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Death to the RFP



The RFP has been king of procurement for too long. It's time for a coup.

By Ryan Hunter

When my family moved into our house, we had a bizarre problem: The prior owners added a room on the back of the house, and every time there was a rainstorm, water would seep out from the doorframe. I don't know anything about roofs, so we had to hire a professional.

Think for a moment: What would you do if you needed a roofer?

Our process was something like this:

- Compile a list of roofers, partly by asking neighbors for recommendations and partly by looking online for well-reviewed local contractors.
- Call the top four to five roofers. Describe the problem for five minutes, get their initial thoughts on what's happening, confirm their interest and availability to do the work, and get a sense of whether they would be good to work with.
- Invite two to three roofers to look at the roof, do a deeper diagnosis, and provide estimates. Pay attention to where they agree and where they disagree.
- Pick the roofer that seems to provide the best value—some combination of competence and low price.
- Finally, work with that chosen roofer to make a more specific plan and timeline. (For example, we had no choice but to fix some flashing around a skylight to resolve the leak. We also found some other shingles that are wearing out, but determined that we could reasonably wait a couple of years to replace them.)

That's what we did. It was annoying, but we found a decent roofer, and within a couple weeks, the repair was made. This year's rainstorms have not resulted in any weeping doorways.

Most people follow a process similar to this when they need to buy professional services: find a list of qualified vendors, identify ways to narrow them down, obtain estimates from the top few, and then make a choice.

However, this is not how the government—*any government*, at least in the United States—buys professional services.

The government uses formal competition to procure goods and services above a specific dollar threshold. The most common such procurement method is a request for proposal—the RFP.

If you have spent much of your career working in the public sector, you have perhaps become inured to how *bizarre* the typical RFP process is to everyone else.

Using the RFP process, choosing a roofer might look like this:

- First, you begin by describing the tasks you want the roofer to do. You don't know anything about roofing, or even what's wrong, but you do your best.
- You decide how long it will take and how much you're willing to pay. For example, you want this done in a weekend, and you will only pay $1,000.
- You don't call roofers. Instead, you create a 20-page document, post it on the web, and wait for roofers to contact you.
- *If* roofers contact you, you refuse to speak to them. Instead, you will only accept questions from them in writing.
- Some roofers ask questions about the current condition of your roof. The roofers aren't allowed to inspect your roof—you just clamber up there, take a look, and answer the questions two weeks later, in writing, as best you can.
- Prospective roofers must spend 10 unpaid hours detailing in writing the way that they will fix your roof

(which, again, they have not yet inspected). They must also send you resumes for every member of their team, a budget in an Excel spreadsheet that you created, and provide three signed letters of reference from prior roofing clients.

- You created a scoring rubric before all this, and you will only choose the roofer that scores best in your predetermined rubric. But you have a set of social concerns beyond your roof, so you also require each prospective roofer to document what city they are incorporated in; whether the company uses recycled materials; the race, gender, sexual orientation, and veteran status of the owner of the firm and the roofers who will come to your house; and what laws their local government has passed about abortion.
- It takes two months to create your request, one month for roofers to respond, and another two months for you to evaluate the prospective roofers. (You should probably go buy a bucket in the meantime.) However, you can't make the decision yourself; you must convene a panel of your neighbors to decide for you.
- If all goes well, six months later, the selected roofer (who still hasn't seen your roof) will then be expected to complete the required tasks within the timeframe and budget you originally agreed upon. You hope that the *actual* problem with your roof won't take longer than a weekend to fix.

That's how our government buys professional services. The result is not only a massive expenditure of time and effort, but also a lot of leaky roofs and water damage (mostly metaphorical, but sometimes literal).

I've been exposed to every side of government solicitations: When I worked in the San Francisco Controller's Office, I helped write and evaluate RFPs for services the city was buying. Now, as a seller to the government, I not only respond to dozens of RFPs every year; I also help public agencies streamline their procurement processes.

Here's the truth: *Everyone* hates RFPs.

The RFP mechanism may work fine for well-defined and low-complexity purchasing, but they're poorly suited to the massively complicated construction, engineering, information technology (IT), and professional services work they're mostly used for. RFPs take massive amounts of staff and vendor time. They often do a poor job of identifying the best vendor—or just fail outright.

