

# Investigating Work, Cultural and Life Values of Construction Employees

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As the US construction industry continues to experience a high turnover rate among employees, few studies have examined individual employee values that promote career satisfaction and ultimately lead to retention in the field. While prior work in this area has examined influences on career choice and satisfaction in industrial and organizational psychology broadly, the lack of research within construction has made it difficult for industry stakeholders to operationalize and apply findings within specific company contexts. To better understand the values that construction professionals prioritize when choosing and maintaining their career paths, this study explores the values construction professionals perceive as lacking in and satisfied by their companies. In particular, this study incorporates a framework developed by Brown's Value-Based Theory of Occupational Choice (Brown, 2002) to examine participant responses to two open-ended questions in a survey distributed to 314 employees from different construction companies in the US. Drawing from Brown's theory, findings revealed three overarching values that influence employees' overall career choice: professional work value, professional cultural value, and professional work-life balance value. Overall, this study found that professional work value significantly shapes employees' career selection processes and career satisfaction relative to the other two values, which maintain a minimal impact.

**Key Words:** Professional work value, Professional cultural value, Professional work-life balance value, Occupational Choice, Career satisfaction

## Introduction

The US construction workforce is experiencing a high rate of workforce attrition (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). While the reasons for this attrition are not all negative (e.g., retirement), it is problematic particularly as employment opportunities in the industry are predicted to rise by approximately 790,000 jobs between 2014 and 2024 (Henderson, 2015). An aging workforce, high turnover rate, and an increased number of projected new construction jobs highlights a critical need for the construction industry's human resources planning, particularly regarding the retention of talented professionals currently in the industry. Prior research has begun to address this need by identifying a link between an individual's career satisfaction (i.e., intent to remain in a particular career) and their work values (Brown, 2002; Gutierrez et al., 2012; Bouwkamp-Memmer et al., 2013). Within construction, the achievement of lifetime career values is crucial for both career success and employee retention. Therefore, to promote retention rates within the construction industry, it is imperative to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which employers are supporting employee achievement of career values. This paper presents an initial qualitative study that seeks to explore and identify employee perceptions of company support in achieving career values. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were asked: 1) What values are currently lacking in employees' chosen careers? and 2) What values do employees seek out when choosing a career choice in the construction industry?

### *Brown's Values-Based Theory of Occupational Choice, Satisfaction, and Success*

Brown's Value-Based Theory of Occupational Choice, Satisfaction, and Success (Brown, 2002) served as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Overall, Brown's theory, as shown in Figure 1, seeks to address external factors that influence an individual's career choice. Initially developed to address "cultural neglect"

(Brown, 2002) in research examining career decision-making processes for individuals belonging to minority groups, Brown's theory positions factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), family influence, history of discrimination, gender, mental health, access to information, and self-efficacy as significant values that may influence where and how an individual maintains satisfaction throughout one's career. Per Brown's theory, these factors are captured using three types of values: work, cultural, and life role values. Work values are values that "individuals believe should be satisfied as a result of their participation in the work role" (Brown, 2002) and include career advancement, professional development, salary, and number of work hours. Individuals who emphasize work values in their lives tend to prioritize achievements and accomplishments that can be obtained through their job or career. Cultural values are values that an individual achieves through interpersonal interactions and engagement with social structures, both within and outside the workplace. Individuals who emphasize cultural values tend to prioritize collective social values (e.g., having a "family-like" working environment) over individualistic work values (e.g., getting a promotion). Life role values encompass the valued roles an individual maintains throughout one's life within a variety of social contexts. For example, prior studies identified gender as a limiting factor in career decisions, suggesting that women maintain stronger orientations toward life roles, such as participating in the family, and less on work values (Harpaz & Fu, 1997). While this reference may be somewhat dated in today's society, it provides a useful example for demonstrating life roles, particularly as they may vary based on external factors such as gender (as shown in Figure 1). As defined by Brown, cultural and life values tend to overlap due to their association with interpersonal relationships and social constructs.

