

Above the Fray: What We Know About How WFH and Hybrid Affect Work





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The pandemic created a fundamental shift in where people work, followed by incendiary disagreements about the tradeoffs of where people work. Those fires have been further fanned by [popular media](#), [business media](#), [anti-business media](#), [social media](#), [TikTok](#), [surveys](#) and [academic advocates](#).

What's been lacking is a fact-based discussion about what science and evidence say are the tradeoffs among WFO, WFH and hybrid work. Now, 4+ years after the initial COVID lockdowns that ushered in WFH, a body of (still emerging) science can start to inform us.

This article is intended to help leaders, especially those in HR, understand the consequences of different work arrangements on performance, innovation, collaboration and more based on the emerging

knowledge. This focus is consistent with my view that we should make the “rules of work” clear to everyone to ensure a fair and inclusive work environment.

What’s not included? There are many important workplace topics like corporate culture where there’s not post-COVID science to guide us. If there’s no post-COVID science or evidence on a topic, it is not included.

Also not included are articles on the many personal benefits that individuals derive from WFH or hybrid working. Enjoyment of, or a preference for WFH/hybrid work are individual outcomes, not business outcomes.

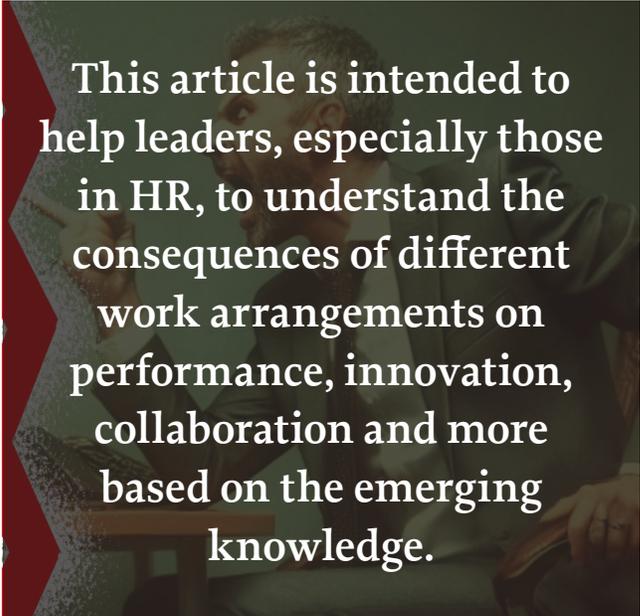
First, let’s clear up a few things

An objective discussion of WFH and hybrid work requires that we first dispel the myths propagated by its proponents and opponents. These myths are loudly shouted opinions dressed-up as facts and posted online to generate maximum clicks, not insight.

- **Myth 1. CEOs who prefer WFO are control freaks/idiots/don’t understand employee needs**

CEOs were promoted to CEO because they had some combination of achievement, capabilities, drive and intelligence. They are largely not delusional, illogical, mentally challenged or any of the other pejoratives that some commentators ascribe to them. If they say they want employees in the office with a certain frequency, they have a “theory of the case” as to why this will produce superior results.

Since there’s not yet science guiding us to the “right” answers, their beliefs that it’s faster to communicate, easier to learn, or



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supportive of creativity to be in the office are as legitimate of opinions as anyone else’s.

- **Myth 2. “Return to Office” (RTO) is all about using real estate**

It’s silly to say that the reason CEOs want workers in the office is because the company has real estate and wants to use it. Office space is typically leased on a long-term basis – it’s a sunk cost. There’s no cost advantage in having a fully occupied office. The same lease payment is due each month whether 1,000 people or 10 people are in that space.

In fact, a full office means higher costs – more power, water, cleaners, cafeteria workers, etc. So, an empty office is cheaper than a full one.

- **Myth 3. It’s proximity bias to want workers in the office**

This term is often mentioned by those who claim that anyone who wants workers

in the office is demonstrating proximity bias. It's only proximity bias if there are no outcome differences between working with someone in person and not working with them in person. I share research later in this article which shows important differences.

This doesn't mean that five days a week in the office is better than none, three or four. But it's a very uninformed point of view to say that there are no differences between working in physical proximity to your co-workers and working from home.

