

## Spoilt for Choice

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### **Abstract**

*Constant working conditions are outdated. Consequently, employees are confronted with the challenge of continuing vocational training. In this context, the question is how to select the appropriate trainer or training institute. In recent years, learning transfer research has focussed on researching the determinants of learning transfer. Baldwin and Ford's basic learning transfer model forms the starting point for this. This model differentiates between training input, training output and conditions of transfer. Thus, trainee characteristics, training design and work environment are determinants of training input. The author examines existing standards for training design and trainer competences in practice. In this regard, the author focusses on the question of which are the decisive criteria for the final decision in favour of a trainer or a training institute. No conclusive answer can be given to this question, as no studies are available. Consequently, a future field of research is evident here.*

**Keywords:** Learning Transfer, Continuing Vocational Training, Evaluation, Study Trainer Continuing Vocational Training

### **INTRODUCTION**

In continuing vocational training, the transfer of newly acquired skills from the learning context to the workplace context is of particular importance (Wißhak, 2022, p. 70). The participants themselves have an interest in successful learning transfer, as this secures their jobs and prepares them for changes. Participants also achieve greater autonomy and self-realisation and a higher level of wellbeing (Wißhak, 2022, p. 70).

In 2018, 87,6 % of German companies invested a total of € 41.3 billion in continuing vocational training (CVT) of their employees (Seo et al., 2020, p. 105). This enormous investment sum underlines the relevance of successful learning transfer.

The beginning of evaluation in CVT are the research findings of Donald Kirkpatrick in the 1950s. His four-level evaluation model is the best-known evaluation model of training programs worldwide. Over the years, further evaluation models have been developed. For example, Philips' model adds a fifth level, return on investment (ROI), to Kirkpatrick's model. It allows the calculation of the return on investment for continuing vocational training. Nevertheless, the significance is limited.

Kellner takes a different approach. His model extends Kirkpatrick's model by a sixth level, value on investment (VOI). On a more abstract level it provides guidance for determining the value of a training in a more structured, questioning, and descriptive manner.

Learning transfer research is based on the research findings of Baldwin and Ford. They developed a fundamental learning transfer model. Their model is based on training input, training output and conditions of transfer. Since then, this model has been continuously expanded and the identified learning transfer determinants have been analysed in numerous studies.

Along with the further development of the theoretical models, standards such as the Q4TE (Questionnaire for Professional Training Evaluation) or ISO standards have been developed. But these are rarely used in practice.

The different determinants of trainee characteristics in Baldwin and Ford's learning transfer process model have been extensively researched. At this point, reference should be made to the research by Koch, who uses the transfer strength method to analyse the transfer readiness of participants and indicates possibilities for improving the desired learning transfer.

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## Evaluation

As already mentioned, the origins of evaluation research go back to the research findings of Donald Kirkpatrick in the 1950s. His four-level evaluation model evaluates training programs on four levels: Reaction, learning, behaviour, and results.

The power of Kirkpatrick's model lies in its simplicity (Alliger and Janak, 1989, p. 331). The first level reaction is usually evaluated using feedback forms. Feedback forms are still the most frequently used tool for evaluating CVT.

Some critics of Kirkpatrick's model emphasize the importance of a holistic model. In 2003 Philips added a fifth level return on investment (ROI). His model can be seen as a first holistic evaluation model. Furthermore, it is linked to the cost-effectiveness of training programs (Lee and Pershing, 2000, p. 200).

The calculation for the ROI is:

$$\text{ROI (\%)} = \text{Net Program Benefits} / \text{Program Costs} \times 100$$

**Figure 1** *Formel ROI. Source: Adopted from (Phillips, 2003, p. 40)*

The significance of the ROI is limited. To underline this the following remarks should be made:

