floor that promote cooperation and innovation.

Managers underestimate the importance of allowing employees to interact informally and solve problems in innovative and creative ways that may not have
been considered on their own. Even when a knowledge worker resides in the office, the workplace is often so poorly designed that opportunities for informal interaction are limited or non-existent. There are also psychological barriers; in many organizations, it is deemed inappropriate to linger at the coffee machine despite the fact that conventional wisdom suggests these areas are breeding grounds for much-needed informal interaction.\textsuperscript{12}

**Global Collaboration**

The emergence of real-time communication and collaboration tools allows organizations to tap talent from across the world and lash together focused teams at a moment’s notice. This new way of working poses new challenges that are not easily overcome by leaders of such teams. Research conducted by OnPoint Consulting\textsuperscript{13} shows that key performance barriers include:

- Infrequent face-to-face contact as a team.
- Effort to build and sustain an effective virtually collaborative atmosphere.
- The ability to manage poor performers and management of part-time team members.

When not addressed, these barriers seriously hamper the productivity and results of a globalized project team.

Most knowledge workers experience problems with the default collaboration tools they use today, such as the telephone, e-mail, some form of intranet, a content management system (such as SharePoint), wikis and (corporate) blogs. A recent Forrester report shows that advanced enterprise collaboration software tools (such as Yammer, Chatter, etc.) will represent a $6.4 billion market in 2016 (up from $600 million). Despite this boom, only 12\% of information workers in the U.S. currently have access to these tools, and only 8\% use these tools at least once a week (see Figure 2).\textsuperscript{14}

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**Access and Utilization of Advanced Enterprise Collaboration Software Tools**

![Graph showing access and utilization of advanced enterprise collaboration software tools]

*Response base: 4,985 U.S. information workers*

*Source: Forrester Research, January 13, 2011*

*Figure 2*
How to Create a Virtually Collaborative Workplace

Given the glaring challenges, how can organizations enable remote workers to be more productive? Fortunately, there are ample examples of organizations and individuals who do this quite effectively. They structure their information flows, create efficient work environments, lead effective project teams and deploy mass collaboration tools in a manner in which the productivity benefits significantly outweigh the potential disruptive elements. The challenge for other organizations is to adopt these best practices and discover how to best apply key learnings to their own enterprises.

Always Connected

Clearly, as mentioned earlier, there’s too much data, causing information overload for knowledge workers across the extended enterprise. This data explosion has an unintended consequence of distracting many employees from the tasks at hand. The human brain is not wired to continuously absorb heaps of data and perform precise analysis on it, without causing a serious system slowdown, or worse. Computers are much better at these tasks.

To survive in what is now referred to as the “Petabyte Age,” organizations need new information management tools and processes that more effectively manage workflow. One solution to the constant torrent of distractions (suggested by collaboration expert Jason Fried) is to artificially create long stretches of uninterrupted “thinking time.” Intel kicked off a pilot project in 2008 to test this approach by having 300 employees deactivate their e-mail boxes, turn off IM, route phones to voicemail, avoid meetings and place “Do Not Disturb” signs near their desks every Tuesday morning. Intel program managers reported enhanced “effectiveness, efficiency and quality of life for numerous employees;” and on top of this, 71% of employees recommended the pilot project be expanded.

On an individual level, employees can counter information overload by creating a system that filters, sorts and organizes information and presents it in bite-size chunks. Although scientific proof is scarce, great success has been achieved by well-known time-management methodologies, such as David Allen’s “Getting Things Done” (GTD). Tony Schwartz, CEO of The Energy Project (a company that helps organizations bolster their productivity), promotes working in intense 90-minute bursts (and napping after lunch) to maintain focus and creativity throughout the work day. The Internet is littered with anecdotal success stories of people employing these methodologies for personal productivity gains, and the authors of this paper can testify to their potential personally!

Work Location Convergence

Remote work can be an extremely efficient and effective tool in a knowledge worker’s arsenal, but some tasks, such as collaborating creatively in groups, cannot be easily performed virtually. For this reason, organizations must find a way to capitalize on the benefits of working remotely while turning their offices into meeting points meant to foster collaboration and stimulate creative encounters. The most illustrative and best proven case is that of Microsoft Netherlands, which has radically, but successfully, implemented a new workplace vision.

