

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF AN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TRAINING PROGRAM ON FOOD RETAIL EMPLOYEES' EMOTIONAL SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Although several studies have highlighted the need to empower the emotional intelligence of sale employees, there has been no relevant research in the food retail sector. The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of an emotional intelligence training program on emotional skills of employees in this field. A sample of 118 employees participated in the study, 92 in the experimental group and 26 in the control group. Participants in the experimental group fulfilled an 11hour training program on Emotional Self-awareness, Self-control, Empathy, Relationship building and Conflict management. Both groups' skills were assessed using a series of actual and self-report measures, three times: at the beginning of the program, at the end of it, and three months later. According to the results, there was a significant positive change on Emotional Self-awareness, Empathy and Relationship building in the experimental group after the training. A lower but statistically significant improvement in Empathy was retained even three months later. On the other hand, no significant change was found in the control group. According to the findings, a training program can have positive results in developing emotional skills of retail employees, despite its short duration.

Keywords: Emotional Skills, Training Program, Retail

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Today's workplace is characterized by intense dynamism, high competition and challenges. For an employee, in order to be effective, skills such as communication, dealing with and managing different types of people, developing collaborative relationships, adaptability and others are considered, in addition to their knowledge. Therefore, emotional intelligence (EI) is an important factor for success in most work environments (Cherniss, 2000) and emotional skills such as controlling and managing emotions can significantly promote employee's working progress and development (Dong & Howard, 2006).

1.1 Emotional skills in retail

Despite the changes that have taken place over time in the retail sector, understanding customers is and will always be a critical factor, as success in this field depends entirely on

customer decisions (McDonald, 1994). For employees who want to succeed in sales or customer service, demonstrating an emotionally intelligent behavior is as essential as physical strength in manual work, and knowledge in intellectual work (Guy & Lee, 2015; Othman et al., 2008).

As the employee bears the burden of creating a successful and honest relationship with the client(s) in the sales procedure (whether it concerns products or services), emotional skills can provide a new way of understanding and evaluating people, interpersonal relationships and customer service (Mishar & Bangun, 2014). A salesperson's attitude, mood and behavior can ensure competitive advantage and create loyal customers (Firth et al., 2004), as this person is identified with the organization in the customer's internal evaluation system (Sony & Mekoth, 2016). Under these circumstances, according to Newman and his colleagues (2009), the four axes on which the interaction between employee and customer should be based are (a) perception of the customer's emotional situation and consideration of alternative ways of behaving, (b) self-awareness of personal emotions, (c) choosing the appropriate emotional response in order to communicate with the customer and (d) expressing personal emotions in order to achieve the desired customer response. The employee's behavior can build trust or create repulsion to the customers. EI skills can be a source of strength and energy, both for employee's "survival" and effective job performance.

1.2 Daniel Goleman's EI model

EI is the ability to respond in a clever way to emotional and social environmental conditions (Keskin et al., 2016). According to Goleman et al. (2002), EI is a mean of improving individual's performance; emotional abilities are professional skills and at least some of them should be cultivated, depending on the workplace's requirements. In Goleman's revised model, EI is divided into four groups of competencies, resulting in a total of 20 emotional skills (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Goleman et al., 2002). Specifically, the model consists of (a) self-awareness, which includes the ability to perceive personal emotions, identifying personal values and self-confidence, (b) self-management, which includes self-control, starting new things and reliability, integrity, adaptability and conscientiousness, (c) social awareness, which includes empathy, organizational awareness, which has to do with the perception of relationships formed within an organization and service orientation; and finally (d) relationship management skills, which include influencing and motivating others, conflict management, effective communication, leadership and cooperation skills.

1.3 Developing EI

There is a constant growth in interest in developing EI through training programs, and many studies are trying to empower emotional skills (Schutte et al., 2013) in many fields (Kotsou et al., 2019). Overall, many of these studies have found positive results in various workplaces, suggesting that training can have a positive impact on individuals' EI (Bagshaw, 2000), just if they are motivated, guided and willing to make an effort (Schutte et al., 2013).

