



# Community Capacity and Vocational Education and Training

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# **Community Capacity and Vocational Education and Training**

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To talk about community capacity and VET in the same breath opens up new ways of looking at how vocational education and training fits into the lives of the people of Queensland. Linking these terms suggests a two way street, an interconnection, the possibility that each impacts on the other – community capacity on VET and VET on community capacity. It is this two way interconnection that we want to talk about today because it helps explain how the value of VET to a community is related to many factors operating within and on that community. We'll see that on the one hand, it is the existing community capacity at any given time that impacts on how training can contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of the community members. But on the other, we will also see how VET activity in its own right can build community capacity in a number of different ways.

For those of us involved in vocational learning – and that would include almost everyone here because learning potentially pervades every aspect of our working life – experience no doubt has proved over and over to us that there is a connection between community capacity and training. Locating VET in this wider context helps explain why training in one situation produces positive results that a community can readily identify; and why in another, for the same dollar investment, the tangible benefits just don't seem to be there. By community we mean here any of the following: a work team, a workplace, an organisation,

or an industry. A community is also be a geographical community such as a city, a town, a district or region and it can be sectors of these larger groups defined for example, by age, ethnicity, occupation or other socio-economic criteria. We hear of the Greek community in Melbourne, the refugee community in Maribyrnong, the farming community in Tasmania, the business community of Brisbane, the Indigenous community of Cairns.

For those of us who are training providers, employers, community leaders, researchers, and public servants and therefore more directly involved with the business of providing and facilitating VET in the state, this link is crucial to understanding how we can maximise the value of training. For us the interconnectedness between VET and this much larger, more holistic, more organic notion of ‘community capacity’ is an opportunity to look at our practices in new ways. At one level, it invites a panoramic perspective, an arial view of how the activity that fills our days relates to the activity of others who are also in the same business of producing value to the community from its VET investment. This perspective takes our vision beyond what’s happening at our own desk, office, or workplace. It allows us to see how our activity works in with that of others with whom we share this common goal. It helps us ascertain how our activities overlap or are in synch and provide one another leverage. It may also reveal how we are possibly duplicating or even working against each other to the detriment of our common goal.

At another level though, the VET and community capacity link invites us to zoom into what we do - but again from the perspective of how our everyday work relates to that of others. The lens would reveal how our every day interactions with people in our office, across departments or community groups, across the city or the State hinder or help us

maximise the value of VET for Queensland communities. Whether the interactions are by mail or email, phone or fax, face to face meetings or on the Internet, they are the fibres that construct the interconnection between VET and community capacity. In other words, the quality of the interconnection is dependent on the quality of those interactions.

It is exactly this link between community capacity and vocational education and training that has been the subject of much of our research at the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia in the last five years. All up, over fifty communities – urban, regional and rural – have been studied across a number of different research projects in all states and the Northern Territory in an effort to search for the reasons that make some communities profit more than others from the training that goes on in their offices, factories, farms and workshops. The link between community capacity and VET became evident when we explored questions like: What are the factors that affect the value a community gets out of training? In what ways does training contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of a community? Here we weren't only interested in what the contributions were but also how they actually came about. Before we look at what the answers to these questions suggest about the community capacity and VET connection we need to explain how we are using the terms VET, community, and community capacity.

### ***What is VET?***

VET here refers to the products, the policies, and the dynamics involved in facilitating, providing and using training courses, programs, and other learning opportunities in a community. VET includes the formal vocational education and training aimed at gaining a qualification under the Australian Recognition Framework; it includes the kinds of

professional and personal development courses and workshops that don't lead to such qualifications; and it also includes the even more informal vocational education and training which occurs incidentally as people go about their daily lives. Informal VET is not structured and not usually recognised as training even though much of the learning we do occurs through informal interactions. In fact, work pressures are causing a rethink in the way we pick up information and knowledge. For example, workplaces are now being designed to be effective learning spaces that encourage informal interactions that have learning potential. Although the new Council Chambers in Cairns apparently were not designed with learning in mind, council staff and workers have quickly identified where knowledge can be exchanged – small foyers dotted throughout the building, L shaped corridors and of course, the coffee shop. So when we talk about VET, we're talking about far more than just accredited courses and programs. VET here is shorthand for the policies, the processes, the people, and the products connected with vocational learning in some way or other.

