

# The Role of Human Resource Management in Organizational Learning: Employees' Perspectives

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาถึงผลกระทบของกิจกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการบริหารทรัพยากรบุคคลต่อการพัฒนากระบวนการเรียนรู้ในองค์กร ซึ่งเป็นการสำรวจความคิดเห็นผ่านแบบสอบถามจากบุคลากรจำนวน 606 คน จาก 18 องค์กร ผลการวิจัยพบว่าองค์กรที่มีแนวทางการบริหารจัดการทรัพยากรบุคคลในด้านต่างๆ อาทิ การสรรหาและคัดเลือกบุคลากรที่เข้มข้น การฝึกอบรมและพัฒนาที่มีประสิทธิผล การประเมินผลงานที่ชัดเจน และระบบผลตอบแทนที่จูงใจจะช่วยเสริมสร้างประสิทธิภาพของกระบวนการเรียนรู้ในองค์กรของบุคลากรได้เป็นอย่างดี ทั้งนี้กระบวนการเรียนรู้ที่มีประสิทธิภาพและพฤติกรรมการเรียนรู้ของบุคลากรจะมีส่วนสำคัญในการสร้างสรรค์นวัตกรรมและนำไปสู่ความสำเร็จในการแข่งขัน

## Abstract

This empirical study investigates the impact of HRM practices on organizational learning. Based on the data obtained through a questionnaire survey of 606 employees from 18 organizations in various sectors, it is found that HRM practices namely recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, as well as reward and recognition are a strong facilitating factor that enhances the climate of workplace learning. The results of this study pinpoint that HRM practices can be more effectively utilized to help shape the way people behave and interact in organizational learning as one of the interpretive pathways to innovation.



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## 1. Introduction

Issues of business innovation are attracting increasing attention in organizational studies and organizational practice. The intense of global competition puts higher and higher pressure on reducing the time between innovation and implementation processes. The pressure also forces organizations to quickly and adaptively cope with such changes. To enhance their capability to respond to the changes, organizations should seek to identify what their core competencies are as well as what they know and then develop and deploy their knowledge to enhance innovation and gain a competitive advantage (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). The key to success is embodied in their people's abilities to learn, assimilate and apply what they have learned to increase the values of organizations. Seemingly, organizational learning has been put forward as an answer to this problem and address how organizations adapt to their environment and sustain competitive advantages.

Organizational learning is now a part of management theory vocabulary. Several discussions have argued the shift from labor to intellectual capital, why learning matters to innovation, the importance of organizational learning as the most valuable practice for organizations to confront today's accelerated changing work conditions and drive innovation (e.g., Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Drucker, 1995; Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Despite all the interests, it seems that contributions in the relevant literature remain largely descriptive, in which the unbridgeable gap between theory

and practice in this domain still exists (Bontis *et al.*, 2002; Yeo, 2002). Such 'thought papers' focus more on why learning matters than empirical investigation on how organizations can build their learning capabilities. Without understanding of this matter, there might be some limitations to develop organizational learning.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate from employees' standpoints, the role of human resource management (HRM) practices as proactive management approach to manage learning process. It aims to gain in-depth knowledge and better understanding of people perspectives to shed light on organizational learning development

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Organizational learning concept*

Organizational learning has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor for an organization's ability to create ongoing economic value and to maintain competitive advantage (e.g., Argyris and Schon; 1987; Senge, 1990; Garvin, 1993). The attention given to an organization's ability to learn has been driven by the need to remain dynamic in a constantly changing work and business environment which is being shaped by globalization, technological advances, demand fluctuation, increased levels of competition, and the era of knowledge-based economy (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).

