

# Fathers: balancing work and family

Both research and policy on balancing work and family life have tended to focus on mothers' lives. As a result, men's fathering roles have often been neglected. Two EOC research studies explore how fathers fulfil their roles both within the family and at work and what support could be of most benefit to them in combining these roles.

## Key Findings

- The breadwinning role remains crucial for many fathers. Many also emphasise 'being there' for their children and aspirations for more involved fatherhood are high.
- Most fathers play a support role within the family - they often have minimal involvement with their children during the week but put weekends aside for family life.
- Some fathers' support role is extensive. About one-third of active parental childcare is already carried out by fathers.
- The gap in pay between men's and women's wages and the high cost of childcare are among the factors affecting fathers' level of involvement.
- Fathers are more involved in childcare when their partner has a relatively high income and is working full-time.
- Fathers often regard balancing family and work as a personal responsibility and use informal arrangements with managers.
- Fathers' expectations and use of specific family-friendly policies and practices are low despite high demand from parents for an improved balance between work and family.
- Eight out of ten employers believe that family-friendly policies improve the recruitment and retention of staff, despite mixed messages on the overall cost benefits.
- Fathers' take-up of parental leave is encouraged by individual entitlement, flexibility between partners, awareness campaigns and, crucially, high compensation for lost wages.



### Background

These findings summarise the key points from two EOC reports.

- *Working Fathers: earning and caring* reviews recent literature on fathers in employment, focusing on their ability to balance work with family life and the role they play within the family. It also reports on a secondary analysis of the DfEE 2000 Work-Life Balance 2000<sup>1</sup> (WLB2000) datasets exploring the provision, demand and uptake of family-friendly employment practices among fathers.
- In contrast, *Dads on Dads: needs and expectations at home and at work* describes a qualitative study which interviewed fathers, their partners and human resources staff to explore fathers' attitudes towards, and experiences of, being a working father. All quotes from parents are from this study.

### Fatherhood

Fathers are more likely to be economically active and in full-time employment than men without children. The vast majority of fathers work full-time (86 per cent). Between 1998 and 2001 there was a small increase in the proportion of mothers working full-time (from 29 to 31 per cent) whereas part-time working remained static. This suggests a period of work intensification for parents. The proportion of lone fathers and mothers in full-time employment also increased during that period. The volume of paid work undertaken by fathers remains two-thirds higher than that undertaken by mothers.

Fathers are not a homogeneous group and there is a wide variety in the roles they adopt. A number of studies emphasise the importance of the breadwinner role as a powerful source of identity for fathers and many cite this role as their main family commitment. Studies show that their earnings are positively associated with children's educational attainment and psychological well-being while being a provider for the family gives fathers a clearly defined role. As one father put it:

"Well, the only one [commitment] I can see is basically keeping them fed, a house over their heads."

At the same time, comparative studies indicate that there is a greater acceptance of less traditional gender roles in Britain than elsewhere, strongest in relation to women's roles. Both reports found that younger men, in particular, have expressed a wish to participate more fully in family life, and there are some fathers for whom the breadwinning role has less relevance, especially those whose partner is also working full-time:

"Personally I wouldn't have any hesitation in a kind of stereotypical role reversal if you like, where she went out to work and I looked after the kids...I'm sure they'd drive me up the wall from time to time as well, but equally they do with my wife, so I can't see that as being any different, really I can't."

So fatherhood is in a state of change. The everyday, traditional role of providing economic support for the family now takes place alongside activities previously regarded as maternal, so that 'negotiating tradition and change is at the heart of contemporary fatherhood'.

Another aspect of fatherhood is providing psychological support - 'being there' for the children. This can mean many different things – physically being around the home as much as possible given the constraints of work, but also spending 'quality time' with the children:

"Being available when they need it, being a good role model, being their mate, empathising with them, facilitating them to develop and learn...Being around and being part of their lives really."

Studies suggest that the gender of the parent is less important for child development than broader parenting style. Early father involvement with a child is associated with continuing involvement with that child throughout childhood and adolescence. For non-resident fathers, parenting style is a more important predictor of good child outcomes than frequency of visits.

<sup>1</sup> Available from the ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex.

