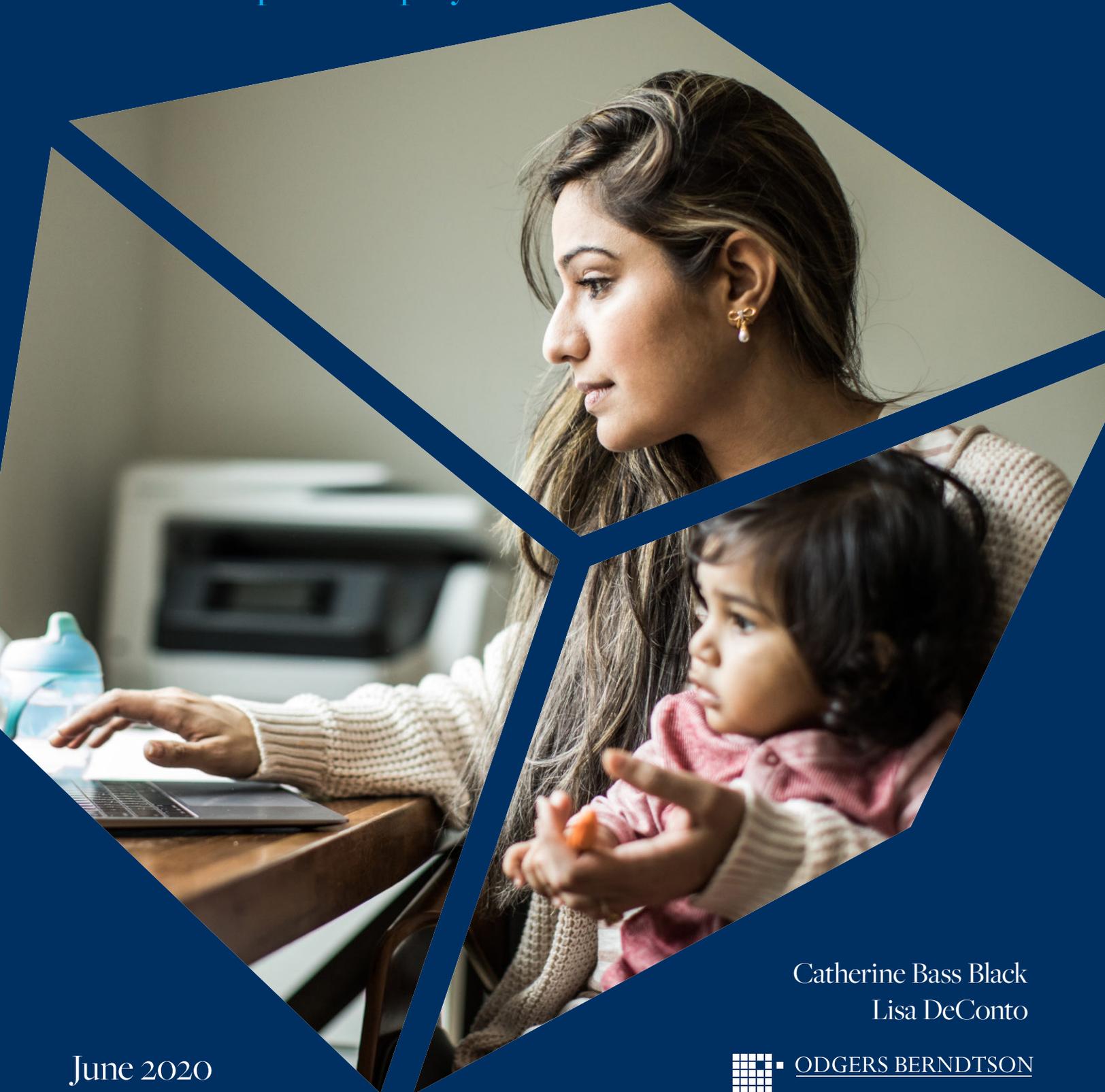


# How To Retain Executive-Track Mothers During And After COVID-19

## A Road Map for Employers



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After two months quarantining with their families, Odgers Berndtson consultants Catherine Bass Black and Lisa DeConto decided to examine the effects COVID-19 is having on executive-track mothers. Their conclusion: if employers do not act quickly, they may lose their next generation of female executives.