Organizational learning is not merely individual learning, yet organizations learn only

through the experience and actions of individuals who act as learning agents (Argyris and Schon, 1978, Hedberg, 1981). Watkins and Marsick (1993) explain that such process refers to the way people learn and work together to overcome changes and lead to better knowledge and performance improvement. It involves experimentation, observation, analysis, willingness to examine both successes and failures, and knowledge sharing among individuals. It is about encouraging individuals to share their mental models by creating the 'learningful' and 'comfortable' environment for capturing, sharing, and utilizing knowledge (Senge, 1990; Argote, 1999). Organizational learning is thus essentially a human process involving individual willingness and social interaction to detect and correct the errors for continuous improvement (Senge, 2003; Carmeli, 2007; Heaphy and Dutton, 2007). This can be achieved through approaches provided by the workplaces.

Organizations that want to be innovative and stay ahead of their competitors must recognize the value of their people and make the most use of their knowledge. Clearly, the key challenge here is to understand how people produce or shape organizational learning in order to align what they think, what they say and what they do. It deals with the questions of how people learn and how organizations build their learning capabilities (Sun and Scott, 2003). However, the area of study on the relationship between the role of people-management practices and organizational learning

concept is still relatively uncharted (Goh and Richards, 1997; Bontis *et al.*, 2002). Also most studies concentrate on identifying the key learning characteristics and measuring the degree of learning practices using a range of instruments as well as benchmarking within and across the industries. Only a few discuss the particular enabling factors that affect organizational learning as suggested in Table 1.

It also seems that organizational members' perspectives have not been widely considered in the previous empirical research on organizational learning although a range of this issue has been discussed in the existing literature (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Van der Krogh, 1998). The unit of analysis of the previous works is mainly at the organizational level (e.g., Ellinger *et al.*, 2002; Shipton, *et al.*, 2002; Jashapara, 2003). The issue is that the respondents of the surveys are limited to management. A few touches on individual level (e.g., Goh, 2001; Bontis *et al.*, 2002; Singh, 2007). How one or two people at a certain management level can evidently determine the characteristics of organizational learning practices since individuals are regarded as key players who act either to learn or utilize knowledge? How organizations enhance their organizational learning for their competitive advantage if their people are not involved? In order to understand how organizations learn, it is necessary to understand how people learn since organizational learning is dependent on people, their world views and their interactions with one another.

## **2.2 The role of HRM in organizational learning**

Managing organizational learning does not narrowly imply efficiently managing hard bits of knowledge contents but more subtly sustaining and strengthening social practices, utilizing interactions among individuals, and matching their cognitive styles. As noted by Schwandt and Marquardt (2000), organizational learning approach represents a complex interrelationship between people and their actions. The actions deal with a process of change in individual attitude and behavior to fit the organizations' knowledge culture (O'Dell and Grayson, 1998).

Ulrich and Lake (1991) suggest that human resource management (HRM) practices are the primary tools for building internal resources and capabilities based on people. They describe HRM as the pattern of planned human resource deployment and activities that attract, evaluate, motivate, train and develop people with the appropriate behaviors and competencies to meet current and future requirements that are set in the organizational context (Huselid, 1995; Delery and Doty, 1996). According to Pedler et al. (1991), HRM practices act rather as a 'catalyst' role to induce learning, being more focused on building and tailoring a supportive learning climate. As a result, the organizations need to create and manage the necessary stimulus among their people to help them absorb new learning and apply what have been learned more effectively.

Organizations need to be clear about what are the key competencies needed in their potential pools (Pfeffer, 1998). Scarbrough (2003) notes that conventional approaches to recruitment and selection may need to be revised in the light of the unpredictable knowledge flows involved in today's changing environment and innovation pressures. In such settings, it may simply be so difficult to specify the knowledge and expertise in advance. Continuous learning is necessary to cope with this issue. HRM practices through recruitment and selection enable organizations to develop their central focus on learning by obtaining people with the required or multi skills and competencies to not only function effectively toward specific business objectives but also lay a foundation to learn more. Furthermore, hiring of new people with different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences can bring in new perspectives to the team. The new recruits will not only bring to organizations different world views based on previous work experience, but also, if specifically employed for their creative talents, are likely to question accepted practice and try out different work approaches which promote learning and deliver organizational specific goals (Gardiner *et al.*, 2001; Soliman and Spooner, 2000).