### ***What is community?***

Now to the word “community”, a concept that is highly contested in the social sciences. Almost fifty years ago, over ninety definitions of the term were found in the academic literature (Hillery, 1955). Back then there was no basic agreement on its characteristics and with even more definitions added in the interim, agreement on what constitutes a community has still not been reached. In the meantime, it is a word that is being used with increasing frequency by politicians, policy makers, service providers, and the general public. Earlier we gave examples of communities that were large communities. In practice these larger communities have much smaller groups that represent them, that act and work

on their behalf. We call these groups communities of common purpose. They are the steering committees, the cluster groups, the reference groups, the lobby groups, the professional or industry based bodies, the councils, and the special interest groups. A common purpose draws the members of these communities together. They exist on either a long term or short term basis, and in a formal, informal or ad hoc way. So when we speak of community capacity, the term may refer to the capacity of these smaller communities of common purpose or to the larger ones.

### ***What is community capacity?***

And now to community capacity, a term that has negative connotations for some and positive ones for others. There are those for whom the term community capacity in government literature signals the threat of funding reduction or funding withdrawal for social services. For them community capacity is a call for community self-reliance that is tantamount to saying “Survive on your own or die”. For others it signals a welcoming change in the relationship between government and the communities it serves. The rhetoric of community capacity for these people suggests government recognition of bottom-up, community-owned planning processes, more autonomy, and more effective deployment of local and government resources in the pursuit of sustainability. Before looking at what community capacity is, let’s ask what community capacity does.

Community capacity has been described as ‘the community’s ability to pursue its chosen purposes and course of action both now and in the future’ (Fawcett, Paine-Andrews, et al, 1995). From a health and social work perspective, it has been defined as the ability of communities to ‘plan, develop, implement, and maintain effective community programs’

(Poole, 1997). In a discussion paper (<http://www.ops.qld.gov.au/gsd/dis3.html>) called *Community Capacity Building in Queensland*, a paper produced as part of the Government Service Delivery Project, community capacity refers to ‘the level of control which people living in communities have over their individual and collective social and economic futures’. The implication in all these definitions, and it certainly appears a logical one, is that capacity precedes economic and social outcomes.

A working definition of community capacity that we have at the research centre is similar to these but it is more specific about what the social and economic outcomes might be. We would suggest that community capacity is the community’s ability to plan for and meet its social and economic needs in pursuit of a quality of life that is acceptable to its members and to the larger community of region, state, and country. As a means of identifying the elements that make up quality of life or social and economic wellbeing, we are using a set of Social Indicators produced by the OECD (1973; 1982) which, after an exhaustive developmental and research process spanning two decades, finally settled on eight indicative categories. These eight bands of indicators are:

- 1 Health
- 2 Education and learning
- 3 Employment and quality of working life
- 4 Time / Leisure
- 5 Command over goods and services
- 6 Environment
- 7 Social Environment
- 8 Personal Safety

When we use these bands, we have found that vocational education and training both formal and informal, has the potential – although not always realised – to contribute positively to every one of these aspects of social and economic wellbeing. The question here is how does it do this. The answer lies in how VET is incorporated in the overall capacity that the community has to achieve its goals.

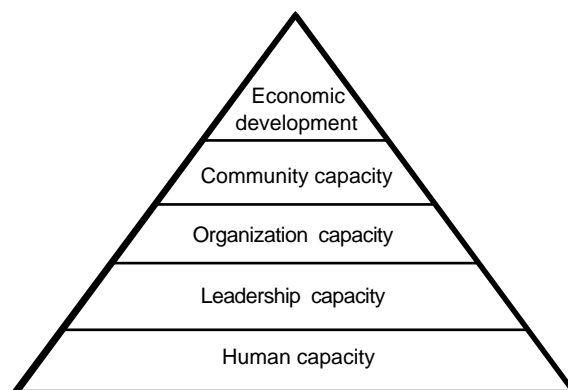
A pyramid model (Figure 1) from the Centre for Rural Community Revitalization and Development at the University of Nebraska identifies several kinds of capacities that go toward making up the community capacity that leads to economic, and to which we add social, outcomes. At the foundation level there is human capacity. It is at this level that vocational education and training operates directly. It contributes to human capacity in at least four ways. The first is through skill and knowledge acquisition. The second is building people's self-efficacy which includes self-esteem and self-confidence. The third is job readiness and the fourth is the networking, interaction and support that learners can experience through participating in vocational education and training.