### Fathers in the 'support' role

In 2001, fathers worked an average of 46 hours per week with nearly 40 per cent working 48 hours or more and one-eighth 60 or more hours per week. Fathers in dual-earner households who work more than 50 hours per week lowered their participation in childcare and housework, while a recent study found that fathers who had 'atypical' working patterns in terms of their working hours, limited family activities with children and partners.

The qualitative study suggests that fathers adapt as circumstances change, but that they broadly fall into one of four main categories (although these are not labels that the fathers use themselves).

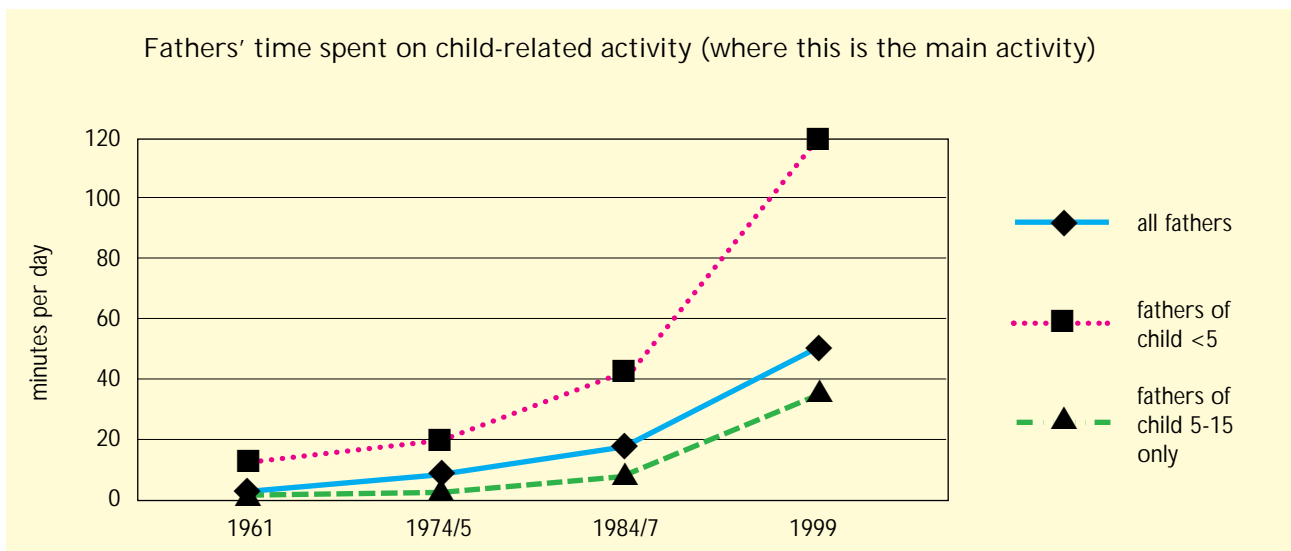
- *Enforcer dad* is not involved in the day to day care of children and sees the most important aspects of being a father as providing a role model and clear rules for the children. These fathers are usually older and tend to emphasise traditional sex roles.
- *Entertainer dad* often entertains the children while mother does the household work like cooking and cleaning, but tends not to be involved in those tasks himself.
- *Useful dad* also entertains the children but helps out with day to day childcare and some household tasks. He still takes the lead from the mother about what needs doing and when.
- *Fully-involved dad* is as equally involved with running the home and family as his partner, at least some of the time, and parental roles are virtually interchangeable.

Most fathers are in the two middle groups which implies a support role in the home rather than a sharing of responsibility. This support is often provided mostly at the weekends, when fathers try to compensate for the long hours they work during the week by dedicating their weekends to family life.

"I would say he is a bit of a weekend dad. I mean, he is fantastic at the weekends, he is great...but during the week he is never here...so he probably spends less than five minutes with them during the week, per day."

American research findings are similar, showing that the largest proportion of father time is spent on play and companionship activities. Weekends are emerging as special times for many working families, providing opportunities for parents and children to sustain family relationships, often in the face of increasing working hours.

A number of studies show that since the 1970s, there has been an upward trend in fathers' and mothers' involvement in childcare. This has been particularly sharp for fathers with children under the age of five years who, in the mid-1970s devoted less than a quarter of an hour per day to child-related activities (as their main activity), in contrast to two hours a day by the late 1990s. Overall, time spent by fathers accounts for one-third of all total parental childcare time.



