

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT: THE NEW CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

Burnout is a condition where the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion is an outcome from the amalgamation of very high expectations and tenacious situational stress. It describes a state of diminution of a person's resources, particularly energy due to extreme demands made on them, which results in impassive behavior of the individual towards their work and the other aspects of life as well. The basic thrust of this conceptual paper is to bring into lime light the theoretical postulates of burn out phenomenon and its reflections on the contemporary workforce in IT industry. Besides reviewing theoretical works on the burnout from a contemporary perspective this paper tries to capture the emotional strength and perceptual understanding of this phenomenon prevailing in IT workforce through a limited study. We tried to analyze the things and propound formulae for dealing with the menace. Above all, a unique attempt is made here to correlate the spirit of theoretical models with that of empirical findings by taking the help of 'Copenhagen's Burnout Inventory'. Leaving scope for a more elaborate study on a bigger sample size the conceptual understanding about the theme Burn Out is clearly spelt out in this paper much to the better understanding of laymen particularly the management clan. This finds more justification in the context of flexible knowledge workers and management of their work life which amply fits to the popular phrase called 'VUCA' (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) business environment.
(Key Words: burnout, stress, Indian, IT/ITES industry, fatigue, emotional, exhaustion)

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of any organization is dependent on human resources – neither money, nor technology or infrastructure can deliver excellence without the requisite human resource bank. Nor money buy human resources – for this is one resource which develops and appreciates over time, while other resources depreciate. Thus, it is being realized globally that an organization can have competitive advantage by leveraging its human resources. Coordinating and managing human resources is very important for any organization to survive. Maintaining them effectively requires a lot of effort on the part of the organization. People in organizations cannot be regarded as human capital in reality until and unless their contribution to their organization can be measured with the same confidence as any other organizational asset. Job burnout emerged as an important concept in the 1970s, and it captured something very critical about people's experience with work especially in the knowledge based firms of contemporary times. The massive growth of IT and IT enabled services in third world countries has literally paved the way the new phenomenon of engaging knowledge workers purely on skill set and knowledge coefficients rather than verifying the emotional strength of individuals. As such, it created lot of imbalances in the workplaces in the wake of increased levels of work stress which other way can be identified as the potential symptoms of burnout. Be it the quantum of work, employee relations, work place culture, job profile the modern day knowledge workers are succumbed to the vicious cycle of collapse of emotional and physical health in most of the countries. This is more so in countries like India where the advent of BPO sector with night shifts is another adding feature to the phenomenon. This view has inspired researchers to study it further and try to understand deeply its meaning and its causes. It has majorly inspired practitioners to find out means to deal with it, avert it, or contend with it. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to study the concept of Burnout amongst the people employed in IT sector, its reason and consequences and how it can be countered based on a survey of people working in select BPO companies.

2. CONCEPT OF BURNOUT

The symptoms are thought to be caused by work-related or other kinds of stress (PubMed Health, 2017). Burnout is a job related stress syndrome that has three components:

- Emotional exhaustion – lack of energy and the feeling that one's emotional resources have been used up at work. Commonly employees feel dread at having return to work with beginning of every working day
- Depersonalization – is characterized as viewing co – workers and clients as dehumanized objects
- Feelings of diminished personal accomplishment – evaluating work performance negatively and feel a decline in job competence and achievement.

Burnout is a result of exhaustion due to overwork. It generally affects professionals that have more responsibilities related to people and who pursue objectives, which are difficult to attain. The nature of Indian IT industry is prone to cause such exhaustion. Risky situations are those where there is a misfit between the tasks and the means allocated to accomplish them and if there is an ambiguity and / or role conflict.

Freudenberger (1974) defines burnout as “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strengths or resources”

Maslach and Leiter (1997) says “burnout represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit and will – an erosion of the human soul. It is a malady that spreads gradually and continuously over time, putting people into a downward spiral from which it's hard to recover”

Burnout is categorized into two types:-

- Physical Burnout – is experienced with excessive physical exhaustion. It is most commonly reflected by injury or fatigue and is normally seen among sports persons.
- Mental Burnout – is an accumulated state where the nature of work which used to be exciting earlier no longer excites the person.