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### THE “SHE-SESSION”

In January of 2020, women composed more than 50% of the American workforce. Six months and fifteen million jobs later, this may not be the case.

It's been widely recognized that women in the United States are being disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Though women are more likely than men to be essential workers (where there have been fewer layoffs), they are also more likely to work in the hard-hit leisure, hospitality, retail, and healthcare sectors, which means that some 60% of the more than 25 million jobs lost over the last three and half months belonged to women. Indeed, the number of women who lost their jobs in April exceeds the total number of jobs created for women in the years between the Great Recession and the current pandemic. Because women do the majority of unpaid home labor in their households, they have been further burdened by the closure of schools, day care centers, camps and summer programs.

As recruiters, we spend a lot of time talking with executives and executive-track individuals. Over the last three months, a recurring theme in our conversations was that the pandemic's effects on women won't be limited to layoffs. In fact, the pandemic has exacerbated many of the pressures that traditionally cause even high-earning women to “opt out” of their careers. It's become clear to us that if, as experts suggest, the pandemic continues to force intermittent lockdowns during the next 18-24 months it is likely to take to develop and distribute a vaccine, companies are at risk of losing significant numbers of the next generation of women executives—namely, today's mothers.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In exploring this issue and preparing for this article, we talked to a number of executives, both women and men. Some were optimistic about the long-term benefits that the work-from-home culture will have for executive-track women, arguing that the widespread adoption of remote work has normalized flexible work practices and will make it easier for some women to manage their roles as parents and employees in the future.



Others were far more pessimistic, citing the fact that many traditional barriers to employment for women—most notably childcare—have become daily challenges for parents thanks to COVID-19 and could increase the opt-out rate for high-potential women, adding that women who suspend their careers to raise children often find it difficult to restart them.

However, nearly all the executives we talked to agree that the response to COVID-19 has demonstrated that employers are capable of doing a far better job of accommodating the schedules of parents (regardless of gender or career phase) than they have been doing to date. These executives also had concrete recommendations about what companies can do now to help parents through this difficult time, and how they can change their policies to better engage and retain mothers in the long run. Most notably, they agreed that those employers who fail to invest in women stand to lose high-potential women employees and see long-term declines in their attractiveness to future employees.

## MANY MOTHERS QUIT

Even before the pandemic, research shows that 43% of American mothers quit their jobs when they have children. These “opt outs” often struggle to re-enter the workforce, a difficulty that compounds the longer they stay out. Many also tend to experience limited career growth relative to women who either do not have children or do not leave their jobs to raise kids, which in turn can translate into permanent limitations to their lifelong earnings potential. As a result, though 70% of women do eventually return to some form of paid work after having children, many don’t return to the careers they originally left, and only 40% come back full time. To translate: that means that one in four American mothers never returns to full time employment after having children.

## WHY?

There are many contributing factors, but generally speaking the answer seems to have two parts.

- Parenthood is a job—a hard one. Sure, it’s unpaid and takes place outside a recognized workplace, but it’s nonetheless important, time-consuming, and oftentimes stressful. This is compounded by the fact that mothers still devote significantly more hours to childcare and domestic work than fathers, though fathers are doing more than they did in previous decades. And single parents, the majority of whom are women, have to shoulder all the work alone. *Although this article is primarily concerned with “working mothers,” we realize there are plenty of families that are not described by traditional father-mother and/or single parent paradigms; we also recognize that the general trends we’ve described—particularly the apportioning of domestic labor—do not describe every heteronormative parenting arrangement and are not limited to them. We think that efforts to increase employer support for working mothers, however, can have positive effects on employees and families of every makeup.*
- The vast majority of American employers have yet to institutionalize adequate workplace flexibility and support mechanisms to help parents balance full-time employment with parenthood. Nor have they done enough to incentivize women to resume their careers without facing penalties for the time they took off to raise children.