In a three-pronged approach called the “New World of Work” program, Microsoft Netherlands has blended the “physical” (a new office building), the “virtual” (digital workstyle and the technology to support it) and the “mental” dimensions (adopt-
**Taking Virtual Collaboration Ever Higher**

As a provider of global IT, consulting and business services, collaboration is encoded in our DNA. In fact, our employees are based worldwide, some in offshore locations like India and China, others in near-shore facilities for North American and European clients in Hungary and Argentina.

To facilitate our work, we have created a global virtual collaboration platform called Cognizant 2.0 (C2) that leverages Web 2.0 social tools and techniques that borrow heavily from the consumer space (think Facebook meets Twitter). The platform has taken work execution, social design and service delivery to the next level. It consists of two major parts:

1. A high-powered knowledge management (KM) and social computing system that can filter both structured and unstructured data to enable employees to tap into the best thinking by domain experts across the globe in real-time to enhance collaboration and service delivery effectiveness.

2. A standardized project and workflow management system that facilitates collaboration and automatically coordinates complex and dynamically changing global projects with capabilities like out-of-the-box process workflow templates, planning tool integration, key delivery metrics and governance dashboards.

The platform is used within Cognizant itself but can also be harnessed by clients. AstraZeneca,* a global research-based pharmaceutical company, is using the platform to increase productivity and reduce cost by sharing information globally to support its clinical studies across the globe.

In C2, participation and collaboration is stimulated through functionality such as:

1. Micro-blogging (called “Cweets”).
2. Blogs, wikis and multi-layered discussion forums.
3. A real-time “Activity Stream” that aggregates notifications.
4. Ispace, an Idea Management System for crowd-sourcing and idea campaigns.
5. An integrated learning capability providing recommended courses.

A tailor-made plug-in allows users to easily synchronize their Microsoft Outlook calendars and tasks in C2, ensuring they never enter the same information twice.

To measure the impact the platform has on project performance and personal productivity, a series of measurement exercises were recently enacted. For each project, a "usage effectiveness" score was calculated, based on how intensively the platform is used.

Performance parameters measured and tracked include:

- **Productivity improvement** (measured as function points delivered per day).
- **Span** (ratio of supervisors to team members).
- **On-time** (projects delivered on time).
- **On-budget** (projects delivered within budget).
- **Load factor** (measured as ratio of the actual effort expended by associates working on the project to the available effort).
- **Defect density** (measure of post-production defects).

Key findings of the analysis for the first half of 2011 include:

- A 9% improvement in productivity in projects using C2 effectively over the average value of productivity across projects.
- A 4% improvement in the ability to deliver projects on-time.
- A 9% improvement in the ability to deliver on-budget.
- A 36% improvement in span for projects using the platform effectively compared with those with low usage effectiveness.
- Projects using C2 effectively had 25% less defect density than those with low usage effectiveness.

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To truly reap the benefits from the increasingly virtual and collaborative workplace, smart business leaders will need to rethink their operational models, reinvent their workforces and rewire their operations to enhance organizational productivity and extend competitive advantage.

Astounding results were reported: Productivity soared by 25%; employee satisfaction rose from 50% in 2008 to 80% in 2011; sick leave numbers dropped from 2.5% to 1.5%; and real estate costs declined 30%.

Of course Microsoft is very well positioned to apply (its own) cutting-edge software to support its business processes. The strength of the company’s program is its realization that the only path to success was to simultaneously address the physical, virtual and mental dimensions of its new workplace. These learnings can be applied by any type of organization, and non-technology organizations can follow suit. Take, for example, the City of Barcelona helping locals and tourists easily find “third places” from which to work by providing a rating of how suitable (measured through table availability, meeting rooms, printers, noise levels, power outlets, etc.) different locations in the city are, based on user feedback.