In my experience, public servants hate issuing them and bend over backward to avoid them. Vendors hate responding to them.

I think it's time to end the reign of the RFP.

How It Got This Way

However, before we dismantle, we have to remember that the RFP (and its predecessor, competitive sealed bidding) was a needed reform. The RFP exists for good reason:

In the 19th century, elected officials had basically unchecked control of government purchasing. They used that control to reward friends, cronies, and family members. Under the spoils system, the electoral winner didn't just set policy, he was also permitted to funnel government money to his political supporters.

In New York City, William "Boss" Tweed was that winner. Construction of the New York County Courthouse in Manhattan was budgeted at $250,000. Tweed built it for $13 million.[1] The city paid Tammany Hall-affiliated plasterer Andrew Garvey nearly $3 million for what historians estimate was $20,000 worth of work, earning him the title "Prince of Plasterers." In post-Civil War Philadelphia, James McManes' "Gas Ring" used the city-owned gas utility as a patronage machine, rewarding politically connected contractors with lucrative municipal work while extracting kickbacks and protecting favored firms from competition.[2]

Public backlash led to a series of reforms: public posting of solicitations, competitive sealed bidding, and transparency in contractor payments. The modern RFP is a safeguard against corruption, graft, nepotism, and kickback schemes.

While that type of government corruption is thankfully rarer today than in 1860, it is by no means gone. Multiple executives from my time in San Francisco are serving federal prison sentences stemming from misdirecting public contracts.[3,4]

The safeguards in the RFP were implemented for a reason. Reverting to 19th-century good ol' boys networks isn't an option.

However, we need to examine the problems with RFPs.

RFPs Are Expensive

RFPs take a *ton* of time, in every sense of the word:

- First, calendar time: the last jurisdiction we worked with took 11 months to solicit and sign a professional services contract. In 2022, Gartner estimated the average government IT procurement cycle



to last 22 months, about triple the private sector.

- Second, staff time: A 2024 NCPP study found that a typical complex RFP consumed about 139 hours of government labor, at an estimated cost of $17,419.
- Third, vendor time: Let's assume that compared to the NCPP study, it takes vendors about half as much time to respond to an RFP as it took staff to prepare it, at a similar hourly cost. The last RFP our firm responded to had 10 vendors, which implies that the total cost of vendors' time in the solicitation was about $87,000.

So to sum up, a complex RFP could quite easily take a year or more, consuming more than $100,000 in staff and vendor resources, and over 800 working hours.

Generally, jurisdictions use formal competitive RFPs for projects above the competitive bid threshold. Those thresholds vary, but mid-sized cities frequently have thresholds set at $50,000. They use the same RFP process for a $60,000 contract as for a $6 million contract.

In other words, public agencies quite frequently incur more costs evaluating the contract than the contract itself is worth.

For vendors, any time spent preparing the proposal is not compensated. You might argue that it's not the public's problem and that I shouldn't include the vendor's time in the RFP cost. But if a vendor must respond to 10 RFPs before winning one, they still have to pay their staff. That overhead gets baked into their billable rates on the work they *do* win; the government winds up paying for it one way or another.

RFPs Are Written by People Who Don't Know the Work

If an agency is soliciting a firm to do work for them, it's because the agency lacks the capacity or expertise to do the work. After all, if it knew how to do the work, it would generally be cheaper and more effective for the agency to do it.

In everyday life, if my roof is leaking, I rely on a roofer's expertise to tell me what's wrong, how to fix it, and what it will cost.

Yet RFPs typically require the buyer to describe, in great detail, a scope of work, a not-to-exceed budget, a set of deliverables, and relevant qualifications to do work that they fundamentally don't understand.

If I hired a roofer the way we write an RFP, I would have required a roofer to give me a cost estimate not to exceed $1,000 to give me new shingles and roofing paper in an area over the leak, when in fact the cause of the leak turned out to be the flashing around a skylight 10 feet away.

Scopes of work and qualifications are often misspecified, prescribing an approach that won't address the underlying

problem: We want to assess public opinion about this issue, *therefore* you should run a survey. We want to develop project management expertise, *therefore* deliver us a four-hour training that covers the following 17 topics.