This failure on the part of employers is one of the reasons why, after seeing significant gains in workforce engagement between 1950 and 2000,—gains made possible by the proliferation of commodities (washing machines, dishwashers, vacuums) and institutions (daycare, summer camps, school buses) that gave women enough time to manage their careers and run households—the percentage of women in the workforce has remained largely stagnant since the year 2000. This is despite the advent of digital technologies that could, if widely accepted by the business community, enhance flexibility and help companies retain and engage more mothers.

## ENTER COVID-19

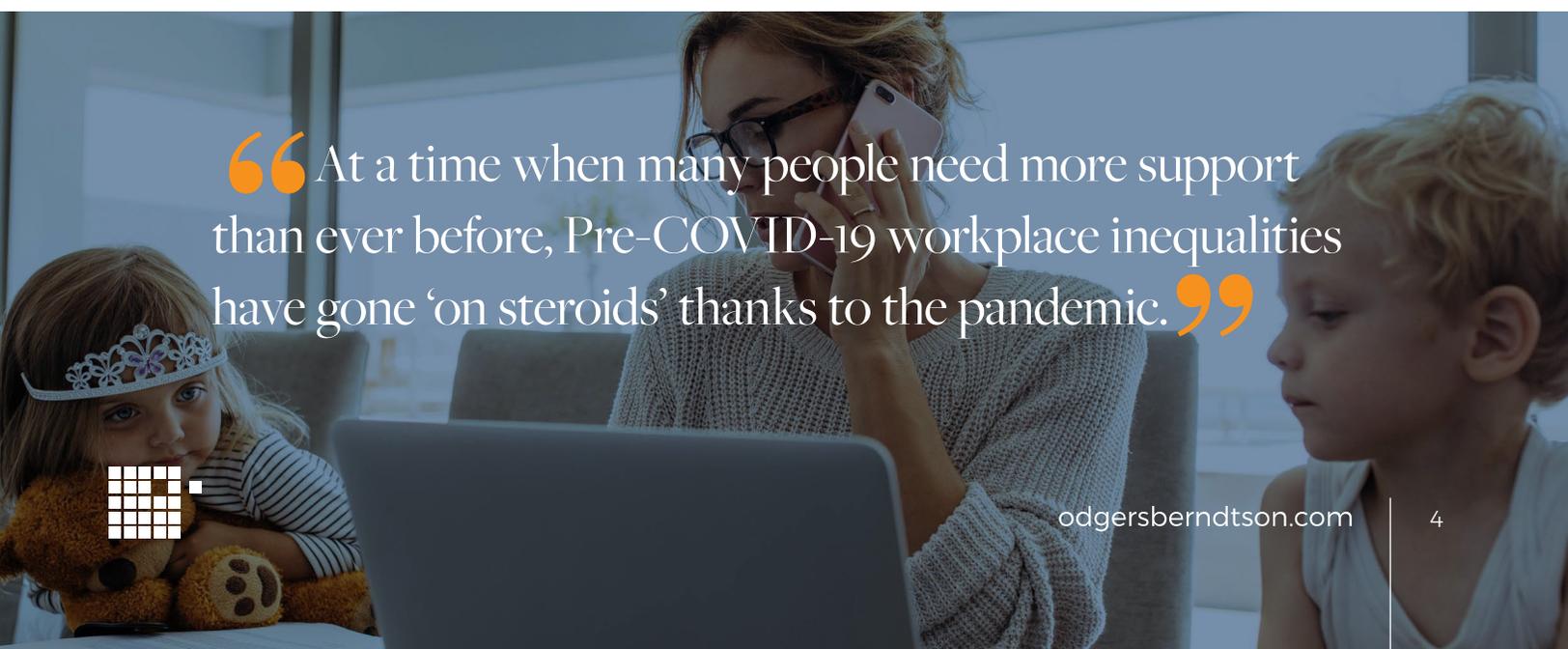
Many of the same factors that cause mothers to opt out of the workforce have been exacerbated by the pandemic. With daycare, schools, summer camps, and sports suspended, and other childcare options (grandparents, babysitters) impracticable for health reasons, parents are now forced to manage work and full-time childcare.

