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Bloxham, Susan (1993) Managerialism in youth and community work: a critique of changing organisational structures and management practice. Youth and Policy, 41 (Summer). pp. 1-12.

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MANAGERIALISM IN YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORK:

A Critique of Changing Organisational Structures and Management Practices

SUE BLOXHAM

The purpose of this paper is to explore the development of hierarchical structures and the growth of managerialism in contemporary youth & community organisations. I shall attempt to show that the traditional organisational design of youth services, whilst matching the complexity of the work and the culture of the service, has considerable weaknesses in relation to improving practice and in providing quick and creative responses to our hostile and dynamic environment. However, changes that are being made in relation to increased bureaucracy and centralised control do not seem to tackle these weaknesses, but may well damage the morale and commitment of good and effective staff. I shall conclude by suggesting alternative approaches to the management and organisational design of Youth and Community services.

The Structure Of Organisations

Mintzberg (1979) defines organisational structure as 'The sum total of the ways in which .. (an organisation) divides its labour into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination between them.' (p2). Handy (1985) agrees that structure seems to have two clear elements within it; one which is about the formal roles that people have and may include elements of hierarchy, lines of accountability and job descriptions, (see a typical organisation chart); and another is the linking mechanisms between those roles. Morgan (1986) makes the point that we tend to think of organisations as machines and therefore design them in a rather mechanistic way, ignoring the influence of people upon them. The development of organisation theory appears to be partially a development of our understanding about how organisations are affected by those within them and the task that the organisation has to achieve. Explanations have moved from a bureaucratic, mechanistic analysis (Weber 1947), to an 'organic' explanation stressing diffusion of power and communication (Burns & Stalker 1961); to the 'contingency' approach with an emphasis on the match between organisational variables and structural design (Hage 1980) [all from Hall 1987].

Mechanistic/bureaucratic:

The mechanistic, bureaucratic organisation is an approach to structure that 'emphasises precision, speed, clarity, regularity, reliability and efficiency achieved through the creation of a fixed division of tasks, hierarchical supervision, and detailed rules and regulations' (Morgan 1986, p24) It is imbued with the idea of rationality and efficiency. However, it requires that the component parts (workers) will behave like machines. Yet, as Morgan says, the tasks facing organisations are far more complex and erratic than those facing machines. Therefore the approach has been criticised for the following limitations:

1. It disregards the human elements of organisations and can have a dehumanising effect, particularly at lower levels in the organisation.

It encourages people to obey orders rather than show initiative or question what they are doing.

2. It can't adapt easily to changing situations
3. It can cause 'mindless, unquestioning' bureaucracy
4. It tends to compartmentalize and cause unnecessary barriers to communication and innovation
5. Clearly specified job roles have a side-effect of telling people what 'is not expected of them'. This is likely to limit initiative and flexibility in responding to change.

   (How many times have I heard youth workers say I can't do so and so because it isn't in my job description)

Organic
Organic theories of organisational design have been strongly influenced by the critique of classical scientific/mechanistic approaches. Theories of human motivation (eg. Maslow) and job design (e.g. Hertzberg) emphasised the need for work organisations to take into account the social and psychological 'needs' of human beings in order to be fully effective and make good use of their human resources. In other words, organisations need to blend human and technical factors and this notion is known as the 'sociotechnical' approach to organisational design.

Open systems
Organic approaches to organisation theory have been expanded to take into account not only the need to consider socio-technical principals in organisational design, but also the fact that organisations are part of and 'open to' their broader environment.

Contingency theory
An obvious development from the 'Open systems' approach, with its recognition of the impact of different internal needs and external circumstances on the organisation, has been the notion of 'contingency' theory. That is, the notion that the most appropriate form of organisational design will be dependent or (*contingent)* upon the task and environment with which the organisation will have to deal. Burns and Stalker (1961) and Lawrence and Lorch (1967) (cited in Morgan 1986) were influential in the development of this theory, and in the period since the sixties, many research studies have tried to illuminate what organisational characteristics are best matched to different tasks and environmental circumstances.

Summary
The debate almost seems to have come full circle. The major rejection of the mechanistic/bureaucratic approach in favour of 'organic' designs has now been displaced by the idea that almost any organisational structure may be suitable. What seems to be more important now is less the intrinsic merit of a design, and more, its effectiveness in meeting the internal and external needs of a given organisation. In other words the **congruence** between the structure and the demands that are being made of it.

