

# Exploring the Commitment of Temporary Agency Workers

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## Abstract

Temporary agency worker (TAW) commitment is an important indicator for reliability and quality of work. This study examines the components of a successful working relationship between temporary agency (TA), host company (HC) and TAW in order to gain commitment from the TAW towards their work. The triangular relationship and social exchange theory are used to understand the relationship and the impacts that each party concerned has.

With an interpretivist approach, the study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Sixteen participants were interviewed; all working for a TA supplying TAWs to one HC in the manufacturing sector. The findings agreed with those of Tan and Tan (2002) that the decision to become a TAW impacted upon the commitment to the job. This idea is further developed; finding that if recommended the agency by friends or relatives, the TAW is likely to feel more committed. The study also agrees with the findings of Buch et al (2010); social integration in the HC has a positive effect on commitment to the job. This study is unique due to contributing identity theory to the literature. If a TAW feels comfortable identifying with the HC, due to integration, they are likely to be more committed to their job.

## Introduction

A particularly popular strategic move for management in previous years has been the increase in the usage of temporary agency workers (Kalleberg, 2001). Recently, there has been a huge increase in the number of staff being employed on a “nonstandard” basis, non-standard work is a generic term referring to a wide range of employment contracts; short-term, contingent, casual or temporary agency work (Svensson, 2012, Van Breugel et al, 2005, Kalleberg, 2000). The increase in the use of temporary workers is partly due to globalisation, the rise in new technology, economic freedoms and the need to obtain flexibility in order to increase or decrease workforce size especially in Britain (Kalleberg et al, 2000, p. 354). Huber (2004) adds that economic downturn has made successful organisational performance more difficult, focus has therefore shifted to decreasing costs and increasing flexibility. For many managers, TAWs provide the ideal solution. These cheap and willing staff allow managers to make fast decisions and change strategy as circumstances dictate (Buch et al, 2010; De Jong et al, 2009; Kellhier and Anderson, 2008; Connelly and Gallagher, 2004).

This research will focus specifically on temporary agency workers (TAWs). Polivha and Nardone (1989, see Connelly and Gallagher, 2004, p. 960) provide a general definition of temporary agency work, “any job in which an individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long term employment ... the minimum hours can vary non-systematically.” This is refined by De Gioia-Carabellese and Shuttleworth (2013, p. 637) identifying three clear criteria: (1) the employment contract is to perform services for an agency, (2) the workers are

temporarily supplied to the hirer by the agency, (3) during the assignments the individual is under the control of the hirer. All definitions of TAWs describe work taking place under insecure conditions, where the TAW has little control (Kalleberg et al, 2000).

This research surrounds one specific food manufacturing company, Company X. The temporary agency (TA) supplies around 1000 TAWs to the sector and believes in looking after the workforce and being committed to their development. The TA is sole supplier of TAWs to Company X and the relationship between the two organisations is long standing. The two organisations pride themselves on collaborating together to engage their staff. This provides an interesting background in which to collect data surrounding TAW commitment as both organisations seek to provide good treatment for workers.

## **Literature review**

Alongside the growing literature regarding the economic demand for TAWs there is speculation surrounding the motives for supply of this work (De Gioia- Carabellese and Shuttleworth, 2013; Felfe et al, 2008; Van Breugel et al, 2005; Mangan, 2000).

With management practices stressing labour force flexibility over staff harmony and stability (Mangan, 2000) seems questionable as to why workers would enter into this type of relationship, especially when it is described by Forde and Slater (2006, p. 150) as, “precarious,” implying uncertainty and negativity. Felstead and Jewson (1999) comment on the term “non-standard” arguing that it is not value- neutral, but actually takes on an inferior and substandard tone. Goldman and Lewis (2011) elaborate on the inferiority of TAWs, using the analogy of a disposable cup, “there to do the job without encroaching on storage space”. This is a particularly strong analogy, written from the perspective of the workplace. However, there may be some questions surrounding the reliability of the source; not being published in a peer reviewed journal. The use of TAWs can counteract Human Resources best practices due to the lack of encouragement towards commitment (Buch et al, 2010). With the perceived treatment of TAWs being so poor, it is even more imperative for the employer that TAWs are committed to the HC in order for them to withstand the relationship. This literature will explore the components of the working relationship which employers hope will foster commitment.