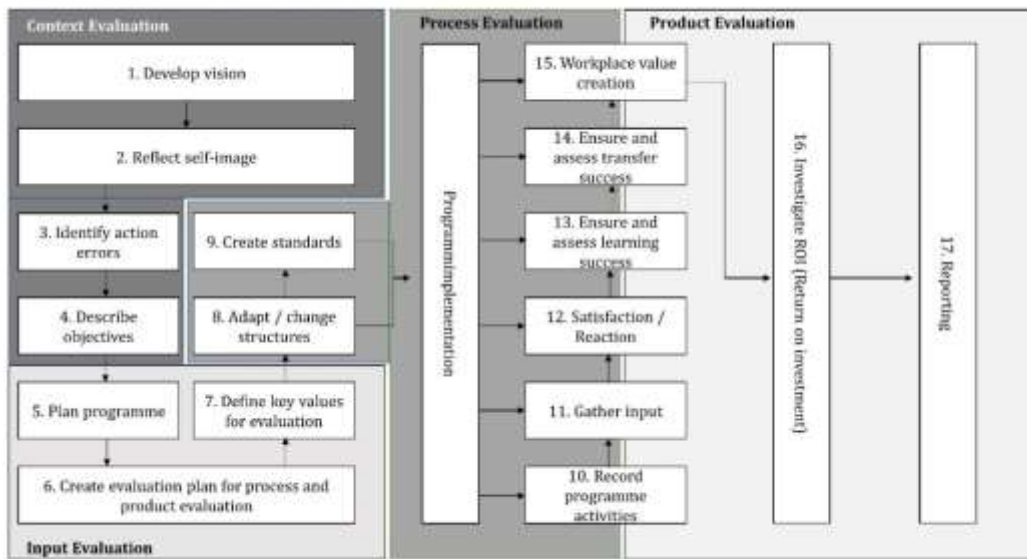
Usually, an observation of one year has been chosen. Therefore, the result of a training program can be determined with one reporting year. It could happen that the investments of a training program extend over several years.

Sometimes, the ROI of a training program could be negative, but the training program could have a high value for the organization in a long run (Kellner, 2006, p. 18).

The calculation of ROI is rarely used in practice. In 2015, Srimannarayana conducted a study among learning and professionals from different companies to investigate evaluation in practice. Only 18.73% of the respondents evaluate ROI (Srimannarayana, 2017, p. 17).

In 2005, Kellner extended the four-level evaluation model by a sixth level called value on investment (VOI). The measurement of the VOI represents the entire spectrum of the effects of continuing vocational training (Kellner, 2006, p. 12). The VOI comprises six successive phases (Kellner, 2006, pp. 19–22). The VOI has no stored algorithms. On a more abstract level it provides guidance for figuring out the value of a training in a structured, questioning, and descriptive manner. Furthermore, in a broader sense, VOI prepares a successful learning transfer.

Even Gessler's design-orientated evaluation model contains no concrete descriptions of how trainers and training institutes are selected. Nevertheless, Gessler's design-oriented evaluation model provides a new perspective on evaluating training programs. This model focuses on the configuration of training programs and takes a more holistic perspective. In this model, program evaluation serves to methodically capture, document, and assess the context, input, process, and products of CVT programs for program design and development. The procedure is a reflexive control on the levels of context, input, process and results in addition to a continuous control of results and impact (Michael Gessler, 2005, p. 16).



**Figure 2** Design-oriented evaluation-model. Source: Adopted from (Michael Gessler, 2005, p. 16)

The evaluation tools mentioned do not indicate how trainers or training institutes are employed.

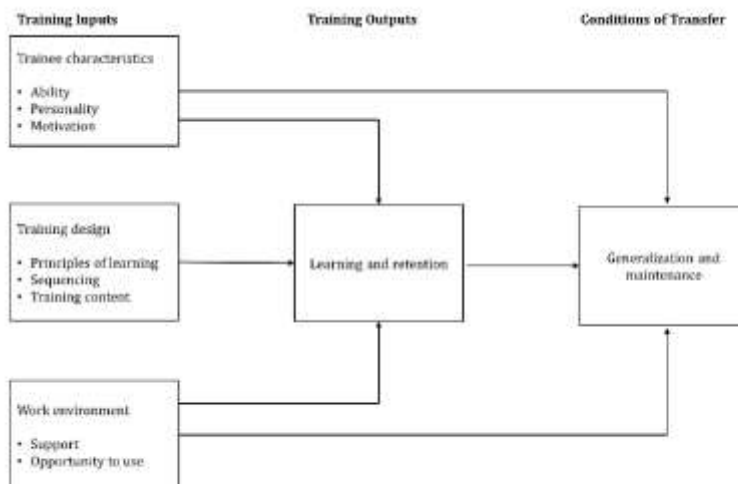
However, research in the field of learning transfer examines how successful learning transfer can be achieved. Current research emphasises the central importance of the trainer (WiBhak, 2022, p. 84).

