

How to Measure Government Outcomes

Government departments and agencies can meaningfully measure intangible outcomes, with this practical roadmap.

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The age of activity measures is over.

Governments need outcome measures as evidence to prove success. Activity measures can't do that.

The increasing demand for greater transparency of, and accountability for, the *impact* from how public funds are spent requires that governments measure their outcomes, not just their activities.

When Malcolm Turnbull was Prime Minister of Australia, he was interviewed by Leigh Sales on 7.30 following his final re-election. She attempted to nail down some of the results that the government would achieve over the upcoming term. When Sales asked how the public should judge the government's performance, Turnbull replied:

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Well the public should judge us against the delivery of the commitments that we have made ... [The government's performance] will be measured against many different criteria, but the fundamental measurement, of course, is 'are the projects underway', 'are they being delivered', 'are they being delivered on-budget'.

Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister of Australia
(2015–2018)

Unfortunately, this is still a common mindset of government leaders for how they define success: that services and programs will be implemented.

But the results we want from government aren't that they can prove they've spent taxpayers' money on services and programs. It's that they can prove how our way of life is improved as an outcome of those services and programs.

Governments around the world are shifting to outcome measures.

Historically, the guidelines provided to government for public reporting focused predominantly on achievement of activities and expenditure of taxes. The FMA and CAC Acts and former resource management act are examples. But we're now seeing, worldwide, that the public expect evidence of outcomes.

In Australia we have the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act, to implement an enhanced Commonwealth government performance framework. Similar legislation also exists around the world, such as the Evidence Act in the United States, and the Whole-of-government Framework in Canada.

Despite the fact that this shift toward outcomes frameworks has been in the making for several years now, outcome measures are still not commonplace in government department and agency strategic plans and annual reports. In a study of nearly 50 public sector organisations in Australia, 58% have measures of their strategic goals, but only 6% have true outcome measures.

Why don't governments measure outcomes successfully?

Measuring outcomes persists as one of the management processes all organisations struggle with most.

In government, it's an even greater struggle to measure outcomes, for several reasons:

1. Government outcomes tend to be **intangible**, and therefore hard to meaningfully describe in concrete or quantifiable terms.
2. Government outcomes often change slowly over the **long-term**, and so measurable change within traditional planning cycles may not be realistic.
3. Government outcomes can be systemically **complex**, affected by the interactions of several or many organisations, and so direct measures of them are not within the control of a single department or agency.
4. Government agency focus on **execution** of the mission can overshadow the importance of managing the agency's own performance.

The challenges:

1. Government outcomes are often intangible.
2. Government outcomes change slowly over the long-term.
3. Government outcomes can be systemically complex.
4. Government agencies are execution-driven.
5. Government agencies lack in-house measurement capability.

5. Government agencies traditionally have not prioritised strategic performance management **capability** in-house, so there are few good examples as role models.

These reasons should not remain excuses for not measuring outcomes. Rather, they should trigger the need for different – and better – approaches for designing the right measures, measures that help government departments and agencies improve their outcomes, not just improve the on-time and on-budget performance of tax-funded programs.

The first step is to understand the challenges in more depth, and how they make outcome measurement so hard for government.

Challenge 1: Government outcomes are often intangible.

Inherently, social outcomes are not as tangible as outcomes of non-government organisations.

Most government agencies exist to influence social stability, justice or welfare; not to produce widgets. This, however, is not the reason that outcomes are hard to measure.

If an outcome matters, we should be able to describe it clearly enough to observe, in some way, if it's happening or not.

But most government agencies *do not* describe their outcomes clearly enough to observe if they're happening or not. Like this example:

“Work in collaboration with the sector and partner agencies to deepen integration of service responses and improve housing outcomes for people with complex needs through integrated place-based services.”

Perhaps this goal means something like this:

People who are homeless know where to go, and can easily get there, to quickly find housing that suits their needs and that they can afford.



The common practice that limits our ability to meaningfully measure intangible outcomes is using vague ‘weasel words’ to articulate those outcomes.

If we accepted the premise that some outcomes are too broad and intangible to measure directly, then we accept the conclusion that there will be no evidence of such outcomes if and when they happen. That means no evidence of how resilient, collaborative, consistent or proportionate (see the example objective, left).