- **Myth 4. Those who prefer working from home don't want to work as hard or sacrifice as much.**

The implication of return-to-office mandates is that either less gets done at home or that an employee's willingness to come into the office signals a higher level of commitment.

There are plentiful reasons to want to spend more time at home than in the office including kids, pets, safer commutes, et al. Most of those reasons don't imply that an individual is lazy or lacks commitment to do their job.

What the available science and experiments say

It seems likely that some work outcomes would differ depending on whether people work in the same location or remotely. That means that we should understand how and if outcomes differ in hybrid or WFH environments so we can manage our companies to best achieve those outcomes.

It has taken time to generate insights and

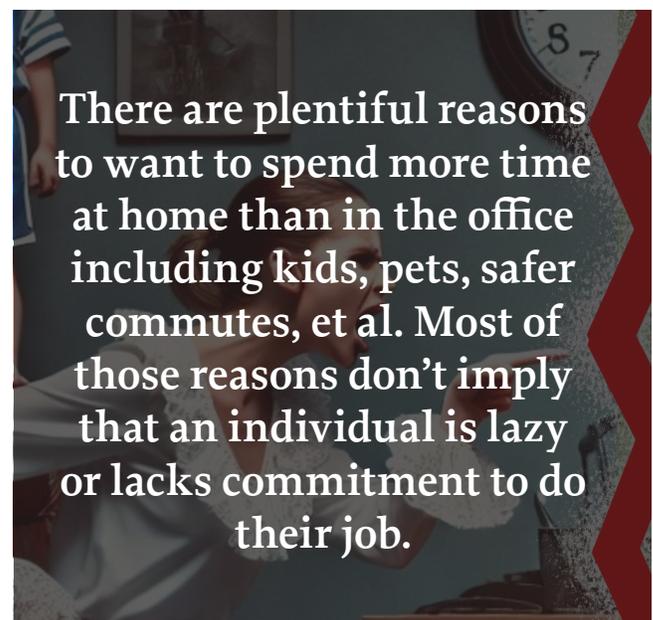
the available science is just the start of scholarship of this topic. The findings below are from the best available studies I found on this topic. All studies are from COVID and after to realistically assess outcomes in a changed world of work. I describe my article research and selection process at the end of this article.

Of course, if your company is exclusively WFH or WFO, some of the insights will be less relevant.

On Performance

The loudest argument about WFH is whether employees are more or less productive working from the office or working from home. There have been plentiful polls and surveys on the topic, but we need actual science and evidence to guide our decisions.

The most reliable research on performance or productivity compares individual worker productivity before the pandemic with the same worker's productivity during or after the



pandemic in a WFH or hybrid environment.

A study of data entry employees in India describes a company that randomly assigned workers in the same role to WFO or WFH. Those assigned to WFH had 18% lower productivity. Those workers who preferred to work from home were 27% less productive when assigned to WFH than workers who preferred to WFO. Those who preferred to WFO who were 13% less productive when forced to WFH.¹

Research that studied 10,000+ employees at an Indian technology company showed productivity drops of 8% - 19% in WFH conditions.² A study of a Fortune 500 company's call center showed that call center workers who were forced to move from WFO to WFH had a 4% decrease in calls answered, and that the same company's regular WFH workers took 12% fewer calls before and after the pandemic than WFO employees.³

A study of four Japanese technology firms showed a productivity decline for WFH workers but that the decline was attributed to WFH set up and communications challenges.⁴ A report on 1,600+ employees at Trip.com found no significant difference in an indirect measure of productivity – lines of code – between WFH and WFO employees.⁵

Some studies based on employee self-report data gathered as a part of larger national sur-

veys showed a productivity decline. A study of Japanese workers showed that self-assessed productivity of those working from home dropped sharply and then rebounded later in the study period, but remained 20% below pre-pandemic self-assessments.⁶

Other studies showed mixed findings on productivity, with a study of Baidu programmers showing increases and decreases in effectiveness depending on which programming metric was measured.⁷ A review of WFH x Performance articles published prior to and after the pandemic found 79% of pre-pandemic articles showed better performance in WFH. Only 23% of articles published after the pandemic found positive results in WFH.⁸

A caveat on the findings above is that many studies used data from technology firms, where worker productivity is often more easily measurable. Also, there were not studies of managerial or executive level roles, and these roles may experience WFH differently.