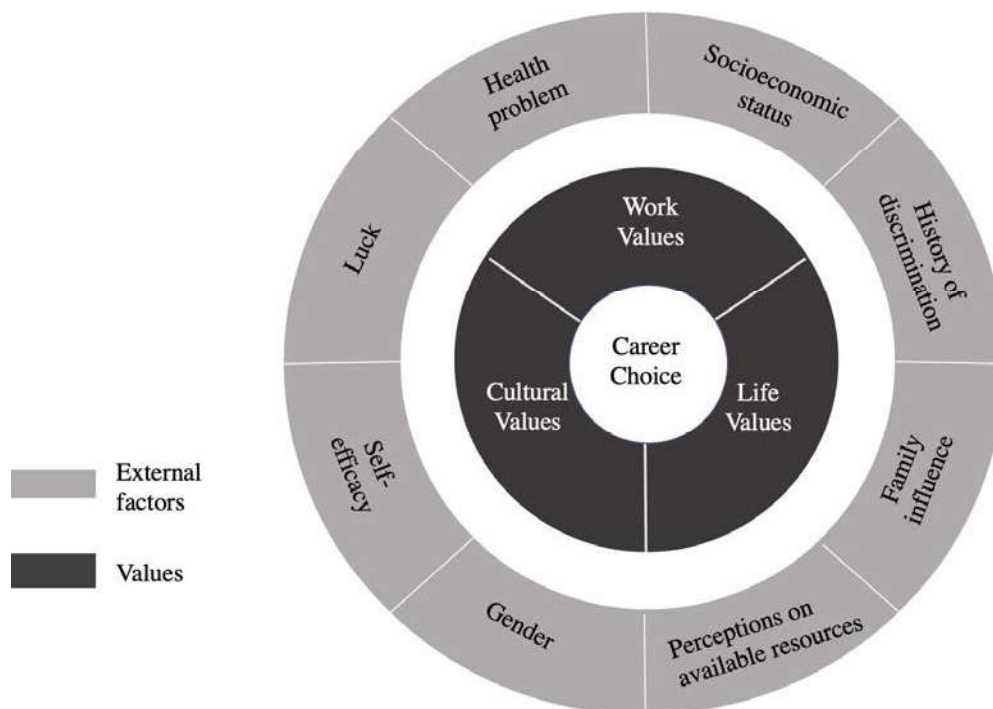


Figure 1: Brown's Value Based Theory (developed from Brown, 2002)

In the context of this study, Brown's constructs of *work value*, *cultural value*, and *life value* were renamed as *professional work value*, *professional cultural value*, and *professional work-life balance value*, respectively. These constructs were renamed to emphasize the various values within and outside of professional organizational contexts (i.e., a company) that still contribute to an individual's overall career satisfaction. For example, professional work value was used to capture the intrapersonal values that an individual believes should be satisfied through the participation of work role (e.g., gaining increases in salary); professional cultural value was used to capture the interpersonal values that individuals believe should be fulfilled through interactions or engagement with workplace environments (e.g., feeling a sense of belonging with co-workers); and professional work-life balance values captured the combined inter- and intrapersonal values that an individual maintains to balance personal life with

professional life (e.g., taking time off to go on vacation with family). Notably, these definitions acknowledge the complex interrelations between the values that an individual maintains within and outside of work.

## Methods

To explore and identify the types of values that influence an employee's overall career satisfaction and decision to remain at a particular company, a survey was distributed to professionals working in the construction industry with titles ranging from senior superintendent to vice president. The survey, in its entirety, consisted of a total of 27 rate, rank, text-entry, and open-ended questions, and sought to gain an initial, comparative understanding of employees' perceptions of company values in relation to their own. For the purpose of this study, data collection and analysis has been focused to examine two text-entry questions to capture participants' emergent values not initially examined within the rate and rank question options. The first question, "What one thing would you change about your current company?" sought to identify values that participants felt their company was currently lacking. The second question asked participants, "What drew you to seek employment at your current company?", which prompted participants to identify key values that initially prompted them to seek employment at the company. These questions were developed in this way to enable respondents to explicitly identify their perceived value alignment with a company prior to employment and discovered value misalignment once employed. Overall, these questions enabled the research team to identify significant values that attracted and influenced construction employees' satisfaction and decisions to continue their careers in the construction industry.

