

**MAKING IT WORK: THE IMPACTS OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS
ON NEW ZEALAND FAMILIES**

Lindy Fursman
Nita Zodgekar
New Zealand Families Commission

Abstract

The demand for “quality flexible work” is increasing, both in New Zealand and internationally. However, there has been limited research in New Zealand on the family factors that influence the amount or type of flexibility needed to support families in different circumstances, or on the impacts that the use of flexible work arrangements can have on family life. This article is based on the results of research the New Zealand Families Commission undertook in 2007/08, which explored how flexible working arrangements can best support family wellbeing and the barriers and success factors relating to the take-up of flexible work. A mixed method approach was adopted, comprising 11 focus groups, 15 case study interviews, and a 15-minute telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people. Findings included the identification of a range of positive impacts that access to flexible work arrangements have for families, and the barriers to the use of flexible working arrangements. The study also found that many people choose their work to fit around family responsibilities. This article provides a summary of the research, with a focus on the findings that relate to the impact of flexible work on family life.

INTRODUCTION

Both in New Zealand and internationally the demand for flexible work is increasing. This trend is driven by major changes to the labour market, as well as social and demographic changes, and is likely to continue as more people engage in further education and training, more women take up paid work, the number of sole-parent families increases, skill shortages grow, and the retirement age is extended. The implementation of the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007 in New Zealand is also drawing attention to the importance of flexible work for government, employers, employees and families. As a result of the Act, employees who are responsible for the care of another person and have been working for their employer for six months or more are able to request a flexible working arrangement.¹ Employers have a duty to consider such requests and respond to them within three months.

Research was undertaken by the New Zealand Families Commission to fill knowledge gaps about the types of flexible work arrangements that support family wellbeing, and factors influencing take-up of these arrangements. The research provided an opportunity to explore flexible work from a families’ perspective, and aimed to contribute to debate about the most effective ways to help families access the flexible working conditions they need.²

¹ However, the data for this project were gathered before the implementation of the Act.

² The full report, *Give and Take: Families’ Experiences and Perceptions of Flexible Work in New Zealand*, is available on the Families Commission website (www.nzfamilies.org.nz). For queries or a hard copy, email enquiries@nzfamilies.org.nz

WHAT IS “QUALITY FLEXIBLE WORK?”

Flexible work allows people to make changes to the hours or times they work, and where they work. It helps people organise their careers to accommodate other commitments, and to manage transitions in and out of the workforce. For flexible work to be described as “quality”, these changes must not adversely affect income, career progression, availability of scheduled leave or access to desirable employment for those who take it up. For an arrangement to be considered truly flexible it must provide the employee with the means to manage his or her work while managing other commitments, and without adversely affecting the business. In addition, “quality flexible work” provides benefits for both employees and employers. Benefits for employees may include increased opportunities for families to spend “quality time” together and greater ease for family members to combine paid work and family responsibilities, while benefits for employers include addressing skills shortages and increased staff retention and loyalty.

PROJECT AIMS

The Families Commission conducted the project to explore families’ experiences of flexible work arrangements and their impact on family life. The key aims for the project were to gather information on:

- the types of flexible work arrangements that support families, and factors influencing the take-up of these arrangements
- the current barriers to access and take-up of “quality flexible work”, and what will improve access and take-up of flexible work arrangements that support family wellbeing.

In particular, the project was designed to gather information to answer the following research questions:

- What flexible work arrangements do adult family members have available to them, which arrangements are successfully used, and why are these arrangements used?
- What is the impact on the family of varying degrees of workplace flexibility?
- What flexible work arrangements would family members like to be available, both for now and future use, and why are these arrangements desired?
- What are the barriers to accessing and/or taking up flexible work arrangements?
- What might improve genuine access to and take-up of, and remove barriers to, “quality flexible work” arrangements that support families?