If there is no evidence of an outcome when it happens, no-one will notice if it's happening or not. So why bother with all the effort to try and create that outcome in the first place?

To succeed at finding meaningful measures of intangible outcomes, we cannot start with questions like “How could we measure this?” Rather, we make it easier and more meaningful if we start with questions like “How would we recognise if this was happening or not?”

Challenge 2: Government outcomes are often long-term.

Many social outcomes take years to change and cannot be meaningfully measured weekly or monthly.

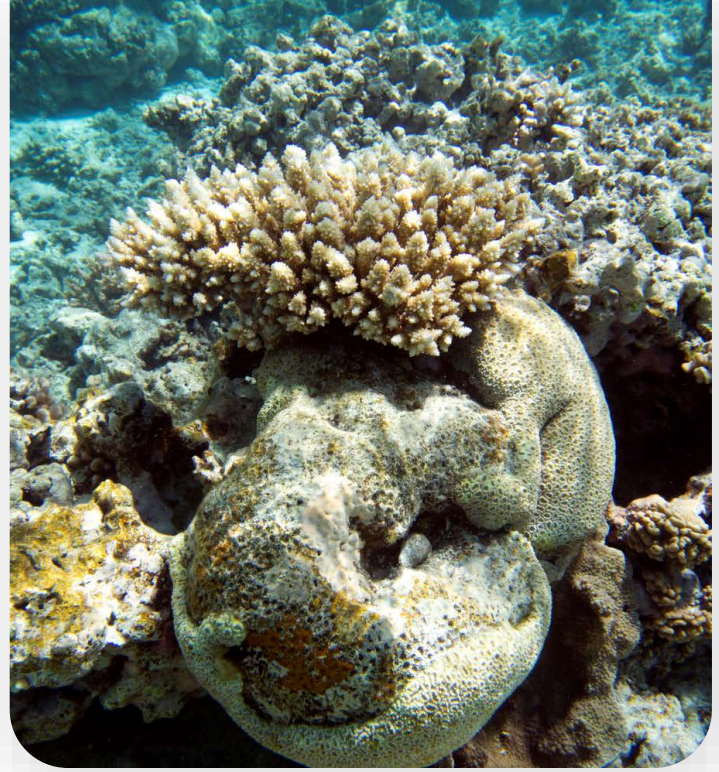
If it's true that government agencies exist to influence social stability, justice and welfare, then it can't be ignored that such things change over longer timeframes. Some outcomes can take many years to change.

Most government outcomes can't be measured as frequently as sales quotas, or revenue growth, or tonnes of coal exported. Like this outcome:

“Contribute to the improvement of the extent, condition and connectivity of Australia’s unique biodiversity and natural resources, consistent with national and international obligations, through protection of habitats and mitigation of threats to threatened species and ecological communities.”

The common practice that limits our ability to meaningfully measure long-term outcomes is limiting our measures to our planning horizons.

And this usually means that we measure only the strategic initiatives within those planning horizons.



The outcome in the above example isn't measured directly by its agency; only its Delivery Strategies have measures (and notice how most are activity measures or milestones):

- “Number of projects/contracts.”
- “Project designs and contracts reflect the objectives of the Reef 2050 Plan and Reef Trust.”
- “Project outcomes are fed into modelling and monitoring programs to inform reporting on Reef health.”

We can't reach our outcomes by monitoring activity alone. If we do, we'll have no feedback to learn which types of activity have the best impact on reaching the outcome.

To succeed at finding meaningful measures of long-term outcomes, we can measure both the outcome itself and the *results* (i.e. the success or impact) of our activities. We can develop useful leading measures to monitor these activity results more regularly, and thereby predict changes in our outcome measures.

Challenge 3: Government outcomes are systemically complex.

Government departments and agencies can struggle to isolate their contribution to social outcomes.