The model shows that for human capacity to be harnessed as community capacity, leadership capacity and organization capacity are also required. These capacities are the key to transforming human capacity into community capacity. Their quality and quantity determine how effectively the VET contributions made at the foundation level percolate up and are realised in terms of social and economic outcomes for the community. It is especially the communities of common purpose directly or indirectly involved with VET - the steering committees, training groups, Chambers of Commerce, regional economic

development organisations, small business groups, industry networks - that hold much of these capacities.

When this model is read top down it provides another insight into the link between VET and community capacity that our research has revealed. There is a cascading down effect between the kinds of capacities operating in a community. What this means to VET activity at the human capacity level is that the leadership and organisational capacities of the training related communities of common purpose determine how VET operates and interacts with the town, district, region or suburb. The types of training offered, to whom they are offered, by whom, where, when, and how are influenced by the quality of the organization and leadership capacities present. Helping to accurately identify community needs, source learners, deploy financial and physical resources, and maximise value across multiple workplaces, organisations, or industries are all ways that existing community, organization and leadership capacities impact on VET's contributions to human capacity.

**Figure 1: The five levels of capacity supporting sound economic development (with minor amendments)**



Source: Allen, J. 1999, The Nebraska model, Keynote address to Regional Australia Summit, Parliament House, Canberra, 27–29 October, p. 9.

These various capacities are not discrete entities for the simple reason that capacities are ultimately held in individuals, in the relationships between individuals, and in the multiple communities of common purpose to which individuals belong. Let's take just one example – an employment or training officer say in a DETIR regional office. She is a member of the Queensland Public Service, a member of the geographical community in which she lives, is possibly a member of a sports club, a member of an informal social group, perhaps doing a training course in one group, delivering training in another, and facilitating training opportunities in yet another. At any given time she holds multiple identities and in any given day she may literally cross several community boundaries by attending meetings, functions, teleconferences, or having a casual chat on the phone. She brokers knowledge across boundaries and shares contacts and networks. The point is that through her interactions she, like the rest of us, carries with her the resource that connects the different capacities operating in a community. That resource is now often called social capital.

### ***What is social capital?***

Social capital is the networks, values, and trust that facilitate a group's purposeful action. Put another way, if the existing networks, norms and kinds of trust in a community do not help it achieve its common purpose then they are not social capital. Social capital is the outcome of myriads of interactions that blend people's values and networks into mutual trust and confidence, thereby allowing community members to work together and pool resources for the common good. Social capital is as valuable to a community as human capital, physical capital and financial capital. The worth to a community of more concrete resources such as funding, buildings and parks, courses and programs is dependent on

social capital. Social capital is the resource that determines how well, or how badly, more tangible resources are accessed and deployed.

Figure 2 represents how social interactivity connects capacities between individuals (at the micro level) within communities of common purpose (at the meso level) and between subcommunities within larger units such as towns, cities, states, countries, or more generally society (at the macro level). It illustrates the interdependency of levels of social activity in building and using social capital. Policy formulated at the macro level of state for example influences the kinds of networks, norms and trust that operate within communities and between individuals within those communities. As another example, the accepted practices, norms and trust operating within an established community of common purpose, say an employers group, influences how members of that group interact with one another and with people outside the group. By the same token a new member can change the social capital of that group to a larger or lesser extent.

So far we have established that VET directly connects with community capacity at the human capacity level. At this level its contributions to learners are in terms of skill acquisition, self-efficacy, job readiness, and networks, interaction and support. However the extent to which these contributions impact on the social and economic wellbeing of the community depends in great measure on the existing leadership, organisation and community capacities. We have explained that one resource that is shared across all levels and is in fact the conduit for interaction between the various capacities is social capital. The quality of that social capital then becomes an important factor to how the different capacities work together to produce social and economic outcomes. Last year the Centre