This article provides a summary of the research findings from the project, with a focus on the findings that relate to the impact of flexible work on family life.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, a mixed method using qualitative and quantitative approaches was used, with each stage building on information gathered from the previous stage. Eleven focus groups were conducted with representatives from families with dependent children, elderly family members or family members with disabilities, and 15 case studies of a diverse group of families with caring responsibilities were completed.³ These

³ The focus groups were designed according to caring responsibility (e.g. parents of pre-school children) with the exception of two focus groups based on ethnicity -- Pasifika family

stages of the research enabled us to explore the influences that affect people's decisions to take up flexible work arrangements, and to identify issues that are important to families as they balance paid work and family responsibilities. The focus groups and case studies were conducted in a range of rural and urban locations in New Zealand. In order to provide a counterpoint to the views of employees, a focus group of employers who run small businesses and three in-depth interviews of employers based in medium and large businesses were conducted.

The final stage of the research comprised a nationally representative quantitative survey of 1,000 "family representatives"⁴ aged 18 years or older. All respondents had to be in paid work or have a partner who lived with them in paid work. Fifty-five percent of the survey sample were women and 45% were men, and a range of ethnicities were represented in the sample: New Zealand European (77%), Māori (15%), Pacific peoples (15%) and Asian (7%).

The primary emphasis of the project was the qualitative research, which focused on families' experiences of flexible work arrangements and their impact on family life. The quantitative stage was then undertaken to provide population estimates of some of the trends found in the qualitative research, as well as to assess the levels of access to, and use of, flexible work arrangements.

Given the small sample sizes in this project, and because the survey did not return reliable data on industry or occupation, it is not possible to determine the full influence of occupational factors, nor can industry and occupation be statistically controlled for. Similarly, because of the small numbers involved, results exhibiting variations by ethnicity and income should be treated with caution.

ACCESS TO FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Table 1 shows that most of the people surveyed had access to at least some kinds of flexible work, with 88% of the sample able to take time off occasionally to go to special events, and 77% able to do this regularly. Varying start and finish times were among the most common flexible work arrangements, with 78% of respondents able to leave work early to pick up family members, and 65% of respondents using this arrangement regularly. Slightly fewer survey respondents (73%) could start work late in order to drop other family members off, with 60% of respondents doing this.

More than three-quarters of survey respondents (77%) could move their lunch-break in order to attend to a family commitment, and 77% of those with school-aged children could take time off during school holidays, although it is unclear whether this referred to the scheduling of their annual leave entitlement. More than two-thirds (69%) of the survey respondents could work longer hours so they could take time off at a later date, while 71% could change their working hours to enable attendance at regular activities such as sports practices.

members and Māori family members. The focus group participants were recruited randomly from the UMR research database.

⁴ The definition of "family representative" used was a person who said that they regularly looked after at least one child under 18 years, or a sick, elderly or disabled relative. Some case study participants were selected from the focus groups and others were recruited from the UMR database.

The flexible arrangement that fewest respondents had access to was working from home, with 44% saying that they could do this and only 36% using this arrangement. In addition, a number of respondents did not have access to “time-banking” their hours (sometimes working longer hours in order to have more time off at other times).

Table 1: Current access to and use of flexible work arrangements

CURRENT FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS				
For each of the following flexible work arrangements, please tell me whether they are (A) an option you use, (B) an option your job offers that you do not use or (C) an option your job does not offer.				
	% (n = 858)			
	Option you use	Job offers but do not use	Job does not offer	Unsure
Able to take time off occasionally for special events involving family, such as school concerts	77	11	10	2
Finishing early to pick family up from school, preschool, childcare or work	65	13	19	3
Able to change your lunchtime so you can go to a family commitment during ordinary work hours	65	12	20	3
Starting late to drop family off at school, preschool, childcare or work	60	13	24	3
Taking time off during school holidays to look after children*	60	17	19	4
Sometimes working longer hours so you can have more time to spend with the family at other times	55	14	29	2
Changing your hours so you can regularly attend activities involving family members other than yourself, like sports practices	54	17	26	3
Working from home so you can look after family at the same time	36	8	53	3

Note: The base is those who do paid work that contributes to the household’s financial situation.

* Only asked of those who regularly care for children who are in primary, intermediate or secondary school and do paid work that contributes to the household’s financial situation (n = 692).

Three-quarters of the respondents in the quantitative research rated their work as having “a lot” or “a fair amount” of flexibility. Those with more flexibility were more likely to rate their work/life balance highly; of those who reported a lot of flexibility, 88% said they were satisfied with their work/life balance, compared with 52% of those who had little or no flexibility.