In the models described, the process of commissioning of trainers or training institutes is not specifically described. The importance of trainers regarding transfer-promoting support is the subject of recent research and will be outlined in the chapter learning transfer.

### Learning transfer

Baldwin and Ford's research on learning transfer extends Kirkpatrick's model. "For transfer to have occurred, learned behavior must generalized to the job context and maintained over a period of Time on the job" (Baldwin and Ford, 1988, p. 63). They developed a model of transfer process.

The basic idea of this model is that the transfer-promoting factors can be grouped into three categories: factor of the learners (trainee characteristics), training (training design) and workplace (work environment) (Bohlinger et al., 2015, p. 45). These categories form the training input.



**Figure 3** A model of Transfer process: Source: Adopted from Baldwin and Ford (Baldwin and Ford, 1988, p. 65)

Training outputs and conditions of transfer can be directly influenced by trainee characteristics and work environment. Whereas the impact of training design depends on the levels of training outputs such as learning and retention.

Furthermore, Baldwin and Ford defined transfer determinants. These are shown in the figure above as sub-items.

In the last 30 years, research on learning transfer has generated many empirical studies. The author refers to the updated literature research of Baldwin and Ford. They describe the development of empirical studies in the period of 1988 – 2008, then discuss conceptual approaches to enhance the understanding of the term learning transfer and give an overview of future research questions (Hodgkinson and Ford, 2009, p. 42).

Baldwin and Ford's model do not consider the trainer, who is responsible for planning and implementing the training and is therefore also a key influencing factor for the training design (Barth et al., 2023, p. 235). This is noteworthy, as trainers consider transfer as an important part of their professional knowledge (Barth et al., 2023, p. 236).

Since Baldwin and Ford's research, a wide variety of learning transfer models have been developed. These models focus on the question of successful learning transfer into practice. One example is Blume's model.

Blume developed a dynamic learning transfer model. This model is based on the transfer process model of Baldwin and Ford. It considers training input, the training output, and the conditions of the transfer. The special characteristic of this model is that, in case of failure, new attempts are made for the learning transfer in a loop-like manner. This means that the procedure for learning transfer into practice is constantly changing if necessary.

Blume takes a slightly different view of the transfer process. Those factors that influence behavior in the workplace are evaluated during the training and lead to a three-stage transfer process: (1) post-training KSAs (knowledge, skill and attitude) that the trainee intends to transfer; (2) the initial transfer attempt, and (3) the evaluation and integration of feedback from initial transfer attempt (Blume et al., 2019, p. 271).

Each individual transfer attempt represents a self-contained set of framework conditions. The transfer can only be evaluated accurately if the personal characteristics of the participant and the characteristics of the situation are considered, and the evaluation is carried out with consistent parameters.

By extending the model, Blume et al. (2019) focus more closely on the workplace and integrate learning transfer into practice with corresponding work results, evaluations and feedback loops (Blume et al., 2019, p. 281).

## **Trainer As Success Factor**

In the view of learning transfer research, trainers as a professional group is difficult to define (Wißhak, 2022, p. 72). In addition, a systematic research and presentation of the findings of learning transfer research with regard to the possibilities of learning transfer promotion by trainers is still pending (Wißhak, 2022, p. 73).

In addition, the job title of trainer is not regulated. Furthermore, a trainer training program is not part of formal continuing vocational training. This means that there is no form of standardisation.

To evaluate the competences of trainers, the short questionnaire was developed. This questionnaire is based on the research results of the QF2Teach project.

QF2Teach was a study carried out in the period October 2009 – September 2011. It was coordinated by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) in cooperation with partners from Switzerland, Italy, Romania, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The project pursued the objective of developing a competence-based qualifications framework of transnational relevance, which on the one hand remained sufficiently abstract to be applicable on a transnational basis, on the other hand defined the competences in a sufficient manner to be directly compatible with daily vocational practice.