Source: Fisher, K., McCulloch, A. and Gershuny, J. (1999) *British Fathers and Children*. Working paper. Essex: Institute for Social and Economic Research

### Men taking the support role

#### Structural issues

Men generally earn more than women. The current gender pay gap i.e. the average difference between men's and women's full-time hourly wages, is 18 per cent. Between men working full-time and women working part-time it is 41 per cent. So where the father earns more than the mother (as is generally the case) it is a pragmatic family decision for the father to continue to work full-time and for the mother to take on more of the domestic burden, possibly reducing her working hours.

Directly linked to this is the availability and high cost of childcare. As a result, mothers' work patterns and prospects often change considerably after the birth of a child:

*"It has affected my career enormously actually, and it hasn't affected Tim's at all."*

The link between the relative pay of women and men and the division of caring roles is also emphasised by the fact that the most egalitarian sharing of household and childcare tasks tends to be found in dual-earner households where the mother earns more than her partner. In these cases, the father is more involved in family life, both in terms of childcare and routine household work, "A bargaining type of interpretation: that it may not be just having to work that warrants increased care giving from father, but the monetary value of that work".<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, fathers who are involved in the emotional side of parenting – having private talks with children, helping with homework etc., are more likely to be involved in routine household tasks compared with those whose involvement stops at leisure and entertainment.

#### Expectations

The attention given to fathers in national policies can indicate the importance which society places on fathers' care of children and their role within the family. The broadening of policy initiatives on fatherhood has been a

distinctive feature of the latter part of Labour's term of office. This has brought Britain more in line with its European partners.

Yet it is still generally accepted that women will take time off, work part-time or job share in order to look after their children. It is taken for granted that a mother will alter her working pattern or face the double pressure of a work and a family career, whereas the father will only have his work career to contend with. For example, schools tend to ring the mother initially, not the father, when a child is sick:

*"There is a cultural acceptance that mothers will have the first call..."*

In addition, some fathers show a lack of enthusiasm for staying at home more, suggesting that they would find it hard but mundane work. There is little reflection that this is also the same for mothers, sometimes falling back on traditional, gender role explanations:

*"I think possibly the mother is more suited...but probably again with the traditional root of things maybe the mother is better equipped all round at being with the child."*

In some cases, fathers who are prevented by work commitments from spending more time with their families do admit that this is a choice they have made, and that they are perhaps lacking the motivation to be further involved. Fathers may also feel less confident or capable than their partner at looking after the children. Men in the case studies suggest that there should be courses for new fathers to prepare them for having children, involving childcare skills as well as time management.

#### Workplace culture

During the 1990s there was increased awareness amongst employers of quality of life issues plus concerns about staff retention, stress-induced absenteeism and business costs in general. A lack of balance between work and family life is recognised as a major factor in occupational stress.

<sup>2</sup> Fulgini, A.S. and Brooks-Gunn, J. (2001) Measuring mother and father shared caregiving: An analysis using the panel study of income dynamics - child development supplement. Paper presented at the "Workshop on Measuring Father Involvement" February 8-9, 2001, Bethesda, Maryland.

The workplace culture can have a huge impact upon a father's ability to balance his work and family responsibilities. This is about more than just family-friendly policies. It includes issues such as how comfortable fathers feel discussing their family commitments in the workplace and how acceptable it is to leave early in order to pick up the children from school, or to spend time with them in the evenings:

"... even though they might have the policies in writing about how they are family-friendly, you wonder sometimes what their attitude would be like if you had a lot of needs and you had to be really flexible and in and out all the time."

There is a general attitude that long hours demonstrate commitment to an organisation, yet there is a clear relationship between long working hours and levels of work dissatisfaction, unhappiness about hours and general discontent about the extent to which work and non-work interests can be balanced. Over 80 per cent of fathers in the WLB2000 survey were fairly or very satisfied with their working hours, but this dropped to 60 per cent for those working 48+ hours per week and to 50 per cent for those regularly working 60+ hours. Some fathers feel that they are actively struggling against the culture of long hours and that there is a constant tension:

"If employers want to have a long hours culture, I don't see how they can reconcile being family-friendly employers at the same time."