At the same time, many of the diversity & inclusion resources that companies do have in place have gone undernourished. D&I initiatives around the country have “slid backwards very quickly over the past few months,” said Kristy Wallace, CEO of [Ellevest Network](#). “They’ve just not been a priority.”

And this comes at a time when many people need more support than ever before, as was noted by Dr. Claudia Goldin, the Henry Lee Professor of Economics at Harvard University. Pre-COVID-19 workplace inequalities have gone “on steroids” thanks to the pandemic.

Even the reopening that we’re seeing in many states is not affecting all workers equally. Parents have greater barriers to returning to work than non-parents. Until schools and childcare facilities reopen, it will be difficult for many parents to return to a full-time traditional office schedule.

It’s important to remember that even impacts that seem short term in nature can actually have long term career implications. Women who even briefly decrease their workforce participation may well see decreases in their career prospects, deflation of their long-term earnings potential, and a reinvigoration of the workplace stereotype that women are less committed to their careers than their male counterparts.



“At a time when many people need more support than ever before, Pre-COVID-19 workplace inequalities have gone ‘on steroids’ thanks to the pandemic.”

## THE BRIGHT SIDE

On a positive note, thanks to widespread stay-at-home orders, working from home has become the new normal for millions of Americans. This has a number of potentially important implications.

### Employers are realizing that remote work is viable

For years people have been calling “flex work” the future of work, but most companies have been hesitant to actually give it a try. However, as one of the executives we spoke to said, COVID-19 has forced us to move past our comfort zones. As Lisa Jones, the CEO of AmundiPioneer Asset Management USA, observed, “We’ve all, at every level, recognized that we can be hugely productive while working remotely. And as a result, decision makers are more open to all aspects of flexible work and to retaining people with these new proven and productive ways of working.” This could have a significant effect giving women the choice of working from home while raising children without jeopardizing their careers.

### Humanization of the employee

When you’re conducting meetings out of your living room on Zoom, the previously ironclad distinctions between your life at home and your life at work are harder to make, and companies are starting to realize that there is an intrinsic relationship between the two. As Jones noted, “The baby crying in the background, the cat walking over the keyboard—we’ve brought it all to life, in full color, and companies now see that the juggle of work and family life is real. Our collective tolerance has increased dramatically.”

### Flexible work options will become a competitive necessity

Now more than ever, flexible work options are a necessary element of talent attraction and a cornerstone of diversity & inclusion recruiting. Jones again: “Employers in the financial services sector have to ask themselves ‘What flexibility can we provide going forward to make sure that financial services emerges as a sought-after industry by the next generation of employees?’ Financial services is not the highly attractive employer it once was, in part because of the inflexible work arrangements and a somewhat weak performance record on the diversity & inclusion front. Increasing our work flexibility could help us to gain and maintain more diversity of thought and experience by recruiting people from other industries more successfully.”



“Companies now see that the juggle of work and family life is real. Our collective tolerance has increased dramatically.”



## ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

In order to remain competitive in the talent marketplace and retain executive and executive-track women, employers need to actively help parents manage the acute difficulties of the pandemic in the short term, while working in the longer term to institutionalize a culture of support.

Here are some things that companies can consider:

### Provide short term assistance

Companies need to actively help parents find a work-life balance while under quarantine. For some this may mean offering paid “COVID-19 Leave.” For others it may mean giving parents the option to temporarily reduce hours and pay, or giving unlimited PTO through the end of the year.

One option is for leaders to embrace the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which currently requires employers to provide employees up to 12 weeks of childcare leave at two-thirds pay. With many employees worried that actually taking this leave will negatively impact their careers, organizations need to talk to employees about the Act’s provisions, urge parents of both genders to take leave and, perhaps most importantly, do the cultural legwork to ensure that no stigmas or repercussions are attached to doing so.

Companies are also allowing temporary roll-over of unused PTO balances during this time. By adjusting their short-term PTO policy, companies can help mothers to adjust for the dynamic nature of the current health crisis. Many camps, daycare programs, and schools are making last minute decisions as to whether they are fully open this summer and fall, or will run with limited capacity, or will close. Faced with having to adjust to these last minute decisions, having flexible PTO is incredibly helpful.