Burnout is described as a state of depletion of a person's resources and energy resulting in apathetic and impassive behavior towards others, having dysfunctional repercussions on the individual and adverse effects on organization.

With technological advancements, workplaces have undergone drastic changes and many executives work in situations which require very little people contact, implying that the construct of executive burnout is qualitatively different and needs to be progressed for better comprehension of this fundamental problem.

The phenomenon of burnout, a debilitating stress syndrome, was observed and studied in US and European countries in the 1980s when these countries faced globalization.

Burnout is becoming a major threat to the executives throughout the world and more so in a country like India where they are under pressure to produce higher and higher outputs with minimum inputs.

3. EVOLUTION OF BURNOUT

Job burnout surfaced as a significant concept in the 1970s, and it captured something very crucial about people's experience with their work. It endures to do so even today after 35 years of its introduction to psychological literature and cultural discourse as well. Both then and now, burnout has been a concept that seems to ring true to a common experience among people (Wilmar B. Schaufeli, 2008). The burnout phenomenon was first described in the context of job related stress by Freudenberger (1974 –1975) closely followed by Maslach (1976) but early phenomenon of burnout was a “case study in the functioning of social systems at defense at anxiety” by Menzies. Freudenberger (1974) was first to characterize burnout stating it as feelings of failure and being worn out. He observed that volunteers entering into the social work experience as phase of more or less wear out and began to use the term burnout to connote with the popular meaning to refer to the effects of chronic psychoactive substance abuse. He presented direct accounts of the process when he and others experienced emotional depletion, loss of motivation, and commitment (Freudenberger, 1975). Applying qualitative methods of interviewing, Christina Maslach (1976) wanted to know how people in emotionally demanding jobs such as doctors, nurses and counselors cope in everyday work and found that coping strategies had important implications for people's professional identity and job behavior.

In 1990's, more quantitative studies came out with investigation beyond occupations in human services and education to clerical, computer technology and managerial work and MBI – GS (General Survey) was published (Gen, Surbey) in 1996 which allowed burnout to be studied independently from its specific job context. However, most of the burnout studies were cross sectional and therefore did not allow causal reference. Only recently, the methodological rigor of burnout studies has been conducted (Borritz, 2005). One of newer developments in burnout research is extension of burnout concept by positive antithesis job engagement so the full spectrum of workers well-being can be studied (Engelbrecht, et. al 2006; 27)

4. MODELS OF BURNOUT

4.1 Veninga and Spradley's Stage Model

Veninga and Spradley (1981) believed that burnout occurred in the form of five distinct stages:

- a) Honeymoon Stage:
 - i. Stage characterized by feeling of excitement, enthusiasm, pride and challenge arising out of new job

- ii. Give rise to certain coping mechanisms and strategies which prove to be dysfunctional later
 - iii. Flip Side – Marks the beginning of depletion of energy
- b) Fuel Shortage Stage:
- i. General undefined feelings of fatigue, sleep disturbance, inefficiency and job dissatisfaction
 - ii. Disturbances can result in concomitant behaviors of increased eating, drinking and smoking.
- c) Chronic Symptom Stage:
- i. Psychological manifestation in previous stage becomes more pronounced
 - ii. Can lead to occurrence of symptoms like physical illness, anger, irritation and depression.
- d) Crisis Stage:
- i. Over a period of time, symptoms may develop into acute psychosomatic disorders like peptic ulcer, tension headache, chronic backache, high BP, sleep disturbance
 - ii. Increased tendencies of self - doubt, pessimistic view of life and general feeling of oppression
- e) Hitting the wall stage:
- i. Total maladaptation due to failure of the person's coping mechanism to deal with stress