Specifically, a number of studies have investigated the impact of EI training programs in improving emotional skills, such as self-awareness (Zijlmans et al., 2015), empathy (Birks & Watt, 2007), interpersonal relationships (Karimi et al., 2020) and management of stressful situations in the workplace (Romosiou et al., 2019) in different professional environments. The

duration of these programs is sometimes very short (Kozlowski et al., 2018), sometimes short (Martyniak & Pelliteri, 2020) and sometimes long (Jaeger, 2003, Ruiz-Aranda et al, 2012); in most cases a combination of training and counselling (Campo et al., 2016) or training and practice in workshops (Kozlowski et al., 2018) is applied within their framework, as this learning practice is considered the most effective (Embregts, 2002). Despite the methodological differences between the programs, for example, the use of one (Kozlowski et al., 2018), two (Nelis et al., 2011) or no control group (Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014), it is important that the positive effects of the programs remain for a considerable time, after completion of the training (Kotsou et al., 2011; Sarabia et al., 2017).

More specifically, in the food retail sector, there is a lack of empirical research aimed at developing employees' EI skills. However, many studies implemented in business world have had a positive effect on the EI of employees (Kirk et al., 2011), managers (Clarke, 2010) and salespersons (Gignac et al., 2012), overall (Kirk et al., 2011) or on some of their skills (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2010, 2011).

1.4 The EI effect on job satisfaction

Various studies have investigated the relationship between EI and job satisfaction, finding a significant correlation between the two concepts (Qaiser et al., 2020). According to Rahman and Haleem (2018), EI has a positive effect on job satisfaction and all EI dimensions are predictors for job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2017). Because of this, job satisfaction is one of the variables whose changes are considered in studies of EI training programs (Turner & Lloyd-Walker, 2008).

Job satisfaction is defined as a set of emotions that individuals experience in relation to their work (Navas & Vijaykuman, 2018) and has to do with a concept linked to working experiences (Sempane et al., 2002). The factors related to job satisfaction can be internal or external. The internal factors relate to individual's characteristics such as pleasure of participation (Nguyen et al., 2003), variety of work activities and feedback (Warr, 2007). The external factors relate to a broader context in which the job is carried out and individual's satisfaction stems from working conditions, money, promotions and other incentives (Nguyen et al., 2003).

1.5 The present study

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of an EI skills training program designed specifically for food retail employees. In particular, it sought to examine whether the program can improve their EI skills and whether its effect has a long term duration (i.e., three months after the completion of the program). Moreover, the study aimed to investigate the effect of the EI training program on job satisfaction of the food retail employees.

Based on the above, the research hypotheses were: (a) the group that participated in the training program (experimental) is expected to show an improvement in EI skills after the program, (b) the improvement in EI skills of the experimental group will be retained after a three-month period, (c) no change of the EI skills is expected in the control group, (d) the experimental group will experience an increase in job satisfaction, and (e) no change is expected in control group's job satisfaction.

2.0 METHOD

2.1 Participants

The sample included a total of 118 employees; 92 of these formed the experimental group while 26 formed the control group. Of the experimental group, 74 were women (80,4%) and 18 were men (19,6%), with a mean age of $M=41,7$ years ($SD= 7,38$). Regarding their educational level, half of the employees (50%) were high school graduates (46 employees), 18 employees (19,6%) held a university/technical college degree, 17 employees (18,5%) were post-high school graduates, 8 employees (8,7%) were secondary school graduates, 2 employees (2,6%) held a master's or doctoral degree, while 1 employee (1%) was primary school graduate. In terms of marital status, the majority of them (80) were married/engaged or in a relationship (87%) and 12 employees (13%) were singles/divorced or widowed.

As for the control group, 16 individuals were women (61,5%) and 10 were men (38,5%), with a mean age of $M=39,3$ years ($SD= 7,83$). In terms of their educational level, 12 employees (46,2%) were high school graduates, 6 employees (23,1%) held a university/technical college degree, 4 employees (15,4%) were graduates of a post-high school, 3 employees (11,5%) were secondary school graduates and 1 employee (3,8%) held a master's or doctoral degree. In terms of marital status, 23 employees (88,5%) were married/engaged or in a relationship and 3 employees (11,5%) were singles/divorced or widowed.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 EI assessment tool. To measure the EI skills of employees in the three phases (before, after and three months after the program), an improvised tool was used, which included 13 scenarios inspired from the employees' daily work and personal lives. These scenarios examined the use of five EI skills, as described by Goleman et al. (2002): Emotional Self-awareness, Self-control, Empathy, Relationship building and Conflict management.

