

Balancing Organizational Work with Personal Lives: What Chief Executive Officers Believe

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Chief Executive Officers have an influence on the adoption and implementation of family-friendly initiatives in their organizations, yet little is known about what they believe about the work/life issues of their employees. Often, they themselves are personally removed from the experience of work/family conflict, yet they have a role in supporting family-friendly cultures. This article explores the beliefs held by twenty-eight CEOs in the Denver area. Implications for HRD are discussed.

Keywords: Work/Life Issues, Leadership, Organizational Culture

Workers today have a difficult time balancing or integrating their work and family lives. Some organizations have instituted work/family programs to help, but employees may not use them due to fear of negative career repercussions. CEOs have an influence on both the adoption of work/family programs at their organizations and whether or not the culture of the organization supports work/family programs. The problem for this research was to collect data on the beliefs and perceptions of CEOs on the issue of work/family conflict and work/family programs.

Theoretical Framework

Pleck (1977) wrote the classic paper on the work/family role system, postulating that there are permeable boundaries between male and female roles in both work and family systems. Segmentation theory (Carnoy, 2000; Heymann, 2000) postulates that the two roles are segmented, while Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt (2002) consider the roles as integrated. Newest theories are that the two roles actually augment the other and support each other, e.g. work-family facilitation (Grzywacz & Butler, 2005).

The most prevalent view, however, is that work and family conflict (work/conflict theory) and that work and family spillover to each other (spillover theory, Eckenrode & Gore, 1990). It is this view that leads to the development of work/family programs that might help alleviate the attendant stress of spillover.

Spillover of stress from work to family and family to work is not uncommon, and is bidirectional (Eckenrode & Gore, 1990). Moreover, fifty-six percent of working women experience spillover in either direction (work to family or family to work) (Bromet, Dew & Parkinson, 1990). This spillover results in work-family conflict. Work-family conflict is related both to lower job and career satisfaction, higher turnover, and increased stress (Joyce, 2003). Research studies consistently show that work/family conflict is related to poor performance, poor retention, and job dissatisfaction (Frone, 2003).

Parents are now participating in greater numbers and for longer hours in the workforce, without a change in domestic duties at home, resulting in a real time squeeze (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Dual-earner parents experience tension over childcare issues and less family time (Turner, 2002).

Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman (1996) found in their study of nearly 3,000 workers, that although more parents experienced work/family conflict (fifty-eight percent) than non-parents, forty-two percent of non-parents also experienced conflict between work and personal life. There was no difference between parents and non-parents in work to home spillover, but parents had significantly more home to work spillover due to working fewer hours, rearranging work schedules, refusing overtime, travel, promotions, challenging assignments, using the phone more, problems with co-workers, or feeling distracted and less productive because of family responsibilities. Parents also experienced more work/family conflict, more stress, and poorer coping. In Heymann's (2000) national survey of 870 adults, thirty percent of respondents reported some work/family conflict over the course of a week.

Background

The influence of CEOs on work/life programs has been well established in the literature (Bankert & Googins, 1996; Budd, Jr., 1996; Hall, 1990; Landauer, 1997; Mascotte, 1993; Perlow, 1998). CEOs drive company culture (Jacobs

& Gerston, 2004). Starrels (1992) in her classic review of work/life programs, noted that it would be interesting to know more about the personal lives and beliefs of CEOs.

There is much anecdotal data available on CEO beliefs. A DuPont vice president stated that empirical data on employee commitment moved him from being nominally supportive of work/family programs to strongly believing that they are important for business (Landauer, 1997). Lawrence Perlman (1993), CEO of Ceridian Corporation, wrote about a pregnant CEO because he has a daughter who recently graduated from college; other CEOs also began to understand the problem when their children tried to cope with work/family issues (Regan, 1994). John Mascotte (1993), CEO of the Continental Corporation, has noted that most CEOs are very traditional because of their age, and they put their careers together when work/family was not an issue; they do not understand the problem in its most fundamental sense. Perlow (1998) noted in the study of boundary control, that for top managers to relinquish the idea of face time (i.e., the more one is at work the more one is assumed to be contributing) in favor of flexible work practices (which could ease work/family conflicts) means going against the very tactic that they used to advance to top management. Randall Tobias, the CEO of Eli Lilly, noted that face time did not always mean results; but that a lot of corporate America just doesn't understand the work/family issue (Morris, 1997). Aetna is an organization whose CEO has made it clear that both parents are expected to make use of work/family programs (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Ron Compton challenged other CEOs to "flex or break" in a speech, and then sent a summary of his remarks to his organization: "At the heart of the work-family issue--like at the heart of every other business issue--it is the imagination, the will, and the flexibility to make it work that makes the difference. As senior managers we have to bring that imagination and good will to the table. (p. 71)."