Training and development is an investment in organizations' human capital (Pfeffer, 1998). The goal of such investment is to maintain or improve individual performance and hence organizational performance. Appelbaum and Goransson (1997) note that HRM practices

**Table I:** Overview of the selected empirical researches on organizational learning

Author(s)	Research Framework	Measurement	Sample
Goh and Richards (1997)	To propose a methodology to measure organizational learning capabilities and compare the levels of capabilities among four knowledge-intensive organizations	Organizational Learning Survey which consists of five dimensions, e.g., clarity of mission and vision, leadership, experimentation, transfer of knowledge, teamwork, and group problem-solving	632 respondents from four knowledge-intensive organizations
Tannenbaum (1997)	To empirically diagnose which factors facilitate continuous learning and identify how learning environment looks like	Learning Environment Survey developed for the study	520 respondents from seven organizations
Gardiner (1999)	To investigate and compare the degree of organizational learning characteristics of learning-oriented organizations.	Learning Organization Research Inventory which is made up of 70 attitudinal questions	431 respondents from various departments of two engineering companies
Goh (2001)	To assess the relationship between the learning organization characteristics, management practices, and job satisfaction	Organizational Learning Survey which consists of five dimensions, e.g., clarity of mission and vision, leadership, experimentation, transfer of knowledge, teamwork, and group problem-solving	632 respondents from four knowledge-intensive organizations
Bontis <i>et al.</i> (2002)	To investigate the relationship between the stocks of learning at all levels and perceptual business performance	Strategic Learning Assessment Map	480 managers from 32 mutual fund companies
Ellinger <i>et al.</i> (2002)	To investigate the relationship between the learning organization concept and firms' financial performance	Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire developed by Watkins and Marsick (1993)	208 mid-level managers from manufacturing firms
Shipton <i>et al.</i> (2002)	To identify the factors that are likely to predict organizational learning process which consist of profitability, environmental uncertainty, organizational structure, HRM approach, and quality orientation.	Learning mechanism that shapes the organizational learning system in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of training and development plan</li> <li>• Formal involvement of line managers in developmental initiatives</li> <li>• Opportunities to discuss</li> <li>• Channel to learn about ways of working outside the current area</li> <li>• Channel to share insight</li> </ul>	44 HR directors from three industrial groups; electronics and communications, food and drink, and mechanical engineering
Jashapara (2003)	To examine the relationships between organizational learning, organizational culture, competitive forces, and performance	Learning in organizations questionnaire adopted from Argyris and Schon (1978) and Mintzberg (1991)	Senior executives of 181 construction firms
Singh (2007)	To examines the impact of emotional intelligence on organizational learning	Organizational Learning Diagnostic Scale	280 employees of learning consulting firms

through training and development can be considered as the first step on the road to build organizational learning capabilities. Investment in training and development are likely to have a positive impact on the extent to which organizations succeed in developing the skill and knowledge of their people. D'Netto and Sohal (1999) confirm from their empirical study that training and development programs assist people in understanding and recognizing specific contexts that prepare them for the future changes. The result is in line with the notion that people with fundamental knowledge and high ability to absorb are likely to link up with the new knowledge from other sources more effectively (Goh, 2002). In the study of best practice and technology transfer process, Szulanski argues from the results that the lack of ability to absorb knowledge of the learners is one of the major sources of stickiness that hinder organizational learning (Szulanski, 1996).

HRM practices through performance appraisal system assist organizations to enhance their people's performance by identifying who or what delivers the critical performance with respect to business objectives, assessing how they are doing on their jobs, and providing them feedback to correct their mistakes as well as to acquire new competencies (Roberts, 2001). Previous researches (e.g., Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Nelson, 1996) have shown that people are more motivated when they know what is going on in organizations. When people know what is going on, particularly performance feedback that they can use the

knowledge embedded to their fullest potential. Gardiner *et al.* (2001) assert that the system to date tends to be based on the notion of management by agreement rather than by control and direction using feedback mechanism. This approach allows superiors to consultatively discuss performance goals and explore learning needs with subordinates in the same concert. It provides people opportunities to refine and improve their development activities, areas of strengths and weaknesses, decision on future initiatives that are geared toward business objectives (Youndt *et al.*, 1996).