The following table from Harrison (1987) illustrates some of the current thinking about the conditions that best fit mechanistic and organic organisations.

Conditions Affecting the Fit of Mechanistic and Organic Systems

Description	*Mechanistic*	*Organic*
Roles, responsibilities	Specialized, clearly defined	Diffuse, flexible change through use
Coordination and Control	Supervision, rules standard procedures detailed plans; frequent evaluation based on meeting objectives, standards	Consultation among all having related tasks; flexible plans; diffuse, changing goals; evaluation of results over longer time frame.
Communication	Top-down emphasis: top management has key outside contacts	Multidirectional: multilevel contacts with outsiders
Supervision and Leadership	Non-participative, one-on-one; loyalty to superiors stressed position and experience grant authority.	Participative team styles: emphasis on task, team, organisation; expertise & knowledge grant authority.
Sources of knowledge	Local, internal	External, cosmopolitan, professional orientation
Fit best when	*Mechanistic*	*Organic*
Technology is	routine (well understood, standardised).	nonroutine (not well understood; or designed for each problem).
Task environment	Predictable (simple, changing predictably)	unpredictable (complex, changing rapidly).
Personnel expect	High level of structure and routine; control from above.	High levels of role flexibility, challenging work.
Effectiveness criteria stress	Efficiency; standard predictable operations and outputs; ease of control from top.	Creativity, innovativeness, adaptiveness, quality of work life, development of human resources.

Harrison (1987) p82

Youth Service Organisations

I now wish to use this potted summary of organisation theory to examine youth service organisations and whether their traditional and changing organisation patterns are **congruent** with their needs. That is, is there a good fit between organisation designs (including their management practice) and the nature of the organisation's staff, tasks and external environment.

In my experience, youth service organisations (large enough to employ several full-time workers) have traditionally fallen into what Mintzberg would call **Professional Bureaucracies** and strong elements of this organisational form continue in contemporary organisations. **Professional Bureaucracy** is one of a number of 'ideal type' structures through which Mintzberg has attempted to formalise key elements of contingency theory. In other words, he has categorised different types of organisation and discussed what contingent factors they are best suited to. For example his **Machine Bureaucracy** is typified by the MacDonalds restaurant. An organisational form which works well for the continuous production of standardised products requiring low level staff skills, and operating in a fairly stable external environment. (Works well for whom you might ask!)

Mintzberg describes the **Professional Bureaucracy** as the structural configuration that appears when an organisation is largely made up of skilled workers; **professionals**. These people take a long time to train, and complete complex tasks. Teachers and doctors are good examples of such professionals because their tasks are highly complicated and skilled. Because the tasks are so complex, the workers retain high levels of discretion. Many judgements are involved and this gives them considerable control over the performance and outputs of their work. Standardisation, or quality of outputs, is not controlled by direct supervision but by 'professional' standards. These are learnt through training and experience, and are regulated by professional bodies and peer pressure from outside any one organisation. For example in the field of youth and community work, the strong emphasis on anti-oppressive practice is determined by the broad professional and academic youth work community nationally. That community has far greater influence on these matters than the particular organisation that any one of us operates in. Indeed, the emphasis on anti-oppression in the professional Youth Work community may be in some conflict with many employing organisations.

> Whereas the **Machine Bureaucracy** relies on authority of a hierarchical nature - the power of office - the **Professional Bureaucracy** emphasises authority of a professional nature - the power of expertise (Mintzberg 1979, p351)

However, such organisations remain bureaucratical (as defined by Mintzberg from Weber) because the behaviour within them is 'pre-determined or predictable, in effect, standardised'. There are formalised methods and procedures for dealing with things; relationships between different roles are predictable. Mintzberg makes the point that *bureaucratic* does not equate with *autocratic* and organisations can be decentralised bureaucracies. Higher Education is a good example of this with heavily bureaucratic systems for timetabling, examining, validation and decision-making, yet traditionally very decentralised in its power structure.