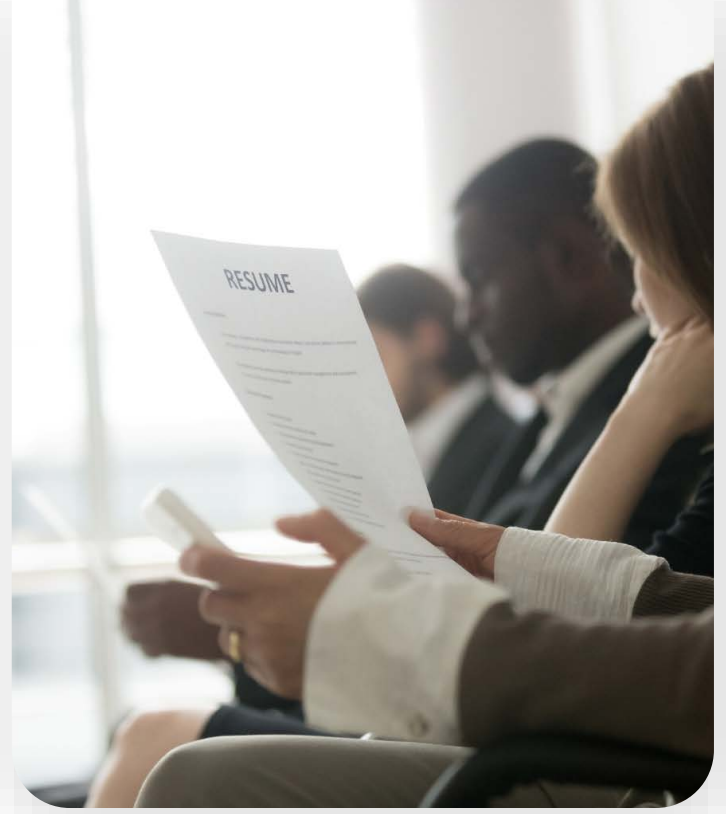
The role of government is more to influence than to directly control social outcomes. Government organisations often rely on collaboration with other public, private and nonprofit organisations to achieve outcomes.

And so, government departments and agencies can struggle to isolate their contribution toward outcomes they can only partially influence, or 'facilitate'. For example:

“Facilitate jobs growth through policies and programs that promote fair, productive and safe workplaces, and facilitate the growth of small business.”

The common practice that limits our ability to measure systemically complex outcomes is defining accountability as 'hitting targets'.

And in the case of the above goal, the only targets that agencies feel in control of hitting are targets for operational activity. And that is



the case with the agency that owns the above outcome. They measure this as evidence of it:

- *“Percentage of claims processed within 16 weeks of receipt of an effective claim.”*

Operational activity measures like this might be within the agency's control, but they say nothing about how well that important outcome is being achieved.

Isolation of the contribution they control is far less important than monitoring their influence. The outcome is that the agency's policies and programs lead to noticeable improvements in fairness, productivity and safety of workplaces. What they influence, which drives this outcome, includes how easily the policies and programs are understood, adopted, and actioned.

To succeed at finding meaningful measures of systemically complex outcomes, we need to build and test a causal map of how we influence the outcomes, and measure both the outcomes and the drivers we can more directly control.

Challenge 4: Government agencies are execution- driven.

Government agencies have stronger focus on executing their mission than on the performance of achieving it.

Humans generally find it easier to think about action than results. Actions are tangible, controllable, and immediate. Results are less so, since they're the product after the actions.

In government, many results are – as we've seen – intangible, not directly controllable, and not at all immediate. A consequence is that their measures are often just more actions, as is the case with this outcome and its measures:

“We protect the safety, wellbeing, and interest of aged care consumers through our regulatory activities and decisions.”

- *“Monitor aged care provider quality and safety performance”*
- *“Undertake home services quality audits and assessment contacts”*

The common practice that limits how much focus is put on agency outcomes, compared to execution, is a confusion between performance management and project management.



Project management is essentially about getting the right activities done on time and on budget. *Performance management* is making sure what the right activities are at the start, and checking if those activities have the desired effect on outcomes, during and at the end. We need both, but too often project management is used as a proxy for performance management.

For the first action listed above, its desired impacts and true measures might be as follows:

- **Activity:** *“Monitor aged care provider quality and safety performance”*
- **Activity results** *Monitoring resources match the risk of harm. Potential harm to aged care consumers is detected before it happens.*
- **Activity result measures** *Monitoring resource spend divided by facility risk score. Number Harm Incidents that should have been prevented through monitoring.*

To succeed at meaningfully measuring outcomes without losing sight of execution, we first set outcomes that provide the context for execution, then use a causal relationship map to show how agency activity-level results lead to the achievement of agency outcomes.

