

Untapped impact: unlocking the 140 million hour opportunity

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About Cebr

Established in 1991, The Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr), is a leading economics consultancy based in London. It works with businesses, governments, and policymakers, enabling them to make informed decisions through data-driven reports, forecasting, and strategic advice.

www.cebr.com

About Royal Voluntary Service

In every corner of Britain, Royal Voluntary Service mobilises volunteers to support people in need and the NHS. Our volunteers work with healthcare teams and in communities providing practical help and emotional support when people are struggling to cope.

Volunteers are the lifeforce of Britain's communities. Here at Royal Voluntary Service we are developing a digital volunteering platform to connect volunteers to the causes they care about.

royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/volunteer-revolution

Foreword

In an era of rapid change and growing global competition, UK businesses are navigating an increasingly challenging landscape.

From a subdued economic outlook and skills shortages to poor productivity and an uncertain trade landscape, the pressures facing UK firms are both diverse and intensifying. At the same time, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) responsibilities remain firmly on the agenda, and expectations from stakeholders are only intensifying. Investors, consumers, employees, and regulators alike are seeking credible, evidenced delivery of social impact.

This report, commissioned by Royal Voluntary Service and compiled by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr), presents employee volunteering as a compelling mechanism for delivering the "S" in ESG.

It also reveals that if volunteering programmes were better used, the UK economy could benefit from an annual productivity uplift of £32.5 billion. This equates to an estimated £5,239 per employee in professional and managerial roles if they fully used their paid volunteering leave, each year. These are substantial gains, particularly in the context of the UK's dwindling productivity performance in the past decade. At a time when marginal gains are difficult to realise, our analysis suggests that maximising the uptake of employee volunteering represents a low-friction, high-impact opportunity for firms and the wider economy.

Despite this potential, over 140 million hours of employer-supported volunteering time went unused in the past year. This shortfall is not due to a lack of interest. Many employees are eager to contribute, but persistent barriers remain. These include limited access to suitable opportunities, logistical challenges, and a disconnect between corporate ambition and practical implementation.



At the same time, there are encouraging signs of progress. As awareness of the broader benefits of volunteering grows, more businesses are beginning to recognise employee volunteering as a strategic investment. When effectively implemented, it supports workforce wellbeing, strengthens employee engagement, and contributes to organisational performance. Our research shows that companies with higher uptake of volunteering, referred to as Volunteer Leaders, consistently report stronger outcomes across both cultural and commercial measures. This highlights what is possible when programmes are well designed and widely embraced.

However, realising the full economic and social benefits of employee volunteering will require a more systemic approach. Programmes must be scaled, better integrated, and made more accessible. Royal Voluntary Service's new Volunteering Marketplace, supported by £5 million in funding from players of People's Postcode Lottery, is a timely and promising intervention, aiming to reduce friction in the market, improve access to quality opportunities, and enable measurement and accountability.



This research contributes to the growing body of evidence that social value and economic value are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, when employee volunteering is done well, it becomes a lever for productivity, resilience, and inclusive growth, offering a rare alignment of commercial return and social good.

As UK businesses look to build purposedriven, high-performing organisations, this research makes a clear case: employee volunteering is not just a moral imperative, but an economic opportunity. The challenge now is to unlock its full potential.

Sam Miley, Head of Forecasting and Thought Leadership at Cebr



Introduction

Volunteering has a long, rich history in Britain.

Over the centuries the act of giving our time for the good of others has become deeply ingrained in our way of life, in our communities and the NHS.

The generosity of volunteers has helped us through many a crisis, from unprecedented global events to challenges in everyday life.

Employee volunteering – offering workers paid time off to volunteer – in contrast, is a much newer concept but has achieved substantial traction in recent years.



Since the turn of the century, the UK government has actively encouraged businesses to play a part in civil society. Under Tony Blair, employers were urged to release staff one day a year to volunteer¹. Later, in the context of David Cameron's Big Society, businesses were asked to become "a force for good in our society" including supporting communities through employee volunteering².

The situation has evolved significantly since and in 2023, an estimated 2.11 million hours were volunteered during company time within FTSE 100 companies alone³.