In addition, motivational factor, e.g., reward and recognition also play a major role to induce organizational learning. Pedler *et al.* (1991: 120) note, "Rewards are important in the Learning Company, and pay is as important here as elsewhere, but the Learning Company pays people to learn and those who join are expected to carry on learning as an implied part of their employment contract." Organizations need to recognize and value people's contributions when they achieve performance outcome or behave in the desired manner. Reward strategies can be used to influence employees' commitment to learning and shape their understanding of the overall purpose of the organizations and their contributions (Jerez-Gómez *et al.*, 2005). On the other hand, if people expend more effort and ingenuity, observe better results as a consequence of that effort, but then receive nothing, they are likely to become cynical and disillusioned and to stop trying (Pfeffer, 1998). It can be expected that, if organizations



provide reward closely linked to employees' performance and contributions, they are more likely to perform and demonstrate their behaviors in a way that will bring them such reward.

### 3. Research Methodology

The primary data for this empirical study were obtained by a questionnaire survey. The well-accepted scale development procedure suggested by Hinkin (1995) was followed. Items were generated based on the essence of the domain and theoretical definition of the constructs as well as scales described in the previous literature in the relevant fields to ensure context validity. Subject matter experts in the fields of HRM and organizational learning also reviewed the instrument for content validity. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and back-translated into local language to be self-administered by local respondents. Prior to distribution, the translated version of questionnaire was pre-tested with fifteen human resource managers to ensure understanding and consistent interpretation of the terminologies used in the questionnaire.

### 4. Sampling Frame

The study followed a two-stage sampling design. In the first stage, 23 organizations from various industries whereby learning capability has been reflected as one of their core values were chosen. In the second stage, around 1,390 employees, ranging from senior managers to experienced staff were randomly approached by

each participating organization to fill in the questionnaire. A total of 606 usable and valid questionnaires from the employees of 18 organizations were returned providing a response rate of 43.6 per cent. The data collected from 606 informants included the background variables like team size, age, gender, tenure, educational background. The majority of the sample respondents are female, *i.e.* 59 per cent. In term of educational background, the majority, *i.e.*, 71.1 per cent hold a bachelor's degree while the rest hold a master's degree or above. The respondents in this study were relatively young, *e.g.*, 71.2 per cent of which were below 35 years of age and the rest are 36 years old and above. Taking years of service into account, about 50 per cent have been working with the current organization less than five years. Many, *i.e.*, 35.3 per cent have 6-15 years of service while only 14.8 per cent have more than 16 years of service. About one-third of the informants always work with their current organizations.

## 5. Measures of Variables

### 5.1 HRM practices

The sampling participants in this study reported perceptual scores on a scale of 22 items of HRM practices. This composite variable was drawn from the most commonly recognized areas of HRM researches (Delery and Doty, 1996; Gould-Williams, 2003). The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they strongly agreed or disagreed with each statement using a

seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) to evaluate their perceptions on the current HRM practices in their organizations.

Data reduction was undertaken by factor analysis using the varimax option, to identify possible underlying dimensions of HRM practices (Table II). Four significant factors emerge from the analysis, explaining 66.46 per cent of total variance. The variables that have high loading in the same factors were grouped. Only three items were not taken

into consideration since they were not loaded well and had relatively low communality. Consequently, the emerged factors were made up of nineteen items. The emerged factors confirmed the main construct and the key components of HRM practices originally suggested in the literature. The indexes had Cronbach's alpha .92 for training and development, .87 for reward and recognition, .78 for performance appraisal, and 0.69 for recruitment and selection respectively.