Mintzberg's category, therefore, describes very well the traditional educational institution or the organisation of hospitals, social work and other human service agencies. Individual staff work largely autonomously and because there is little need for direct supervision, the organisational shape is flat with broad spans of managerial control. Middle management is of minor importance because there is little point in the direct supervision of staff. Furthermore such professionals not only control their own work, but also tend to exercise collective control over other aspects of the organisation that affect them. The committee structures that abound in Universities are an excellent example of this collective control. Senior management, whilst having less power than in other types of organisational structure, still hold more power than any other individual professional in the organisation. However that power may be overwhelmed by collective resistance.

It is possible to see why Professional Bureaucracy is an important configuration to discuss in relation to the Youth Service where the staff are highly trained (compared with staff in MacDonalds) and they perform tasks that are so complex that they cannot be easily broken down and specified (witness competency lists). It is also difficult for those outside the Youth and Community field to assess the quality of the work. Thus the staff retain high levels of discretion over their performance. For example, during a period of one year when I worked as a full-time youth worker for Lancashire Youth Service, my line managers did not once observe my work with young people; I had considerable control and discretion in relation to my work, much as I do now as an academic. However, despite the level of worker autonomy, youth service organisations have remained largely bureaucratic in the sense that there are formalised procedures and a reasonable standardisation to activities. Good practice is frequently determined outside any individual organisation as part of 'professional' standards. For example, the development of *girls' work* has filtered into organisations not by senior management dictat but by mainstream workers in contact with a wider community of youth workers, and pressure groups, who are able (if somewhat slowly) to exert collective influence on their organisation. Furthermore, youth work staff expect to have considerable control over their organisations and to be consulted about changes and developments.

Contingent factors

How effective is this traditional structure of Youth and Community organisations for their current role and contemporary external environment? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider what Mintzberg identifies as the contingent factors related to **Professional Bureaucracy**. That is, under what circumstances is it an effective organisational design? Mintzberg argues that a **Professional Bureaucracy** is appropriate for organisations:

1. Where the staff do complex, skilled work

2. Which operate in a stable external environment

3. Where the technical systems are unsophisticated

To what extent are these an accurate description of youth work organisations?

Complexity:
There is no doubt that the role of youth worker is enormously complex. Attempts to develop competency lists have revealed dramatically how difficult it is to identify and describe all the different skills, attitudes and knowledge required by an effective youth worker. Likewise, the measurement of that performance has created similar problems, not least because of disputes regarding what counts as good practice and appropriate outcomes. In the event, the complexity of performance leads to it being measured by the 'professional judgement' of a fellow worker or manager. This complexity, both in the range of skills used and discretion held by staff, links with decentralised management where staff do not require regular direct supervision and tend to resist administrative and supervisory interference in their work. Mintzberg argues that this 'control over his own work means that the professional works relatively independently of his colleagues' *(p349)* and this is certainly true in youth and community work. Even in part-time teams, staff may well be working with different groups of young people with only brief periods available to discuss their work together. Therefore staff enjoy considerable autonomy and organisations tend to be 'fairly loose conglomerations of their constituent staff members' *(Becher 1987)*. However, this does not prevent standards of performance being set but these tend to come from outside the organisation as, for example, standards in relation to provision for young women. 'Individuals act in an essentially entrepreneurial role'.

Therefore, in terms of complexity, the professional bureaucracy appears to be congruent with the nature of Youth and Community work. However the same could not be said of the external environment.

External environment
There is no doubt that the youth service is now operating in a turbulent and hostile environment. It interacts with an environment which is both complex and changing and this presents organisations with considerable uncertainty. Witness the proposals for a national core curriculum in 1989, which were overturned by the new minister responsible for youth soon after his appointment in 1992. Earlier paragraphs highlighted the environmental conditions suited to different organisational structures. Katz and Kahn argue that an organisation's success depends on how well it adapts to its environment *(cited in Harrison 1987)*. Therefore, a turbulent and dynamic environment requires an organisation that has sufficient flexibility to make rapid changes in tune with the needs of the environment. The youth service over the last decade has needed, for example, the ability to respond quickly to changing demands *(from both communities and the state)* such as youth unemployment, inner-city riots, changing patterns of training, the advent of HIV/AIDS, and youth homelessness and destitution.

Therefore a **Professional Bureaucracy**, with its need for a stable external environment, would appear to have major shortcomings in relation to the current operating environment of Youth and Community organisations.