Challenge 5: Government agencies lack measurement capability.

Government agencies traditionally have not prioritised internal strategic performance management capability.

It is still not widely enough appreciated that measurement needs a methodology or proper approach. Current common practices leave out essential steps and proven techniques to make outcome measurement work well. **Management, leadership and strategy training largely fails to teach good measurement practice.**

It's therefore understandable that so many government departments and agencies have poor measures. More useful measures of outcomes, and their drivers, will only come about when the measurement approach, skills and implementation are allowed to improve.

The common practice that limits our ability to develop internal strategic measurement capability is the lure of quick fixes to save time.



If a framework looks like it will save time, it can be too tempting to ignore. But simplistic frameworks like OKRs, when used on their own, typically lead to more trivial activity measures:

“Objective: Foster partnerships with relevant stakeholders to amplify advocacy efforts.

Key Results:

Identify and engage with 5 strategic partners...

Develop joint advocacy campaigns or initiatives with 3 partner organizations...

Establish effective communication channels with 5 key stakeholders...”

Frameworks like OKRs can work, but they need the support of a complete performance measurement methodology to underpin them.

To succeed at finding the outcome measures that are right for our department or agency, we need to invest in internal measurement and performance management capability and treat it like the vital management process that it is.

Government outcomes can't be meaningfully measured in the usual ways.

A fundamental change in the approach to measurement is essential before any outcome can be meaningfully measured.

Essentially, the current practices for choosing how to measure government outcomes aren't producing meaningful outcome measures.

Brainstorming, benchmarking and hiring consultancies to find outcome measures rarely works and often wastes time. Some shifts are needed in our approach to measurement, so we can find meaningful outcome measures.

These shifts are as much a series of mindset shifts as they are techniques for replacing the current practices that aren't working. Five shifts are needed to create meaningful outcome measures in government (and any other organisation, in fact):

1. Treat measurement as a vital management process and invest in internal measurement [capability](#).

Meaningful outcome measures are:

- Direct evidence of the outcomes, rather than evidence only of activity to reach the outcomes
- Feasible to quantify and monitor at appropriate frequencies over time, rather than only after-the-fact
- Owned by the teams that will work to achieve the outcomes, rather than imposed upon them
- A focal point to choose lead measures that monitor activity results, rather than completion
- Inspiration that drives learning and performance-improving behaviour, rather than judgment

2. Focus [accountability](#) on continually improving, not hitting targets.
3. Write outcomes with [clear words](#), not weasel words.
4. Use measures that [quantify evidence](#), not milestones and actions.
5. Align teams to outcomes via [cause-effect](#), not action plans.

These shifts can work together to provide a new practice – a practical roadmap, in fact – for the selection of meaningful outcome measures.

The roadmap to meaningfully measure government outcomes.

The challenges of measuring government outcomes cannot be solved with current practices. We need a new outcome measurement roadmap.

This roadmap is more deliberate than it is difficult. It does have more steps than simplistic KPI frameworks, but that's why it works:

1. Invest in the first wave of internal measurement capability.
2. Start with a fresh understanding of why we need to measure.
3. Measure the outcomes and strategic goals first.
4. Align the organisation by building a cause-effect map.
5. Encourage and hold the space for ownership and buy-in.
6. Use measures to drive continuous improvement toward targets.
7. Reflect and learn, then go back to Step 1.



STEP 1: Invest in the first wave of internal measurement capability.

Performance management skills are essential for every organisation. But because they are not part of typical management and workplace training, we can't assume people have them.

Everyone needs a deep understanding and ownership of what really matters about the performance of the agency, and specific measurement skills will depend on their role:

- **Executives** need skills to make strategy measurable, and to design, interpret and use them to drive strategy implementation.
- **Managers** need those same skills, but also an appreciation of what it takes to bring performance measures to life.
- **Strategy and Performance Measurement Professionals** need skills in *every* step of the performance measurement process.
- **Everyone else** needs at least an awareness of why measurement matters and the principles of doing it well.

Government leaders can make sure that proper measurement training gets allocated a budget and given priority time.