The results of the project are nine key competences, which are assigned in four areas: Methodological competence and expertise, social and personal competence.

Based on the findings of the QF2Teach project, Kauffeld examined a short questionnaire for the assessment of trainer competences. This questionnaire provides an effective evaluation tool for trainers' competences. Therefore, the relationship between the four areas of trainer competences (methodological competence, expertise, social competence and, self-competence) short-term, and long-term training success measures was investigated. It was found that there is a significant correlation between methodological competence and the perceived transfer success of participants (Grohmann et al., 2021, p. 86).

Both QF4Teach (Zagir and Mandel, 2020, p. 166) and the short questionnaire approach focus on teaching competences. These approaches are too limited to answer the question of how trainers can influence successful learning transfer.

A more holistic approach is taken by ISO standards. In 2010, ISO 29990, an international standard for learning service providers (quality management system for educational institutions) was introduced.

ISO 29990 „Learning services for education and training – Essential requirements for service providers“ was published to provide a common guideline for learning service providers in the design, development and delivery of learning services beyond formal education (DIN-Normenausschuß Dienstleistungen, 2019).

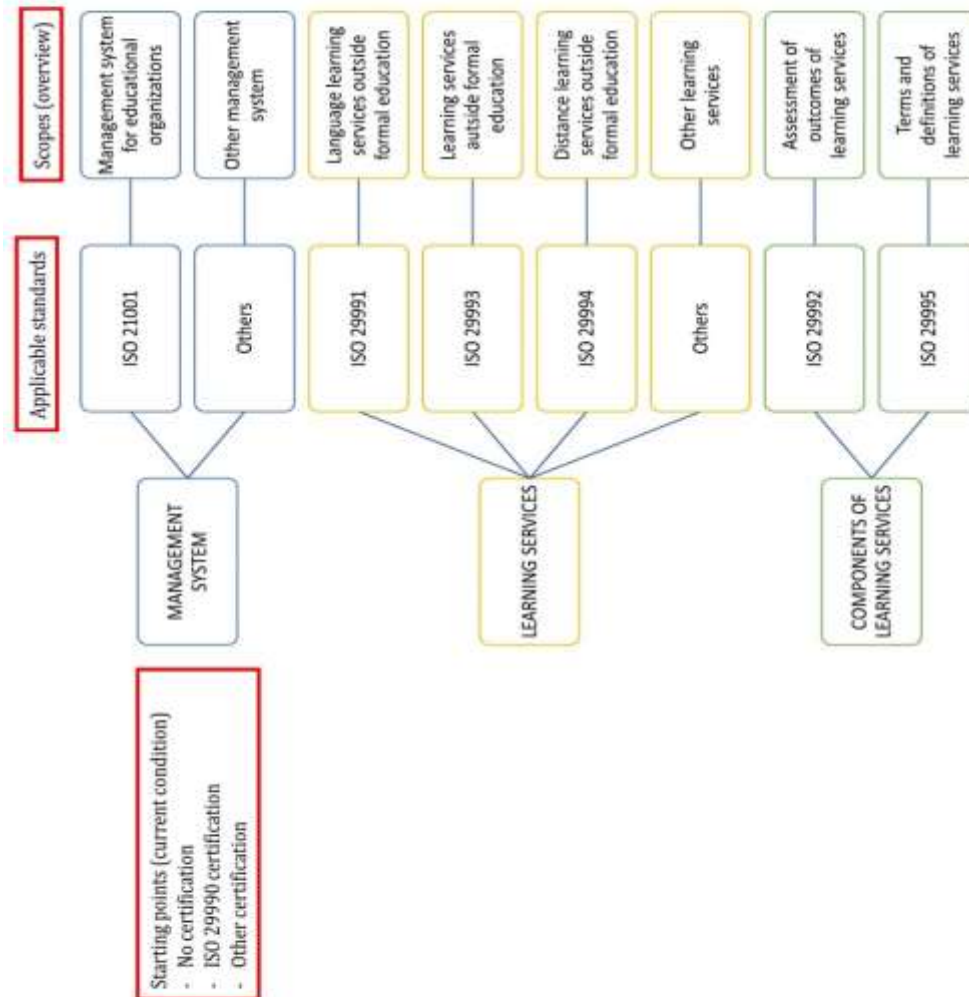
This standard has not been able to gain widespread acceptance to date. In Germany, only 50 educational institutions were certified according to this standard in 2015 (Stiftung Warentest, 2015).