### **Worker commitment**

Commitment is described by Becker (1960, p. 33), as, “a disposition to engage in consistent lines of activity.” In a similar manner, Gallie et al (1998) describe commitment in terms of the encouragement of a worker to display more flexibility and absorb stress, adding that the only way to do this is by offering worthwhile values and treatment. With this in mind, encouraging and maintaining employees’ commitment to the organization is seen by many managers as the most effective strategy used to gain competitive advantage, especially in the difficult financial climate.

Meyer and Allen (1991) make the distinction between the three separable components of employee commitment which form the basis of much of the literature (Felfe et al, 2008; Van Breugel et al, 2005; Boswell et al, 2012). These are Affective commitment; a desire to be a part of the company, due to identification and involvement; Continuance commitment; a perceived need to maintain a positive relationship with the organisation and Normative commitment, a perceived moral obligation to maintain the employment relationship. These distinctions are important for this study due to the relationship between TAWs, the HC and TA as mentioned previously. The unusual nature of the relationship means that commitment of TAWs should not be taken for granted, as will be investigated further.

Buch et al (2010) suggest that TAWs will only be committed if they are receiving what they perceive to be fair payment for their actions; they also suggest that this can only be in the form of money. Ward et al (2001) suggest that in some cases TAWs are actually the core of the HC; due to the number working within the HC. It is therefore vital to investigate further the drivers behind commitment for TAWs; whether this be in the form of payment or otherwise. De Cuyper (2011) refers to these things as, “justice perceptions,” yet there is no clear description of what these are. This will be researched within this project.

### **The triangular relationship**

For many researchers, the temporary work arrangement is unusual as it is necessary under these conditions for the TAW to commit to both the employer (the TA) and the host company (HC); where they carry out their daily tasks and are managed (Buch et al, 2010; Van Breugel et al, 2005). This is termed by many scholars as “The Triangular Relationship,” (Buch et al, 2010, Forde and Slater, 2006). Buch et al (2010) comment that the triangular relationship complicates the examination of commitment as the TAW must uphold loyalty to both parties. It could be expected that this would cause strain on the TAW, and a tense relationship due to aiming to fulfil the diverse and separate aims of the two organisations, this is also known as, “dual commitment,” (Buch et al (2010, p.93; and Connelly et al, 2004).

Felfe et al (2008) comment that the Triangular Relationship makes it difficult for people to develop high commitment to the HC, the TA or their job. Tension and stress is created from fulfilling requirements of two organisations, whose expectations are not always aligned due to strategic decisions and pressures from stakeholders. As De Cuyper et al (2011, p.107) explain, with two foci of commitment, workers may either show, “productive or contra-productive,” behaviour towards the TA; choosing to aid or hinder the achievement of goals. Companies therefore need to be aware of the commitment barriers that TAWs are likely to feel. Boswell et al (2012) report that TAWs generally have significantly higher affective commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991) to HCs than to the employing TA. This affective commitment depends on the level of attachment that they feel towards the organisation. Using this insight, it would be key for both organisations to be aware that the feelings of attachment are key to TAW commitment and therefore should be managed where possible.

### **Social exchange theory within the triangular relationship**

It is assumed by Felfe et al (2008) that employees in temporary roles are overall less committed due to a low investment from the HC and uncertainty surrounding length of employment. However, this analysis fails to account for TAWs who have worked at the HC for many years, possibly due to this situation being unusual. Ward et al (2001) add that contradictions between the HC and the TA may be representative of more wide ranging sources of tension between the need for cooperation and flexibility within the employment contract. It is likely to be the case that these two organisations, bound into a self-satisfying relationship, need to work together to form a more cohesive plan for TAWs who appear to be pulled in separate directions.

Social exchange theory describes social behaviour as an exchange in which acts are performed for rewards (Emerson, 1976). It is argued, using the process of social exchange that TAWs respond positively in terms of behaviours and attitudes towards the HC or TA when positively invested in. According to Buch et al (2010) it is difficult for TAWs to repay the HC and TA for their investments into the relationship. This results the relationship with the TA being more salient than with the client organisation; due to the employment contract. This is a surprising finding; as the TA does not directly manage the worker and so has little contact with them. Investment into the relationship from both organisations will have a

positive effect towards commitment of the TAW into the triangular relationship. However, there are those, such as De Jong (2009) who believe the relationship between organisational investment and subsequent worker commitment to be non-existent. After all, if TAWs have entered into the employment relationship due to other commitments, they are unlikely to be swayed by the contribution of the employer. De Cuyper et al (2011) reinforce this finding, adding that the lack of stability that the employment offers, results in a lack of commitment from the TAW.