BARRIERS TO THE USE OF FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Approximately one in five respondents in the quantitative survey lacked access to specific flexible work arrangements, and more than a quarter (27%) reported that they would be nervous about asking their employer for flexible work. This proportion rose to 49% among those who said their job offered no flexibility.

The research showed that there were a number of barriers preventing the take-up of flexible working arrangements, with many of these resulting from employee perceptions that using

flexible work arrangements would not be supported by their employers. The lack of available arrangements in particular workplaces was an obvious barrier; however, other barriers centred on negative employer attitudes, both perceived and actual, to requests for flexible work. Employees reported that they did not use flexible work arrangements because doing so would have a negative impact on career progression and negative financial consequences (particularly for those who perceived that flexible work necessarily involved reduced working hours). Employees also reported perceptions that only valued employees would be granted flexible work arrangements, and that the nature of their work and/or industry would make flexible work impossible.

Some employers confirmed employee perceptions regarding the negative impacts of using flexible work arrangements, expressing concerns, for example, about appointing to a management or supervisory role those using flexible arrangements.

“What they’ve got to understand is that once you start moving up the ladder in a business then ... there are more responsibilities that come with it. So I sort of think that if you put your name out there and say, ‘Well jeez, I want to be the supervisor of the shift but then ... the rest of my shifts I want to leave an hour early’, you’ve sort of got to say, ‘Well is that leading by example?’ as well, so you’ve got to take that into consideration.” (Male manager, Waikato employer interview)

For some workplaces, “quality flexible work” arrangements may be challenging to implement, such as in very small businesses providing face-to-face customer services. However, it appeared that in many cases the real barrier preventing the take-up of flexible work arrangements, even when they were available, was workplace cultures that did not support the use of flexible work. As well as the attitudes of immediate managers or employers, employees also noted the impact of the views of colleagues and co-workers on their take-up of flexible work arrangements.

WHAT KINDS OF FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS DO FAMILIES WANT?

Different families valued different flexible work arrangements, and there was no one arrangement that helped all families. Participants in the qualitative research emphasised that what really mattered was the extent to which family members had control over their flexible work arrangements and could choose which work arrangements best suited their own family. There were, nevertheless, some specific flexible work arrangements that were commonly cited as particularly helpful. In particular, these included being able to take time off occasionally for special events such as school concerts, more flexible start and finish times, the ability to take leave to look after children during school holidays, and opportunities to work from home.

The quantitative research showed that arrangements that provided flexibility in working hours were among those that were most desired by those who did not currently have access to them. Two-thirds (66%) of those who were unable to take time off to attend special events reported that having access to this would be helpful to them, and half (50%) of those who were unable to change their working hours stated that it would be helpful to them if their hours could be altered to allow them to regularly attend a non-work-related activity.

DECISIONS ABOUT USING FLEXIBLE WORK – AND CHOOSING WORK TO FIT WITH FAMILY

For most families in the qualitative research, “decisions” about whether or not to use flexible work arrangements were not discussed in any formal sense. Families did not have meetings where they sat down and worked out what the impact of work arrangements would be on the family. Instead, decisions were largely based on a mix of assumptions, understandings and incremental decisions. The nature of a person’s career also often influenced their perception of the types of flexible work arrangements that were available to them, and many respondents spoke about this in terms of “It’s just the way it is in my work”.

However, active decisions were made about the kinds of work respondents engaged in, and the degree to which these fitted with care responsibilities. A key finding from both the qualitative and quantitative research concerned the degree to which respondents chose their work to fit around their family responsibilities. The focus groups and interviews suggested that many respondents prioritised their care responsibilities, then proceeded to look for employment that fitted around these responsibilities.

Evidence to support this finding was also found in the quantitative research, which asked respondents whether the statement “I chose my career because it fitted in well with my family commitments” applied to them. More than two-thirds (67%) of women and 39% of men indicated that this statement pertained to them, with those on lower incomes, those who were self-employed, and those with a lot of flexibility more likely to agree with this statement. Also more likely to agree were those who were working 20 hours or less each week, those who worked in the weekend, and those whose partners worked full-time.