4.2 LEITER – MASLACH PROCESS MODEL

On the basis of her studies, Maslach (1982) had developed a three –dimensional construct of burnout and had defined burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’. It is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or are having problems.”Leiter and Maslach (1988) posited that there is a sequential development of different dimensions of burnout. It is the emotional exhaustion that first appears as a result of the excessive demands at work. In order to cope with the drainage of energy, the individual distances himself from his work and others as a defensive strategy, and this manifests as depersonalization or cynicism. Finally, as a sequel to this depersonalization, the ability of individual to work effectively decreases and

when the realization that his present accomplishments do not match with his original expectations and ideals set in, it leads to a sense of reduced personal accomplishments or inefficacy. But this developmental sequence of exhaustion – depersonalization – reduced accomplishment has been modified in the light of later empirical findings. The revised model (Leiter,1993) proposes a mixed sequential and parallel development of the burnout dimensions. In the new model, burnout starts off with exhaustion and is sequentially followed by the development of depersonalization. There is a parallel development of the feeling of reduced personal accomplishment (renamed as ineffectiveness or reduced inefficacy) independent of other two dimensions, and this happens due to the work environment. Thus, while in the earlier model, burnout was entirely internal process in which exhaustion was triggered due to environmental stress, in the latter model; environmental stressors affected the entire process of burnout by influencing all the dimensions of burnout.

4.3 MEIER'S MODEL OF BURNOUT

Meier (1983) presents a framework patterned on the work of Bandura (1977), which views burnout from an interactionist perspective, suggesting that burnout is a result of not just the organizational factors; rather it develops from interplay between the environment and the individual factors. Burnout is defined as “a state in which individuals expect little reward and considerable punishment from work because of the lack of valued reinforcement, controllable outcomes, or personal competence” (Meier, 1983). The four elements are:-

- a) Reinforcement expectations
- b) Outcome expectations
- c) Efficacy expectations
- d) Contextual processing

To elaborate, burnout occurs when an individual, due to his repeated work experience, has low expectations or little hope of receiving positive rewards or reinforcements. Also, the person feels a lack of control over the existing reinforcers, being unable to exert control over the reinforcement along with a high expectation of punishment being present in the work environment (Sharma, 2007). The model has not received much support in later researches.

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To study the conceptual framework of Burnout
- To analysis the personality related variables burnout among IT employees

5. 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Random sampling method is used to draw a sample of 100 middle and senior level executives. The executives are selected from companies having operations in the all-India, across all the four regions. Viz, north, south, east and west. The data is collected from 5 companies using the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory questionnaire. The data was analyzed using MS – Excel

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The sample size may not adequately represent the macro view as methodology followed is random sampling. Other variables like stress and coping mechanism can be included for better understanding of antecedents of Burnout

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

6.1 Personal Burnout Component Analysis

Statement	Almost Never (5)	Seldom (4)	Sometimes (3)	Often (2)	Always (1)
How often do you feel tired?	2	28	38	26	6
How often are you physically exhausted?	0	40	44	16	0
How often are you emotionally exhausted?	0	10	32	54	4
How often do you think: "I can't take it anymore"?	0	40	34	24	2
How often do you feel worn out?	0	28	32	20	0
How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?	0	26	50	24	0