**Table II:** Varimax rotated factor matrix of HRM practices

Items and Factors	Eigen Value	Com.	C.F.
<b>Training and development</b> ( $\alpha = .92$ )	8.22		
Training & development is encouraged to develop knowledge needed for advancement.		.79	.84
Management emphasizes the importance of training & development.		.77	.83
Training & development are constantly revised to fit the current circumstance.		.79	.83
Training & development programs are perceived of high quality and fit needs.		.74	.82
I am provided with sufficient opportunities for training & development.		.70	.82
Training & development broaden knowledge into area not directly related to present work.		.60	.74
<b>Reward and recognition</b> ( $\alpha = .87$ )	2.29		
My organization rewards good or innovative ideas that work.		.70	.78
My organization relates compensation with the levels of skills/knowledge acquired.		.70	.75
When I do a good job my performance is noticed and rewarded.		.72	.74
Career advancement or promotion criteria are clear.		.66	.63
Compensation of my organization is closely tied to performance appraisal results.		.54	.57
I receive adequate recognition for my contributions / accomplishments		.55	.53
<b>Performance appraisal</b> ( $\alpha = .78$ )	1.10		
Performance appraisal puts more emphasis on getting result.		.60	.75
Emphasis is placed on finding avenues of development when discussing performance.		.65	.73
Criteria used to evaluate my performance are clear.		.62	.62
Performance feedback on how I am doing on my job is regularly provided.		.53	.55
<b>Recruitment and selection</b> ( $\alpha = .69$ )	1.02		
My organization takes people recruitment and selection process to fit needs seriously.		.74	.74
Recruitment and selection process in my organization is rigid.		.70	.72
My current roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.		.53	.65



## 5.2 *Organizational learning*

To measure this construct, the pool of scale adopted from Organizational Learning Survey (Goh and Richards, 1997) and Strategic Learning Assessment Map (Bontis *et al.*, 2002) were adopted to develop organizational learning measure. Using a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), respondents were asked to indicate their perception to 34 attitudinal questions. Examples of the items are: (1) Organizational members are encouraged to experiment in order to improve work processes, (2) I often have an opportunity to talk to other staff about successful work activities in order to understand why they succeed, (3) My manager frequently involves people in the decision process, (4) People exchange information or share knowledge with each other, (5) My organization has a constant communication to distribute knowledge across work unit, etc. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .96.

## 5.3 *Control variables*

No organization operates in a vacuum and therefore it is important to investigate organizational and people characteristics in order to be able to understand the general relationship between people's perception of HRM activities and organizational learning. This study, therefore, adopted the background variables like team size, tenure, age, gender, and work experiences with other organization(s) before joining their current organization.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

Table III shows descriptive statistics and correlation among the sets of variables in this study. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to ascertain the degree of association among all variables. Such pair analysis provides an understanding of direct relationship between HRM practices and organizational learning. This then suggests a better explanation about the possible fit among those variables. As shown, each HRM configuration, namely recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and reward and recognition are positively correlated with organizational learning. The degrees of correlation were moderate to high, ranging from .55 to .64 ( $p < .01$ ). The results indicate that organizations that invest more in training and development, perform systematic performance appraisal system, provide attractive rewards based on performance, and adopt comprehensive recruitment process are likely to enable organizational learning.

A regression analysis was run to further investigate the impact of HRM practices that are related to recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and reward and recognition on organizational learning. The results are presented in Table IV. Individual HRM practice to predict organizational learning was entered into the equation (Model 1). The model was significant overall which accounts for 54.7 per cent of the total variance ( $F = 181.31$ ,

**Table III:** Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Organizational learning	4.47	.91	1				
2. Recruitment and selection	4.57	1.08	.55	1			
3. Training and development	4.55	1.14	.56	.50	1		
4. Performance appraisal	4.39	1.06	.63	.50	.46	1	
5. Reward and recognition	4.40	1.09	.64	.55	.50	.70	1

Note: All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed test).

$p < .001$ ). HRM practices in terms of recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and reward and recognition are found to be positively associated with organizational learning ( $\beta = .17, .23, .26, \text{ and } .25$  respectively).