The cited studies were based on data from the pandemic to 2024, so it's possible that changes may occur as companies better learn how to manage individual productivity in different working arrangements.

Other studies that didn't use actual worker data found no effect on performance or productivity. A study by the Federal Reserve Board of San Francisco stated that, "After



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controlling for pre-pandemic trends in industry productivity growth rates, we find little statistical relationship between telework and pandemic productivity performance.”⁹

A study of programmer productivity on GitHub found a very small decline in performance based on implied WFH periods.¹⁰

A large study from the United Kingdom using self-report data found no change in perceived productivity overall but significant differences within segments of the group. “We find that workers in jobs that are less suitable for WFH reported lower productivity than before the pandemic. Consistent with this, and with the literature, females and low earners also reported worse productivity outcomes on average. . . The opposite types of workers, e.g., those in the ‘right’ occupations and with high incomes, reported higher productivity than previously.”¹¹

It’s worth noting that the studies showing no effects from WFH used group data or broad economic data. The studies showing negative changes in productivity measured results of individual workers.

Papers based on self-reported ratings of productivity generally reported no change or a positive change in productivity in WFH settings.¹² A study using participants gathered from a Qualtrics survey panel showed the “overall perception of productivity level among workers did not change relative to their in-office productivity before the pandemic. Female, older, and high-income workers were likely to report increased productivity.”¹³

Self-report data is subject to social desirability and various self-serving biases, so I include

that study only to contrast its outcomes with those from well-structured, outcome-focused evidence.

There is high quality research that shows decreased productivity in specific roles in WFH conditions. That research is too specific to extrapolate to all jobs since studies suggest that some roles benefit more from WFH than others. It’s worth waiting another year or two for more studies with high quality survey designs involving a broader segment of the WFH or hybrid population to be published.

On Creativity

A study that measured professional creativity before and during COVID lockdowns (a proxy for but not identical to WFH) showed no difference in creativity pre- and during COVID.¹⁴ A study on creativity in videoconferencing settings found that “videoconferencing hampers idea generation because it focuses communicators on a screen, which prompts a narrower cognitive focus. Our results suggest that virtual interaction comes with a cognitive cost for creative idea generation.”¹⁵

An article reviewing studies on creative idea generation states that creativity “depends on multiple factors that are still not fully comprehended by neuroscience and it is negatively affected by virtual interaction, which confirms that presentational events cannot be replaced by video conferences and online substitutes without harm.”¹⁶ In other words, in-person work is superior to generate creative outcomes even if all the reasons for that aren’t currently known or the size of the effect.

A thorough Google Scholar search found few studies on Creativity and WFH, and no

studies that showed a positive outcome in WFH conditions. This lack of research means that no firm conclusions can be drawn on WFH's or hybrid work's influence on creative outcomes.

On Innovation

A study of innovation in an Indian IT firm that include direct measures of pre-COVID WFO and COVID WFH found “the quantity of ideas did not change during the WFH period as compared to WFO, but the quality of ideas suffered. During the later hybrid period, the quantity of submitted ideas fell. In the hybrid phase innovation suffered particularly in teams which were not well coordinated in terms of when they worked at the office or from home.”¹⁷

An analysis of the production of breakthrough ideas found that remote teams of scientists produced fewer ideas than co-located scientists.¹⁸ This is not a direct measure of WFH/WFO but indicates that distance between people may hamper innovation compared to being co-located.

Again, a thorough Google Scholar search found few studies on Innovation and WFH. The few existing studies showed that innovation may be more challenging in a WFH environment and no studies showed a positive relationship between innovation and WFH.

On Work Relationships

Work relationships influence trust, execution capability, culture, engagement and much more. The few studies on this topic generally showed a neutral or negative influence on work relationships when working from home. No studies were found which showed an improvement in work relationships in a WFH or hybrid environment.

A cross-company study of Taiwanese workers showed that “the absence of cues in remote workplaces exacerbated prior impressions formed in the physical office. Furthermore, remote work led workers to develop polarized perceptions of their respective ties.”¹⁹ This means that the less well I know you, the more likely I am to rely on my biases to interpret who you are if we don't work in-person.