Open-ended responses to each question were collected and analyzed using an inductive qualitative approach (Charmaz, 2014; Thomas, 2006). A qualitative approach was utilized due to the exploratory nature of this study to identify unanticipated and emergent values that contributed to employees' career satisfaction within the construction industry. Due to the qualitative nature of the open-ended questions under investigation here, a qualitative analysis enabled the research team to examine themes and nuance across survey responses. Data analysis was conducted in three phases. In Phase 1, the research team conducted a preliminary round of open coding to gain an initial understanding of the types of values identified by respondents for each question. Open coding is a process that allows researchers to explore data and generate codes without the structure or intervention of a framework (Charmaz, 2014; Thomas, 2006). In Phase 2, open codes were clustered based on value type and Brown's theory (2002). For example, codes identified in Question 1 such as 'Communication (General),' 'Communication (Internal Information Transfer),' 'Communication (Vertical),' and 'Communication (Between Different Operations)' were combined to create an overall category of 'Communication'. This category was then classified as a *professional cultural value* due to its emphasis on interpersonal interactions with individuals in the company. Codes that could not be clustered according to value type or Brown's theory were clustered into a *miscellaneous* category, which included codes such as 'Personality'. This was particularly true for coded segments that lacked context to identify what type of value the respondent was implying such as 'Expertise, Diversity and Innovation'. In Phase 3, categories and code clusters for both questions were scrutinized and checked to ensure that all codes belonging to each identified category captured the same meaning within the context of Brown's theory. In the event that it was found that a code did not align with the overall category value meaning, it was either moved to a category that more-closely aligned with its meaning or added to the miscellaneous category. Throughout the analysis process, the research team met intermittently to discuss emerging codes, clusters, and the application of Brown's theory. The final coding scheme consisted of 28 and 30 codes for Q1 and Q2, respectively. This coding scheme and emergent findings, as agreed upon by the research team, are discussed in the following sections.

## Results

In the survey, respondents were asked to identify: 1) what they would change about their current company, and 2) what drew them to seek employment at their current company. Of the 314 total survey responses, 192 (61%) and 224 (71%) respondents answered Q1 and Q2, respectively. Due to the nature of the response content, some responses aligned with a number of categories and were coded more than once. Therefore, a total of 228 response segments were coded for Q1 and 350 were coded for Q2. To identify the overarching value that respondents felt were lacking in their current company (Q1) and the type of value that attracted them to their current company (Q2),

respondents' text-entry segments were counted based on the type of value to which the segment was assigned. These counts were then converted into percentages to better visualize the distribution of identified values. Overall, professional work value was the most prominent value that was observed to influence employees' career choice and satisfaction for both Q1 and Q2 (see Figures 2 and 3).