Applying the Benefits to Your Enterprise

Businesses are at an important “shift point,” a time where key megatrends are reshaping marketplace rules, how work is conducted and value is created. This presents an almost unprecedented opportunity for companies to restructure by better integrating technology with key business processes. To truly reap the benefits from the increasingly virtual and collaborative workplace, smart business leaders will need to rethink their operational models, reinvent their workforces and rewire their operations to enhance organizational productivity and extend competitive advantage. The challenges posed in this white paper suggest a multi-pronged approach that requires the following actions:

- Ensure employees are outfitted with the right collaboration tools and devices.
- Set communications ethics and train the workforce in handling information overload.
- Stimulate regular face-time between knowledge workers.
- Re-allocate context tasks so knowledge workers can focus on high-value activities.
- Manage the workforce based on results achieved rather than by time present.

Ensure Employees are Outfitted with the Right Collaboration Tools and Devices

Although today’s collaboration tools bring a wealth of productivity improvement opportunities, most companies remain unable to successfully leverage them. As a start, companies provide state-of-the-art collaboration tools such as
videoconferencing and smartphones. Too many companies limit accessibility to managers and above. This is not only unacceptable to millennials and those with a more collaborative mindset, but it is also often driven by the wrong reasons—which are often cost-related.

Increased productivity and employee job satisfaction will easily make up for the required investment. If an employee is provided with a smartphone with e-mail capabilities (even the most basic kind), this investment is earned back if he gains only a few hours of productivity by routing lower priority e-mails while commuting to work. Employees are accustomed to these devices in their personal lives, and organizations must recognize that they can no longer withhold these tools from them.

At a more advanced level, organizations must consider the deployment of advanced social collaboration tools to empower their employees. The selection of such a tool is not an easy process, and multiple vendors are vying for their share of early adopting clientele. Identify the HEROes—highly empowered and resourceful operatives—in your organization to find and deploy the right tool that satisfies your specific requirements.¹⁹

**Reset Norms and Train Knowledge Workers in Handling Information Overload**

Access to the right technological tools can provide a clear boost to personal productivity. The immediate downside of being always connected is that individuals are overwhelmed with information and easily distracted. There are a myriad of personal organization systems and methodologies available—with associated tools and devices, to boot.

The core of the solution lies in first changing the mindset and communication culture within your organization and then equipping your workers with the right tools and devices. Turning off the BlackBerry during the weekend must become accepted to allow creative minds to rejuvenate. Work colleagues should only be involved with tasks or projects where their unique contributions are absolutely necessary to successful outcomes to avoid unproductive multi-tasking throughout their workdays. In order for this critical operational change to counteract deeply embedded organizational norms, a strong example must be set by senior management.⁹

On a more individual level, knowledge workers should be trained in handling information streams. For example, applying David Allen’s GTD principles is a very straightforward but rewarding action that can help any workforce survive, and maybe even thrive, amid massive information flows. The methodology is extremely successful because it takes lists of action items out of the mind and puts them into a reliable system that can be consulted at all times. This allows the employee to remain "on top of the game" and jettison constant worries that nothing is forgotten.²⁰ Some suggestions:

- Make room for workers to employ their own personal information management systems by enabling the installation of technical support tools (e.g., Microsoft Outlook plug-ins).
- Find out what training is applicable to your organization and integrate these programs into your training portfolio.
- Encourage the idea of working in 90-minute cycles, and if someone wants to nap after lunch, by all means let them!
Stimulate Regular Face-Time Between Knowledge Workers

Research shows that the importance of regular face-time cannot be underestimated. Face-time and, in particular, spontaneous casual interactions around the water cooler or coffee machine promote trust, empathy and cooperation between people, all of which are essential to an effective work environment.12

With a local workforce, companies should incent employees to gather in the office at least one day a week. Many consultancies have employed this tactic for years with their “Friday admin” days. With a widely dispersed workforce, it is more challenging to create proximity, but there are simple ways to “plan” casual interactions among distanced people.

One example is the global business management university INSEAD, which found that with dispersed groups, opening the video connection before class, as well as leaving it on during breaks and afterward, stimulated casual interactions between students.12 From our own project experience, we have witnessed the advantages of using a videoconference over a regular phone conference call: better reciprocal understanding, less distractions and an increased willingness to go the extra mile for one another.