Technical systems
It could be argued that the technical systems of Youth and Community organisations are very unsophisticated, with the primary tool for delivering the work being

the workers themselves. There are some moves towards management information systems but with many workers still carrying out most of their own administration, and work roles being largely independent of each other, the need for complex technical systems to co-ordinate work has largely been absent. In this sense, the **Professional Bureaucracy** has been an appropriate form of organisational design for Youth and Community Services.

In summary, it would seem that although there are elements of Youth and Community work which suit a **Professional Bureaucracy**, the current external environment certainly does not fit with this organisational form. Therefore in the next section, I would like to explore further the failure of this organisational form for Youth and Community work and examine the attempts that have been made to overcome some of its disadvantages.

Problems and possibilities

The process whereby each youth worker has tended to operate as an independent entity has had important consequences for aspects of communication and co-ordination in youth work organisations. Internal co-ordination is very difficult. They are fragmented, loosely coupled *(Watts 1990)* institutions and horizontal communication (ie between workers across the organisation) is hampered by the lack of interaction. However, where this flat, decentralised structure has been replaced by an equally bureaucratic, *hierarchical* structure, horizontal communication is also curtailed by having to travel up and down the hierarchy.

The lack of co-ordination also creates considerable political conflict as different sections argue over the boundaries of their territory. When new problems or expansion are dealt with by allocation to existing units and workers, rather than by combining them, it is not surprising that those different groups put up a fight. Organisational tasks that do not fit into existing categories become lost in the gaps between specialisms and teams of workers. This has enormous consequences for adaptation to the external environment, as we shall see below.

Centralisation refers to the distribution of power in organisations and, as I have said, youth service organisations are traditionally very decentralised. One of the benefits for the people involved has been the democratic structure. Staff may complain about not having sufficient say in matters, but compared to many types of organisation, youth services traditionally allow staff considerable voice in decision-making procedures with team meetings, consultative groups, and representation on committees. This decentralised decision-making is clearly linked to poor co-ordination by Hall *(1987)* with the associated inability to implement consistent organisation-wide policies and make rapid decisions. Matterson (1981) talks about 'the innate conservatism of representative government' which tends to put off making decisions and avoids excessive change. Unfortunately, such caution is contingent on a stable external world, and does not sit comfortably with the environment facing Youth and Community Services currently. As Francis *(1987)* says 'The difficulty of obtaining the willing co-operation of many independent people means that change proceeds with almost painful slowness' *(p68)*.

Not surprisingly, then, the last decade has seen a concerted effort to change this type of organisational structure in the Youth Service with attempts to increase rationality and tighten controls by executive management, evidenced by reduced autonomy and increased management supervision, appraisal and accountability. There has been a huge growth in managerial posts, phrases abound like 'management's right to manage' and organisational structures have become much taller. For example when I worked for Lancashire in 1980 as a full-time worker, there was one tier above me in the Youth Service structure and the odd adviser floating about. Now the same post would have four tiers above it within the Youth Service and probably two or three more in the Senior management of the Education Department. A total of 10 levels between Chief Education Officer and part-timer!

Of course the internal changes within Youth Services reflect wider political pressures as well as internal dissatisfaction. As Tolbert *(1985)* argues in relation to Higher Education, organisations experience pressure to conform to external views about how they should operate. Failure to respond can effect the legitimacy of the organisation and its ability to attract resources. The funding arrangements related to in-service training, youth work curriculum and the head quarters grants of voluntary organisations have all reflected this pattern.

One example of this political pressure has been the individual freedom of workers which has come under considerable pressure over the last decade with external efforts to curtail it in all areas of professional life, particularly in the public sector. The national curriculum is an excellent example of this as is appraisal as a precondition of wage rises for teachers and academics. Parallel pressures can be seen between the demand for Higher Education institutions to justify their activities and account for their use of resources in terms of effectiveness (Sizer 1986) and Alan Howarth's challenge to the Youth Service to clarify 'the core of what the youth service is uniquely best placed to provide' *(1989)*.