This report explores employee volunteering in the UK, and the motivations and rewards it delivers. We set out the huge potential gains for society, businesses and their people, if gifted time was fully used. It's published at a difficult time for many charities and causes, who face a perfect storm of rising costs, increased demand for services and declining volunteer numbers.

The report draws on quantitative research conducted by Censuswide amongst 1000 UK businesses and 2000 adults aged 16+. It also includes analysis by researchers from the Centre of Economic and Business Research (Cebr).

¹BBC News report http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/662692.stm

²Businesses urged to help build Big Society press release December 2010 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/businesses-urged-to-help-build-big-society

³CAF Corporate Giving 2024 https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/corporate-giving-reports-ftse-reports/cafcorporate-giving-2024---the-ftse-100-and-beyond.pdf

Executive summary

2025 has been a year marked by uncertainty and shifting priorities for UK businesses.

Various studies outline productivity as a major weak point for the nation's economy and global research earmarked Britain's employees as among the least engaged and most emotionally burdened in Europe⁴.

No universal solution is available, but our research indicates a new wave of workplace volunteering is quietly reshaping how UK businesses are approaching productivity and employee wellbeing.

Analysis by Cebr indicates it could deliver considerable financial rewards.

A growing trend

Our research found nearly two thirds (62%) of UK businesses now offer paid volunteering days to their employees. In the last 12 months alone, over a quarter (27%) have introduced volunteering programmes. A further 18% plan to do so in the next year. The data suggests nearly all UK businesses could offer workplace volunteering in the future.

Strategic motivators

This growth is likely being driven by a range of external and internal factors. One is demonstrating social impact, and a large majority (87%) of businesses cite employee volunteering as important to their company purpose and/or ESG strategy.

Volunteering is also considered a strategic lever for performance and an effective employee wellbeing and engagement tool. 34% of firms who have, or plan to introduce, programmes consider them a way to tackle employee burnout and one in four (25%) as a route to boost productivity (through skills development and employee satisfaction). Nearly a fifth (17%) say volunteering is a way to meet social impact expectations in procurement processes.



⁴Gallup report, April 2025. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/659279/global-engagement-falls-second-time-2009.aspx



Huge gains to be made

Analysis by Cebr calculates the UK economy could benefit from productivity gains worth \pounds 32.5 billion each year if employee volunteering days were fully used by those in professional and managerial roles. Additionally, the research suggests increasing usage will deliver stronger cultural and commercial outcomes.

140 million lost volunteering hours

Despite good intentions, the research highlights that businesses and workers are not using their volunteering programmes to the full. Over 140 million⁵ hours of volunteering time was lost in the last year alone, with only 31% of the days allocated being taken by employees. Several barriers have been identified, including a lack of flexible and team building opportunities, and difficulties finding suitable activities. This indicates businesses still need help to better leverage their volunteering efforts.

*According to the latest Labour Force survey, during October to December 2024, the number of people aged 16+ in employment was 33.86 million.

⁵According to a Censuswide survey of 2000 UK Adults aged 16+. 30.06% of UK workers are offered paid volunteering days. This equates to 10,176,504 people being offered volunteering days in the UK.* The average number of days offered to all UK workers is 2.34. This equates to an average of 23,794,124 days a year being gifted, or 190,352,994 hours (based on 8 hour day). The mean percentage of volunteering days taken in the last 12 months is 26.22% = 49,907,338 hours taken in the last 12 months with 140,445,656 going unused.

Employee volunteering: a rising movement

A Charities Aid Foundation report in 2024 revealed a 64.9% uptick in hours volunteered by employees of FTSE 100 companies in 2023 compared with the previous year⁶.

Employee volunteering is a growing phenomenon, and one being embraced by organisations of all sizes. Our research found 62% of firms now offer paid volunteering time to their employees. Larger businesses were more likely to have schemes - 71% versus 58% of medium and 55% of small businesses - which given their larger budgets and demands for impact, is to be expected. The number of businesses introducing workplace volunteering initiatives is rising rapidly. Over a quarter (27%) of businesses introduced programmes in the last 12 months and nearly one in five (18%) plan to do so in the next year.