### **The spill over effect**

It is suggested by Van Breugel et al (2005) that there is a “spill-over” effect whereby TAWs feelings towards one aspect of the HC or TA affect feelings towards another aspect. Having more agencies to choose from does not change the commitment of the TAWs to the job; yet the supportiveness (dealing with problems and the close contact) does have an impact. According to these findings, factors which may increase affective commitment; a desire to be part of the company may “spill-over” to influence continuance commitment; a want to maintain a positive relationship with the employer. It is understood by Connelly and Gallagher (2004) that there are inter-relationships between the types of commitment that a TAW may feel according to the acts of the organisation. However, there seems to be no research into the spill-over between the commitment towards each organisation in turn and the impacts that efforts to raise commitment towards one party may affect the feelings towards another. This will be explored further within this research.

### **TAW workplace social integration**

Being integrated into the working environment is a key theme throughout the commitment literature. According to Van Breugel et al (2005) a highly supportive working environment is instrumental to encouraging high levels of commitment throughout the employment relationship. De Cuyper et al (2011) refer to these feelings as, “justice perceptions.” If TAWs feel that they are receiving inferior treatment in comparison to permanent workers, they are less inclined to show commitment and alignment with the organisation.

Feldman et al (1995) oppose the view that TAWs are less committed, stating that individuals use their temporary role to find permanent work, being familiar with a working environment aids this, therefore increasing their commitment. Many researchers believe that commitment amongst TAWs is high (Van Breugel et al., 2000, Goldthorpe et al (see Gallie et al, 1998 p. 186)) yet the reasons for this commitment are yet to be explained in great detail.

### **Voluntary and involuntary decisions to work**

Tan and Tan (2002) introduce the distinction between voluntary and involuntary decisions to become TAWs. Voluntary TAWs are those who seek temporary work arrangements willingly, “receptive pockets of labour,” Thurman and Tran (1990, see Mangan, 2000, p. 69) despite being able to find permanent work arrangements. Involuntary TAWs are those who would want permanent roles, but are unable; due to lack of qualification, or, “retrenchment;” the reduction of the size of a workforce. Svensson (2012) is as bold as to say that to be a TAW is equal to failure. The distinctions between voluntary and involuntary decisions are prominent in the literature, (Kalleberg, 2000; Mangan, 2000; Felfe et al, 2008; De Gioia-Carabellese and Shuttleworth, 2013) however, there are such varied definitions for the term temporary worker, contingent worker or agency worker that it could be argued that application of these theories will vary widely and that the impact will be diluted due to the different context and terms in which they work. Tan and Tan (2002) also suggest that involuntary TAWs harbour feelings of low connection to the HC and TA. It may then be the

case that TAWs who feel undervalued by the HC and TA will feel less inclined towards commitment.

Voluntary and involuntary decisions to enter a work relationship are linked to Kalleberg's (2000) distinctions between good and bad jobs due to the perception of the role on undertaking it. According to Kalleberg (2000) temporary working is an example of a bad job because TAWs are transient in the system, the roles are uncertain and flexibility for TAWs comes at a price. According to Kalleberg (2000) there is very little about these jobs that signify quality and are therefore they are extremely undesirable and will be encountered involuntarily. This would seem to suggest that all TAWs are unhappy to their role. This will be investigated further in this paper.

Kellhiser and et al (2008) refute the distinction between good and bad jobs; as there is no clear outline of the criteria between the two. Buch et al (2010, p. 98) elaborate, adding that there is a non-existent relationship between investments by the employer into the relationship and quality of work; the only way that they can increase commitment is through, "tangible economic resources." It may be the case that increasing wages is the only way to increase commitment amongst TAWs; something which has been recently introduced within the Agency Workers Regulations 2011 (The National Archives, 2011). According to this new legislation all TAWs are entitled to equal payment after 12 weeks working at the HC (De Gioia-Carabellese and Shuttleworth, 2013, p. 650). As the legislation is so new, there is no literature investigating the impacts of the AWR upon TAW commitment.