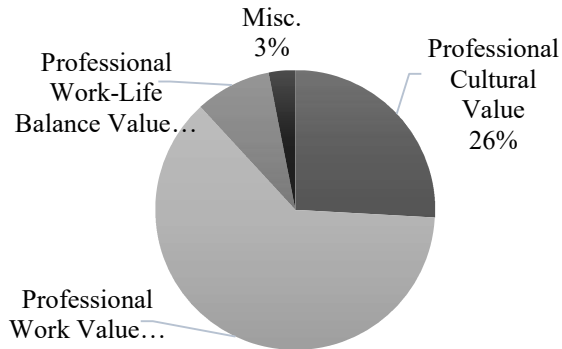


Figure 2: Value Distribution for Q1

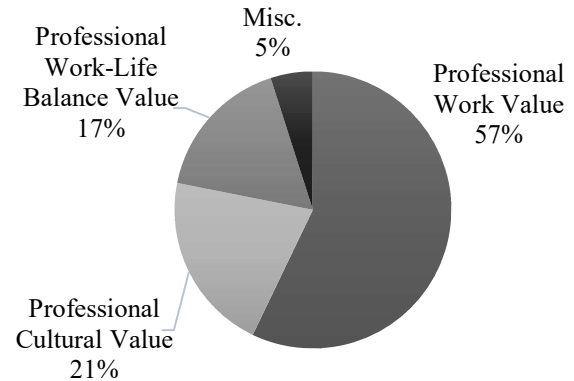


Figure 3: Value Distribution for Q2

To gain a greater understanding of the nature in which these values were operationalized within professional contexts, the most frequent codes from Q1 and Q2 were identified and are shown below in Figures 4 and 5. With the exception of the miscellaneous category, the description of each value was developed and adapted from Brown's theory to encompass unique characteristics of the professional work environment in the construction industry. The three most common responses to Q1 included three professional work values: 1) 'Professional Development' (7%) - employee indicated a desire to have more opportunities for advancement and structured professional development programs; 2) 'Salary' (6%) - employee indicated a desire to receive a higher salary based on the workload; and 3) 'Control of Work Schedule' (6%) - employee indicated a desire to have more flexibility in their work schedule. Also, one of the most common responses to Q1 included one professional cultural value: 'Communication' (11%) - employee indicated a desire to have an efficient communication system among different levels and branches of a company. Lastly, 'Location' (6%) - a desire to stay near home and the community or to travel, was found to be one of the common responses of professional work-life balance value for Q1.

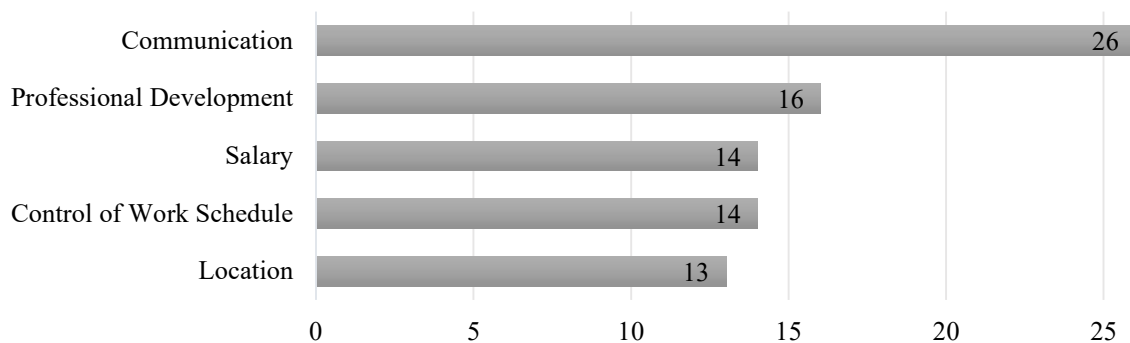


Figure 4: Types of the most frequent Codes from Q1

As shown in Figure 5, the top three most common responses to Q2 included three professional work values: 1) 'Reputation' (19%) - employee indicated a desire to work at a reputable company with opportunities for employee growth; 2) 'Professional Development' (11%) - employee indicated a desire for opportunities for professional growth, having an authorship in work, and advancing in career; and 3) 'Project Type' (8%) - employee indicated a desire to work on a certain type and size of a project. In addition to professional work values, one common response to this question included one professional cultural value: 'Belongingness' (5%) - employee indicated a desire to have a sense of involvement in their company. Plus, 'Location' was also found to be common in Q2. As such, the

respondents in this study tended to emphasize professional work values as values important for career decision-making.

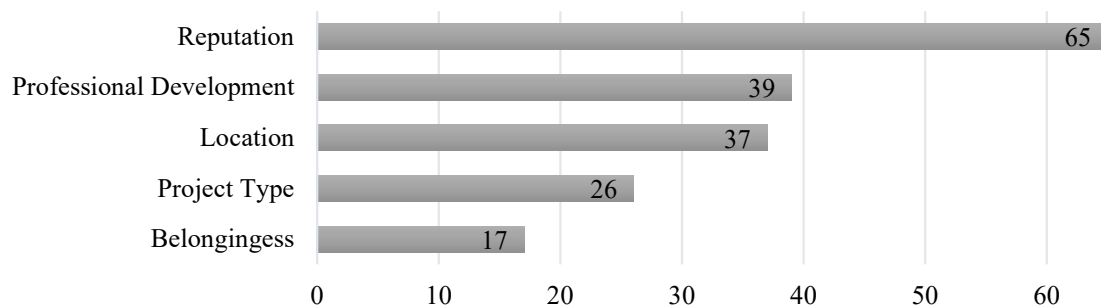


Figure 5: Types of the most frequent Codes from Q2

## Discussion

### *The Prominence of Professional Work Values*

As described in the study results, professional work values were the most commonly reported value that attracted an employee to their current company; however, these values were also highly reported as lacking within those environments. When parsing out the characteristics of this overwhelmingly important value, employees identified professional development, salary, and control of work schedule as lacking within their company (Q1) while company reputation, professional development, and project type were identified as initial attractors to a company (Q2).