The qualitative research indicated that decisions about particular types of employment were made, to a large degree, according to perceptions of flexibility that particular occupations might have, rather than evidence of the specific arrangements that a particular position might have on offer. In some cases, choosing a job for the perceived flexibility it offered had the potential to result in significant under-employment, or under-utilisation of skills.

“That’s why I’m typing, because it is flexible and all that ... I’ve actually been looking for a job [using my degree] in microbiology ... but they just do not have part-time jobs.” (Female, sole parents responsible for children, Christchurch)

IMPACTS OF USING FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

More “Quality Family Time”

Respondents in the qualitative research offered many examples of what they considered to be the benefits of flexible work arrangements. These included better relationships, and happier adults and children within families. The importance of “quality time” was confirmed in the quantitative research, with 98% of the survey respondents agreeing that it was the most important thing they could give to their family.

“Some of the precious little things ... for instance, if the Mrs comes home [early] she might say, ‘Come for an hour’s walk with me’ ... I mean, it seems small but it’s actually quite precious ... and those are the sort of times when you do a lot of talking.” (Male, Māori focus group, Auckland)

Numerous respondents in the qualitative research emphasised the importance of having time to do things together as a family. For some this meant being able to have dinner together each night, while for others the activity itself was not particularly important and the emphasis was on simply spending time together.

“Because I can’t get all my work done in an eight- or nine-hour day, I can get home, have dinner with them, and once I’ve put them to bed and read them their stories I can work again. I can work until whenever.” (Female, parents with mainly pre-school children focus group, Auckland)

“It’s just really cool to do stuff together.” (Māori female participant in Auckland)

The qualitative stages of the research highlighted a number of benefits for families conferred by “quality time”. Spending more time with children meant having a better idea of what was important to them and what they were interested in, and parents would generally feel closer to them.

“Benefits like going on excursions like a class trip or something, it makes the kids really happy and I enjoy it too, and it’s not normally a problem for me to get out of work to do that ... Going to like an award performance or stuff like that helps to feel connected with the kids, so I understand what they’re actually talking about too.” (Male, parents with mainly pre-school children focus group, Auckland)

Being able to spend time with children also made them feel valued.

“[The children] know we know [what is important to them] too so they feel valued and important to us.” (Female, parents with mainly pre-school children focus group, Auckland)

Another benefit of flexible work was more effective support for, and better monitoring of, children and young people within families.

“The children feel more secure knowing their parents will be there. That contributes to their self-esteem ... Hopefully we can also spot any problems so going into the schools, we know who those kids are, or the kindy, that they’re talking about, and if there’s a problem with any kids or teachers or whatever we can hopefully pick up things quickly.” (Female, parents with mainly pre-school children focus group, Auckland)

A particular benefit of being able to access some kinds of flexible work was that it could make it easier for parents to support children to participate in extra-curricular activities, and for parents to help with homework.

“At the moment, it works quite well if he works night time because at least someone is here to take them around. We have swimming activities, soccer, netball, Tae Kwan Do.” (Female Chinese, case study in Wellington)

Some respondents reported that having flexible work arrangements enabled them to be there for their children whilst earning enough money to provide their children with better opportunities. Those providing care to elderly or terminally ill people emphasised the importance of flexible work arrangements in helping them to spend time with loved ones who had little time left.

Fulfilling Care Responsibilities While Doing Paid Work

Flexible work arrangements made it easier for workers with caring responsibilities to fulfil those responsibilities while maintaining their participation in the workforce.

“I said [to employer], ‘I’m thinking of giving up work to look after my mother in [place] some of the time’ and they said, ‘We don’t want to lose you. How about we alter your work schedule ... we’re prepared to alter your work hours a bit, lessen them a little bit, give you more work in [place] so that you can both fit in going there to look after your mother and being in Auckland to work for us.’”
(Female, caregivers for elderly family focus group, Auckland)

The quantitative survey showed that more than 70% of people who were not currently in paid work would be more likely to enter paid work if they had flexible work arrangements that allowed them to fit that work around the needs of their family. As the majority of those not in paid work were women, this suggested that access to flexible work arrangements may be particularly valuable in helping women with care responsibilities who are currently not working, but would like to be, to move into paid work.