## **Summary**

Despite the interest in the nature of TAW commitment, there are a number of gaps in the literature. The literature has not adequately examined the reasons behind the choice to become a TAW and the impacts that this has on feelings towards the HC, the TA and the role. Whilst Tan and Tan (2002) have introduced ideas about commitment being related to reasons behind being a TAW; there is not enough research surrounding the impacts that this actually has on the commitment of TAWs to the job in the long term. This needs to be investigated.

Whilst social exchange theory goes some way to explain the interaction between TAW, the TA and the HC; (Buch et al, 2010) it is still not clearly defined as to what extent this is the case. This is especially the case specifically in the manufacturing sector.

Another significant gap within the literature surrounds the changes that the TA and the HC could make to improve the commitment of TAWs within the triangular relationship. (Connelly et al, 2004). Specifically, researchers have yet to examine the practices that organisations can put into place in order to increase the willingness to commit towards the HC. If managers and supervisors understand the importance of raising the commitment of TAWs and the processes that they can use to increase it all parties in the relationship will benefit (Connelly et al, 2004 and Buch et al, 2010). Therefore this will be investigated.

Therefore, the research aims to answer the following three questions: 1) How does the reasoning behind the decision to become a TAW affect commitment to the job? 2) How does social integration in the workplace affect TAW commitment to the job? 3) In what way (if any) can the HC and the TA work towards improving TAW commitment?

## **Research methods**

With an interpretivist approach, this research uses case study as the main strategy. The research is based in Company X. Altogether, 16 interviews were carried out on TAWs. All participants work for one particular TA and working at one HC, i.e. Company X.

A group of TAWs were contacted and invited by telephone through the TA management to participate in this research. Sixteen of those contacted agreed to take part in

the study. The interviews took place in an office at the TA headquarters. At the end of each semi-structured interview, participants were asked to fill in a mini questionnaire, in order to collect some basic demographic data. On average the interviews were 40 minutes in length. With the participant's permission the interviews were recorded; to make transcription more accurate and in order for the interviewer to maintain attention to the flow of the conversation without interruptions (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Reasons for wanting to become a TAW**

With regard to the decision to become TAWs, the group of participants was split almost equally between those who had made a choice to apply to the TA, and those who felt that there were no other options for them. The majority of participants who chose to become a TAW, making a voluntary decision (Tan and Tan, 2002) did so in an attempt to balance family life or study commitments; most found that temporary work offered the most convenient solution.

When being asked whether they believed that it was important to be committed to their role, one participant replied,

*"Yes... when I am here... I put everything into my job but in-between it doesn't matter. I don't have to do extra to show my commitment."*

This seemed to be the response of 2/3 of the participants who had commitments outside of work, with the ability to appear committed at work. Once these participants were outside of work they no longer needed prove their commitment and they could focus on their responsibilities outside of work. For these workers then, being a TAW allowed them to decide when to commit alongside being present at work.

There were a number of participants who saw being a TAW as a positive indicator of a long term career with the HC.

*"This way I can show that I am a hard worker... There are thousands of people saying it all over the country... none of them have jobs."*

Here, it would seem that this participant believed that through showing their commitment to the HC by working as a TAW, that they would encourage commitment from the HC in the form of a permanent contract. By proving their competence they hope to increase their chances of full time work. This is particularly prominent amongst this sample, likely due to the shortage of jobs in the market (De Gioia-Carabellese and Shuttleworth, 2013.) These results correspond with the thoughts of Feldman et al (2005) whereby TAWs are extremely committed due to the desire to be a permanent member of staff with the HC.

### **Reluctance to become a TAW**

For those who were reluctant TAWs there were less reasons behind the decision. Five participants were forced into the move due to the lack of alternative roles. With one seeking to prove to himself that he was not too old to work after a redundancy. For the other participants however, commitment was not important but the role served as a stepping stone applying for more desirable jobs.