A study from Estonia showed no significant difference in relationship satisfaction with coworkers or managers in work from office or work from home. The survey included measures pre- and post-pandemic.²⁰ Similarly, a study of 364 white-collar workers, employed by a larger Swedish municipality, found a strong correlation between the frequency of meetings with their managers and their satisfaction with managerial support, but no difference in relationship satisfaction.²¹

An analysis of how Microsoft employees interacted with each other showed a decline in



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“weak tie” relationships among employees in WFH. Weak ties are casual or infrequent employee interactions or relationships that help to bridge different departments, increase the flexibility of the organization, and enhance individual networks among other benefits.²²

That report also showed an increased focus on “narrow networks,” meaning that employees spoke more often with people who they already knew well. Those employees also used more asynchronous communication rather than live meetings or calls.

These studies suggest a potential reduction in the scope and quality of work relationships in WFH or hybrid environments. It’s worth noting that these studies were done early in the pandemic and workers may later have adapted better to relationship management in WFH.

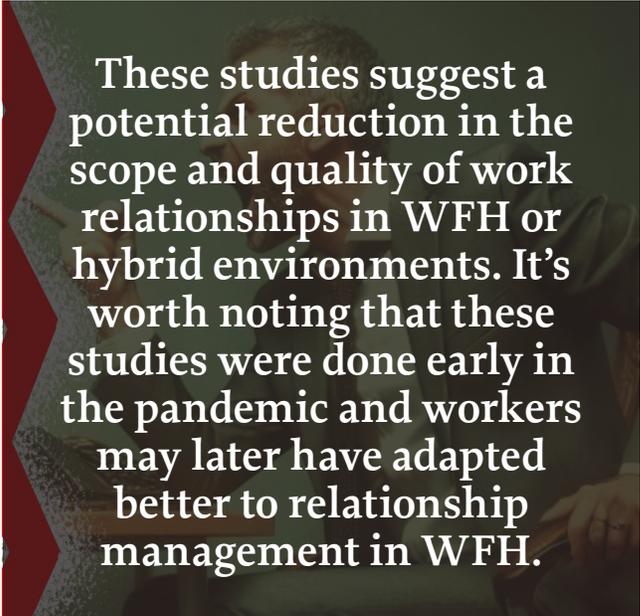
On Collaboration

There were almost no quality articles on this topic found on Google Scholar.

One article that received significant publicity early in the pandemic was an analysis of Microsoft employees in mandated WFH. That study found workers spent less time on collaboration and that collaboration time included more instant messaging and fewer meetings. Those who were more experienced working from home experienced less change in their interactions, indicating that new WFH workers may adapt over time.²³

On Managing

A study of 700+ employees in WFH during COVID in the Netherlands found “that managers perceive they execute significantly less control and delegate more. Employees also



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perceive a significant decrease in control; however they perceive on average no change in delegation. . . employees of lower-level managers even report a significant decrease in delegation.”²⁴

A contrary finding drew from a dataset of 27,000 managers across 48 countries and stated that managers displayed far more directive management post-COVID. This study ended in December 2020, so adaptation to WFH management may have occurred after this time.²⁵

A study of 1,000+ Danish managers found “that most managers found their work as distance managers more demanding and worked more hours...The data also show that the majority (67%) of the managers prefer to manage from the office but similarly, they can continue managing from a distance if needed post-pandemic.”²⁶

The studies above relied on perceptions rather than more objective measures. No quality studies were found that directly measured

managerial effectiveness in WFH or remote conditions.

What We Know

The good news is that we finally have a growing body of evidence about the differences between WFO and WFH. And, while that picture is emerging it's still too fuzzy to draw firm conclusions. It suggests, but far from proves, that there are value-adding activities like innovation, network building, relationship management and others that may be less effective when people are not co-located.

As an employer, you need to identify where new gaps may have emerged and how, and if, you want to mitigate their effects. If you're a hybrid employer, you've likely found that many of the deliverables you expect from team members can be produced in a WFH environment. Your job is to understand the pivotal capabilities that drive your company's success and to assess how they might be affected by not working in the same physical proximity as in the past.

Are there new “rules” emerging?