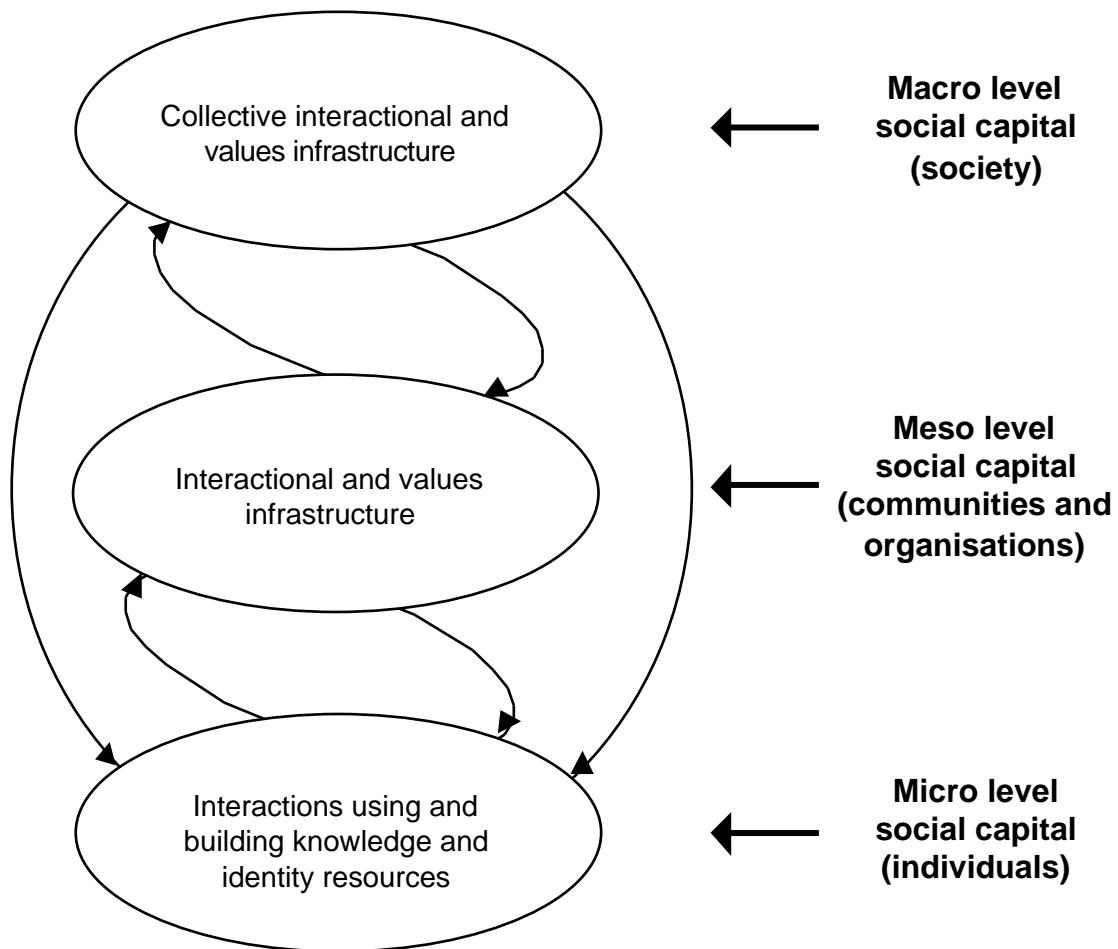
completed two major studies on communities and vocational learning that looked specifically at the connection between social capital and VET. The studies concluded that in the communities that seemed to benefit the most from vocational education and training, two sets of conditions prevailed. The first we called a “chronological continuity of shared experience” and the second “community connection”. The impact of vocational education and training on community capacity seemed to be more powerful where these conditions influenced the kinds of social capital that linked capacities.

### ***Continuity of shared experience over time***

So what do we mean by a chronological continuity of shared experience? And what does this have to do with how VET becomes incorporated into individual, organisational and community capacities?

We would all agree that we act, interact, plan, and learn only in the present. It cannot be any other way. Whether we are talking about ourselves as individuals or as members of communities of common purpose – say a steering committee, a work team, a cluster group, a department, a group of elected representatives - we cannot perform other than in the present. What’s also true is that both our past experiences and our future expectations and goals strongly influence how well we do perform in the here and now. Our learnings from histories of shared experiences between members of the various communities we have or have had membership produce the current knowledge and identity resources that we draw on at the present moment. Our understanding of what the future holds helps us decide what our common purpose should in fact be. It helps us evaluate the adequacy of those knowledge and identity resources that we have accumulated and take appropriate action.