Not every CEO believes that work/family programs should be adopted, however. John Clendenin, chairman of Bell South, has said, "People have always had to make choices about balancing work and family. It has always been a personal issue, and individuals have to do it" (Morris, 1997). Friedman, Christensen, and DeGroot (1998) noted that "...most executives still believe that every time an employee's personal interests 'win,' the organization pays the price at its bottom line" (p. 119). Rodgers (1992) reported the finding of a human resource VP that "more than half of the executive management group of the company (including the CEO) still believe that the need for flexibility in and of itself is a sign that a person is not really committed to the company" (p. 183).

Research Question

The research question was: What are the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes held by Chief Executive Officers about work/life balance and work/family programs?

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was an interpretive qualitative strategy as outlined by Merriam (2002). Data were collected primarily from one hour face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with participants recruited with a letter, by personal contact, or by referrals. All face-to-face interviews took place at the organizational site, in the informant's office, or in a conference room. Interviews were audio taped with the permission of the informants. Specifically, informants were twenty-six CEOs, except for one Division Vice-President, of for-profit organizations in a variety of industries in Denver, Colorado. Two of the CEOs were female. CEOs were asked for their opinions on work/family programs in an open-ended interview.

The audio taped interviews were transcribed and then coded using HyperResearch. The data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis on an existing database as outlined by West (2001). The coding strategy was guided by the processes associated with constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and utilized both a deductive approach using concepts from the literature review to assist in inducing coding categories, for example, CEO beliefs about family, as well as an inductive approach utilizing participants' thoughts to induce new and additional categories. Reliability and verification were ensured with member checks, thick descriptions, and audit trail procedures.

Findings

The CEOs interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds. Sixty-eight percent of the CEOs interviewed were either college graduates or had obtained a postgraduate degree. As might be expected from a Denver sample, most (forty-four percent) were born in the Western section of the country, followed by thirty-two percent from the Eastern part. Only one CEO was not born in the United States. Twenty-eight percent of the CEOs interviewed were between

the ages of fifty and fifty-five, with the youngest at thirty-eight and the oldest at sixty-four. They were employed in a variety of industries and sizes of companies.

All of the organizations interviewed reported some sort of response to the work/family conflict needs of their employees in the form of informal work/family programs or what they termed a sensitivity to the issue, while about a third of the organizations had some formal programs. In a few organizations, however, none of the usual work/family programs, such as flextime, part-time, or work-at-home options were available, even though the CEO felt that the organization was sensitive to these issues. Moreover, the availability of these options varied, from managerial discretion to grant some sort of flexibility, to being regarded as a privilege, to being available to everyone, or to being available only to parents.

CEO Beliefs About Productivity

Perhaps the most salient beliefs that CEOs have which affects their opinions about work/life issues are their beliefs about productivity, and the best way to achieve a high level of productivity in their organization. CEOs reported differing beliefs regarding the effect of flexibility, long hours, and employee happiness on productivity. Flexibility was either believed to be critical to productivity or detrimental since the CEO couldn't count on everyone being at work at the same time.

Some positive beliefs about the flexibility-productivity link included the CEO's belief that it doesn't matter how or where work gets done, as long as it gets done. Some CEOs also believed that flexibility led to retention of employees and therefore less turnover, and served to attract employees as well. CEOs cited increased loyalty and happier employees as benefits of flexibility, and that a flexible organization could be successful. Throughout this paper I will quote the CEOs directly, although all the names and identifying features have been changed.