Although around half of participants decided to become a TAW voluntarily, there are still a number who mentioned that they would enter into full time work regardless of the role in order to leave the TA. This demonstrates that entering temporary agency work voluntarily is likely to increase commitment to the job. This finding is in line with Tan and Tan (2002) who made the connection between voluntary decisions to work as a TAW and higher commitment.

The research results suggest that the TAW's expectations from the relationship prior to joining, will affect their assessment of fair treatment. The impacts of the HC and the TA's efforts to encourage commitment will differ in effectiveness depending on initial expectations. This also links with the findings of Kalleberg (2000) and Mangan (2000) who believed that TAWs experienced a low connection towards the HC due to feeling undervalued and therefore unlikely to be committed. However the findings of Tan and Tan (2002) refer to involuntary TAWs and this study has found this occurring amongst voluntary TAWs who have not had the TA recommended to them.

### **Working relationship and impacts on TAW commitment**

A key finding surrounded feelings of safety associated with working at the HC site. There were two main reasons amongst participants for this feeling. The first is with regard to social integration; due to the acceptance of TAWs within the HC as legitimate and worthy workers. Some participants described the work place in terms of family, offering support, advice and a feeling of acceptance. For many, it was these feelings which evoked commitment.

*"If they need me I am available, I want to show that I can repay the agency for their kindness, I needed them to give me work so it is only right that I give the agency all that I have when I can."*

*"...Company X is where I work; that is where I will give the first impression. They... give them (the agency) their opinion... It needs to come from Company X and be passed on."*

For these participants, making positive impressions upon the HC and TA was of particular importance as it encouraged a positive working relationship. It is this understanding of repayment, from the perspective of the TAWs rather than from the TA, which is striking amongst results. As TAWs understand the organisations' efforts to make them feel valued and improve their employability for the future, they therefore feel impelled to reimburse the HC and TA through flexibility and acceptance of the HC and TA. This aligns with the thoughts of De Cuyper et al (2011) and the term "Justice Perceptions," whereby a supportive work environment is more likely to induce positive feelings towards the HC and TA and therefore increased commitment.

The second reason surrounds a perception of equal rights. There was an underlying understanding that equal pay must equate to equal treatment influencing the feelings of these TAWs.

Both of these reasons led TAWs to, under their own estimations, feel more committed towards the HC and go beyond the organisations' immediate expectations. However, there was a considerable proportion of TAWs who did not feel that they had been socially accepted by permanent workers and therefore saw the working relationship simply as a transaction of work exchanged for wages.

*"It might seem that we are getting treated fairly day to day... we don't get holiday pay or sickness pay."*

This quote indicates that this participant's belief; pertaining to an illusion or trickery in being treated fairly. Many participants believed that treatment was still unfair for the amount of effort that they put into their role. This reflects the findings of Felfe et al (2008) who found that TAWs were generally less committed due to a low investment in the worker by either organisation involved in the relationship. This explains why commitment is low amongst participants who see the efforts of the HC and the TA as sub-standard.

## TAW identity

Feelings of unfair treatment divided TAWs with regard to their identity. All voluntary participants applied to the TA specifically to be working at the HC and there was an overwhelming proportion of participants (11/16) who appeared to struggle with their perceived position and value within their role as a TAW at the HC. Felfe (2008) commented that it was difficult for organisations to build an environment in which TAWs are committed due to tension and stress from misalignment of expectations.

Just below half of participants felt that they had been effectively integrated into the HC. These perceptions of inclusion evoked feelings of appreciation for the efforts of the TA to employ them in such an agreeable environment whereby training and support is provided. The team aspect is particularly prominent here.

These participants felt that they were mostly treated the same as permanent staff and that there was in fact no distinction. In this way, they identified themselves as employees of Company X. This identity meant that they were able to consider themselves as valuable as permanent employees; thereby improving self-worth. By identifying themselves with the HC, commitment to the role was increased. Spill over effect (Van Breugel et al, 2005) can be applied here; as a desire to be a part of the HC develops into a positive relationship with the HC thereby turning affective commitment into continuance commitment.

There were a number of participants who identified themselves more with the TA workforce. The reason for this was due to feelings of disappointment and rejection when the HC and TA make a distinction between the two workforces. One particular example of this surface during the interviews when speaking about equipment issued by the HC.