Specifically, out of the 13 scenarios, three related to Emotional Self-awareness; e.g., "Nikos has a date with his girlfriend at a café at 6 p.m. His girlfriend is 15 minutes late and Nikos calls her but she doesn't answer. Nikos waits patiently, but at 6.30 p.m. he begins to worry that something bad may have happened to her. Finally, after 5 minutes, she arrives at the meeting point. Nikos feels... (a) initially scared and then happy, (b) initially upset and then relieved, (c) initially angry and then calm, (d) initially indifferent and then surprised.

Three scenarios related to Self-control; e.g., "Helen works as a cashier in a supermarket. She is always polite and helpful to customers. Someday, a client who visits Helen's checkout complains about the waiting time and speaks harshly, insulting Helen. Since then, every time this person visits Helen's checkout he causes emotional pressing to her. How could Helen manage her feelings when she is called to serve this person? (a) Talk to him in the same way. That's the only way some people understand, (b) Avoid serving him, (c) Discreetly crumble a piece of paper with force to release her negative energy, (d) Focus on something positive in her day and downplay this particular moment.

There were four scenarios addressing Empathy; e.g., "Your colleague is very upset. He has just been informed that his employment contract has not been renewed and he has to stop working

for the company. You try to make him feel better by saying... (a) I understand... my brother has been unemployed for a long time and I know how difficult this situation is, (b) Come on, don't be sad!, (c) Just know that you are in my mind and if I hear of any job openings, I will let you know, (d) Try to stay calm, maybe it happens for the best!

Two scenarios concerned Relationship building; e.g. "A new employee has been hired at the store where you work, and you will be taking on a demanding position together. To ensure the best possible cooperation between you... (a) First of all, you make sure to clarify your duties so that your colleague knows his obligations from the beginning, (b) Initially, you try to get to know the new person in a friendly manner. Then you try to develop a positive personal and professional relationship, based on mutual interest, (c) Good cooperation is based on a good relationship, so you look for common ground between you and that will help you bond, (d) You maintain a professional relationship with your colleague and keep an appropriate distance. You strictly limit yourself to discussions about work issues without showing interest in anything personal.

Finally, one question concerned Conflict management: "Anestis works in a retail store. At some point, he notices that two of his colleagues are arguing during working hours. Anestis... (a) prefers not to get involved in the disagreement between his colleagues and continues his work as if he had not witnessed the incident, even when the argument has been clearly noticed by customers around, (b) A good idea is to try to calm his colleagues down, taking an open position in their disagreement. Expressing your opinion is right, even if this sometimes leads to relationship breakdown, (c) He should try to calm his colleagues and keep equal distance from both sides, (d) He should immediately notify the store manager. Resolving disagreements is out of his business".

The scenarios had three, four or five alternative answers describing the employee's response to every incident. Each alternative answer corresponds to a score from 0 indicating very low EI skills to 4 indicating a very good level of EI. The answering criteria were formed by researchers and experts on EI. Before being used in the current study, this tool was tested in a pilot study which ensured its adequacy to measure the EI skills.

2.2.2 Job satisfaction questionnaire. For the measurement of job satisfaction in the present study, the Employee Satisfaction Inventory - ESI (Koustelios & Bagiatis, 1997) was used. The inventory was created using Greek employees as a sample. It included 24 items, which measure six dimensions of job satisfaction. Specifically, 4 items refer to satisfaction with the "job itself" ("My job is worthwhile"), 4 items refer to satisfaction with "salary" ("I feel insecure with this salary"), 3 items refer to satisfaction with "promotions" ("There are many opportunities for promotion"), 4 items refer to satisfaction with the "supervisor" ("My supervisor understands my problems"), 5 items refer to satisfaction with the "working conditions" ("The working conditions are the best I have ever had") and 4 items refer to satisfaction with "organization as a whole" ("The organization takes care of its employees").