Less Stress for Individual Parents and Caregivers

Having flexible work arrangements made it easier to cover for changing circumstances, such as those caused by a sudden illness or accident, where parents and caregivers felt they really needed to be able to “drop everything and go”. This also applied in less urgent situations, such as school holidays and when the usual childcare was not available.

“I guess the best thing about flexible work is knowing that if anything happens it’s not a big deal. You’re not going to be fired, you’re not going to lose your job, you’re not going to be penalised financially ... It’s a type of security.” (Female, low socio-economic status family with school-aged children focus group, Auckland)

“I guess the big thing is stress ... It’s just less stress, and a happier lifestyle.”
(Male, low socio-economic status family with school-aged children focus group, Auckland)

Potential for Work to Encroach on Family Time

Although most participants found flexible working arrangements extremely valuable, some in the qualitative research acknowledged that flexibility could come at a cost. Flexible work arrangements could make life more complicated than simply working standard hours and missing some aspects of family life, and could also mean that work encroached on family time.

“In the afternoon I come [home from work] 15 minutes after [my son] but I’m coming home with my load of work ... sometimes [working in] the evening is not possible, and I could be waking up at one o’clock in the morning and going until four. That is my regular way of catching up with work and time for my family.”
(Female, Pasifika family, Auckland)

“Like, if they’ve got athletics on I can turn up in the middle of the day and watch them but it might mean that I’m working at 10 o’clock at night when they’ve gone to bed rather than watching telly.” (Male, Māori family, Auckland)

This was particularly the case for those who worked from home, who made up time off work by working at home later in the day, and for those whose day extended into “family time” at home.

There was less evidence of this in the quantitative research, where those with little or no access to flexible work arrangements were more likely to juggle work and family, or experience negative spill-over between work and home.

Feeling Guilty

A key finding from the qualitative research was the high degree of commitment and dedication many respondents showed when talking about their work. There were numerous examples of respondents putting in extra hours and effort to complete work tasks even when this was not formally required by their employer. Similarly, respondents spoke of missing family events because they were needed at work.

Many respondents spoke of feeling guilty when taking time off work, especially if they perceived that taking such time was letting down either their employer or their colleagues. There were, for example, many respondents who said that they felt guilty about calling in sick when they had to look after sick children, or when they needed to care for other family members.

Those who used flexible work arrangements were more likely to report these feelings of guilt, and many reported that they had actually ended up working harder and doing longer hours than they might otherwise have done.

“[If I come in late] I actually feel guilty that I’m not following my normal routine ... but ... if you’re back at your desk and you don’t take a break until you leave at 6 you’re probably actually doing more work than you would normally.” (Female, couples and non-couples with no children but care responsibilities, Auckland)

“You feel the guilt too. You want to do your job. That’s how I was anyway. I didn’t want to let my old employers down either ... I didn’t want them going through that because they needed someone there who could do the hours when they needed it.” (Female, caregivers for sick and disabled family, Auckland)

It is likely that feelings of guilt about having time off work, and the corresponding desire to work harder to make up for such time, is influenced by both the culture of the workplaces respondents are in, as well as broader cultural messages about what being a “good worker” involves. If colleagues and managers frown on time away from the workplace, either explicitly or in a more subtle way, an employee may feel more guilt about taking time off and more of an obligation to make this time up. It is therefore important to consider workplace culture as part of the context in which decisions about work are made.

“These are the companies, when they say they’ve got flexibility, mean they’re quite happy for you to work as many extra hours as you want.” (Male, high socio-economic status with school-aged children, Christchurch)

NOT HAVING ACCESS TO FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

The qualitative interviews showed that people who did not have access to flexible work arrangements felt this was overwhelmingly negative, especially because of the impact on time together as a family.

“I mean, at the moment we never sort of see each other. He generally sleeps on the couch or when free time comes up it’s normally I’m going or he’s staying or we never actually do anything together.” (Female Pasifika, case study in Auckland)

Participants without access to flexible work arrangements reported that it was difficult for them to spend time together as a family, it was hard for them to complete everyday tasks, and families were not as close as they would like to be.