As gleaned from participants' survey responses, professional development was operationalized as a desire to have more opportunities for advancement and structured professional development programs (i.e., training). However, within this study, participants sought different professional development opportunities in different ways for different reasons. For example, some participants indicated their desire for company-sponsored opportunities that guided their career paths and made them more competitive in their profession: "I would want my company to be more organized with our development programs. We do a poor job of outlining what the progression will be for our employees." As demonstrated in this segment, this participant attributed this lack of professional development opportunity to the disorganized nature of the company. In contrast, it was also found that employees did not necessarily look for their own professional development opportunities that were geared toward increasing their skills. Rather, they sought out opportunities that boosted their overall work productivity and increased their accountability for assigned tasks: "I would create a 5 day orientation specific to job position. This would help the transition and learn the software, responsibilities and any specific company protocols." Therefore, employees perceived macro-level professional work values (e.g., overall skill development and career advancement) as the company's responsibility while taking ownership of micro-level professional work values (e.g., increasing proficiency in tasks).

Regarding salary, participants' responses indicated a desire to receive a higher salary based on workload. In particular, some participants indicated that their salary was not adequate for expected workload, as one participant stated, "[e]ither higher salary or reduction in workload. We tend to be more lean [*sic*] which creates more work for individuals." Due to the unique characteristic of the construction industry, such as tight scheduling and timelines, it is evident that the employees often work overtime and perceive the salary as hardly compensating for the hours they spent at work. Aligning with responses relating salary and work schedule, other respondents indicated a desire to have more flexibility in their work schedule. However, in many instances, this lack of schedule flexibility and an overloaded work schedule was often attributed to the nature of the construction industry. For example, one participant stated, "the number of hours that need to be worked are higher than I would like at times. This is common to the industry in general." While salary, workload, and schedule flexibility are professional work values

that they would like to see change in their companies, they identify that the lack of these values are no fault of their employer, but are values inherent to working in the industry, itself.

In terms of values that attracted employees to their current companies, a large proportion of participants identified company reputation as the reason for seeking employment at that company in Q2. Although many responses were written as simply as “reputation” and without further explanation, some responses implied a satisfaction from working in a company renowned for its successful history and ongoing employee professional development, as demonstrated by one participant’s statement, “Opportunity to work with a company dedicated to excellence in all aspects of the industry.” Overall, responses exhibited that working in a reputable company provided employees with a stabilized career, professional training, and pride.

In addition to reputation, participants mentioned opportunities for professional growth, increased authorship in work, and advancing in one’s career as values that drew them to their current company. While professional development was a common response in Q1, it was discussed in greater detail in participants’ responses to Q2. The relationship between these aspects of professional development were demonstrated in a response by one participant in which they stated, “Great opportunity to learn and experience a mixture of engineering and business. It was also a smaller company... You can make a bigger difference and have a bigger impact on a smaller company. It gives you a greater sense of accomplishment.” Due to the more individualized nature of these aspects of professional development, this participant expressed an anticipated feeling of accomplishment as a result of choosing to work at their company.

Lastly, project type was one of the professional work values that influenced an individual’s career choice. Participants stated their desire to work on certain types and sizes of projects. For example, large scale and high profile projects were among those desired by participants, “the opportunity to ‘step-up’ and work on large-scale heavy-highway projects.” This participant, in particular, believed the challenges, complexity, and unique characteristics of the project would provide greater career satisfaction.

### *The Complexity of Professional Cultural Values*

Communication was one of the most common, emergent professional cultural values reported in Q1. Participants illustrated inefficiencies and conflicts in communication among different operations, within internal information transfers, and in vertical communication. Including general responses such as, “better communication,” the lack of communication structure and skills of a company were prevalent. From these responses, it was identified that construction companies, which typically have a localized office near their projects, are truly in need of an efficient communication system that is tailored to the company’s specific needs. Consequently, information may not be transferred as easily and coherently as necessary to safely and effectively conduct their work. For example, participants identified a lack of, “ability to communicate the ‘message’ down through the ranks of the company. The highlights are typically there, but a lot of items can get lost in translation.” As a result of communication gaps in their company, the participants expressed a desire to have a better way of communicating among levels and branches of the company.