RFPs lack any way to challenge or reframe the problems that agencies are trying to solve. Consultants often *know* that the tasks an agency requests won't deliver the result they want. But they don't have a mechanism to say, "If you want to know what your patrons think, our experience tells us that focus groups yield better feedback than surveys."

My least favorite version of this is when an agency asks for a report with recommendations using language such as, "Consultant will assess the city's hiring process and produce a set of recommendations for streamlining..." I have yet to find an agency that fixed its problems with a report.

Agencies ask consultants to write reports because that is the only thing they know how to request. They don't know how to write a procurement request to speed up hiring.

Finally, RFPs are long and complex documents, and mistakes can be made in creating or repurposing them. They are often confusing, and staff may be tempted to cut corners trying to produce the next one.

Vendor Evaluations are Structured as One-Way Conversations

It's the buyer's job to ask, and the vendor's job to answer questions.

Recently, our firm was invited to a final round interview for a seven-figure contract for an organizational assessment. We were expected to describe our qualifications in a PowerPoint presentation and answer a list of questions, but at no point in this process was there an opportunity to talk to the client about what problem they were trying to solve, why they wanted help, what they'd tried in the past, or what they liked or didn't like about our proposed cost or approach.

After this, we needed to prepare a "best and final offer" without getting any direct feedback from them about our proposal—only vibes. From our perspective, there was nothing "best" or "final" about our offer. But because the process allowed no space for conversation, we did our best and crossed our fingers.

The sum of all this is that it's distinctly challenging to elicit a high volume of strong proposals. The proposals you *do* receive do not reflect vendors' best thinking about your problem: They're responding to the tasks that you've specified.

RFPs Assume the Solution is Clear Up Front

When the roofer came to my house, he said the issue was *probably* related to my skylight, but the scope and cost of the repair would depend on whether there was rot or structural damage beneath it. He could give me rough cost estimates based on different scenarios, but the only way to know for sure was to start the work, rip up the shingles, and evaluate.

Real life is like this. We can describe symptoms of our problems, but solutions aren't immediately clear. We expect experts to inspect, diagnose, and explain options.

RFPs discourage this kind of judgment in favor of adherence to timelines and prescribed deliverables. RFPs almost universally assume a waterfall approach to project management—in other words, we can start the project with a detailed plan that, if followed, will produce exactly the intended result.

The trouble, of course, is that life is rarely like this. Most problem-solving is iterative: We make our best guess about the leak, open up the roof, and reassess. In a white-collar setting, that could be a rapid diagnostic on a hiring process, which provides some initial hypotheses about what's hampering results and where to intervene first, which could be limited technology, clunky processes, or poor management. Even in construction, site conditions can easily throw a wrench into carefully laid plans: when work on a new gym reveals an old family graveyard or a 1940s Army storage tank, those plans go out the window.

The good news is, you can do iterative problem-solving with rigor: the field of Agile project management is exactly this. The bad news is that Agile has rarely spread beyond software development, and even there, it's the exception rather than the rule.

My firm once worked with a jurisdiction that needed (but lacked) Agile contracting to digitize its special-event permits. Permitting a music festival or a marathon involves coordinating applications across a dozen departments, from Police to Public Health. The ultimate goal was to have these all built into one streamlined system—but that would require deep process changes from all dozen departments.

The obvious first step was to create a digital umbrella *intake*, which could then initiate each department's existing permit processes. Once that was working well, the permitting processes could be integrated into the umbrella one by one.

Procurement made this impossible.

Changes to the permitting system needed to be made by a contracted third-party integrator, and the city got only *one* chance to write those changes into a work order. They needed to specify,

up front, every business requirement that the consultant would need to build into a new system.

Everyone knew this wasn't possible. But it's what the contract required.

And the procurement team had no expertise in drafting contracts any other way.

RFPs Don't Reduce Risk

Maybe all this would be worth it if it produced a strong product. But the reality is that many RFPs and the projects they produce fail.