It will be interesting to monitor if this intention converts to action, but the research indicates businesses who don't offer volunteering time are already in the minority.

2.88 days the mean number of volunteering days offered in UK businesses

IT & Telecoms and Finance firms lead on offering employee volunteering



⁶CAF Corporate Giving Report 2024 https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/corporate-giving-reports-ftse-reports/caf-corporate-giving-2024---the-ftse-100-and-beyond.pdf

Businesses say they are looking to employee volunteering to help overcome a variety of internal and external challenges.

36%

Improve employee wellbeing and reduce burn-out

25%

Boost productivity through skills development and engagement

23% To meet ESG goals **30%** Team building

Unequal access

Offering workplace volunteering may now be 'the norm', but not all workers get equal chance to benefit. On average, only half (50%) of employees in companies with programmes are given the opportunity. Just under one in five (19%) firms offer it to all their staff.

This was mirrored in our survey of workers. We found less than a third (30%) have access to paid volunteering days – equivalent to around 10 million people. Higher earners were more likely to be offered paid volunteering time, with those in lower paid positions often missing out.

Just 14% of workers earning £15K or less are offered volunteering days, compared with 47% earning over £55K Volunteering has been proven to be hugely beneficial for individuals – from improved wellbeing and social connection to building confidence and skills – and this translates into benefits for employers too. Therefore, scaling up volunteering isn't just fair – it's good business.

Volunteering preferences

Team building was identified as a top motivator for introducing volunteering programmes, so it is possibly no wonder that team-based activities are favoured by UK businesses. Nearly half (47%) of those with programmes said this was their preferred option, closely followed by skills-based volunteering (46%), where employees can gift their professional expertise.

This type of skills-based activity has been shown to be mutually beneficial for all involved⁷ and unlocking pro bono action for charities in the UK could be worth in the region of £17 billion each year⁸.

But whatever the preferred route, every form of volunteering adds value.

TOP 5 volunteering preferences



We set up a formal volunteering programme two years ago, working alongside partners like Royal Voluntary Service, to tap into their knowledge and expertise, so we could get our offering right. Since starting our journey, we've learnt so much about why volunteering is vital to Britain and the role we, as a business and employer, can play in civil society.

Our employees have very diverse roles and routines, so for us, offering a broad variety of volunteering options has been vital to growing participation. We've also tried to weave volunteering into our company culture as much as possible."

Jess Payne, Director of Social Value at Compass One, part of Compass Group UK & Ireland

Compass Group UK & Ireland has 55,000 employees in the UK, working across different environments, from hospitals, schools and defence sites to workplaces and sports stadia.

Volunteering pays

The UK is grappling with a significant productivity challenge which poses a serious threat to economic growth and resilience.

This can be attributed to a wide range of factors. A lack of investment in innovation and skills is one example. Indeed 77% of mid-market business leaders believe a lack of necessary skills is affecting their productivity⁹.

Another is the UK's health status, with the hidden cost of employee sickness increasing by £25billion since 2018, due to its impact on productivity levels¹⁰.

There's no quick fix, but there's growing evidence that volunteering could be a strategic lever to increase productivity - supporting skills development and improving employee wellbeing and engagement.

It's a theme we explored last year with economists at PBE. They calculated that volunteering adds at least £4.6 billion per year to the economy in relation to productivity gains¹¹. Building on this, new analysis conducted by Cebr for this report, estimates the UK economy could stand to benefit from productivity gains worth £32.5 billion each year - £5,239 per employee working in professional and managerial roles – if employee volunteering days were fully utilised.

And the key point here is *utilisation*. To realise these productivity gains businesses need to maximise the volunteering time. That's not the case right now - less than one third (31%) of paid volunteering hours were used in the last 12 months.

These potential productivity gains could be higher still if the voluntary efforts of those in other job roles were also considered and if programmes were expanded to more, or even all employees.

