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The "Health" of the organization. On some intangible components as the basic realities to improve the governance of contemporary public health organizations.

La "salute" dell'organizzazione. Su alcune componenti intangibili come realtà di base per migliorare la governance delle organizzazioni sanitarie pubbliche contemporanee.

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Abstract

The today's challenge by the organizations of the public health service is perhaps basically constituted by the need to develop an individual and collective more professional *emprenurship* capable of urge internal and external resources through a specific and well-defined strategic orientation, in a very complex situation that can be seen on the one hand, the growing increase in demand and, on the other hand, a substantial reduction of the available resources. Therefore, needs to focus on the organization and on the *organizing* so strong more than in the past, as it is today that the organizations of the public administration delegated to the provision of health services are definitely emerged as active subjects is significant not only in the context of welfare but also in

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those occupied by the economy and from politics, those who work in a context crowded and competitive.

Key words: organizations; health; service-*organizing*-intangible; assets-post bureaucratic organizations-organizational strategies;

Premise

A number of issues deriving both from certain effects of international welfare systems crisis on public health organisations, like open (and explored) territories, from the spread of the new information and communication technologies as well as the new normative-institutional contexts, or in other words, the main overall non-postponable needs of contemporary society, have made traditionally predefined organisational thought/structures ineffective and have developed an ever growing need for specialisation, knowledge, essentially shared information and cooperative work, organizational culture or everything that can actually make an organisation 'fluid, flexible' to a greater extent than in the past. In particular, the new complexities require a real acquisition of different communication styles (in the broad sense of the term) and work, structured forms of development/diffusion of knowledge: all this seems even more significant if related to the condition of a 'change' to be definitively considered no longer as a 'variable' but as a structural 'condition'.

The core challenge (or in other terms the *business idea*) today for public health organizations is perhaps fundamentally constituted by the need to develop a more professional entrepreneurship even if not homologated, which will encourage internal and external resources through a specific and well-defined organizational action. Therefore need to focus above all on *organizing* more than ever, as it is right now that the social service organizations are definitely emerged as active and significant not only in the welfare but also in the economy and politics, however, in a crowded and competitive context that also sees an overall reduction in resources available. In particular, this means a strategic *organizing* focus on intangible assets that may characterize the organizations themselves, and this essay tries to identify some relevant issues.

Some of those components analysed in this paper attempt to define perimeters for further in-depth studies.

Culture

We can imagine the organisation as a socio-cultural subset and, as such, it is possible to observe the essential features (obviously, "filtered" by the specificity of the organisation itself), of the overall referential socio-cultural system, within it. (Malizia, 2003).

However, the organisation is not simplistically a "place of imitation" of what passes through and constitutes the referential global culture, but rather a particular "cultural-bearing milieu" (Pondy,1983), a place, as Crespi (1996) writes, where, symbologies, values and models are produced and reproduced. They not only have legitimated and characterized its existence to the "world", but they have also provided the internal "bearings" of reference to the action.

Crespi points out that "nowadays it is not possible to speak about an organisational culture as if it were about a unique coherent system of models and values: the plurality of cultural influences,

characterizing the contemporary societies that are highly differentiated, also affects the diversity of the symbolic forms within such organizations”. (Crespi,1996:229).

Cultures, like societies, represent some sort of “bearings” of the organizational acting, also providing it with the fundamental features of identity and belonging.

In fact, thinking of an “organizational cultural” (paraphrasing whatever holistic definition of “culture” in a general meaning), as what is produced within an organization in terms of “immateriality” (values, behaviours etc...), and “materiality” (technology, artifacts/manufactured products), through the experiential contribution, both individual and collective, (increased inside and outside the organization), of its members, in a way that is relatively steady and shared anyway, we can immediately understand as the organizational culture itself constitutes (along with the “structure”), the keystone of the organizational acting.

Therefore, it is about “rethinking” its own cultural system, the changes that have happened, its strengths/weaknesses to face the challenges that all profit or non-profit, public or private, product or service organizations expect.

Moreover, it can be also considered as the result/convergence of different factors such as a renewed interest and greater attention on attitudes/behaviours that can be individual and/or collective of the members of the organizations, almost a “neo heliocentricity” of human resources that maybe are “stored away” (as far as interest is concerned), because of the attention on other “resources” (technological, financial, political etc...), and, finally, necessity of new ideas, new approaches and ways of analyzing that aim at the organizational development and performance improvement.