“It’s even down to simple things, like being able to ... have a doctor’s appointment ... you have to make it in the hours that you’re not working ... and if you’re working during the week and they’re closed on the weekend.” (Female, Māori focus group)

“The kids sort of miss not having their dad there too, you know?” (Male, parents of mainly school-aged children, not using flexible arrangements focus group, Bay of Plenty)

Lack of flexibility was also associated with difficulties in attending events and activities, which was sometimes disappointing for children and made family life pressured and stressful.

“It’s really hard when your six-year-old says, ‘Oh my mum won’t go to that, she never comes’.” (Female sole parent, case study in Christchurch)

IMPACT OF TRANSITIONS ON THE NEED FOR FLEXIBLE WORK

Transitions, or changes in family circumstances, were a strong motivator for seeking flexible work arrangements. Some transitions related to the age of children, including children starting primary or secondary school. Children starting primary school could mean a significant change in the flexible work arrangements desired, because “care” during the day was effectively provided at school.

“I think it’s easier now because if you’re running a few minutes late they will be in the playground playing and waiting ... You know you can ring the school even and say, ‘Hey I’ve got stuck’ and they’re more than accommodating to sort of let the kids know even.” (Male, gay parents bringing up children case study, Auckland)

However, starting school could also mean the loss of full-day care, as parents needed to drop children off at the start of the school day and pick them up at the end, or put them into before- or after-school care.

“The big problem with school is it starts with 8.30 and by the time you’ve done a drop-off at 8.30 ... I’m not starting my day until 9.00 and I still have a job to do so it’s going to impact on my end of the day. We don’t have the solution to this yet, but that’s the kind of problem.” (Female, parents of mainly pre-school children focus group, Auckland)

Parents also had to make arrangements for the school holidays, whereas preschool children in paid childcare could be there every week.

“It was so stressful knowing that the holidays were coming up and organising it all. Who can I send her to this day? Who can I send her to that day?” (Male, low socio-economic status family with school-aged children focus group, Auckland)

Children entering the teenage and secondary-school years could also result in an increased reliance on flexible work arrangements because the carer still had to be available to “drop and run” when needed. In addition, many parents felt an increased need to be around to supervise their teen and to help them stay out of trouble.

“Officially that’s when they can look after themselves, but that’s when you’ve got to watch them more. You’ve got to be aware of what they do, and working full-time it’s very difficult.” (Female, parents with mainly primary-school-age kids focus group, Whakatane)

Secondary schools have longer holiday breaks, which meant it became even more of a challenge to cover these periods, particularly until the parents were comfortable with leaving their children home on their own.

Transitions were not only about the changing needs of children as they grew older, but also about the changing needs of elderly family members.

“On Sunday afternoon, just for example, my sister said to me after I’d been away camping, ‘Mum’s become more needy, I’m having to go there twice a day ... So I said, ‘Well I will change my work hours’.” (Female, caregiver for elderly relative case study, Waitakere)

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research suggest that many family members have access to flexible work arrangements, and that such arrangements provide significant benefits for them and their families, including less stress and pressure and more opportunities to spend time together. Flexible work arrangements can also allow family members to meet their care responsibilities while maintaining their participation in the paid workforce. The arrangements wanted and needed by families changed as their families changed; for example, as children reached school age, or older family members became increasingly more dependent.

There was evidence that flexible work arrangements could also have negative consequences, such as impinging on family life. Respondents showed a high degree of commitment and dedication to their work, and often felt guilty using flexible work arrangements. However, those that did not have access to flexible work were more likely to report that they felt like they were constantly juggling work and family responsibilities.

The need for flexible work often drove people’s choices about the kinds of work they engaged in, with this sometime resulting in a significant under-utilisation of their skills. However, although decisions about the kind of work were consciously made with family needs in mind, there was little evidence of family-based decisions about the use of particular flexible work arrangements.

“Quality flexible work” arrangements can provide a range of benefits for employers and workplaces as well as for employees. However, significant numbers of respondents in the qualitative and quantitative stages of the research reported negative workplace cultures which

impeded their ability to use flexible work arrangements. Both managers' and colleagues' attitudes to flexible work had an influence on whether workers felt they could access such arrangements without sacrificing career progression, income or their reputation as committed workers. Offering "quality flexible work" arrangements can, however, help address increasing skills shortages, and can benefit businesses by increasing staff loyalty and commitment.

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