Laura Harrison:

I was a Senior VP and had a employee who was having a problem with their 13 year old...I found out about it through other people and I approached the employee and suggested to her that she come...you know, that she leave work early enough to be home for her son when he got home from school and to see how that worked and to see if his disciplinary problems would have gotten better and lo and behold they did. So what did that do for that employee? That employee was more loyal because we were flexible with them, they worked harder, they were more productive because they didn't have to worry about their son anymore and overall I think it increased the productivity of that employee in this company.

Fred Andrews:

It just made good business sense, it just never made sense to me to try and not be accommodating as it related to a tradeoff for either productivity or engagement in what we're trying to get done...so much of it I think is just a tolerance or understanding or realization that you could be flexible and still be successful.

Another CEO, Harry Dawson, was also a big believer in flexibility—as long as the job got done, he didn't care how:

The way I think of it is, less formal flex programs to adjust to a specific family need and more, that's being a professional staff member. It means if you've got a child conference today you've got a conference, if you need to come in later forever because of you're getting the kids to school in the morning and it takes you a while to do that, that's fine and as long as you're getting your job done and adjusting to that I don't care.

Jeff Manley put it this way:

We expect a lot from people from a work point of view but if we give them completely rigid rules to work by and that doesn't work in their real life then they aren't going to be terribly productive...so we don't have a ton of statistics that measure that, we can't say because of flexibility we offer employees, the managers to make these kind of decisions that we get more productivity than other folks, but intuitively it seems to me it's the case. We have historically very, very low turnover rate averaging in the two to three percent a year range for most of our history and we have looked at formalizing programs and we have decided in each case not to do it.

Other CEOs worried that flexibility could be taken advantage of, but most CEOs interviewed seemed to feel that to be flexible was good for an organization. Flexibility was generally not encouraged company-wide however. Some job types seemed to be less flexible than others; however, this seemed to depend on the mindset of the CEO. Although most CEOs felt that call centers could not be flexible, Harry Dawson believed that flexibility could be built in, by overstaffing and planning to be flexible. His main worry was not the logistics headache that flexibility would cause, it was that his call center employees were front-line employees who interacted the most with clients—they were the last employees he wanted to be angry because of inflexible scheduling.

I think that you staff, by definition, there are going to be a certain percentage of people who are not going to be able to come in a certain day and one of the things you do if you staff call centers well is you build in that coverage.

Several CEOs agreed that there was a link between employee happiness and their productivity.

Bob Edwards:

I just know when you're, you know, when you're personally happy you're as happy as can be in your job, then your productivity goes up.

John Dover:

Some employees tell us they can't believe what a great place this is to work 'cause they tell horror stories of other employers but I think we just understand that people have to get things done and if they're not happy in their personal life they are not going to be happy here and vs. versa probably.

Peter Lewis:

I also believe that there's a linkage, I always look for linkage, and not to be too absurd here, but you take an employee who is able to concentrate on their work and enjoy what they do, recognizing that their job has been set up in such a way that they can get home, and I'm using flextime as just an example here, but the environment has been set up where the company has enabled, where the company is an enabler to allow them to get home, have their time with their family, or have a three-day weekend so that can have Friday or Monday with family. If in fact that translates into a family that feels better about the company, you just won, because you're going home and your family's proud of the fact you work for this company and that's gonna help you, that's gonna show up somewhere in your expense line.

Ben Carson:

As long as the job gets done and the person is a contributing member of the team and a valued member of the team in terms of their work product and output...but we're gonna make whatever arrangements keep that employee happy because the bottom line is without happy employees who feel they are treated fairly and equitably across the whole organization you won't have a successful company.

This belief was also expressed in the negative; i.e. unhappy employees leave, with some CEOs believing that they need to intervene if employees are unhappy.

Jeff Manley:

I've found that people that are so consumed with the job that they can't manage their family life at some point burn out and become unproductive.

A few CEOs did not mention a belief that this link existed.

Most CEOs agreed that long work hours did not necessarily mean more productivity, but it could lead to burnout and other health problems and therefore be detrimental to productivity.

Adam King:

I think someday the research will show that all the stress associated with working that many hours, more hours, longer work schedule is detrimental to people's health. It's certainly detrimental to their productivity.