When you decide to spend a year and hundreds of hours of staff time issuing an RFP, you're running some huge risks:

- Fingers crossed that vendors see your RFP and are interested in it. Lots of RFPs fail due to getting no qualified bidders. One study found that 44% of federal procurement dollars went to contracts that received only one bid. That's not competition; that's going through the motions.[5]
- Fingers crossed that you make it all the way through the RFP process without accidentally breaking one of a thousand rules that will require you to throw out the results and start over. In my experience, as many as a quarter of solicitations have a problem that requires them to be reissued or significantly revised. Governments rarely track canceled or reissued solicitations.[6]
- Fingers crossed that you described vendor qualifications and created scoring criteria such that you *actually* wind up with a competent vendor. It's not at all unusual for the highest-scoring vendor to fail to perform.[7]
- Fingers crossed that the tasks you asked the vendor to do are actually what's needed.

The entire solicitation process is built on the premise that the vendor will try to "pull one over" on you. We replaced cronyism with formalism: That's why we've constructed a wall of arcane purchasing rules, set rigid budget constraints without market knowledge, exclude vendors' expertise from the purchasing decision, and require vendors to sign 17 forms.

RFPs are falsely seen as risk-reducing. Often they generate risk.

A Foundation of Mistrust

I sometimes say that your process is precisely tuned to give you precisely the results you're getting right now. So let's recognize that the RFP was built on a foundation of mistrust: The process presupposes that government buyers will attempt to give government money to cronies, and vendors selling to government will attempt to soak the government dry.

That's the DNA of the RFP: *suspicion* and *compliance*.

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But that same formalism today obscures quality and value. A Kafkaesque process is rife with opportunities for abuse.

I work with many purchasing teams, and most are really asking only one question: "Is it legal?"

The truth is, many anti-competitive practices are perfectly legal.

Kickback schemes today are rare. When they do happen, they often happen as much *through* the RFP process as around it: the bribed officials in Chicago's red light camera scandal funneled $124 million to a preferred contractor through a fully "compliant" RFP process. The city official who rigged it sat on the RFP evaluation committee.[8]

The Worst-Kept Secret in Government

What I'm about to tell you is the worst-kept secret in government:

Most public managers do everything in their power to never issue an RFP.

There are myriad ways to avoid an RFP: You can scope the contract under the threshold. (Look at your city's recent contracts and see if there aren't *a lot* of $49,000 or $99,000 contracts.) You can spread the work over a couple of fiscal years. You can find a contract that another department used and "piggyback" off it. You can argue that only one vendor provides the service and enter into a sole-source agreement. There are many such cases.

But sometimes you just can't avoid issuing a solicitation.

As we've said, opening an RFP process is a massive risk, in part because it's an ineffective way to identify the best vendor. Many agencies have already identified a vendor that they would like to do the work.

The second worst-kept secret is that there are a thousand ways for agencies to ensure their preferred vendor wins the RFP.

They can involve them in writing recommendations or specifications that might later inform the solicitation. They can impose rigorous qualifications that only their preferred vendor will meet. They can ensure that the RFP is posted with no notice and only kept open for the minimum amount of time to reduce the risk that other vendors apply. They can build the scoring criteria so that it culminates in a highly subjective interview process.

Of course, these strategies are not in the spirit of open competition, but they are generally legal and common. As a vendor, I usually assume that half of the open solicitations I see are earmarked for another company. The frustration is that it's impossible to know which half.[9]

The Best Public Servants Have Learned to Subvert the RFP Process

I quite strongly believe that effective public leaders are trying to achieve the goals I described earlier: stewarding taxpayer dollars by making the most effective use of *both* staff time and budget dollars and finding excellent vendors that do quality work for reasonable prices.

It's *precisely because* the RFP as a tool fails at those things that they have treated it as a *barrier to be worked around* rather than a tool to get things done.

Because traditional RFPs are such a poor vehicle for determining best-fit vendors, *real* assessment of vendor qualifications occurs outside the formal solicitation process. Most public managers act just like me with my roof: they'd like to use a trusted vendor who's done good work in the past, or failing that, find other reasonable options through informal networks such as asking their friends and colleagues who they trust.

If that sounds nefarious to you, consider that this is how we buy things in just about every other domain of life. As a homeowner, it's how I chose a roofer. As a small business owner, it's how I chose a web designer. It's how major firms work, too: Google can call a trusted vendor and sign a contract next week if it chooses.

Death to the RFP

I've argued that the most competent public servants have learned to subvert the RFP process by avoiding it entirely or bending it to their will.