Post modern organizing

Regarding the present situation and perspective of the organisation systems, beyond-modernity defines four possible models of logic of organisational coordination, or that is: ‘hybridism’, ‘cyclicity’, ‘transversality’, ‘turbulence’ (Bergquist, 1994) co-existing in the same organisation. ‘The first of these models – writes Bergquist –refers directly to the post-modern themes of complexity and fragmentation. The contemporary organisations are described as strange mixtures of forms and different processes which embody pre-modern, modern and post-modern elements. The second model embraces the theme of complexity. In this case complexity is described in terms of foreseeable and unforeseeable movements that take place in organisations according to their phases of development. The third model also refers to the subject of complexity, as well as to the post-modern one of ambiguity. Organisations are described in terms of the interweaving of public and private, profit and non-profit, between big and small forms and functions. The fourth model refers specifically to the complexity of variable speeds and the aim of the change within most of the post-modern organizations’. (Bergquist,1994:25)

In the context of ‘hybridism’, the basic assumption of which, as mentioned above, is the constant cultural co-existence of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ as well as of an absolutely critical ‘more-than-new’ (beyond modernity) but just as essentially the ‘melting pot’ of all the most diversified diachronic and synchronic experiences, the organisations must by and large give up the myth of integration among functions directly proportionately to the growth of the organisation itself, the ‘classical’ myth of modernity: ‘the integration of functions in organisations on a vast scale could be no longer possible or, if it were, could require too great a portion of the total of the resources of the post-modern organisations and a renewed enthusiasm for the value of small dimensions or at least

for the flexibility of the organisation'.(Bergquist,1994:37)

This does not certainly and necessarily mean the disappearance of the big organisations, but it is just as certain that today in the organisational cultures the values and philosophy that are basically different from those that have kept up the 'modern' organisational cultures cannot avoid being established, or the 'keeping everything together' in a structurally homogeneous way, or the logic of the 'hybrid made up of various forms and dynamics'.

Such 'hybridism' is furthermore already strongly felt in public and private organisational realities, even though the real most frequent difficulty that one comes across in these processes is a 'cultural' resistance to change.

A post-modern organisation that makes its structuration of the 'cycle' also a reference value in fact revolutionises a 'classical' theme of organisations in contemporaneity, or the 'homeostasis' (the difficulty to modify one's own way of being) and therefore 'enemy number one' of such can be represented by those that we could define as the 'pre-eminent residues' of the culturological history of the organisation itself and which anyway cannot and must not necessarily 'disappear', but undoubtedly be historicised and not become a sort of impregnable 'Berlin wall' such as to maintain a 'rigid' and inflexible' organisational culture, all the more reason with an external scenario that does not allow this and with the reasonable risk of creating a Mertonian 'incongruity', difficult to remedy except at a high price. Important different lessons can be drawn from this cyclical perspective. In the first place we must pay more and more attention when we start up new organisations since the structures and processes that are established at the beginning will offer great resistance towards the changes that are introduced at a later date. Secondly, we must realise that, while the deeply rooted models of an organisation give a sort of order, the short and long term variations will inevitably lead to a second type of order. These changes produce chaos in the short term, but order in the long term. Lastly, a cyclical model of organisational life teaches us – just as other post-modern concepts do – that organisational reality is determined, at least in part, more by the perspective angulations used than by the organisational phenomenon observed. In any organisation 'there are good reasons to find both order and chaos.

'Transversality' should be that post-modern feature of organisations whereby they have the ability to culturally exploit themselves in order 'to leave' their own monothematic mission and act transversally on different fronts and different objectives. Transversality has nothing to do with the modern phenomenon of the so-called 'diversification' (which has often produced very negative results for the organisations themselves) insofar as it is not a question of 'doing different things' from what constitutes the original mission, but of acting in a different way from usual on more neighbouring territories.

'Turbulent and/or 'cyclical', 'hybrid' and/or 'transversal', the perspectives of the beyond-modern organisations that we have attempted to analyse, for the very reason that they are post-modern, do not outline particularly precise scenarios but only the crisis of the existing and an indeterminable future. It is just as significant though that they witness a reflection and a complex difficult search, a real sign (at least in this) of the times, as well as 'flexibility' as a primary need.