**Figure 2: CRLRA model showing interdependency of levels of social interactivity in building and using social capital**



What we are finding is that the more seamless and uninterrupted our shared narratives of past experience are, and the more comprehensive, informed, and shared our vision of the future is, the more effective we are in the present as learners and as community members. In the social capital research literature, this reconciliation of the depth of the history with the vision for the future is referred to as 'historicity' and 'futurity'. The point we're

making here is that the continuity isn't about a linear continuity of time itself. Rather it's about how well we simultaneously draw on the past and pull on the future to interact and act in the present. A community's skills and ability to do that impacts directly on how vocational education and training can be incorporated to best produce results.

It is evident when this dimension of continuity of shared experience is present in a community. This was the case in a town of about 10 000 people in rural Victoria. When the CEO of the large successful regional community owned and managed training organisation described its business philosophy, she said:

Our job is to look four or five years down the track at any one time and say where is business and industry going to be and what does this mean for training and education to our businesses now?

This same organisation has shared histories with businesses in the district that are ten years long. Talk to the employers who purchase training from this provider and they will explain that they see their employer provider connection as a partnership with the common goal of progressing the employer's business. Through ongoing casual interaction and newsletters the partnership remains active even when businesses have not purchased training in any particular year.

A very different kind of example in which continuity of shared experience is evident is in an urban renewal program in Manoora a suburb of Cairns. The program began less than two years ago but it has nevertheless drawn on a historicity that goes back decades. Recently the Cairns West School, the primary school in the Manoora area placed an advertisement in the *Cairns Sun* a free newspaper (see Appendix). The advertisement said that the Cairns West

School was a provider of adult training and it then listed the courses available – First Aid, an advance computer course , literacy, numeracy, meeting procedures, government . As an adult training provider the school has a very short history but as a primary school it has a very long and good one in the area. Most of the children in the Urban Renewal area go there as did many of their parents. The trust that has been built up between the School and the community from shared experience over many years and its geographical location make it an excellent choice as a training provider that will help community members prepare for a brighter future.

As it is obvious when communities do function in accordance with this principle of continuity, it is just as evident when they do not. Learners’ experiences can reveal discontinuities. For example, a large collection of training certificates that have led to no work, or apprentices in rural and regional areas trained in trades that have no need for them are evidence that training in the present did not account for future realities. Policy produces unintended discontinuities. The practice of inviting training providers to tender for state wide training contracts for example can result in learners in far flung parts of the state not being “owned” or followed up for further training or work once a course finishes. Regional correctional centres is a case in point. Inmates for example, may participate in literacy programs conducted by training providers a thousand kilometres away. However once their time is up and they return to their homes – which are usually in the local area – they more often than not do not follow through with further training because they have no shared history with the local training providers.

Arguably the practice that is most at risk of producing discontinuities is the short term project driven approach to training provision and other many services. Continuity of staff and program is an obvious consideration in a 'project' policy environment where funding can chop in and out, sometimes leaving students, staff and employers in limbo. This aspect of funding procedure risks the re-invention of human capacity and infrastructure every time a new program is begun. Value for money spent on one program is not maximised when its physical, human, social and learning outcomes (capacity) are not carried forward as infrastructure for subsequent use.

To optimise the value of VET investment, there must be a 'fit' of past, present and future. Factors that interrupt the shared narratives of experience between VET providers and facilitators, learners and trainers, participant and community prolong the time required for effective outcomes, or may render potentially rich learning experiences worthless or even negative.

### ***Community connection***

If continuity is about time, community connection draws our attention to our interactions in space and place. Community connection is about partnerships and collaborations called upon or established to achieve a common purpose. Community connection comes only from interacting. A network of connections 'on paper' is not a network of connections 'in practice' unless it is active, unless there are interactions between its members.

It is the nature of those interactions that affect the quality of the community connection which in turn impacts on the community's capacity to achieve its goals. The main elements

that people bring to an interaction and which determine the quality of the interaction are listed in Figure 3. Knowledge resources; identity resources by which we mean norms, values, and self confidence; trust; a sense of common purpose; reciprocity; links within the community and links with people and organisations outside the community determine how useful those interactions are to achieving the common purpose.