HOW: The PuMP suite of programs offer the right training to the right people, based on their role in measurement.



STEP 2: Start with a fresh understanding of why we need to measure.

There are too many examples of performance measures that drive dysfunctional behaviour. So often, measurement's purpose needs to be reframed before any meaningful improvement can happen in the measurement of outcomes.

Proper performance measurement produces information with more objectivity, comprehensiveness, accuracy and speed than does human perception. That's the reason why it's so important for government outcomes.

The most constructive reason to measure outcomes is to learn how to continually improve the agency's performance. It's not constructive to compare and judge. This also means we need to redefine accountability to focus on improving performance to reach for targets, not on success or failure of hitting targets.

Government leaders can encourage dialogue about measurement's real purpose, to give everyone a fresh understanding of why we need to measure.

HOW: Use the PuMP Diagnostic to help people explore what good measurement practice involves.



STEP 3: Measure the outcomes and strategic goals first.

Measurement is the most practical way to create a performance culture that is capable of taking the journey to become a high-performance organisation. But it won't work quickly enough, or nearly as well, if it doesn't start with the senior leadership team.

However, the problem that most managers and employees don't really understand strategy the way it's typically written (weasel words) is a very real problem – one they will be too uncomfortable to reveal.

That makes it's vitally important for government leaders to be the first to make sure outcomes and strategic goals are clearly articulated and have measures that are direct evidence of those outcomes and goals.

Government leaders can seamlessly integrate these two steps – making outcomes measurable and designing meaningful measures for each outcome – into *any* strategic planning process.

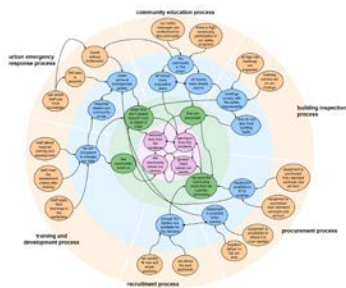
HOW: Test the measurability of outcomes and clarify before you design evidence-based measures of each outcome.



STEP 4: Align the organisation by building a cause-effect map.

A cause-effect map is a way of building alignment of every part of an organisation to that organisation's strategy. This aligning process helps each part of an agency to set goals and measures directly related to how they each contribute to the agency's outcomes.

There are a few popular methods used in government to build strategic alignment from outcome measures we influence through to the driver measures we control. They include the Logic Model and the following Results Map:



[Click to open a larger version in your browser or locate the link in the References.]

When government leaders build the centre of their agency's Results Map, it gives the focus for each team to align their goals and measures.

HOW: Use a Results Map to communicate and align each part of the agency to its strategic outcomes.

STEP 5: Encourage and hold the space for ownership and buy-in.

The only way that people can truly take ownership for anything is by taking part in creating it. This is especially true of getting employees to own goals and performance measures.

Strategy design and execution processes need to provide space for each part of the agency to develop their own goals and measures. We cannot let others do it for them. They need the tools and skills to create their own goals and measures, aligned to the agency's outcomes.

A combination of two tactics make this quite easy to organically facilitate:

- Use Measures Teams in each part of the agency to learn and lead local measurement
- Use Measure Galleries for each Measures Team to share with and gather input from everyone else, to broaden the buy-in

Government leaders can use both Measures Teams and Measure Galleries as the key tools to execute strategy around agency outcomes.

HOW: Use Measures Teams and Measure Galleries as key strategy execution tools that align every team's measures to .

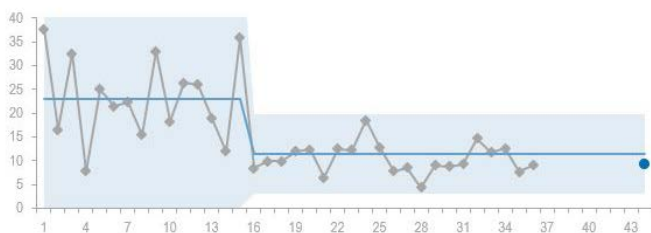


Step 6: Use measures to drive continuous improvement toward targets.

By following the previous steps, we will have measures for both the outcomes and their drivers, and all of them need to be monitored.

The driver measures are more frequently monitored for change, and what we will use to continually learn and improve our actions to achieve the outcomes. This means we need a quick and accurate way to interpret any real change in each measure.