Once again organisational 'flexibility' stands out as a basic cultural value and structural model for organisations; flexibility in the broad sense of the term ('adaptive', 'strategic', 'systemic') as a category of thought (even before being a structuring form of organisational action) capable of constantly modifying the configuration of the system and which, in scientific literature,

according to various approaches, has sometimes taken on the image of the ‘network’ (above all in the sense of ‘internal network’), and to others that of the ‘starfish’, or the ‘lean organisation’, etc.

Complexity

In a sociological and organisational economic context, complexity is undoubtedly an overworked concept but difficult to exactly and thoroughly define. The characteristics of an entity that can be defined complex are ‘together multiplicity (multiplicity of components and relations among them) and some specific form of autonomy (an entity is autonomous if its behaviour is dependent on its own rules, non-defined and non-definable from the outside). Such a combination makes the behaviour of a complex body unpredictable insofar that it is impossible to reconstruct the logic underpinning it (Ardigò and Mazzoli,1993:35)). We have to distinguish “complexity” in generic terms from “social complexity”, the very feature of every organisation. Social formations, in fact, are characterised by multiplicity as well as the pluri-dimensionality (pragmatic, semantic, familiar) of linguistic interactions. The social complexity within an organisation is today aggravated by the increased external complexity (turbulent nature and unpredictability of the context in which public and private organisations find themselves). The internationalisation of markets and therefore greater competitiveness, the fragmentation of the offer accompanied by an increasingly composite and differentiated demand, fast growth rates in technological development require of the organisation complete flexibility, the ability to adapt to the continuous changes, attention to and monitoring of possible action prospects. The approach to the task, the commitment in the solving of problems, the high rate of creativity and participation, the frequent information exchange, despite the attempts to reduce and simplify internal social complexity (by means of delegating, hierarchy, specialisation) lead the organisation to the attaining of ‘its threshold of sustainable complexity.

Many organisations face the context in which they find themselves with hardship insofar as they do not accept that they are part of the environment. This is a question of social formations which have an inflexible representation of their identity (preserved at all costs) and which at the same time underestimate the widest system of interrelations of which they are part. The condition of the existence of organisation and environment is in their reciprocal relationship: *‘when they activate and confront the environment egocentrically, often organisations do not realise their own complexity nor do they realise the conditions on which they depend’* (Morgan,1997:328).

The ability to rethink the organisation, to experience the emergency as a situation of normality, of active adaptation to the continuous changes of a turbulent environment are in contrast with a strictly hierarchical structure (verticalised), strong divisionalisation of work (methodical and repetitive) and excessive control at the expense of any kind of handing over of responsibility and delegation. The classical organisation theory (bureaucratic organisation) characterised, in the first place, by a hierarchy, strict definitions of duties, precisely defined communication and lines of command, is now obsolete. The same can be said of the theory of the scientific organisation of work based on the division of work, an excessive control but which in particular disengage the planning and programming of work from its execution. The need to face new situations in fact makes standardised procedures and predefined communication channels inefficient. This inefficiency in turn generates inaction and is worsened by the high level of divisional specialisation, given the inadequate communication exchanges and poor coordination between functions. The excessive

specification of duties and control (supervision) generate apathy and inefficiency. Nowadays the organisation can be compared to a continuous process of information processing. In these terms we could compare it to the human brain (metaphor of the brain), considering that such change constitutes the ideal model to which it leans. The company is asked for decentralisation and at the same time control and coordination. Only in this way will it be able to self-reproduce, and endorse the need for self-organisation in answer to unexpected local events. Each of its components will possess the knowledge, and competences to reach strategically shared objectives. These needs pinpoint decentralisation and specialisation of knowledge, information, action and system coordination at the same time. This objective can be reached in the first place by means of the establishment of a homogenous culture as well as through the use of information systems. 'The information system, just like the nervous system of a person, must be always ready to detect and point out threats and opportunities originating in the socio-economic context or inside the company itself'. The information system makes it possible to share the information to support management, the archives and the knowledge produced and internalised by the organisation. In particular the internal communication networks (intranet) enable information, once structured, manipulated and checked by the organisational hierarchies, to be exploited, disseminated and re-processed also right on the periphery of the organization : *the organisation's information systems represent the basis on which to develop a sort of shared organisational mind* (Morgan,1997:329).