"We need to stop making work the focus of our lives. I think men are particularly victim to the long hours culture."

Part-time work for fathers is generally not seen as an option. Not only are the financial aspects prohibitive, but it is widely felt that part-time work does not have the same status as full-time employment and that, in some way, it suggests a reduced commitment to the employing organisation. The quality of fathers' work can also have an effect on family life, with the effects of work overload sometimes being more severe than those of long hours.

## Balancing responsibilities at home and at work

Eighty per cent of fathers and 85 per cent of mothers agreed that employees should be able to balance their work and home lives as they want, compared with 62 per cent of employers. This shows encouraging levels of 'commitment in principle' by employers although there remains a substantial gap between this and the high degree of expectation of provision by parents.

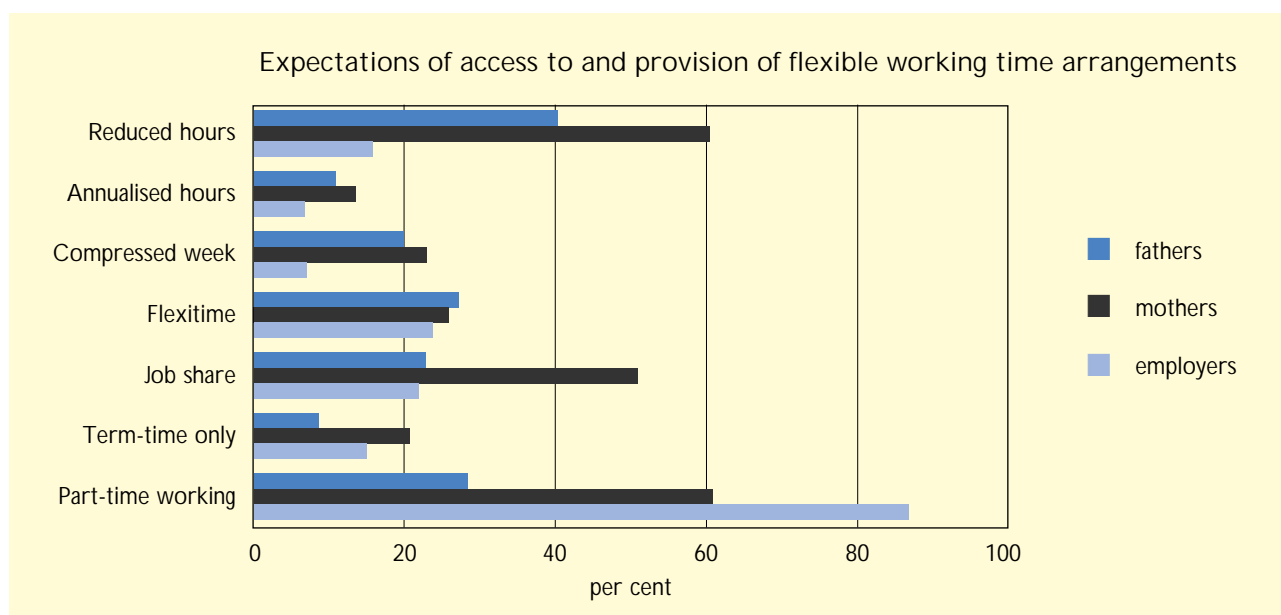
Although 90 per cent of companies reported that there was one or more 'proactive mechanism' in place to inform staff about what was available, the most common form of communication, reported by over a quarter of employers, was word of mouth. This suggests that on an individual company level, many employers rely on unsystematic and informal information flows to promote awareness of policies. As a result, many employees are unaware of such policies in their workplace. It is also possible that some companies actively choose not to promote their family friendly policies:

"I think, being truthful, we would not go out of our way to publicise it."

Some companies argue that there is no obvious demand from fathers. But fathers may not know that the policies exist. Even where they do exist, fathers are often happier relying on informal arrangements, or assume that the policies are either not relevant to them, or are not aimed at the main breadwinner. In the case study research, fathers sometimes tended to view the need to resolve their work and family roles as a personal responsibility:

"I do think far more is to do with your own considerations about the work-life balance, and if you really want to have more input in things at home then you have to do it yourself."