In many communities VET is the catalyst or facilitator for new networks and connections. In one community we visited the Area Consultative Committee supports an education and training sub-committee whose members are the private and public training providers in the region. The area consultative committee provides secretarial and administrative assistance as well as a venue for the monthly meetings. The purpose of the group is to enhance the value of VET to the community through information sharing, networking and collective action. They lobby, embark on joint projects, and take up learning issues that affect the whole community. The sub-committee attributes its effectiveness to its ability 'to take some issues and possible solutions from a concept stage to actually doing something about it'. When we asked what makes the group effective, members stated that cooperation, good will and maintaining a community perspective are the key characteristics of how the group operates.

In this next example the local training organisation established a new network that linked small businesses in the same industry from a number of regional centres. Before this network was established very little training was taking place. Any compulsory training was done in the city and this involved travel and accommodation costs. The common purpose of the network which has been going for two years is to meet its training needs. By pooling

resources and planning training programs collaboratively, the group uses its collective purchasing power to overcome the difficulties of distance and expense. The network meets regularly, knowledge is shared between businesses and the training provider and action is planned and taken. If the local training provider does not have the resources to meet the group's training needs, the provider through its external networks calls in the people with the appropriate expertise.

In places where the community connections are weak or inappropriate, community capacity suffers and the value that the community reaps from VET suffers. Key barriers to effective collaboration and partnerships include a lack of social cohesion and trust, a lack of appropriate leadership, presence of competition when collaboration would be more productive, and especially an inadequate knowledge and skills base within the communities of practice whose business it is to provide direction and leadership. In these cases there is often duplication of services, an absence of needed resources or services on the one hand, and a supply of underutilised resources and white elephants on the other. One example of such a white elephant is a fully equipped manual arts training workshop we saw in a remote community. It is cobwebbed, locked, and never been used. Clearly the government made a substantial financial investment but in its first five years at least, it has not enhanced that community's capacity to meet its social and economic goals by one iota.

Figure 3: Dimensions of community capacity: Chronological continuity and community connection



## ***Conclusion***

In summary, the business of VET is to develop human capacity which as we have seen is at the very foundation of community capacity. VET's sole purpose in a community is to enhance the economic and social wellbeing of its members through a cycle of individual knowledge, skills, and identity development. However to view VET's link with community capacity in terms of human capacity only is too simplistic. Our research has shown that VET works best in those communities where the VET practice of government, providers, employers, facilitators and promoters draws on the existing social capital and deliberately goes about generating more social capital of the kind that specifically helps maximise the value of VET to the community. The social capital of a community is a strong determinant of its capacity to meet its social and economic needs. What is important is the way in which VET practice uses and produces social capital. Two principles of good social capital building practice that we've described here are the principle of chronological continuity and the principle of community connection.

To look at VET practice in relation to community capacity is a powerful way of exploring how VET contributes to a community and the factors that affect those contributions. Community capacity is an ecological concept. Just as ecology in the natural sciences has people look at ecosystems rather than individual elements of that system in isolation, community capacity has us look at how VET practice fits into the sum total of what goes on in a community. The issues and questions this ecological framework generates for our practice are many and we'll leave you with just a few:

1. Just as not all individuals are created equal, communities too have different levels and kinds of community capacity and especially of social capital. What does this mean for those communities within the larger community that have maximising the value of VET as their common purpose? What kinds of interaction are required? What does this mean for the kinds of skills needed by community leaders, training providers and especially government agents?

2. To view VET in terms of community capacity suggests new ideas of what best practice might look like, even new ideas of what constitutes success. It also suggests that different sets of knowledge are required at a local community level, regional, and at a state level. How will those knowledges be generated? Who will own those knowledges? How will they be accessed? And most importantly, how will those knowledges be valued by all those groups and individuals who in one or other act for and on the communities of Queensland?

3. How do our policies and practices work for or against the principles of continuity and community connection?

For researchers like us, our work has in many ways just begun. The ecological perspective that the notion of community capacity brings to VET promises great potential to better understand and improve the value that VET brings to community capacity.

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