But also: That's a *tragedy*.

What we need is to channel the energy of public sector leaders into creating *alternatives* to the RFP process that actually deliver what they hope to achieve—excellent goods and services,



I have never—not once, in decades of public work—seen someone who looked forward to running an RFP process. But why not? What if we could create a purchasing process that was fun? Engaging? Exciting?

value for taxpayers, and less time and effort—*without* compromising transparency and competition.

What if we just acknowledged that public servants have to bend or break solicitation rules to get good work done, and redesign procurement in light of that reality instead of pretending it doesn't exist? If we want public buyers to use official channels instead of workarounds, then those channels must work as well or better than their current workarounds.

It's time to do something really new, not a slightly faster version of something that was innovative in the New Deal decades ago. It's time for us to develop a new form of public purchasing. We need forward-looking cities or states to go beyond just innovating on the RFP and experiment with developing new models.

I don't have one grand plan for what those new models should look like. I would *love* to work with public servants to try a variety of new approaches and see what works. I believe these new solutions should do a few things:

- **Bring back human problem-solving.** We should have a normal, professional, human conversation where public agencies and potential vendors explore together the problem an agency is trying to solve, which approaches might work or fail, and where each vendor is a strong fit and where they're not.
- **Lead with problems to solve and outcomes to achieve, not tasks. They should acknowledge that buyers need vendor expertise and invite vendors as partners.** Instead of telling vendors what we want them to do, we should tell them what we need to accomplish and let them propose the best way to do it. We should let each vendor propose the diagnosis and solution they do best and choose between approaches that might be quite different. As my grandmother would say, there's more than one way to skin a cat.
- **Reduce time and effort for vendors *and* staff.** The onerous, time-consuming RFP process incentivizes firms to take their business elsewhere. What if, at least as a first screening round, we committed to single-page solicitations and responses, then required full proposals only from the top qualified respondents? That would broaden the applicant pool while wasting less of everyone's time. 18F's California child-welfare procurement managed to reduce a 1,500-page solicitation to 10.
- **Become an asset to staff, not a hindrance.** I have never met a public sector leader who was excited to run a solicitation because it would be a useful tool to find the most qualified vendor. That's a shame. Let's design a process that better empowers buyers and creates real confidence in the outcome.



An RFP Process That's Fun?

I have never—not *once*, in decades of public work—seen someone who looked forward to running an RFP process. But why not?

What if we could create a purchasing process that was fun? Engaging? Exciting?

Many people enjoy shopping for major purchases such as a house or a car. Even in business, it's fun for me to hear from web designers who can show me how cool my company website could be.

There are better examples out there we could build on:

- **Outcome-based solicitations** focus on the result the government wants to achieve, not the specific tasks they think will get them there. The California Government Operations Agency's recent Request for Innovative Ideas (RFI2) process is one example.[10]
- **Agile procurements** break large, risky projects into small, testable stages, allowing governments to learn, adapt, and scale only when something works.
- **Try-before-you-buy models**, such as San Francisco's Civic Bridge or City Innovate's Startup in Residence, bring vendors in for a sprint or pilot before committing to a contract. [11]
- **Short-form qualifications screens** flip the process: instead of demanding full proposals from everyone, they ask for a five-page pitch or brief capabilities statement, then invite top candidates to go deeper.
- **Prequalified vendor pools** (via requests for quotes) allow governments to do the heavy screening once, then move fast when a need arises, without re-running a full RFP.[12]

Change is hard. Many companies benefit from the existing, inefficient, anti-competitive system and will fight change. It's a lot easier to maintain the status quo than to rock the boat. In the meantime, we have relegated ourselves to the very real consequences of the broken system we're in now.

- **Staged awards** let agencies spread risk and discover value: give five firms $25,000 to try something small, then award the $500,000 follow-up to the one that proved it out.[13]

These approaches exist. Often, these unconventional procurement vehicles have been the province only of technology or innovation purchasing. But there's no reason that similar approaches can't be used elsewhere. And they're vastly better at matching government problems with vendor expertise, faster, while preserving transparency, competition, and fairness.

The enemy isn't competition; it's over-engineered process.

We can procure social services with an open, transparent request for the best

approaches to reducing street homelessness, instead of a list of tasks.