While communication was the most frequent professional cultural value in Q1, sense of belonging to the company was the most frequently stated professional cultural value in Q2. For participants in this study, sense of belonging was exhibited in responses that described family-like working environments where a “close knit group of people working at the company... care about one another outside of the job itself.” Family-like working environments were often described as companies that gave their employees voice and listened to what they had to say. This type of family-like environment is contrary to company working environments that treat employees as an anonymous asset. In some instances, participants stated a desire to be more involved in the decision-making processes of the company. These participants believed that the inclusion of employees in these processes would prompt and allow the company to more directly share in the setting and achievement of company goals, which would promote collaborative employee engagement and increase satisfaction.

In this study, the most frequent professional cultural values included communication and sense of belonging. However, the research team experienced difficulty in defining professional cultural values based on Brown’s theory. In his theory, Brown merely related cultural values to the workplace context by stating, “the role of cultural values in occupational choice, occupational satisfaction, and occupational success is essentially unexplored at this juncture”

(Brown, 2002b, pg. 53). Although Brown briefly positions cultural values as values belonging to certain types of ethnic groups, the cultural values examined in this study move beyond ethnicity and focuses more specifically on the culture within construction workplace environments and the organizational culture within a construction company. In other words, cultural work values, within the context of this study, encompass the unique characteristics of a cultural background individuals reflect to and from a society in which they are present (Carter, 1991). However, identifying the bounds of cultural values in terms of interpersonal interactions and social relationships as related to workplace contexts has proven to be a more complex task than initially anticipated. This is particularly true when recognizing that workplace interactions can occur outside of the workplace setting. Future work will be necessary to further delineate the variety of professional cultural values that exist within the construction context.

### *The Underlying Influence of Professional Work-Life Balance Values*

Professional work-life balance values were not as significant as the other values, aligning with Brown's theory (Brown, 2002) that positions life value as having a minimal influence in individuals' career path selection. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the overall percentage that professional work-life balance values reported in survey responses were fairly minimal. Therefore, this paper discusses the most frequently-stated codes related to professional work-life balance values for both Q1 and Q2, which is the location of the workplace. Workplace location serves almost as a physical manifestation of professional work-life balance value due to employee negotiations that must take place in terms of working at a location near to or far from family. Some individuals value spending time with their family or near their home-town communities choose to work at locations that meet these values, "my wife was a school counselor locally and with the children established in good schools we did not want to move..." On the other hand, participants also mentioned that they would prefer to work on projects overseas because it "satisfies a lot of personal objectives," such as world travel. Although the participants described in this section each had different preferences on workplace location, they are similar in that they both pursuing career satisfaction through the individualized balance between their professional and personal lives.

## **Conclusion**

During the analysis, the research team found overlapping values in which some coded segments could not be parsed out by a single code or value. One reason for this occurrence may be due the closely intertwined nature of an individual's personal and work life within a profession. For example, for some individuals, a shorter commute time (i.e., location) may be considered as an employee's desire to either be near home and family (i.e., a professional work-life balance value) or to be closer and more productive at work (i.e., a professional work value). A similar overlap was observed for segments identifying the reputation of the company as a value, which could be described as working in a company renowned for providing the best professional development programs (i.e., a professional work value), or for being socially respected by others and elicits pride for both the company and the individual (i.e., a professional cultural value). Overall, future work is necessary to further investigate nuance among the codes that overlap more than one values.

In summary, as the construction industry is facing the increasing rate of employee attrition, it is critical for recruiters to understand the values of individual employees as a means to promote career satisfaction and retention. This study found that professional work values primarily influenced employees' decision-making processes relating to company choice, which also contributed to their overall career satisfaction. While this paper does not include an all-encompassing discussion of Brown's theory (Brown, 2002) as applied within the context of the construction industry, it serves as a stepping stone to help recruiters in understanding an individual's salient values when seeking a future career path. As this paper contributes to the development and implementation of value-based theory in the context of the construction industry, more rigorous studies on professional values should be conducted to fully explore the values necessary for retaining current employees and attracting the next generation of employees into the workforce.

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