Participants had to answer whether they agreed with each statement, based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree and 5 = I strongly agree). The average score of each of the six dimensions was calculated, as well as the total mean score of all items.

2.3 The program

The program designed is titled “EMO-5” and aimed to cultivate/improve five emotional skills (Emotional Self-awareness, Self-control, Empathy, Relationship building, and Conflict management) in food retail employees. The program combined theoretical training and experiential practice and implemented in 3 training sessions with a duration of 3 hours and 40 minutes each. The total duration of the program was 11 hours and took place within a week. To attend the training program, participants of the experimental group were divided into groups of 8 people each, due to the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 legislation that had to be implemented at that time.

The program included presentations of the theoretical background of EI, practical training on the current EI skills, group discussions, role-playing and paper-and-pencil exercises. All of the above activities were designed to encourage trainees to reflect on their emotions: their causes and consequences, their impact on professional practice, and the ways in which they can be effectively understood and managed on the context of their workplace.

2.4 Process

The training program was implemented under the conditions of the global health crisis caused by Covid-19 virus, inSpecifically, food retail employees were among the groups that continued working under these conditions, when the majority of employees were forced to stop working and stay at home.

Participants were allocated into experimental and control group was based on their voluntary response. Employees were informed by their employer about the purpose and procedure of the study. Those who were interested in participating, and committed to attend all the sessions were placed in the experimental group. The others formed the control group who only took the tests at the same times as the experimental group.

The questionnaires were individually and anonymously completed, three times for experimental and control group. In the experimental group, the questionnaire was completed (1) before the beginning of the program, (2) after finishing and (3) three months later. In the control group, where no intervention took place, the same questionnaires were completed at the same time intervals.

2.5 Data analysis

For the all the data, means and standard deviations were calculated. In order to investigate the effect of the program on the EI skills and job satisfaction of the experimental and control group, a series of paired samples t-test was applied to the data. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 EI skills improvement

The findings from the three measurements of the EI skills in the experimental group are shown in Table 1. It is noted, that there was an improvement in the participants’ emotional skills at

the end of the program (post). Furthermore, although there is a general decline in their scores 3 months later, they remained higher than their scores before the program (pre).

To test whether there are significant changes in the emotional skills scores before (pre) and after (post) the program in the experimental group, a series of paired sample t-test was used. Results presented in Table 2 show that there are statistically significant differences between pre and post training in Empathy ($t(91) = -9,70$, $p = <0,05$), Self-awareness ($t(91) = -3,81$, $p = <0,05$) and Relationship building ($t(91) = -3,49$, $p = <0,05$). Furthermore, a statistically significant improvement in Empathy was retained three months later ($t(91) = -4,59$, $p = <0,05$). According to these findings, the effect of the program was found to be statistically significant in three out of the five emotional skills and, in one of them, it remained significant three months after the completion of the program.

Regarding the control group, their EI skills scores, are presented in the last columns of Table 1. As shown, there are marginal positive and negative changes or no change in the scores of the control group during the second measurement, whereas after three months they regress to the initial levels.

As shown in Table 2, none of these changes was statistically significant.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the EI skills, Pre and Post training

Emotional skills	Experimental group (N=92)			Control group (N=26)		
	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	3 months later M (SD)	1st M (SD)	2 nd M (SD)	3rd M (SD)
Empathy	12,1 (2,69)	14,8 (1,77)	13,6 (1,94)	13,1 (2,68)	13,1 (2,08)	13,1 (2,46)
Self-awareness	7,4 (1,69)	8 (1,36)	7,7 (1,36)	7,8 (1,45)	7,6 (1,44)	7,8 (1,6)
Self-control	7,2 (1,04)	7,5 (0,89)	7,3 (1,14)	7,2 (0,93)	7,3 (1,05)	7,3 (1)
Relationship building	6,6 (1,27)	7,1 (0,88)	6,9 (1,11)	6,9 (1,09)	7,1 (0,97)	6,9 (1,14)
Conflict management	2,5 (0,76)	2,7 (0,6)	2,4 (0,74)	2,5 (0,76)	2,6 (0,63)	2,4 (0,84)
Emotional skills (tot)	35,9 (3,89)	40,1 (2,97)	38,1 (3,14)	37,5 (4,44)	37,8 (3,44)	37,5 (4,19)