We could build public works by hiring five firms to do small contracts and then awarding the huge contract to the one that does the best job. In other words, promote competition by actually evaluating how they do the real work.

We could determine the current market rates for commodities and *buy them from someone who sells them at that rate*. In other words, determine a fair price transparently without a 50-page response and an evaluation panel. If anything I've said sounds crazy, it's only because we've forgotten what normal looks like.

The RFP has had a long reign. It's time to kill it and replace it with something better.

We Want *You* to Start the Anti-RFP Revolution

There's just one main obstacle to overthrowing the RFP. It's not the law. Chances are, in your city, most of the above approaches are already legal. [14]

Instead, we're stopped by fear. Fear of an audit, an allegation of favoritism, or a lawsuit (or even the threat of one).

Change is hard. Many companies benefit from the existing, inefficient, anti-competitive system and will fight change. It's a lot easier to maintain the status quo than to rock the boat. In the meantime, we have relegated ourselves to the very real consequences of the broken system we're in now.

To overcome that fear, we need leaders:

- Elected officials, who recognize that the boring pipes of government procurement are in fact the lifeblood of all their policy goals.
- Wise procurement leaders, who can proudly stand in front of their legislatures, their suppliers, and their taxpayers and coherently explain their selfless thinking in every decision they made with the public money entrusted to them.
- City attorneys, who can weigh not only the risk of change but also the risk of doing what we've always done.
- Heads-down practitioners, who know their job is about more than compliance: it's about being good stewards of public resources—both time and money.

If that's you, contact me. Let's plot a coup. **CM**

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ENDNOTES

1 In 1860s dollars! That's equivalent to about $350 million in 2026.
2 Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*
3 https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndca/pr/former-san-francisco-puc-chief-sentenced-four-years-prison
4 https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndca/pr/former-san-francisco-public-works-director-sentenced-seven-years-federal-prison
5 Kang and Robert A. Miller, Winning by Default, Review of Economic Studies 89(3), 2022.
6 The federal government does not systematically track cancelled or reissued solicitations; GAO could not determine the outcome of more than 75% of solicitations posted in 2014. GAO-16-502R (2016).
7 Only about 13% of large government IT projects are delivered on time, on budget, and as promised. Standish Group CHAOS data, reported in Brookings, Doomed: Challenges and Solutions to Government IT Projects (2015).
8 The Chicago red-light-camera scheme (Redflex). John Bills, who sat on the city's RFP evaluation committee, steered a contract that grew to roughly $124 million and was convicted of bribery. U.S. Department of Justice, Northern District of Illinois.
9 ...*unless* you talk to staff in the agency who are issuing the RFP and get them to tell you the story behind the RFP. Such a conversation is, of course, explicitly against the rules, and would be grounds for both your immediate disqualification and cancelling the RFP.
10 California GovOps Request for Innovative Ideas (RFI2): the 2019 Wildfire Sprint drew 131 applicants and awarded about $2 million in contracts in time for the next fire season. StateScoop / GovTech, 2019.
11 City Innovate's Startup in Residence (STIR) and San Francisco's Civic Bridge place vendors in short pilots before contracting; STIR cohorts launched tools such as Binti, foster-care software now used by over half of California's counties.
12 Prequalified pools at scale: the GSA Multiple Award Schedule did $51.5 billion in FY2024; the UK G-Cloud framework has transacted over 4 billion pounds, the majority with small businesses and with purchases made in weeks rather than months.
13 The Defense Innovation Unit's commercial-solutions process ran 450 competed prototype agreements (FY2016-2023), with 51% transitioning to production and awards targeted in 60-90 days versus 18-plus months; SBIR/STTR uses the same phased model. GAO-25-106856 (2025).
14 Take San Francisco, for instance: San Francisco's procurement practices are governed (legally) by Chapter 21 of the city code. Chapter 21 has been interpreted over time to require a gigantic RFP process, with a boilerplate solicitation dozens of pages long. But the core of the law in Chapter 21 just requires transparency, competition, and fairness. To be specific, it requires an open competitive process, evaluation criteria disclosed in advance and applied consistently, and vendor selection that is documented and defensible. Everything beyond that is just interpretation.

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