Mintzberg (interestingly, writing in **1979**) points out that a view of professional problems as a result of insufficient control over professionals leads to the introduction of **co-ordinating controls designed for other types of organisational configuration**. These tend to be 'direct supervision, standardisation of work processes, or standardisation of outputs' *(p376)*. Some recent examples of these in the youth service include accounting for time used, regular managerial supervision, monitoring of club activities, competency lists, appraisal, detailed job descriptions, and performance indicators. In general, the approaches are a shift to a hierarchical structure of control with a strong emphasis on **management intervention**.

However, this move is in direct contradiction with traditional practice in youth work *(as I have suggested above)* and it is argued *(Becher 1987, Mintzberg1979)* that not only does it fail to improve the work of incompetent staff, it also damages the work and motivation of competent staff. Becher *(speaking of HE)* says that like most 'top down' reforms it fails to take into account other features of the work and Mintzberg states that it is based on the false assumption that professional work can be formalized by rules. As Mintzberg says, technocratic measures do not enrich professional practice and they cannot differentiate between good and bad professionals. 'They constrain both equally....(and) only serve to dampen professional

conscientiousness' *(p378)*, creating conflict, job dissatisfaction and passivity. They force professionals to play the 'bureaucratic game'. For example, Cave et al *(1988)* illustrate how performance indicators can be sabotaged or can detract from good practice. They illustrate how measuring the quantity of research output for academics might encourage publication of low grade research. Likewise measuring attendance figures encourages discos and asking for indicators of social education invites workers to redescribe football as developing team work and constructive use of conflict!

Mintzberg argues that complex work cannot be carried out well unless it is under the command of the person who does it and therefore it is through the **training and learning processes** that change happens and not by its imposition from above. However, the trend is to reduce individual autonomy and increase centralisation despite the arguments, presented above which indicate that an organic structure is far better suited to a dynamic and hostile environment than increased formalisation, hierarchy and bureaucracy. Hall says 'It is odd that the environment pressures to do this, since in many ways the loosely coupled organisation is more adaptive to the environment and is more likely to develop innovations that might be beneficial over the long run.' *(p229)*

There is a clear contradiction here for managers attempting to change to a more effective organisational structure. On the one hand external political forces and a hostile, uncertain environment are creating pressure for centralisation, yet the recipe for organisational survival in such a dynamic, competitive environment seems to be an, organic decentralised organisation.

In the Youth Service, it may be the case that because the traditional pattern is decentralised, the pressure for change is automatically interpreted as a need to change the level of **centralisation** rather than a need to change the level of **bureaucracy**. And this view is heavily supported by fashionable, political ideology in public sector management practice. But this increase in centralisation will not foster innovation. It may make difficult decisions but it will not make exciting or creative ones. The evidence suggests that we have to retain decentralisation but move to a more flexible, organic structure which can adapt quickly to changes in the environment and can co-ordinate activities easily across old bureaucratic boundaries.

Barriers to change

A further crucial issue in discussing recent changes in management structures is aspects of organisational culture. A great strength of the Professional Bureaucracy, and why it is so fashionable with workers *(Mintzberg)* is its ability to meet two important needs of its staff. Firstly, it is a very democratic organisational form and secondly, it offers its operators considerable control over their work. Mintzberg suggests that this is a considerable aid to the motivation of staff and Francis *(1987)* describes it as providing 'deeply satisfying work' *(p67)*.

The notion of 'culture' in organisations is based on the idea that there is a shared system of meaning amongst the members of that organisation. This system underpins the values that are common to the different people involved. Handy argues that 'No structure, however well related to the diversity of the environment, will

work effectively without a culture appropriate to the structure ......The designer of the organisation forgets this at his peril' *(p318)* This is a vital factor in youth work organisational structure and management because there is a traditional culture of democracy and an emphasis on individual freedoms. Clearly, changes in structure need to work with, if not accept, the existing culture in the organisation. The move to managerialism has not always taken this into account.

To conclude this section, the traditional organisational design in Youth Services, whilst matching the complexity of the work and the culture of the service, has considerable weaknesses in relation to improving the work and quick and creative responses to our hostile and dynamic environment. However, changes that are being made in relation to increased bureaucracy and centralised control do not seem to address the weaknesses, but may well damage the morale and commitment of good and effective staff.