Table 2: Paired samples t-test between EI measurements, in experimental and control group

	Experimental group (N=92)		Control group (N=26)	
	Pre-Post t (df=91)	Pre-3 months later t (df=91)	1st – 2nd t (df=25)	1st – 3rd t (df=25)
Emotional skills				
Empathy	-9,70	-4,59	0,00	-0,08
Self-awareness	-3,81	-1,89	0,7	-0,14
Self-control	-1,84	-0,98	-1,07	-0,37
Relationship building	-3,49	-1,96	-1,07	0,13
Conflict management	-1,94	-0,32	-0,52	0,89
Emotional skills (tot)	-11,05	-4,95	-0,46	0,11

3.2 Checking for changes in job satisfaction

A total of 87 employees in the experimental group completed the job satisfaction questionnaire, while 5 employees left it incomplete. The job satisfaction scores of the experimental group, pre and post training, are summarized in Table 3. As shown, the pre and post training scores remain stable. Paired sample t-tests presented in Table 4 showed no significant differences, indicating that participants' job satisfaction, both overall and in terms of the specific job dimensions, was not affected by the emotional skills training program. Similarly, when testing the scores between the first and the third measurement, no statistically significant differences were found either.

Also, the job satisfaction scores of the control group are summarized in Table 3. As shown, the scores of the 1st and the 2nd measurement are similar. Paired sample t-tests presented in Table 4 showed no significant differences in employees' job satisfaction, both overall and in terms of the specific job dimensions. Similarly, when testing the scores between the 1st and the 3rd measurement, no statistically significant differences were found.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations of Job Satisfaction and dimensions, Pre and Post training

	Experimental group (N=87)			Control group (N=26)		
	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	3 months later M (SD)	1st M (SD)	2 nd M (SD)	3rd M (SD)
Job satisfaction subscales						

Job itself	4 (0,49)	4 (0,45)	4 (0,46)	4 (0,73)	4,1 (0,53)	4,1 (0,49)
Supervisor	3,8 (0,56)	3,8 (0,6)	4 (0,67)	4 (0,52)	4 (0,56)	4 (0,42)
Working conditions	3,8 (0,54)	3,7 (0,55)	3,7 (0,61)	3,9 (0,68)	3,8 (0,7)	3,8 (0,53)
Organization	3,5 (0,67)	3,5 (0,65)	3,5 (0,68)	3,5 (0,65)	3,5 (0,62)	3,5 (0,61)
Promotions	3,4 (0,71)	3,5 (0,62)	3,3 (0,77)	3,3 (0,72)	3,3 (0,66)	3,5 (0,54)
Salary	2,7 (0,85)	2,8 (0,88)	2,8 (0,87)	2,9 (0,96)	2,8 (1,04)	3 (0,96)
Job satisfaction (tot)	3,5 (0,41)	3,5 (0,41)	3,6 (0,44)	3,6 (0,47)	3,6 (0,47)	3,7 (0,38)

Table 4: Paired samples t-test between Job satisfaction measurements, in experimental and control group

Job satisfaction subscales	Experimental group (N=87)		Control group (N=26)	
	Pre-Post t (df=86)	Pre-3 months later t (df=86)	1st-2nd t (df=25)	1st-3rd t (df=25)
Job itself	0,75	-0,29	-0,96	-0,7
Supervisor	-0,45	-2,41	-0,24	0,35
Working conditions	1,78	0,66	0,73	0,95
Organization	0,04	-0,97	0,14	-0,05
Promotions	-1,48	1,02	0,84	-1,38
Salary	-0,26	-0,82	1,27	-0,14
Job satisfaction (tot)	-0,13	-1,06	0,34	-0,1

4.0 DISCUSSION

“EMO-5” was designed to offer food retail employees the opportunity to apply, practice and improve emotional Self-awareness, Self-control, Empathy, Relationship building and Conflict management, relevant to their everyday work life. It was developed based on Goleman’s EI model, as in the case with other similar programs (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2010, 2011). In terms of content, the program included theoretical courses and practical exercises, in line with training programs that combine theoretical training and experiential workshops (Kozlowski et al., 2018). The duration of the program (11 hours) places “EMO-5” among the short-term interventions in the literature (Martyniak & Pelliteri, 2020). The methodological design of the current study involved an experimental and a control group (Kirk et al., 2011).