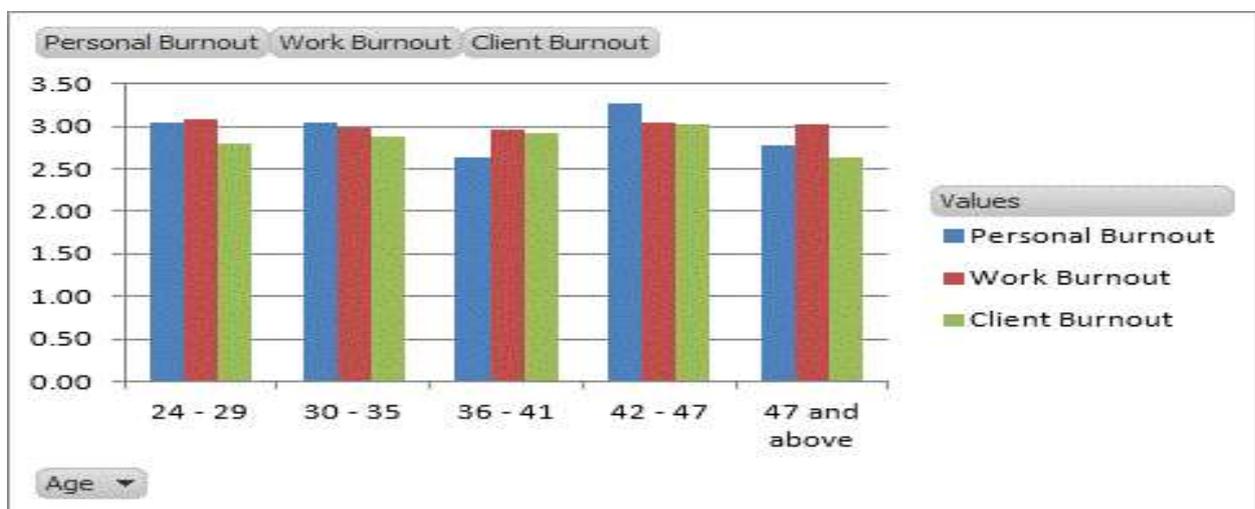
Analysis:-

- Syntel shows the highest Personal and Work Burnout rate amongst all the 5 companies
- L&T Infotech indicates the highest Client Burnout amongst all the 5 companies

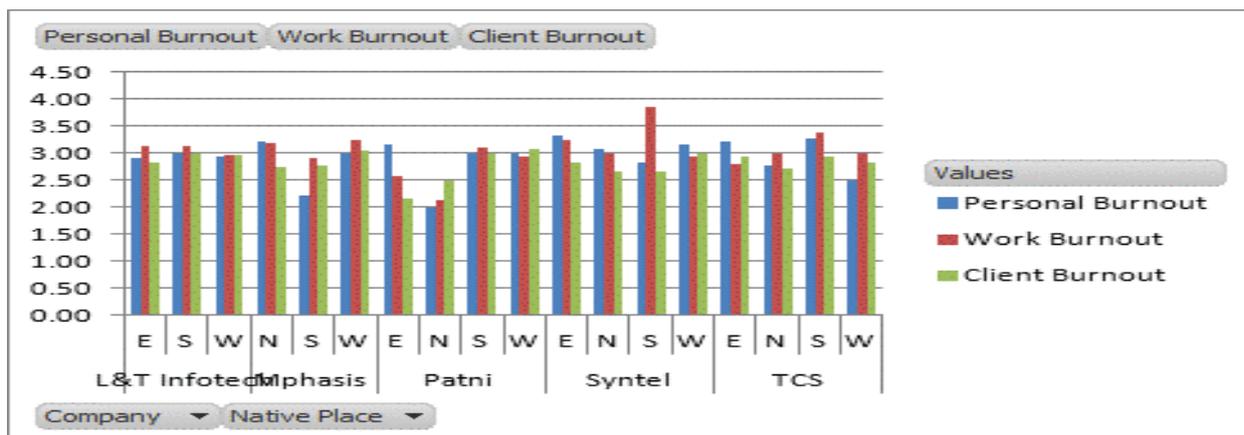
6.2 Personal, Work and Client Burnout - Gender wise



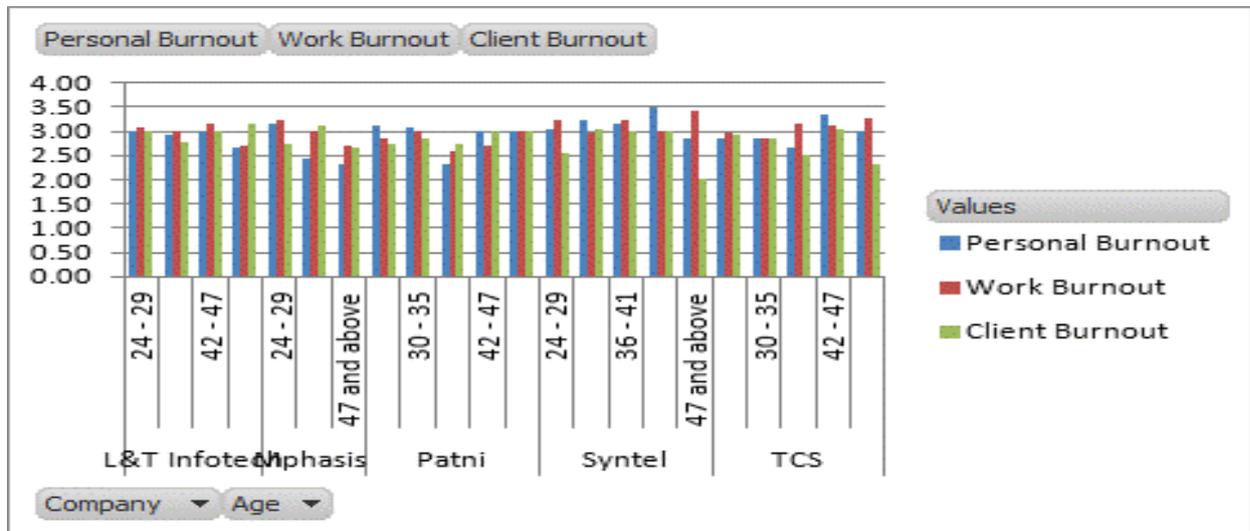
6.3 Personal, Work and Client Burnout – Age wise