Communication

The structural changes that have been taking place in all organisations for some years now, both in the public and private sector, make it necessary to rethink the organisations themselves, under a strategic and tactical profile. Changes such as the total quality process, product innovation, inter-functional integration, the passage from the hierarchical-pyramidal organisation to the 'flat' one, the construction of shared values, cannot be realised if the support is disregarded that is to be gained from a specific and coherent internal project of relations and information. Internal communication is a strategic variable of the change process. The new company model is not the result of the summation of valid professional interventions, but individually considered ones such as information, motivation, climate, belonging, participation in decision-making and informed involvement. 'The right way is the inverse one: to reform the organisational model with an out-and-out constant action of communication-sharing (Romano and Felicioli,1992).

In short, in order to be efficient organisational communication must:

- be coherent with the organisational dynamics and, therefore, be consequent to the structural changes;
- not be unidirectional and even less so only top-down.'
- It is possible to give different functionalities to internal communication:
 - integration and control,
 - coordination,
 - innovation.

1. Integration and control

When communication is aimed at integration and control it has the objective of offering a scheme of reference, common and explicit, capable of integrating, interpersonal relations, organisational relations as far as possible, both reducing uncertainty and codifying the rites of belonging. With the increase of uncertainty, the sharing of goals, strategies and 'how to do' becomes fundamental, or of the technologies to apply. On the one hand, the importance of the conscious management of the premises on which choices and actions are based increases, and on the other the weight of the sense of belonging to the group, of the search for the imitation and approval of others. It is possible to characterise communication aimed at control and homologation not only in relation to the objectives but also according to the segmentation of the end-users, the courses and of the message/promise of the communication flows.

2. Coordination

In organisational structures a more changeable and heterogeneous environment spurs on:

- greater complexity, insofar as the peripheral units referred to safeguard the critical areas on the input and output front multiply;
- greater flexibility and growth of the approach to the task rather than to the function;
- less rigidity of the connection of operations and planning that is more permeable to external needs.

This involves an increase in the quantity of internal communication and the channels utilised. More flexible and less repetitive organisations encourage forms of coordination that are less linked to work standardisation procedures and job planning, but more dependent on the reciprocal adaptation of individuals and the operative units during activities. Decisions become more frequent, personal interactions more numerous, information exchange, opinions and directives more intense.

3. Diffusion of innovation

The change process is no longer guided and regulated by hierarchical-bureaucratic top-down mechanisms, but derives from the outside and, starting with the functions facing each other with the area affected by the change, runs transversally through the entire organisational structure. The adaptive organisation is therefore characterised by a moving of responsibilities and intelligence towards the functions safeguarding the task environment and by the great permeability of the structure to the information flows crossing it horizontally. Important effects emerge in relation to the centrality of the professions system (at the negotiating and career development level) and to the peripheral nature of control. These are the transformations that put communication at the forefront as a widespread and distributed capacity, as the condition to guarantee cohesion and flexibility for a highly stratified and decentralised course of action. The first and fundamental consequence of the considerations made is that coordination and innovation presuppose an environment that communicates.

Knowledge

Knowledge Management sets out to be the first and most significant ‘organisational practice’ which uses intellectual capital as a manageable resource. The organisational elements that come into play in Knowledge Management practices are aimed at optimising and improving the recovery and circulation of data, information and knowledge important for the organisation, and at sending them to individuals and groups involved in carrying out specific tasks. These individuals, called *knowledge workers*, undoubtedly make up the most vital resource for the companies of the XXI century. The prime aim of Knowledge Management consists in placing intellectual ability at the disposal of the knowledge workers, or those who on a daily basis determine the success or failure of an organisation.

Knowledge Management does not therefore consist in transforming the *knowledge workers* into the interchangeable workings of any company database. Instead it involves the ability to supply them with the necessary raw material so that they can do what they are best at doing, or what Bill Gates defines as ‘thinking work’.

Knowledge Management sets out to make technology collaborate together with culture and company processes on an equal footing, using the former as a vehicle to manage the rest.