⁹Grant Thornton – The skills gap and its impact on productivity - https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/insights/the-skillsgap-and-its-impact-on-productivity/

¹⁰IPPR – Hidden cost of employee sickness - https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-hidden-annual-cost-ofemployee-sickness-is-up-30-billion-since-2018

¹¹A probono bonus – the impact of volunteering on wages and productivity. Royal Voluntary Service and PBE – www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/probonobonus

Volunteering trailblazers

Further analysis by Cebr presents even more incentive to increase uptake. Researchers found those businesses with a higher uptake and usage of volunteer days – coined Volunteer Leaders¹² – see the strongest outcomes from their programmes.

Impact of workplace volunteering	Volunteer Leaders	Companies with under-used programmes
Improved employee motivation	53%	42%
Stronger wellbeing and engagement	52%	37%
Enhanced reputation in the community and with clients	49%	37%
Increased employee skills and confidence	37%	33%
Help attracting new talent	33%	30%
Commercial gain (e.g. increased productivity)	29%	28%

¹²Volunteer Leaders are defined as the top 20% of businesses in terms of volunteer day usage, with employees volunteering on average 1.44 days. Based on Censuswide research of UK businesses

Wellbeing, skills and engagement

Workplace sickness is costing UK businesses billions each year¹³, with poor mental health alone impacting employers to the tune of £51bn per year¹⁴.

Our research indicates employee wellbeing is a core concern.

Around 3 in 10 businesses say an increasing number of employees are experiencing burnout

39%

of businesses cite employee wellbeing as one of their main challenges

It's obvious then why employee wellbeing is a top business priority. Yet, researchers at the University of Oxford discovered success rates of workplace wellbeing interventions are "murky", with one notable exception – volunteering¹⁵. This also came across in our study – 44% of firms said engaging in volunteering has improved employee wellbeing. And in fact, it was the top motivator for introducing schemes. 36% of businesses which have introduced or are introducing volunteering are doing so to improve employee wellbeing and reduce burn-out.

Further evidence comes from our own volunteers, who regularly report higher levels of wellbeing than the UK average¹⁶.

46%

say employee volunteering is effective as a wellness benefit

¹³IPPR – Hidden cost of employee sickness

¹⁴Deloitte, May 2024 - https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/about/press-room/poor-mental-health-costs-uk-employers-51billion-a-year-for-employees.html

¹⁵University of Oxford, Wellbeing Research Centre, January 2024 - https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.12418

¹⁶Royal Voluntary Service annual volunteer survey. The survey ran from 13th January to the 3rd Feb 2025. 2301 participated in some aspect of the survey; with 1768 completing most of questions. Data compared to ONS's UK measures of National Wellbeing dashboard

Skilling up

Evidence links increased skills with improved productivity. They're important to economic growth and prosperity and can determine potential earnings and employability and impact general life satisfaction.

Volunteering is being recognised as a valuable tool for enhancing the skills of their employees - one in four (25%) businesses questioned cited boosting productivity through skills development and employee satisfaction as a reason for introducing volunteering. And it's working. In a recent survey of our own volunteers, 6 in 10 under 45 said skills used or developed through volunteering had made them more employable or helped them into employment¹⁷.

Volunteering, it seems, has many powers. Through greater participation in volunteering programmes, and by extending them to more employees, there are considerable gains to be made.



¹⁷Royal Voluntary Service annual volunteer survey. The survey ran from 13th January to the 3rd Feb 2025. 2301 participated in some aspect of the survey; with 1768 completing most of questions.

Delivering the S in ESG

Corporate responsibility and ESG have continued to rise up the corporate agenda in recent years, as pressure builds from stakeholders for companies to verify their 'good' credentials. It's a lucrative business, and the global ESG market is predicted to surpass \$40 trillion by 2030¹⁸.

Demonstrating social value is also increasingly central to public sector procurement. The Government's evolved Social Value Model – aligned to the new National Procurement Policy Statement – for example, sets out a range of priorities focusing on issues like health, skills, and economic growth¹⁹.