The shift to WFH and hybrid workplaces has created obvious changes in how we work together. While managers and team members may now be clear about the explicit rules of working together in a hybrid environment, there's a concerning lack of clarity about the subtler or unwritten rules of work.

That lack of clarity threatens to reverse years of hard-won progress on equality, create a two-tiered system of progress and make the workplace seem less fair. The cautions that follow are intended to clarify for both employers and the employed some important potential

new rules of work.

There is penalty in some companies for those who WFH. It's lessened when more people WFH

A UK survey of more than 1,000 managers, accurately titled “Managerial (dis)preferences towards employees working from home” found that there is a bias against those working from home. The article states that:

“The findings indicate that employees who WFH are less likely to be considered for promotion, salary increase and training than on-site workers. The pay and promotion penalties for WFH are particularly true for men (both fathers and non-fathers) and childless women, but not mothers. We also find that employees operating in teams with a higher prevalence of WFH do not experience negative career effects when working from home. Additionally, the more WFH experience the manager has, the lesser the career penalty for engaging in this mode of working.”²⁷

It appears that those without a perceived good “excuse” for working from home (e.g. being a working mother) are penalized. Those who are considered “in-group” are rewarded in either condition, depending on whether the group is WFH or WFO.

Relationships matter for both performance and potential

As I wrote in [8 Steps to High Performance](#):

“(S)cience shows that influencing and connecting strategies are amazingly effective to get what you need from superiors and peers. Your ability to get these additional resources and relationships is essen-

tial to reaching your theoretical maximum performance. Better yet, your ability to connect is almost entirely controllable by you.”²⁸

The initial research on building and maintaining strong, non-transactional relationships in hybrid or WFH environments confirms the obvious. The depth and quality of your relationships always has, and always will, matter if you want to advance at work.²⁹

The very real risk for those who WFH and don't actively manage relationships with their boss and peers is that they won't get the support and sponsorship needed to succeed. Out of sight is out of mind and you need to take responsibility to build and maintain those relationships. The same tactics you use to keep your non-work relationships strong should be applied to work relationships when you are in a WFH or hybrid environment.

WFH may be about performance and WFO about potential

In February 2024, Dell Computers sent a note to all team members clarifying the rules of upward career progress. It said that:

“For remote team members, it is important to understand the trade-offs: Career advancement, including applying to new roles in the company, will require a team member to reclassify as hybrid onsite.”³⁰

That reclassification meant that an employee needed to be in the office about 3 days each week to be eligible for advancement. Independent of how you view the policy, Dell is to be congratulated for making the implicit rules of success explicit.

The implicit rule was that workers who

are in the office somehow contribute more, or show a level of dedication or sacrifice that increases their future value to the company. Performance, Dell implied, can be demonstrated from anywhere. Potential can only be demonstrated from the office.

If you are an employer, have you made your rules about promotion or advancement in the new hybrid era this clear? If you are employee, do you understand how decisions are really being made about your future, independent of your company's statements?

Your bargaining “power” in your working arrangement depends on your unique value

There are plenty of complaints as some employers shift back from pandemic-driven WFH to a hybrid or WFO policy.³¹ What many complainers ignore is that their expected individual contribution influences how tolerant their company is of where they work.

If you are the star salesperson, delivering 150% of your target every year, you have



bargaining power to ask for some additional consideration about where you work. The same is true if you have unique or rare skills that would be difficult to replace.

But, if you are an average employee (and most of us are by definition), you don't have that bargaining power because you are replaceable by another equally skilled, average employee. If you want more power in dictating your work arrangement, your consistently demonstrating truly outstanding performance will give you leverage in that discussion.

Some reasons for WFH may be taking our workplaces backwards

Various authors have written that select segments of the workforce may benefit from not working in the office.

- Neurodiverse workers are said to benefit from WFH since they may have sensory issues in the office environment or work in offices where they are not properly supported.³²
- Some Black employees and other people of color who perceive racism or microaggressions at work say they feel more comfortable working from home.³³ Although other Black authors cite different challenges when working from home.³⁴
- Working mothers may prefer WFH because of their taking on an extra burden of household management. WFH has brought a record share of working mothers into the workforce who say they would not otherwise be able to contribute.³⁵
- Physically handicapped people may be more comfortable and productive by not

having to adapt to a workplace not structured for their success.³⁶

These benefits can't be argued against but as employers and employees we need to consider the logical endpoint of this line of thought. In a U.S. context, those in the office would predominantly be able-bodied, white neurotypical men, white neurotypical women not raising children and some percentage of other employees who choose to tolerate the disadvantages of WFO.