The thesis from which H. Nonaka and I. Takeuchi (1997) depart is that the success of productive organisations is based, in a climate of continuous innovation, on capacity and experience in the ‘creation of organisational knowledge, that is, on the capacity of an organisation overall to create new knowledge, to spread it inside itself.

The importance of knowledge in our age has been well documented by the works of A. Toffler (1990) and P.F. Drucker (1993) on the *knowledge-based society*. These authors announce, each in their own way, the advent of a new economy or a new society, ‘the society of knowledge’, which differs from the past particularly owing to its central role consistent with the cognitive dimension (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1997:31).

In his work Drucker states that knowledge has become the only significant resource, crowding out work, capital and the earth, to become the only production factor: ‘*the central activities in the creation of wealth will not be either the allocation of wealth in productive employment, or work...*’ and ‘*...today value is created by productivity and innovation, which are both applications of knowledge to work*’ (Drucker, 1993:193).

Toffler is of the same opinion when he maintains that ‘*... we are distancing ourselves from an economy based on brute force and we are moving towards an economy based on brain capacity. We are going towards an economy based on a new type of capital: knowledge is the new production factor, the basic substitute of the other factors*’ (Toffler, 1990:93).

Knowledge therefore is definitely the strategic resource of the new millennium but it must be made widely accessible and usable for it to become wealth.

Participation

As mentioned above, the technological transformations taking place are modifying not only the forms of learning, but more generally, the forms of aggregation, producing radically new phenomena.

In order to understand these transformations it is necessary to first of all comprehend the genetic mutation of the new ICTs: from instruments for the processing and transmission of data, the new

technologies have transformed into instruments of communication with a potential that has not been fully explored even today.

There are two main factors characterising this transformation: the first is connected with the redefining of the geometries of communication flows between persons, the second with the passage from the carrying of codified data to multimedia.

In particular, the second evolution factor, the transformation of the network from vehicle of codified data to different forms of media has the valorisation of contexts as its main effect. From the moment in which information technologies were no longer limited to the big companies, which could economically back the complex cycle of codification and re-contextualisation of knowledge, the media made it possible to carry contexts and produce them at low costs. The new instruments of web communication and cooperation make it possible for the end-users to exchange messages of a different type (texts, sound and images) creating new cooperation environments. The new technologies considerably reduce the coordination and communication costs, as they limit the use of knowledge codification procedures.

It is in this context of the structural modification of technologies that the virtual communities become popular, like new forms of organisation of collective learning processes.

The distribution of knowledge represents a distinctive feature of the community, with respect to the traditional organisational forms, based on the opposition between centre and periphery. Knowledge is continuously enriched by experience, making it a social learning device.

The communities (Rheingold, 1994) however can be classified into two different types: traditional and virtual communities. The first are known to us as the modernisation of society, based on the individual as participant in the civil consortium with full rights; the virtual communities can be defined as the distribution of persons and knowledge in space and time.

In a wider meaning of the expression virtual communities can be defined *'as a set of persons, who communicate with each other by means of the web; the communities are assimilable to spaces of expressive freedom, contexts of free communication among people, united by values and interests and by an ethics of minimal but shared communication'* (Costa and Rullani, 2000:23). According to this meaning the Internet *chat lines, conferencing systems* are communities where people can communicate with one another.

A categorisation of the universe of the virtual communities is possible by referring to the basic characteristics defining a virtual community. The dimensions of reference used in this context are two: the participative and the informative dimensions:

- the informative dimension of a community reflects the importance that a certain group of persons gives to a common database.

The sharing of interests, whether they be economic or cultural, unites people who want to use information that is important for their work or for any other activity. The sites in which these communities take part are essentially databases, whose attractiveness depends on the completeness of their archives and by the facility and speed of consultation.

- the second dimension, the participative dimension, is probably the most emphasised by web supporters: Internet represents a moment of dialogue and open exchange of opinion that is not conditioned by external subjects. The communities of relations, or the communities which focus their attention on the possibility to take part in and create relationships, are constructed not so much on the basis of precise interests but on questions regarding people's affective dimension. The

participant is not useful in an economic sense but reflects the need to share plans and experiences. The community of practice can be defined as a group of workers informally linked to one another by the sharing of a common class of problems, and the search for common solutions and therefore themselves the bearers of common knowledge.