Control variables were taken into consideration when the individual HRM component to predict organizational learning was entered into the equation (Model 2). The model was also highly significant at  $p < .001$  with an increase in  $R^2$  (e.g., from .55 to .56). The standardized regression coefficients of the individual HRM component ranged from .17 to .27. All are significant at the .001 level. From the equations, reward and recognition, training and development, as well as performance appraisal had by far the largest beta indicating that it had the largest effect on organizational learning. The overall results highlight the important role of HRM practices in facilitating and enabling organizational learning in the

workplace. In other words, the more HRM practices effectively used within organizations and well perceived by employees, the greater the impact on organizational ability to promote learning climate. This finding is consistent with the argument that HRM practices are pre-conditions for the development of organizational learning (Pfeffer, 1998; Watkins and Marsick, 1993).

Of the control variables, team size was found significantly associated with organizational learning ( $p < .05$ ). This indicates that smaller team tends to be more efficient in harnessing learning mindsets that could build more psychological comfort to this matter among members than the larger one. Age also had significant relationship with organizational learning ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that junior employees tend to be more enthusiastic to learn than senior ones.

**Table IV:** Results of regression analysis of HRM practices on organizational learning

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
	$\beta$ (t-value)	$\beta$ (t-value)
Control		
Team size		-.055 (-1.98) *
Tenure		.016 (0.37)
Age		-.09 (-2.09) *
First or only organization?		-.036 (-1.26)
Gender		.004 (0.14)
Independent		
Recruitment and selection	.17 (4.73) ***	.17 (4.93) ***
Training and development	.23 (6.96) ***	.24 (6.93) ***
Performance appraisal	.26 (6.64) ***	.23 (5.62) ***
Reward and recognition	.25 (5.97) ***	.27 (6.32) ***
Constant	1.09 (8.36) ***	1.50 (7.70) ***
R <sup>2</sup>	.547	.561
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.544	.553
F Value	181.31 ***	73.51 ***
N	605	585

Note: \*  $p < .05$  and \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; all tests are two-tailed. T-value is in parentheses.

## 7. Implication and Conclusion

Based on the findings, HRM practices in terms of recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, reward and recognition are positively associated with organizational learning. The overall findings from this study ascertain the notion that intervention intended to enable organizational learning highlights initially on four basic configurations of HRM. To effectively drive learning capability toward innovation, individuals need to have opportunities to interact with others to describe and discuss not only their mental models but also learn about other people's world views. Their propensity to do so may be dependent on the staffing approach, the way in which rewards are calculated

within organizations, the system relating to performance appraisal and consultation, and the effectiveness that exists for the way people get trained. The results are consistent with the premises and arguments of several researchers (e.g., Ulrich and Lake, 1991; O'Dell and Grayson, 1998; Shipton *et al.*, 2002; Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 2003) that abilities to learn and leverage knowledge are embedded in human resources and that managing such people matter are a vital catalyst to get organizational learning concept implemented.

Contributions of this study are in the empirical evidences that support the notion of organizational learning in term of HRM as a key facilitating factor that affect knowledge absorption of people.

The managerial implications stemmed from the results suggest that organizations need to refocus their efforts when managing organizational learning by taking people perspective into account. People are not just a cost to be consumed; rather, as is maintained in the resource-based perspective, they are emerging as critical sources of competitive advantage for organizations. Organizations, therefore, need to manage their HRM practices to align with today's dynamic conditions and the atmosphere of people participation to shape their behavior in order to successfully bring the notion organizational learning into the achievable practice.

It also can be argued that individuals' perceptions are what matter most since these perceptions will ultimately govern the degree and types of learning and management practices that occur within organizations. Both organizational

learning and HRM need to be well-managed and individuals need to comfortably feel that all related organizational practices are that effective. To keep momentum of learning capability as one of the core values, organizations should periodically diagnose their organizational learning climate and HRM practices for continuous improvement. Organizational health-check process should be run through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The obtained data can provide organizations insights to target subsequent change efforts and help them develop interventions that will capitalize on their strength and mitigate their weakness, particularly their people agenda in order to successfully bring the concept of the organizational learning which is one of the interpretive pathways to innovation to live.

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