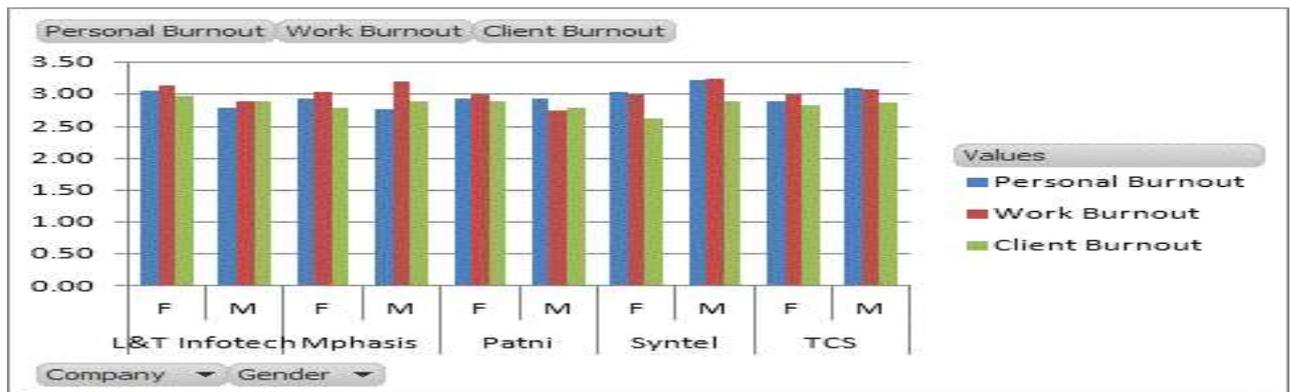
6.4 Personal, Work and Client Burnout – Company and region wise



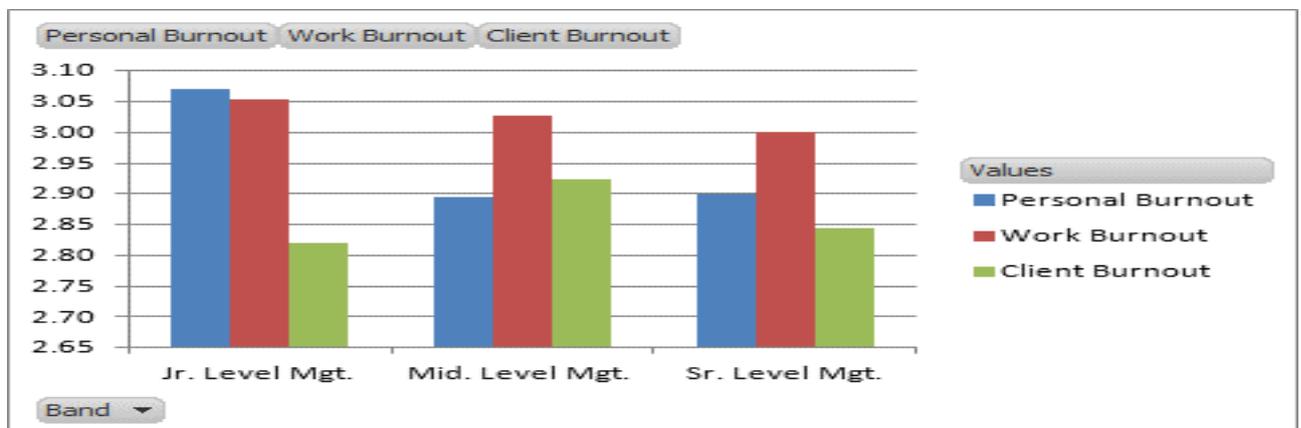
6.5 Personal, Work and Client Burnout – Company and age wise