### Adjust work schedules

As COVID-19 has forced us to rethink the viability of remote work, it should also make companies rethink the way they structure work and measure employee engagement. When your employees can go to an office and their children can go to school, a 9-5 work schedule makes sense to structure the work day, allowing parenting to happen before and after the 8-hour day. But for remote workers with children at home, a full eight-hour block isn’t particularly tenable.

To accommodate parents during and after COVID-19, companies have several options:

- Allow for customized schedules. For example, for some employees it may be easiest to bifurcate the day into two major chunks, wherein a typical day might have a first shift from 6:00–10:00 AM, and a second shift from 4:00–8:00 PM.
- Elongate the week. For many parents, it might be easier to work six hours per day and seven days a week rather than eight hours per day and five days per week.
- Develop a project-based rather than time-based conception of work. For some employers, it may be more efficient to measure work based on output rather than hours and schedules. Many tech firms, for example, give engineers unlimited vacation time and flexible on-off hours, measuring their work based on the successful completion of projects.



## Provide incentives

Companies can ensure that women executives feel valued—while offsetting burnout—by formalizing an incentive structure aimed at validating mothers and motivating them to push through stressful work-life situations. A great way to do this is to provide monetary incentives—stock ownership, annual bonuses, and post-leave retention bonuses—that give women a tangible financial reason not to opt out of their career.

## Rethink career timelines

Another option for employers is to formally incorporate parenthood into their business's promotion timelines. In other words, companies can (a) be transparent with would-be parents about what work options are available to them; (b) establish a set of expectations around how parents can manage parenthood and work schedules; and (c) articulate a clear promotion path for parents. But working toward these solutions with women employees does not mean companies need to overlook their bottom lines, Lisa Jones said. "Greater flexibility to offer a work from home opportunity builds tenure with employees who may feel the pressure to step away from one's career because of the challenges of balancing work and family. For employers, not being fixated on having employees work in an office affords us the opportunity to cast a wider radius and may attract a broader diverse talent pool. And some parents want to spread out their career trajectory during their child-raising years, and many will be willing to exchange short-term compensation for that flexibility."

## Don't let up

Bringing diversity & inclusion into your business means designing a workplace that works for everyone, regardless of gender, dependents, race, class, or age. By giving all employees the kind of flexibility valued by parents, employers can avoid giving one employee demographic advantages over others. Similarly, it's important that employers don't take parents off of big-ticket projects or client assignments just because they're busy at home; in the long term, access to pipeline roles is crucial to the development of executive-level talent. "I don't see that we are really winning by saying we are supporting women by letting them carry the load at home and letting them off the big cases or projects", said Dr. Goldin. "CEOs and Senior Partners need to make sure they are not treating women as a special species of homo economicus. Whatever we do for women, we need to do the same for men." Companies have traditionally felt that altering societal norms lies outside their business function, shareholder mandate, and economic purpose, but this needs to change; companies that brand themselves as leaders of social and environmental change stand to gain a competitive advantage over their peers.

## Support fathers

Many of the factors that contribute to women dropping out of the workplace—for example the fact that men do less domestic labor than women—may feel outside an employer's ability to solve. In fact, companies can help lead change over time by urging male parents to take time off to support their families, especially during times of stress. "When fathers have the opportunity to spend more time at home and share more of the work, it's a benefit to men and it helps women," said Ashley Jones, Director of Executive Development and Team Member Engagement for Pilot Company.

## Ask mothers what they need

"Employers need to ask women what they need to be successful in their roles," said Dr. C Nicole Mason, President and CEO of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, "and it has to go beyond mentoring. Mentoring is fine, but lack of mentorship is not what is holding women back today. What's holding women back is structural and it's practical. Ask women what they need." The simplest suggestion in this road map is all too often overlooked: Listen to your employees, hear their needs, and be creative about how you can work for them, so that they can work for you.



## About the Authors



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[Catherine Bass Black](#) is a Principal at Odgers Berndtson where she advises Industrial and Consumer sector clients on executive recruitment, retention, and organizational change management. A parent of two young children, she is a relentless (and sleepless) advocate for working mothers.



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