Re-allocate Contextual Tasks so Knowledge Workers can Focus on Core Activities

Studies show that knowledge workers spend a large portion of their time on contextual tasks such as creating materials (e.g., presentations, posters and dashboards), merging spreadsheets and processing meeting minutes. The outsourcing of these contextual tasks — often called knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) — is an increasingly popular way of enabling knowledge workers to focus on core activities.

Amazon's Mechanical Turk.com, for example, provides a platform where organizations can decompose and describe specific tasks and have them performed through crowdsourcing to experts with available bandwidth. The U.S. pharma giant Pfizer introduced the “PfizerWorks” program, which allows knowledge workers to pass secondary activities on a 24x5 basis to an offshore support center. Pfizer reported that within a year, it had saved more than 60,000 hours of unproductive time, which can now be used for high-value knowledge work.21

Manage the Workforce Based on Results Achieved vs. Time Spent

An increasingly geographically dispersed workforce — somewhere between home and across the ocean — prevents managers from monitoring the work of their employees on an hourly basis (provided this ever was a good idea from the start, considering the interruptions caused by monitoring). Through increasing geographic distance, it is becoming ever clearer that performance management requires a different approach: managing based on output (i.e., results) rather than input (i.e., time/presence).

For most knowledge-based jobs, research shows that output-based management is effective, but it requires a different mindset on the part of senior leaders. First, they must infuse trust into the organization. Giving employees the trust to get their work done at the time, speed and place they desire has been shown to improve productivity and performance.

In his book The Future of Work,22 MIT professor Thomas Malone describes how knowledge workers developing new information technologies work more effectively in decentralized organizations that have abandoned command-and-control management philosophies. Malone defines decentralization as “participation of people in making the decisions that matter to them.”
A well-known case study is the results-only work environment (ROWE) at U.S. electronics retailer Best Buy. Initially started as a revolt by employees who were unhappy with being assessed on the time they spent behind their desk, this strategy empowers employees to design their own work day while being paid on the basis of performance rather than their mere physical presence. Studies suggest that ROWE resulted in a 35% increase in productivity, while reducing attrition by as much as 90%, as well as promoting employee wellness.

Looking Ahead
The new workplace can benefit employees and employers, alike. Organizations are slowly becoming more aware of the pitfalls that prevent them from achieving greater productivity, higher job satisfaction and lower attrition rates. Unshackle your employees from their context tasks; equip them with the tools they need to unleash their potential; and ensure they have the right mindset to handle ever-increasing levels of virtual collaboration across the extended enterprise – anytime, anywhere and from their smart devices of choice. However, be aware that this ultimate empowerment has a potential downside: incredible information overload. Stand ready to treat it wherever it confounds productive work process and results. Subsequently, don’t overlook the importance of face-time and casual interactions, and ensure that your organization measures employees on the results they achieve.

As American academic John M. Richardson, Jr. once said, “When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: Those who made it happen, those who let it happen and those who wonder what happened.” Make sure your organization does not suddenly find itself in the third category. Avoid the productivity pitfalls inherent in a virtually collaborative workplace by taking action now.
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Footnotes

7 Chatter is a Salesforce.com product, know as the “Facebook for the Enterprise,” http://www.salesforce.com/chatter/whatischatter/.
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About Cognizant

Cognizant (NASDAQ: CTSH) is a leading provider of information technology, consulting, and business process outsourcing services, dedicated to helping the world’s leading companies build stronger businesses. Headquartered in Teaneck, New Jersey (U.S.), Cognizant combines a passion for client satisfaction, technology innovation, deep industry and business process expertise, and a global, collaborative workforce that embodies the future of work. With over 50 delivery centers worldwide and approximately 137,700 employees as of December 31, 2011, Cognizant is a member of the NASDAQ-100, the S&P 500, the Forbes Global 2000, and the Fortune 500 and is ranked among the top performing and fastest growing companies in the world. Visit us online at www.cognizant.com or follow us on Twitter: Cognizant.
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