So fathers' expectations about whether specific work-life balance practices could be made available in their current workplace are low, as is their access to family-sensitive facilities such as subsidised or workplace nurseries or other financial help with childcare. Indeed, a majority



Source: Work-Life Balance 2000 Employee survey, IFER/IFF, 2000. Available from ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex.

of fathers said that they were satisfied with their overall job, the hours they worked and their flexibility over working hours.

### Use of existing policies

Fathers actual use of flexible working practices is low, with shift work and flexitime the most prevalent. In general, fathers were most likely to want access to flexitime, a compressed working week or the ability to work at home. Those who were dissatisfied with their working hours highlighted three favoured changes: being able to leave on time; working less overtime; and working more hours for more pay.

Many new fathers have made use of paternity leave: 61 per cent of fathers with a child under one year in the WLB2000 survey. This provides a good baseline figure for the introduction of the Government's policy of two weeks statutory paternity leave, which comes into effect in April 2003.

### Informal arrangements

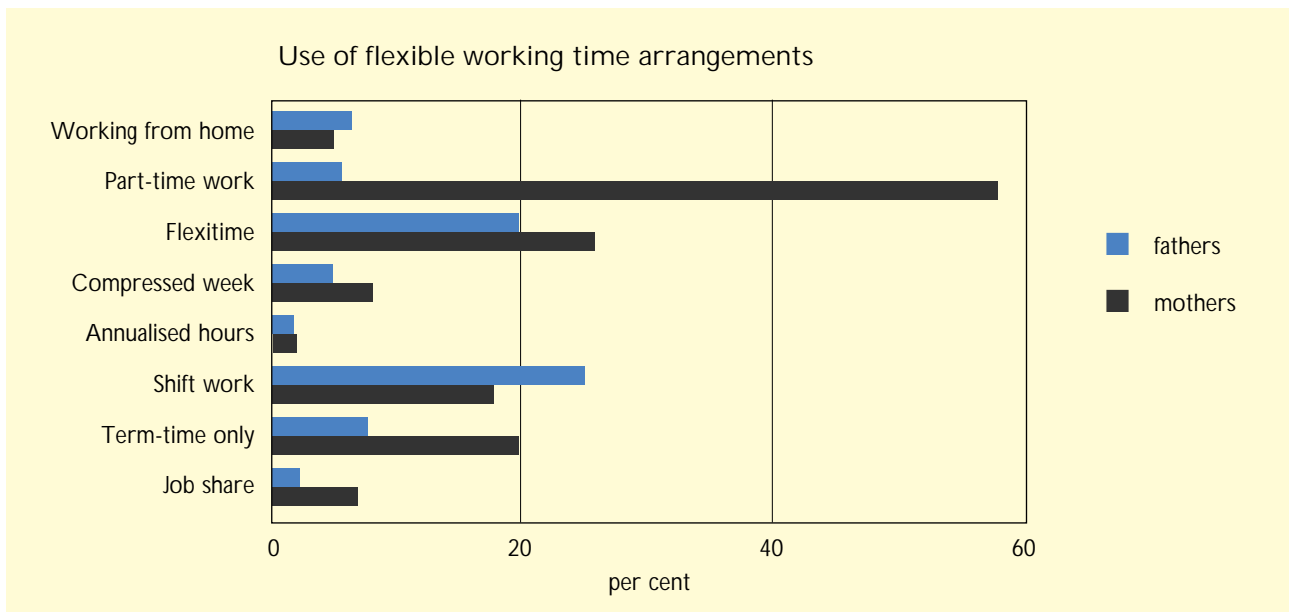
For many fathers, informal agreements made with their manager were felt to be sufficient to meet their needs. In the case studies, employees working in a small business said there was ad hoc flexibility when necessary. It was possible to change shifts for family reasons on occasion, but generally not to shorten working hours. This also applied in emergencies.

Similarly, informal arrangements were preferred by the public sector employees in the case studies, even though the organisation had formal policies in place to help parents. Employees were happy to negotiate time off with their manager and did not tend to make use of the actual policies, although it is likely that the very fact that the policies existed helped them to negotiate this flexibility. However, managers were not always understanding of fathers' family commitments and some fathers would have preferred greater flexibility:

"I asked for a couple of hours in the morning because my boy was starting school that morning. I asked him the day before and he said "no, can't you go the next day"...and that comes from a male that didn't have children."