Our research shows businesses are actively looking to improve their social impact and value

We have set social impact goals and targets	27%
Social impact is at the heart of our business model	27%
Social impact is a top priority for the business	28%
The best way we can deliver social impact is through employee volunteering	29%
Volunteering is key to delivering social impact	31%
Social impact is a growing priority	33%
We are keen to do more to increase our social impact	35%

¹⁸Bloomberg Intelligence February 2024 - https://www.bloomberg.com/professional/insights/sustainable-finance/esgaum-set-to-top-40-trillion-by-2030-anchor-capital-markets/

¹⁹Procurement policy note 002: The Social Value Model https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ppn-002-takingaccount-of-social-value-in-the-award-of-contracts/procurement-policy-note-002-the-social-value-model-html

Our research indicates employee volunteering is helping firms deliver on the "S" in ESG. An overwhelming majority (87%) of the companies questioned cited employee volunteering as 'important' to their company purpose and/or ESG strategy, and for a third (31%) it's considered key to delivering social impact.

Volunteering also builds social capital, connecting people, fostering trust and encouraging cooperation, which leading economists identify as a key driver of economic growth and stronger communities and workplaces²⁰.

Social responsibility is a key driver for workplace volunteering:

23%

of businesses want to meet ESG goals

25%

of businesses want to connect to the community they serve

17%

of businesses want to meet social impact expectations in procurement

Doing the right thing and evidencing impact will need to be intrinsically woven into businesses' fabric in the years to come. Employee volunteering should be thought of as a highly valuable tool, and one that yields demonstrable results.

Measuring up

Employee volunteering makes social value visible. However businesses need to be able to effectively measure and quantify the effects of their activities. It's a mixed picture currently. Two fifths (40%) of businesses admit they do little or no evaluation of their volunteering programmes.

Having a formal strategy, setting KPIs and measuring impact is a vital part of the process. But metrics should go beyond purely hours donated and take stock of the broader outcomes.

²⁰Social Capital 2025 - The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Social-Capital-2025_The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations.pdf

A missed opportunity

140 million employee volunteering hours went unused last year.

A growing number of businesses now provide employee volunteering opportunities, surpassing those that do not. It's heartening news, but although more are offering volunteering, on average under a third (31%) of the hours available were actually used in the last 12 months. An estimated 140 million hours to employees went to waste.

Why does this matter? It's significant as UK charities and causes, need support more than ever. Reduced funding, financial uncertainty and policy changes such as Employer National Insurance Contributions (ERNICs) and the National Living Wage (NLW) are taking their toll. As a result, 68% of charity and voluntary organisations²¹ anticipate an increased reliance on volunteers.

This is set against a backdrop of already dwindling volunteer numbers²² and increased demand for services²³.

Volunteers are the lifeforce for so many charities and causes, and are vital to delivering their work. Unlocking this unused employee volunteering time could be transformational in its effects – improving lives and communities nationwide.

Reducing barriers

Responsibility for low utilisation of employee volunteering time should, and cannot, be laid solely at the door of businesses. Historically, organising activities has not been straightforward, from identifying causes that align with business values to sourcing suitable opportunities and securing employee buy-in.

The voluntary and private sectors have also sometimes had conflicting priorities and needs, adding to the complexity.



²¹Paying the price: VCSE Barometer Wave 9 report. https://www.ntu.ac.uk/media/documents/academic-schools/nbs/ Paying-the-Price-VCSE-Barometer-Wave-9-Report-March-2025.pdf

²²Community Life Survey 23/24 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-volunteering-and-charitable-giving

²³Charities Aid Foundation research of 84 UK charity leaders, October 2024. https://www.cafonline.org/home/aboutus/press-office/charities-struggle-to-meet-growing-demand-amid-financial-strain#:~:text=The%20research%20 among%20784%20UK,similar%20survey%20was%20carried%20out.

Our research found businesses face common barriers with employee volunteering

Lack of flexible opportunities

25%

Difficulties finding the right volunteering roles

20%

Slow processes/too much red tape

20%

Not enough team opportunities

18%

Workers too face obstacles. Amongst those unable to take their full allowance of volunteering time:

30%

were unable to fit volunteering around work commitments

29%

admit to being worried to ask for time off to volunteer

Addressing the flexibility issue

Struggling to find the right roles and lack of flexible volunteering opportunities came across strongly in our research. It's a recurring issue, and one we've been working alongside others in the voluntary sector to address.