In view of the complexity and diversity of the global learning service market, ISO published ISO 29993 in 2017 to provide minimum requirements for learning services. This standard was adopted as DIN ISO 29993 in 2018. At the same time, ISO 21001 was developed at the international level to provide a separate management system standard for the education sector. This standard will also be adopted as DIN ISO 21001 in the future (TÜV Nord Cert GmbH, 2020).

The complexity and diversity of the global market of learning services requires standards in the field of continuing vocational training. These required standards are described in ISO 29993 (International Organization for Standardisation, 2018, p. 1).

The fact that international standards have been developed for learning service providers in education and training once again underlines the relevance of evaluation.

The figure below shows an overview of the existing ISO standards.



**Figure 3** Possible options for combining different standards. Source: Adopted from (International Organization for Standardisation, 2018, p. 4)

Despite the wide range of possibilities for teachers to exert influence, so far there have been few studies on whether they are aware of the research findings on the determinants of learning transfer and whether they know how they can promote learning transfer (Barth et al., 2023, p. 233).

Moreover, trainers regard themselves as important for the learning transfer (Barth et al., 2023, p. 236).

### *Spoilt for Choice*

A literature review on transfer determinants shows that trainers can promote learning transfer and should have the necessary competences to do so (Wißhak, 2022, p. 69).

The customer's role

In the previous chapter, the possibilities for the trainer to influence successful learning transfer were described. Therefore, the commissioning of the trainer or training institute plays a decisive role.

According to the AES (Adult Education Survey), approximately two-fifths of all continuing vocational training activities are offered and carried out by employers (39%). Freelance individuals (13%) are also of greater importance. However, commercial institutes (6%) are less important (Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung and W. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2017, p. 140).

But how are trainers and training institutes commissioned? Practical experience gathered by the author shows that the following criteria are used as criteria for appointments.

A selection of possible criteria is listed below by the author:

Internet research - Internet presence of the trainers or training institutes

Awards such as 'Top provider for continuing education 2024'

Internet portals for seminar providers

Personal recommendation

Many years of cooperation

References

Verification of the trainer's practical experience in the desired subject area

Interview with the trainer

Costs

In this paper, the author analyses the significance of awards. As an example, the 'FOCUS Top Training Provider' award is analysed. This award is presented by a renowned business magazine in Germany for the D-A-CH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland).

The award is presented according to the following process:

The study focuses on continuing vocational training providers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland that offer continuing vocational training for people living in Germany. The broad market of providers of continuing vocational training is analysed by a leading company in the field of social data analysis. Various online forums such as Studycheck or social media channels such as Facebook are searched for evaluations of training institutions. This method is known as social listening. The advantages of this survey method lie in the large number of judgements, which achieves a high degree of representativeness, as well as in their authenticity.

After all company ratings have been collated and assigned, all training providers for which ratings are available undergo a complex quality assurance process at various points in time. Relevant company key figures are checked in the process.

### **Step 1 - Selection of Potential Providers**

On basis of the following minimum criteria, a further pre-selection of providers is made who are eligible for further calculation:

The provider has to be primarily active in continuing vocational training

There has to be a minimum number of evaluations from participants (at least 10 evaluations in the last 2 years)

On a scale of 1 to 5, the average rating has to be at least 3.0

The ratings must relate to the continuing vocational training provider's offering

The provider may not be a university with a purely face-to-face program.

## **Step 2 - Calculation of Scores Per Training Provider Based on The Evaluations Received**

The online evaluations are analysed in three dimensions.

Reputation: For this purpose, the online evaluations of study and training participants are analysed and the sentiment towards the providers is assessed.

Popularity: For the analysis, the total number of reviews and online contributions to the providers on the Internet is measured.

Customer proximity: This involves analysing the number of fans and followers as well as the interactions on the providers' Facebook channels.