One believed that the organization could lose employees if they were expected to work long hours. Long work hours were believed to be the result of poor management, or an employee not wanting to go home. Some CEOs did expect employees to work long hours:

Jack Kelly:

You want to develop an environment where they think results are important...there are twenty-four hours in a day we would like to think that we get a large ch--, portion of those twenty-four hours.

Other beliefs about productivity included the belief that work/family conflict leads to less productivity, that balance between work and family leads to higher productivity, and that employees are actually more productive if they do not worry about their families (such as worries about childcare) while at work. Other CEO beliefs about work/family conflict included the belief that family was more important than work (a few CEOs felt that God came before family and work), and that if an employee's job is destructive to their family life then the employee cannot be happy. One CEO expressed the belief that although workers had more free time now, there was less time for family; another believed strongly in supporting the family. Another believed that the way to leave time for family was to get to work early and leave early.

CEO Beliefs About Organizational Role

This discussion leads to beliefs about what organizations ought to do about work/family conflict of their employees. Most CEOs believed their organizations did have a role to play in ameliorating this conflict. One CEO believed employees do not leave their families at the door; another believed if employees were not focused on their work it was the company's problem. Not all CEOs agreed however; one stated work/family conflict was a real issue but it was not one for his business to solve; another believed that he liked to be supportive of his employees but he cannot do everything.

Some CEOs believed that work/family programs were simply the right thing to do; others believed it was simply good management. A couple had some opinions about CEOs who do not believe that work/family programs

are good for organizations: one called these CEOs dinosaurs; another said that these CEOs were blind, ignorant and inflexible.

Christopher Mason:

This approach (work/family programs) is a phenomenally positive thing to do as a leader of a company and I think people who don't do this are blind and ignorant and unwilling to be flexible and I'm not sure I'd want to work in a place like that, even me.

The belief that mothers should be home with their young children was expressed by CEOs in different ways. For a couple of CEOs, it meant they did not believe their daughters should work and raise children. For others, it applied to their female employees.

Larry Smith:

My natural bent was that neither one of them would work when they had children that's just what I would think is better...I remember when the first grandchild was born and she was set to go back to work in 4 weeks and leave her little baby with somebody else and they didn't live near us at the time... And that was just totally against ... for me that's not my background, my feeling was it was not a great idea.

Maxwell Smith:

I think the most important thing that a person will do with their lives is raising their children so if a mother says I don't want to work anymore, I want to take care of my kids, I wanna, like, shake their hand and say, I think you're doing the right thing... it can also kind of prejudice but mothers have a unique role with young kids and it's a hard thing to delegate even if society said men and women are equal in the workplace, delegate, I'm not sure men are good at accepting that responsibility and women are good at delegating that responsibility there's that nurturing genetic thing that women have with kids in the younger years, I think that it's pretty basic, it may not be PC at this moment but it is pretty real.

Scott Wilson:

We have someone that's out now on maternity leave and if she wants to stay home with her baby I would support that, it would be a big loss for us but that's more important.

One believed having work/family programs was a positive thing to do as a leader of a company; another believed that helping employees manage their work and family lives helped keep families together. Another CEO believed that being concerned about work/family conflict means that his organization respects the family. One CEO believed that there needed to be a champion in the organization to get the CEO to try work/family programs.

CEOs had both positive and negative beliefs about specific work/family programs and the employees who use them. CEOs believed flextime was either a no-brainer or resulted in happy campers. Most beliefs about part-timers were negative: CEOs did not perceive them as committed; that if you pay for 30 hours you actually get 15-20; and part-timers are not as dedicated or focused on the business.

Dick Henry:

Because it's a part-time job, it's not central to uh, chances are if someone's working part-time they're not gonna view this place as important as the entirety of their deal.

One CEO did not believe that the more hours you work the more committed an employee was. While one CEO believed a part-time employee could not compete for promotions with the full-timers, another believed that part-time employees were a great value:

Maxwell Smith:

One of our key ladies in marketing had a baby and we strained all the rules and flexed everything and so she works here and there and sometimes but it's hard for her to compete with other people in her department when she's only working two or three days a week...I mean she'll never make it to the top at two or three days a week.