According to the findings of the present study, “EMO-5” had a positive effect on the trainees’ Self-awareness, Empathy and Relationship building while there was no significant change in the control group. Three months later, there was still a positive effect on trainees’ Empathy. Based on these findings, the research provides further evidence that EI training programs can influence the level of emotional skills in retail sector, confirming the successful efforts of other interventions to improve the skills practiced within their framework (Birks & Watt, 2007; Karimi et al., 2020; Romosiou et al., 2019). It is important that training’s positive effect remained three months later, consistent with findings from previous studies (Kotsou et al., 2011; Sarabia et al., 2017).

In contrast, Self-control and Conflict management were unaffected by the training program. Unlike Self-awareness or Empathy, which are often more cognitive and reflective, Self-control and Conflict management are highly behavioral and context-dependent skills. They require not only understanding but also habit change under pressure which typically develops over longer periods and through repeated real-life practice. An 11-hour intervention may simply not be sufficient for such deep behavioral shifts. Self-control, in particular, is activated emotionally charged situations, where automatic responses dominate. Without ongoing coaching, feedback, or real-time reinforcement, trainees may struggle to transfer what they learned into actual workplace behavior. Similarly, Conflict management often requires interactive, dynamic practice (e.g., role plays with escalating scenarios), which may need more time or intensity than was available in the program.

Regarding job satisfaction, no impact was observed. According to the literature (Qaiser et al., 2020), higher levels of EI typically lead to increased job satisfaction; however, despite the improvement in certain emotional skills after the program, participants’ job satisfaction remained unchanged. This could be explained by the fact that EI did not increase overall, nor significantly enough. Furthermore, the study shows that job satisfaction is linked to external organizational factors (such as working conditions, salary, relationships with colleagues or supervisors) which remained unchanged, failing to bring about any significant changes in trainees’ job satisfaction. Consequently, after an EI training program, participants may improve their EI skills, but they may not feel more satisfied about their job.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The results of the present study reinforce the belief that emotional skills can be improved through training. In addition, this research presents a new training program for improving EI skills in retail sector. These findings have practical implications and may attract the interest of food retail employees to improve customer service quality through participation in training

programs. At the same time, they can serve as an incentive for customer service companies and service providers to include consistent and frequent training in their business plans in order to develop their human resources in the long term. By strengthening their EI skills, employees will be empowered to deal with difficulties and problems in the workplace and become more efficient, thus ensuring clear benefits for the organization. Finally, it is also important that this study could provide a basis for implementing similar interventions in other work environments and design EI programs that address specific emotional needs of the employees.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

One of the main limitations of this study has to do with the geographical location where it was conducted. Given that the study was carried out in semi-urban areas of Greece, the conclusions are influenced by particular social and economic contexts, which may constrain their generalizability. Another limitation concerns the research instruments. Specifically, EI skills were assessed using an improvised tool, which may limit the validity of the findings. Finally, the work-related constraints imposed by the Covid legislation at the same time the study was carried out could have affected the levels of job satisfaction of the employees.

Regarding suggestions for the future, the present study can be a stepping stone for designing and implementing EI training programs and testing their efficiency in enhancing EI in food retail employees. Similar programs in the future may include training of various EI skills and for longer duration as well as other training techniques (such as working in groups or simulation training) to facilitate learning.

In conclusion, despite the valuable findings of this study, further empirical research is needed to better understand the factors that facilitate EI skills training across different workplace contexts. It is important to clarify that such training cannot instantly transform employee behavior; rather, it marks the beginning of a process that requires sustained personal effort, practice, and self-care. At the same time, organizational support through ongoing training and retraining is essential. Together, these elements may foster resilience and contribute to long-term organizational competitiveness.

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