### Encouraging take-up

The early 1970s saw the beginnings of father-sensitive family policies in Europe. Paternity leave, which marked the arrival of a legal right that fathers should be absent from work for a period of time when their child is born, was first introduced in Sweden in 1974. The philosophy behind the Swedish and much of the Nordic parental support policies has been from an equal opportunities perspective – to create a social environment where women and men have the same access to employment, familial and personal fulfilment.



Source: Work-Life Balance 2000 Employee survey, IFER/IFF, 2000. Available from ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex.

European experience shows that when parental leave entitlement is available to either the man or the women, it is taken by very few men – less than five per cent. One way of improving father take-up is to have designated ‘daddy periods’, where a proportion of paid parental leave is set aside exclusively for fathers. In Norway, four weeks of parental leave is available only to fathers and use of this special father’s quota rose to 85 per cent in 2000. This policy recognises the needs of both mothers and fathers – as the quota was an extension of parental leave and not subtracted from maternal leave.

Scandinavian experience suggests that high take-up of parental leave by fathers is linked to four key conditions: when parental leave is an individual entitlement not transferable between the mother and father; where there is flexibility in the way that leave can be used by couples; when provision for fathers is publicised through Government awareness campaigns; and where there is high wage compensation.

Given this, the probable take-up of unpaid parental leave in Britain is likely to be very limited, although it is broadly welcomed as a step in the right direction. The case study research confirmed concerns that the level of reimbursement at £100 per week for paternity leave will not be sufficient, particularly at a time when family costs have

suddenly increased. Evidence from the Nordic countries suggests that income replacement levels of 80-100 per cent of earnings are a necessary condition for universal take-up.

### The business case

The WLB2000 survey found that a majority of employers felt that the impact of family-sensitive practices and policies on the organisation was positive. Eight out of ten employers thought that they fostered good employment relations and two-thirds agreed that they improved staff motivation, retention and turnover. However, 44 per cent thought that they increased overall costs to business. European evidence is also somewhat mixed, with some surveys showing that parental leave schemes, for example, have caused problems for their organisations.

### Implications from the research

Fatherhood is in a state of change. It is clear from the two studies that fathers are already more centrally involved in family life, even if this is often in a support role to the mother.

An informed public debate is needed about how fathers balance their economic and other commitments to children and partners. The introduction of paternity leave could act as a catalyst for such a debate.

A change in workplace culture is needed so that active fatherhood is accepted and the

prevalence of long working hours reduced. Excessive working hours reduce satisfaction with work-family balance and fathers' involvement with children.

The new flat-rate paid paternity leave and unpaid parental leave schemes will both need careful monitoring to assess satisfaction and uptake. The research suggests that many fathers in Britain will not even consider taking parental leave that is unpaid and the Nordic experience of parental leave schemes show that uptake is greater where income replacement levels are high and a special dedicated 'daddy quota' is adopted.

Employers need to promote policies which are available and ensure that fathers know which practices are relevant to them. The research shows that fathers need more flexibility in the workplace, with greater control over their working day.

Addressing the gender pay gap is key to enabling greater choice about the roles that women and men play in the home. Men currently earn more than women on average, which encourages the traditional gender roles of father as breadwinner and mother as carer. Fathers are more willing to alter their work patterns if their partner earns more than themselves.

It is important that any policies and practices which are introduced to help parents balance their work and family roles, recognise the differing needs of both mothers and fathers.

### Technical Note

The WLB2000 Employee survey dataset comprises data from a nationally representative survey of 7,500 persons in employment in workplaces with five or more staff, including 1,486 fathers and 2,260 mothers with dependent children. The Employer dataset comprises data from a nationally representative survey of 2,500 workplaces with five or more employees. MORI conducted 61 qualitative in-depth interviews with fathers, their partners and HR managers in six case study organisations, and three focus groups with fathers, between April and June 2002.

Working Fathers: earning and caring by Margaret O'Brien and Ian Shemilt, University of East Anglia (January 2003) and Dads on Dads: needs and expectations at home and at work by Warren Hatter, Louise Vinter and Rachel Williams, MORI Social Research Institute (October 2002) are published in the EOC Research Discussion series. They can be downloaded from the EOC website or are available as hard copy.

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## RESEARCH *findings*



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