The sharing element that unites the members of a community of this type is *practice*, and by this concept is meant the carrying out of a professional activity/action. It must not be interpreted only as an activity as such but as an activity collocated in a certain historical and social context, which gives structure and meaning to the activity and therefore it would probably be more correct to speak of *social practice* (Costa-Rullani,2000:208-232).

Creativity

Creativity, understood in the Paretian sense (Pareto,1964) as the activity of making combinations between norms, hypotheses and of relating heterogeneous factors, in itself constitutes the possibility of innovating, above all today by means of the almost unlimited use of all the ICT applications, thus making concrete creative connections highly significant. It must also be remembered that the new web in particular has developed profound exchanges of knowledge and ‘discourses on knowledge’, by means of simulation for example, an extremely useful modality to realise combinations of variables by holistically creating dynamic-procedural models and/or interactive representations of reality.

‘Organisations – writes Philips – are increasingly aware that it is necessary to encourage creativity; valid innovations will depend more and more on the creativity of all the members of an organisation.... it is not sufficient to foster a creative atmosphere: the organisations that want to take advantage of creativity....must support innovative ideas from the moment in which they appear up to their complete elaboration...not all organisations manage to exploit it (‘creativity’). Often incommunicability, red-tape and other impediments stop ideas from being realised, communicated and efficiently developed. The elimination of these obstacles can be difficult, but probably it is the most productive thing and at the same time the most radical thing that an organisation can do’ (Philips, 1994:51-55).

‘Creativity’ must therefore be a cultural asset and the organisational cultures cannot avoid reckoning with the need to organise themselves with modalities and philosophies ‘encouraging’ creativity and innovation. If fostered however, creativity manages to construct a precise organisational dynamic which, in order to be fully realised, must avoid ‘anti-creative’ conduct like forms of strict and frequent control in the workplace, professional specialisations, ecc., the mere formal promotion of new ideas without ever following them up, the application of ‘red tape’ always and anyway.

Therefore creativity, understood as an organisational dynamic, must be suitably accompanied and supported in all its manifestations and development and this is undoubtedly not easy to realise. It suffices to think for example of the difficulties and obstacles not just of a bureaucratic nature but of status interests, professional and functional interests that can interpose in the phases of ‘development’ and ‘acceptance’ of creative-innovative ideas, and the individual and/or collective, real and/or instrumental ‘resistances’ to change (psychological, structural, interests etc.) which will actually come to hinder the phases of ‘collectivisation’ and ‘adoption’ of those very ideas. This is

not all though: in terms of organisational culture one can say that creative-innovative ideas (unless there is a traditionally consolidated habit in this sense and creativity itself is collectively experienced as a value) are often ‘culturally rejected’ just because they are ‘threatening’ (in a real and presumed way) to the existing cultural order, even if not ‘risky’ for the organisation itself.

Creativity therefore as the basis for innovation. In fact we start with the assumption that innovation is one of the main keywords of third millennium economy and that this, in turn, presupposes a culture of creativity and change. Consequently by innovation management is meant the set/system of management processes at the source and at the end of innovations itself, in other words the management of the actors – factors – structures – cultures which, starting with the development of creativity up to the application of innovative results, guarantee a real capacity to leave a mark (qualitatively and quantitatively) on organisations.

Conclusions

This essay, dedicated to the values of the most significant contemporary *intangible assets*, started with the axiom that today in particular the social systems in general and formal organisations specifically, live and develop constructing processes of relations, communication, significance and development of knowledge, as well as the diffusion and sharing of the same in the various webs constituting them. This paper has been written around these issues and contents, ‘navigating’ furthermore on now established transversal logics like knowledge management and knowledge workers, made indispensable by the dematerialisation of the economy and by the unstoppable impact of information technology in its polymorphous applicability and which have basically changed the *modus vivendi* of the same. In fact, this has produced a ‘semantic revolution’ in the understanding of and approach to complex organisations, as well as in their ‘daily life’, a marked consideration of the importance of the *soft* factors, this is, for the analysis of the organisational dynamics just as for the strategic-management practice in public health’s services organizations.

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