Christopher Mason:

When I was at a large consumer products company, when I hired two women who had young kids that basically worked for me about a average of three days a week you could say they split a job but I was in a strategic planning role so the responsibilities were more task-oriented than they were ongoing business oriented...the results were phenomenal my experience was that I basically paid somebody for three days a week, I got four days a week worth of work for a couple of reasons. One is because they didn't turn off their mind when they weren't working, they still did voice mail and stuff like that on days they weren't in the office and they also were more incredibly efficient when they were in the office because they knew they were only there for a short period of time.

Beliefs about job-sharing were also polar, some believing it was only feasible for low level clerical staff, while others believed it could work in higher levels. While most CEOs agreed their job could not be shared, Nick Allen told me that he and the President of his organization basically shared the CEO duties, so that they were like co-CEOs. This arrangement seems similar to job-sharing.

Work/family programs such as telecommuting—working from home—and onsite daycare generated the strongest beliefs. Work at home (WAH) in particular seemed to involve many negative beliefs. CEOs believed that they did not get as good work from at-home workers; while employees were distracted at work they were much more distracted at home; WAH would not be more productive if kids were involved; and success in working at home depended on the individual employees.

Mike Slater:

Telecommuting to which I'll define generally that means working from home part of the week and working from the office part of the week...personally I'm not much of a fan I don't think we get the value as a company when people are at home.

Few CEOs were really enthusiastic about it; one believed it might be more productive because of fewer interruptions. Fred Andrews was very enthusiastic, primarily because his best employee worked at home; another tried to talk a key employee into working at home because he was afraid he might lose the employee because of a long commute.

CEOs tended to believe that balance was necessary both for the family and for the employee's personal health, and balance leads to higher productivity. The difference, however, lay in whose job it was to provide that balance, the organization's or the employee's. Some CEOs believed that if employees are treated with respect and fairness they will be loyal and productive. Treating people right, or as they would want to be treated, was an important value for some CEOs. One CEO stated balance was a matter of personal conviction and choice.

CEO Beliefs About Effectiveness of Work/Family Programs

Almost all CEOs believed work/family programs were effective, but CEOs differed in their beliefs in how the programs returned to the bottom line. Many CEOs believed work/family programs increased retention, increased attraction of new employees, and resulted in higher productivity. Other CEOs generally agreed that work/family programs were effective in terms of retention, but were not so sure about productivity or attraction. Some believed the balanced lives of their employees returned to the bottom line; flexibility attracted higher quality people; and good feelings and attitudes were generated by work/family programs. Other CEOs reported if employees were treated with fairness and respect, then they would be more loyal and productive; what you do for employees will return to the bottom line. Other benefits CEOs believed work/family programs produced include higher employee reliability, more focused employees, and productivity which extended from the individual to the organization itself.

The minority viewpoint held work/family programs would not deliver benefits to the organization, primarily because of a perceived lack of need. One CEO conceded a better analysis of exit interviews might yield some measurements of effectiveness. A few CEOs were not sure whether or not the programs resulted in greater productivity and worried about abuse. A few pointed to studies showing the programs as effective or not, depending on the numbers manipulated. Gerald Harris remarked that a CEO can rationalize any thing he wants to do; i.e. if he is in favor of the programs, he can come up with favorable numbers, and vice versa.

Other CEO Beliefs

CEO beliefs about employees and work/family programs seemed to relate to their beliefs about the causes of organizational success. Some CEOs believed the company was successful because of their employees so they should help their employees. If employees were happy and treated with respect, the company would be successful.

CEOs expressed some beliefs about their role. Some believed their employees looked to them for norms and methods, the culture is set from the top and work/family programs reflect the values of the organization. Some believed the CEO had a responsibility to the employee and to their families to run the company in the right way. If employees are not happy, then it is the role of the CEO to intervene. One CEO believed he should be an example to his employees, and said that it was a "bummer" that in this area, he was not a good role model. While he believed employees ought to go home to their families, he tended to work long hours himself. One CEO expressed the belief others perceived him differently than he did.

CEOs also had various beliefs about parenting and working parents. Bob Edwards believed he could not do his job without the support of his stay-at-home wife taking care of his child. Some expressed the belief a mother should be home with young children and that the mother is the more important parent; others recognized in many homes, both parents are working.