It seems antithetical to the spirit of DEI to allow the workforce to self-segregate by race, gender, neurological status, ability, etc. Where WFH provides a clear and obvious benefit (i.e. to someone with a disability that makes commuting or WFO difficult), we should celebrate the inclusion in the workforce of people who might not otherwise participate.

But if people WFH because their work environment doesn't seem inclusive, accepting, quiet enough, undistracting, or adaptable, shouldn't we address the root cause of those issues rather than allow essentially a two-class system to emerge? This is a choice that each company must individually address, but I'd suggest that we set our companies back by decades if we allow WFH to be used to avoid solving systemic workplace problems.

We shouldn't expect employers to automatically love WFH

In January 2020, if you wanted to speak with your boss, you walked to her office. If you wanted to quickly bounce an idea off your team member, you did the same thing. If you wanted to know who was paying attention in the team meeting, you

looked around the room. If you wanted to give a quick “atta’ girl/boy” after a presentation, you did it walking out of the conference room. If you wanted to build a relationship, you grabbed a coffee or lunch with someone. If you wanted to hear/spread/observe gossip, you randomly saw people in the break room.

In today’s WFH environment, each of those valuable activities requires more effort, can’t be done easily or can’t be done at all. This creates a “tax” that no one asked for but that managers and employees need to pay.

Managers need to find new ways to observe, coach, give feedback and otherwise manage team members. Everyone needs to intersect with co-workers’ schedules that now contain blocks of non-working time.

The benefits previously received from serendipitous interactions are far more rare.³⁷ We shouldn’t expect those paying the new workplace coordination tax to be happy about

it, unless they find benefits that outweigh the drawbacks.

Where we are

It’s fair that people have strongly held opinions and preferences about where and how they work. It’s also fair that we seek to understand if there any differences and outcomes from how and where people work. The combination of all those insights will allow employers to make smart decisions about who, how and where work gets done.

We should approach solving this problem in the same intelligent way as we suggest all human problems be solved – start with the science. We show in this article that there is an emerging, yet far from complete, body of knowledge on this topic. Let’s focus on adding to and understanding these findings while we turn down the volume on opinions so that we can collectively reach the best possible outcome for all.

About the source articles

An article needed to meet a few key criteria for me to include its data:

- **Only research done in 2020 and after:** If we want to understand the effects of WFH and hybrid, looking at research done before our current working environment isn't helpful. That would be like studying how people spent their evenings before the light bulb was invented. Those findings are likely less relevant after indoor lighting was introduced.
The changes in COVID and post-COVID workplace dynamics means that experiments, evidence and data from that environment forward feel more reliable than similar content pre-COVID.
- **Academic journal:** Articles that appeared in academic journals or databases were used. While my preference is to ensure quality by only citing articles from the top tier journals and meta-analyses, there isn't a sufficient body of either to cite at this time. Nothing is sourced from opinion pieces, magazine or news articles and other non-experimental pieces, no matter who the authors are. We want evidence, not opinions.
- **Quality of data matters:** There are a small number of articles where the authors could measure a change in the same people from before the initial WFH period to its start or implementation. These are the most valuable. The next most valuable are articles where objective data was gathered by researchers, even if just at one point in time.
Studies based on large economic models rather than individual worker data were included but are less compelling as evidence.
Articles that used self-report data that was carefully gathered and not likely to be biased are next.
What is not valuable and not used are articles that used self-report data to ask opinions or assessments where objective data are needed (i.e. "are you more productive working from home?")
Quantitative studies were more valued than qualitative ones. Studies based on interviews with small numbers of workers were not used.

Google Scholar is the source: Articles were searched for in Google Scholar using basic search phrases like "Creativity and Working from Home" or "Performance and Hybrid Work." Where an article was valuable, articles that cited that article were searched as well. For most search terms, I went five pages deep into search results.

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