*“You can’t have your name badge printed on your coat until you are permanent. I don’t think that it is fair... I have been here for 10 years. It just feels like they don’t want to make an effort for me.”*

For this participant, the actions of the HC created a divide, highlighting the TAWs from the rest of the group despite them having been working at the HC site for many years. This encouraged a feeling of repudiation within the TAWs as they did not believe that they were being recognised sufficiently for their efforts. Other participants felt similarly, mentioning the steel-toe capped boots that they had to share, without allocation of parking spaces to TAWs, being lack of inclusion in the staff survey or being invited to the recognition event for long service. Buch et al (2010) noted that the relationship with the TA was more salient than the HC, this is demonstrated here as some TAWs see the TA as less likely to disappoint.

*“It’s hard because we are expected to act like permanent staff but then they continue to make the distinction.”*

Overall there was a feeling amongst participants of confusion about their identity whilst working for the TA at the HC site. This was summed up perfectly by one particular participant,

*“If I was applying for a job I would say that I was working for Company X on my CV because they have more importance... I just work for an agency and I am not very impressive,”*

This quote provided an insight into the confusion about this participant’s identity; choosing to use it to their advantage for future employability. It demonstrates temporary worker identity within the triangular relationship; particularly for TAWs who have been working with the same HC and TA for many years.

This study has highlighted the interplay between TAW expectation and perception of treatment within the triangular relationship and commitment. Each element which may affect commitment of TAWs has been explored from the perspective of the TAWs themselves.



The study has proven the thoughts of Tan and Tan (2002); decisions surrounding becoming a TAW have an impact upon commitment. It has further developed these ideas by finding that having the agency recommended to them influenced positive justice perceptions (De Cuyper et al, 2011) likely due to realistic expectations before joining. Moreover, the study has also found that social integration and exchange has a large impact on TAW commitment. It means TAW feeling a part of the group when at work makes them more inclined to perform positively for the HC and TA. This rejects the findings of Buch et al (2010) as the TAW does react to integration positively.

## **Conclusion**

### **Contributions**

Identity has been pinpointed as an influencing factor towards commitment. It has been noted that the confusion surrounding which company in the triangular relationship the TAW can most identify with has an impact on commitment. This has not been discovered previously. As explained by Stryker and Serpe (1982) behaviour can be understood as consequences of the setting. When applied to the behaviour of TAWs; the way in which they identify themselves will have an impact upon the commitment that they feel towards their job and the way that they act towards the organisation. The aim of the organisation is to encourage commitment (Rubin and Brody, 2005, p. 844; De Jong et al, 2009 and Svensson, 2012) and therefore the identity of the TAWs needs to be made clear by the HC through its actions. This paper has highlighted the impacts of identity upon TAWs and the influence upon commitment to the role. Further research needs to be commissioned into the impacts of identity upon commitment of TAWs in other industries to gain clearer knowledge on its effects.

### **Limitations and implications**

Like all research projects, there are limitations to this study. The first is that the study was completed using one TA and one HC only. There could be questions surrounding the validity of the findings as they may not be applicable elsewhere. Future considerations should be made, to research in other organisations with similar settings in order to ensure that the findings are reliable and valid.

In terms of the data collection process, opinions were only collected from TAWs, instead of a mixture of management and full time staff. Including these parties would have enabled triangulation; findings could be authenticated by comparing and contrasting them with the thoughts of others (Anderson, 2013).

Furthermore, due to the high proportion of Indian TAWs working for an English agency taking part in the study, the reliability of the findings may be called into question. As the majority of the workforce in the UK is British, any influences that national culture may have on the contribution that participants made to the study will not be replicable in other companies facing similar problems with regards to TAW commitment.

### **Recommendations**

This research concludes that commitment is influenced by the actions of the HC and TA combined. Whilst this study has outlined the components of the relationship to encourage commitment it is not clear that organisations understand the impact that their decisions have upon TAW commitment. The implementation of the AWR has been embraced; encouraging appreciation and subsequent commitment from TAWs. However, fair treatment does not seem to have been integrated into the all of the HC and TA's procedures. The paper suggests that simple improvements, such as allocating boots or named coats for long term employees

would have a huge effect. Straightforward changes by the HC and TA would display that both companies understand TAWs are a valuable human resource and should be treated as such, thereby increasing commitment to the job.

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