Many CEOs believed that children were important and that it was tough to be a parent. Kids need values and morals from their parents, parents need to spend time with their children, and the support of parents makes a real difference in the lives of children. Beliefs expressing the world is only as good as its families, further supported the idea that children are the promise of the future. Nick Allen was engaged and was planning to have children and a nanny, but believed that he and his fiancée would still be active and responsible parents.

CEOs had different beliefs about women in the workforce and the nature of work itself. Some recognized the workforce has changed with a higher representation of women. One believed that whether an employee was male or

female should not matter, but it does; Maxwell Smith believed that young women in his company get pregnant and leave; Don Larson expressed his belief that women have a difficult time because they have so many roles.

One CEO believed that the company should come first, but most believed that families came first. Other beliefs about work included that the boss should be on time and not leave early; a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, and that work is only one part of life, employees also need to be happy with their family life.

Attitudes of CEOs

CEOs had differing attitudes in regards to their employees, to parenting and to work/family programs. In analyzing the data, phrases using the words "like" or "don't like" were indicative of attitudes, according to Weyant's (1986) definition. In general, most CEOs did not reveal much about their attitudes toward work/family programs. They were far more likely to use cognitive terms such as "I believe" or "I think" rather than the affective terms of "I like" or "I don't like."

Many CEOs liked to empower their employees, liked to see them win, and run their own shows. One expressed the attitude of supporting employees, but could not do everything for them. Another expressed his dislike of turnover and preference for a stable workforce. One CEO liked to see his employees leave at a decent hour, while another liked to take all the annoyances out of life so that his company could get a large share of the employee's time.

Many CEOs disliked bureaucracy and rules and regulations; for some, this translated into a dislike of formal work/family programs, for others, this was part of a flexible mindset that preferred providing employees with flexibility in their organizations.

What happens is, as these things do, until you get them down into a real hard policy format, which I don't like to do cause then it's hard to make exceptions because you put a hard policy in place then you need to follow that.

One CEO said that he liked himself better when he was flexible.

Work/family programs such as part-time and telecommuting elicited the most negative attitudes. One CEO mentioned that he really likes full-time employees; another that he did not like part-time employment to occur. Another mentioned that he liked to have everyone around; another mentioned that he did not like telecommuting.

On the other hand, a couple of CEOs liked onsite daycare theoretically, but thought it too complex for a small organization. Winston Salem fondly remembered an onsite daycare center at a former company, but didn't think it feasible for his own organization.

A few CEOs expressed their own feelings about their families. Maxwell Smith wished he could spend more time with his family; Adam King said his greatest joy was spending time with his kids. Larry Smith said he would rather that his working daughters stayed home with their children.

Adam King:

...and my number one priority is truly here I mean with my kids I mean the greatest joy I feel in life is seeing my little guys painting in the kitchen looking up...hey, dad help me here, you know just being with them, looking at them, it's the greatest joy I have.

Maxwell Smith:

I'm the father of five, two grandchildren and I really hope on my tombstone it says, Maxwell was a good father not a good corporate businessman, so I personally am conflicted on the matter as well

Conclusions and Recommendations

Little is understood about the personal experiences and opinions of CEOs on work/life related issues, although this knowledge would be important in understanding their positions (Starrels, 1992). From this study it is clear that there is no one consensus amongst CEOs in their attitudes and beliefs. CEOs have a variety of experiences and beliefs about family, the boundaries between family and work, work/life programs, and the responsibilities of the organization to employees struggling with work/life issues. Since this study is a qualitative one, no conclusions can be made on why differences exist between CEOs.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research would include broadening the scope of the interviews to outside the Denver area and including a larger number of participants so that some differences can be explained. It is possible that CEOs in other geographical locations, organizational sizes, as well as other variables, may have different beliefs, and this should be tested by a broader study. Further study in linking the personal experiences of CEOs to their beliefs about work/life issues would also be useful. Interviewing more female CEOs would help shed light on any gender differences.

Contributions to the field of Human Resource Development

Little is known about the personal lives and experiences of the folks who run our organizations, yet they are very important to the organization. This paper provides insight on how CEOs think and what they believe. HRD has an important role with senior executives and understanding more about them can only be helpful when selling programs. This research has applicability not only for HRD professionals concerned with work/life issues, but also for those who are involved in coaching executive level managers.

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