The XmR chart is the best tool to see – and agree on – the performance gaps we must prioritise for action.



Government leaders can more quickly and accurately identify signals of change in outcome and driver measures with XmR charts.

HOW: Use XmR charts to visualise KPIs and targets, on performance dashboards designed to focus on priorities for action.



STEP 7: Reflect and learn, then go back to Step 1.

It takes several years for an organisation to master the measurement, monitoring and improvement of its outcomes and drivers.

This means it will take several iterations through the first six steps. Each iteration, however, will make worthwhile improvements to how outcomes are measured and improved. And that means the return on taxpayer investment continually improves.

One way to draw a line in the sand, and to monitor maturity of an agency’s performance measurement capability, is to use the Performance Measurement Maturity Score. It’s based on assessment questions that help remind and raise awareness of the essential parts of a good approach to measuring outcomes and their drivers. This keeps the approach improving, so outcomes keep improving too.

Government leaders can reinforce the measurement approach as a formal part of organisational management.

HOW: Master outcome measurement by allowing time to pilot test, practice and then fully roll out the measurement approach.

Start with PuMP.

Because PuMP is a true measurement methodology, it's the perfect foundation to measure outcomes – and any other results that matter – in government.

PuMP is a true performance measurement methodology, created and developed in Australia, in a government context. PuMP is now used world-wide in over 90 countries, in every sector, including administration, aerospace, finance, defence, health, local government, and natural resources, and transport.

Each step of PuMP directly solves the most common struggles leaders, world-wide, face in measuring what matters. To practically and engagingly develop meaningful government outcome measures requires all these steps.

For government leaders, developing and using meaningful outcome measures is the only way that their departments and agencies can pursue high performance and demonstrate the return that businesses and citizens get for their taxes.

While it might take several years to master, creating meaningful outcome measures can become immediately easier by making sure the measurement approach directly deals with the unique challenges of government outcomes, in a practical and engaging way.

The PuMP Blueprint



About the author

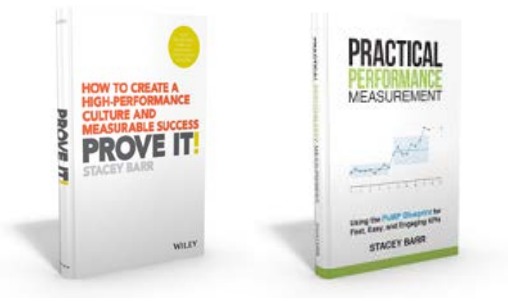
Stacey Barr

Stacey Barr is a globally recognised specialist in organisational performance measurement.

She discovered that the struggles with measuring business performance are, surprisingly, universal. The biggest include hard-to-measure goals, trivial or meaningless measures, and no buy-in from people to measure and improve what matters. The root cause is a set of bad habits that have become common practice.

Stacey created PuMP[®], a deliberate performance measurement methodology to replace the bad habits with techniques that make measuring performance faster, easier, engaging, and meaningful.

Stacey is author of [Practical Performance Measurement](#) and [Prove It!](#), publisher of the [Measure Up](#) blog, and her content appears on [Harvard Business Review's website](#) and in their acclaimed ManageMentor Program.



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PUMP

The deliberate, step-by-step performance measurement process, that makes measuring what matters faster, easier, more meaningful and engaging.

STEP 1

Understanding Measurement's Purpose

Fixing the focus firmly on continuous improvement as the purpose for measurement.

STEP 2

Mapping Measurable Results

Translating our strategy into clear, focused, and measurable performance results.

STEP 3

Designing Meaningful Measures

Choosing the most feasible and relevant measures that evidence our performance results.

STEP 4

Building Buy-In to Measures

Getting ownership from our stakeholders, quickly, easily and engagingly.

STEP 5

Implementing Measures

Documenting in detail the data, analysis and reporting requirements for each of our measures.

STEP 6

Interpreting Signals from Measures

Focusing ourselves on gaps between as-is and to-be performance.

STEP 7

Reporting Performance Measures

Creating useful and usable performance reports that inspire us to action.

STEP 8

Reaching Performance Targets

Improving business processes to move as-is performance toward to-be.

Links to references and resources

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