What might be done:

Innovation and speedy response to the environment:

The weakness in flexible response to change is located in poor co-ordination between autonomous workers. Appropriate structures should foster control at the lowest possible level in order to involve more people, with the best information, in making decisions and feeling ownership of decisions that are made about their direct work. To this end, delegated budgets seem like a move in the right direction. A move that recognises the 'loosely coupled' nature of Youth Services and does not try to co-ordinate the unco-ordinatable. Smaller groups making decisions must be speedier than long-winded trails through committee structures and up and down hierarchies. I would argue that many full-time staff spend so much time trying to communicate with each other and attempting to co-ordinate their efforts that little time is left to actually work with young people. Furthermore, delegation of decision-making should also allow greater opportunity for participation by local communities.

Co-ordination and control of work:

As with all forms of work, some people do not do it to the satisfaction of others. This is a band wagon that the Tories have jumped on over the last decade and have bashed all of us in the public sector as needing better control and co-ordination. The problem is equally important to youth work staff. A frequent cry on in-service management courses is the request for help from managers who complain that staff are sabotaging change and development. 'Our staff say they will do things but always come up with excuses in the end', 'How can I make them turn up on time, do so and so, etc', 'Can you tell us about disciplinary procedures?'

This is an essential point for those involved in training youth work staff. The route to improving work practice is not through greater bureaucratisation which is easily sabotaged and demoralises good staff. Managing improved work needs to come through training, particularly the 'sitting-by-nellie' approach where managers are able to model good practice. Managers need to understand the importance of developing their workers *by example*; by being present; by demonstrating high standards; by talking and sharing good practice. Supervision, appraisal and disciplinary action will not do. If this notion of **Professional Bureaucracy** is valid, then

it suggests that maintaining and improving standards of youth and community work comes from having a strong *professional community* which can articulate good practice. I suggest that that community exists and managers can provide a key reflection of it, particularly for part-timers.

Kenney and Reid point out that learning goes on all the time when people are brought together:

> *Every encounter between a superior and subordinate involves learning of some kind for the subordinate (and should for the superior too). The attitudes, habits and expectations of the subordinate will be reinforced to some degree as a result of every encounter with the boss...Day by day experience is so much more powerful that it tends to overshadow what the individual may learn in other settings.*

Thus the move to greater managerial roles and less work alongside part-time staff is probably detrimental. Staff with management responsibility need to consider their role in relation to maintaining and developing codes of professional good practice by demonstrating them in all their contacts with staff. Frequent regular contact of this nature will, I suggest, be far more effective in achieving improved practice than endless supervision and appraisal sessions or the filling of monitoring and evaluation forms, or the detailed demarcation of job descriptions and the checking off of competency lists, to name a few examples. It will also increase the time available for managers to work with the clients of their service.

Endpiece

The direct translation of managerial methods and theories from areas of industry and commerce to complex human service organisations, without regard for their different tasks and staff roles, has failed us. I have to say that the best illustration of this failure of the 'management' approach confronts me regularly when I visit my local youth centre and find that virtually nothing has changed over the years despite the endless upheavals in the local authority hierarchy operating above the two part-timers struggling to deliver what they think the young people want, almost totally unacquainted with the practical application of developments in youth work ideas. I do not think they have ever had the benefit of working alongside their largely absent manager to watch him cope with the difficult youngster, or start a discussion on a challenging topic. The impact of equal opportunity policies is another illustration. Whereas management can devise policies and issue guide-lines, changed practice will only come via the changing professional community that staff are exposed to through observing good practice and attending training.

Critics may argue that this whole paper still rests firmly within conventional organisation and management theory and this is a major weakness. For example, developments in feminist theory *(see Fenby 1991)* are highly critical of the technical/rational approaches that underpin traditional management theory, particularly American work. I imagine that the continuing notion that organisations can be understood objectively, and separately from the individuals who compose them would expose my arguments to criticism that they have failed, at the very least, to

address the power dimension within institutions. As Fenby says of social work:

> *The discussion remains overshadowed by the booming male voice, which continues its romance with the technical at the expense of examining moral choices (p35)*

So, there is considerable room for further debate in this area and it is certain to be spurred on by internal dissatisfaction as well as external pressure for change - not the least by the massive recent cutbacks. This paper has attempted, merely, to open up that debate, challenge the increasingly accepted wisdom and begin to suggest some alternatives.

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