We believe accelerating the availability of flexible and accessible voluntary roles could revolutionise volunteering, not just in the UK's workplaces, but across the whole country.

30%

of businesses say more flexible ways for staff to volunteer would increase participation

Central to this work is the development of our new Volunteering Marketplace which includes a game-changing digital volunteering platform, made possible thanks to support from players of People's Postcode Lottery.

Launching late 2025, the platform aims to be a long-term asset for everyone, and the largest digital community for flexible, accessible volunteering opportunities.

It will support charities to recruit volunteers, and also help organisations more easily link employees with volunteering roles to fit around other commitments. Significantly, business users will be able to track and measure the impact of their efforts.

Conclusion

This report has outlined how employee volunteering could deliver financial gains through increased productivity and help meet social impact targets.

It has demonstrated the large role organisations can play in building back civil society and how their people can benefit from this.

The challenge now is realising this opportunity so we can mobilise more volunteers for a better Britain.

Employee volunteering a high-value opportunity

- **Productivity gains:** valued at £32.5 billion to the UK economy annually
- Happier, more engaged employees: more than half of 'volunteer leaders' see improvements in motivation and wellbeing and engagement
- **Skill up:** 34% see increases in employees' skills and/or confidence, even when uptake is low
- **Social impact goals:** 1 in 3 consider volunteering as key to delivering social impact

Key recommendations

Offering paid volunteering time has become a standard business practice. However, the greatest outcomes will be achieved through making sure this time is actually used. Workplace volunteering programmes should be actively championed with voluntary work becoming core to a company's DNA. Businesses should also assess which volunteering formats (and causes) best suit their goals and employees, as ongoing engagement may offer more value than a one-off event.

Motivations for introducing employee volunteering programmes are wide ranging. To gain maximum benefit there's a strong argument to expand schemes to more workers. We need to level the playing field and ensure anyone who wants to volunteer through their workplace has equal opportunity to do so, regardless of position or seniority.

Volunteering pays; boosting productivity and helping businesses tackle complex challenges and demonstrate social impact. To further substantiate this value proposition and gather evidence for stakeholders, robust measurement, data collection and evaluation needs to become a fundamental element of volunteering programme design.

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Greater flexibility and accessibility are central to reducing barriers to participation, in businesses and more widely. This should be driven by the voluntary sector, working together to accelerate the availability of flexible roles and via collaboration with employers to create mutually beneficial offers. Through our joint efforts, employee volunteering could fulfil its potential to drive significant business value and create positive change for the UK.

Methodology

Research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 1,000 HR Decision Makers in UK businesses (aged 21+), with a minimum of 50 working for FTSE 350 companies. The data was collected between 27.02.2025 - 04.03.2025.

An additional survey was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 1,949 Nationally Representative UK Respondents. The data was collected between 28.02.2025 - 03.03.2025

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

Analysis was conducted by **The Centre for Economics and Business Research** (Cebr). To estimate the potential productivity uplift from volunteering in 2024, Cebr drew on data from <u>Pro Bono Economics</u>, which calculated the productivity gain for an individual in a professional/managerial role who volunteers.

Cebr updated this figure to reflect 2024 values by using the latest official earnings data from 2023 and applying the wage growth for 2024 to estimate the current average salary. Cebr then applied the original uplift ratio from the PBE report to calculate the updated per-person productivity benefit. To assess the total potential impact, Cebr used results from Censuswide survey of a representative sample of 2,000 UK adults to estimate the proportion of professionals/ managers who are offered volunteering days. This percentage was applied to the total number of workers in those roles. For a maximum-impact scenario, Cebr assumed all employees in professional/managerial roles offered volunteer days used their allocated volunteer days. By multiplying the per-person benefit by the number of qualifying individuals, Cebr estimated a total potential productivity boost of £32.5 billion to the UK economy in 2024.



royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/ volunteer-revolution

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