6.6 Personal, Work and Client Burnout – Company and Gender wise



6.7 Personal, Work and Client Burnout -Level of Mgt. wise



7. FINDINGS OF STUDY

- Males indicate more of work burnout than other two categories but in each category they are show less tendency of burnout as compared to their female colleagues
- 26% of the respondents say that they often feel tired which is marginally lower than the respondents who seldom feels tired
- 100% of the respondents are neither always physically exhausted nor almost never physically exhausted. 44% are sometimes physically exhausted
- 54% of the respondents are often emotionally exhausted which indicates that people in IT industry are tend to show more of emotional outbursts and jobs in this industry are more emotionally challenging and physical or mental challenging task
- 2% of the respondents say that they have often thought of almost giving up because they can't take in the job pressure and stress anymore
- 50% of the respondents say that they sometimes feel weak and susceptible to illness because of high emotional challenging tasks
- Personal Burnout is highest amongst the age group of 42 – 47 because of their large involvement in more of analytical and conceptual part of doing the business
- Employees who belong to Eastern region of India tend to feel more of a Personal Burnout.
- Employees who belong to Northern region of India tend to feel more of a Work Burnout
- Employees who belong to Southern region of India tend to feel more of a Work Burnout but least of the personal burnout amongst employees from all the other three regions
- Employees who belong to Western region of India tend to feel more of a Work Burnout and Client Burnout than personal burnout.

8. CONCLUSION

The data collected from the primary survey conducted has been analyzed in both generic way and in specific to the companies. Following points indicate some of the major conclusions drawn from the survey:

- Client Burnout shows the highest impact amongst the employees of all the companies which indicates the level of customization to the customer needs.
- Since Syntel is not much into Client servicing, employees of that organization tends to feel burnout more by the Personal and Work factors.

- Employees of Patna seems to be comparatively less affected by Burnout because of their dynamic HR policies.
- Senior Management Team of L&T Infotech and TCS seems to be affected more by Client and Personal burnout because of their high orientation towards work and client. Work Burnout is highest amongst the age group of 24 – 29 because of high involvement in learning the job and satisfying the first three basic needs of Maslow's Need Theory
- Client Burnout is highest amongst the age group of 42 – 47 because employees in this group are on the verge of being promoted to the top level of management and since IT industry in India is customer driven, they involve themselves to a very high extent to show their talent.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Developing cultural competence among IT employees results in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures, and work with varying cultural beliefs and schedules.
- Interesting and challenging work is a top motivator in the workplace of the IT employees. The work itself is a stronger motivator than the compensation for the work which distresses the employee of the organization.
- The IT companies' management should follow the principle of equal opportunity in regards to its hiring and promotion procedures. The employer should not allowed to discriminate based on items such as race or gender, and is required to give everyone an equal chance.
- Managers must be able to communicate with employees and employees must be able to communicate with managers in order to have a profitable business.
- The IT employee will become more efficient and productive if he is trained well in his behavioral and technical aspects. The companies should focus on the training of the employees frequently based changing trends in the industry.
- Team bonding brings people together by encouraging collaboration and teamwork. Fun activities that help people see each other in a different light allow them to connect in a different setting are organized.
- The employees who work in high stress or dangerous jobs as well as those who are employed at a place where there is high pressure environment are often prone experiencing stress. Understanding how to manage, minimize and deal with stress is

essential which in turn, can help people feel more relaxed and react well when stressful situations actually arise. Hence, some de-stressing activities are very necessary, in order to make the employee feel like his stress issues are being taken into consideration by the organization.

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