All three assessment dimensions are included in the overall assessment with different weightings. If a provider is represented at several locations, the results of all locations are summarised under the respective umbrella organisation.

## **Step 3 - Determining The Top Providers Of Continuing Vocational Training Based On The Total Number Of Points Achieved**

A list of recommendations is compiled from the overall rating of the training providers, in which the individual providers receive between one and three points. The list of the best training providers is then presented in alphabetical order.

### **The Result**

FOCUS-Business publishes the results of the annual data collection and analysis in the form of the 'Top providers of continuing vocational training' list, which includes 298 entries this year. The top providers of continuing vocational training are published online on the FOCUS-Business website and can be filtered according to certain criteria. In addition to the points rating, this also includes a selection from the countries and regions of the D-A-CH area. The online publication of the list is intended to offer all interested readers a free guide to the market of further education providers and thus contributes to greater transparency (Focus Business, 2023).

The criteria of reputation, popularity and customer proximity do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the quality of the provider in terms of successful learning transfer. Therefore, the informative value of such awards must be questioned.

Furthermore, the author conducted a literature search for studies on the procedure for commissioning trainers and training institutes. Searches were carried out in the JSTOR, EBSCO, Google scholar and scopus databases for the keywords 'commissioning of continuing vocational training' and 'commissioning of trainers in the field of continuing vocational training'. Consequently, there are currently no studies on how trainers and training institutes are commissioned.

The Continuing Vocational Training 2020 report also contains no analyses of how trainers and training institutes are commissioned. (Central Statistics Office, 2022). According to the AES, 53% of all continuing vocational training is commissioned by the employer (Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung and W. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2017, p. 137).

Internet research is named as the most frequently used selection criterion in the author's seminars. Internet research also considers the contributions of trainers and training institutes in social media.

Studies on the effects of the trainers and training institutes commissioned based on the selection criteria mentioned above on successful learning transfer are not available. There is also a lack of studies on which selection criteria are prioritised by the respective commissioning parties.



## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this article, the author has outlined the development of evaluation and learning transfer research and analysed its application in practice.

The participants in the training process are collectively responsible for the successful transfer of learning. The influence of participants and trainers has been researched and described in detail. The same applies to the working environment and the role of the supervisor.

Surveys of company managers show that the learning transfer in in-house training programs is only marginally or at best partially supported (Barth et al., 2023, p. 238). Wißhak emphasises that trainers should be considered as important actors in the promotion of learning transfer in the future (Wißhak, 2022, p. 84). Transfer promotion also requires the support and counselling of participants, as well as close cooperation with the commissioning organisations (Wißhak, 2022, p. 84). To date, little is known about the professional knowledge of trainers about the learning transfer (Koch et al., 2022, p. 90). In addition, the type of training program content can be regarded as a transfer-critical variable (Barth et al., 2023, p. 241).

The following open research questions arise from the author's research:

How do training and learning transfer designs differ according to training content?

How are trainers and training institutes selected and commissioned?

Which criteria are decisive for the commissioning of trainers and training institutes?

What effect do these criteria have on successful learning transfer?

What is the value of awards such as 'Top training provider'?

For the author, the central research gap is the lack of research into how trainers and training institutes are commissioned.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The author's practical experience relates to the D-A-CH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). This means that there is a regional limitation.

The lack of studies on the commissioning of trainers and training institutes reveals a research gap. In addition, cooperation between trainers and the commissioning organisations is seen as conducive to transfer. This once again reveals the research gap described by the author.

There are no studies on how actual cooperation between trainers and client organisations takes place.

Important results on how successful learning transfer can be ensured can presumably be expected here.

Trainers contribute to successful learning transfer with their transfer-promoting behaviour. Teaching general principles and concepts poses a particular challenge. One example of this is basic conflict training courses. In these courses, basic information about the emergence and impact of conflicts is conveyed. In this case, there is no defined target behaviour, and the transfer is designed by and the responsibility of the participants alone. This demonstrates the responsibility of the trainer regarding successful learning transfer.

Recent research has focussed on the development of a test instrument to assess the professional knowledge of trainers (Koch et al., 2022, p. 89). This approach once again underlines the importance of the transfer-promoting behaviour of trainers.

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