Quiet Quitting: The Silent Challenge of Performance Management

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Abstract

The term "quiet quitting" refers to employees who put no more effort into their jobs than absolutely necessary. The cost-of-living crisis, and workers ending up feeling short-changed have heightened the risk of employees quietly quitting. Quiet quitting is gaining attention lately as a workplace strategy for some employees and a challenge for some.

It also is a significant challenge in managing costs in organisations as the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in workplace performance need to recognise this phenomenon. Enlightened companies are designing jobs that give employees control, pride in their work, and a fair wage. Employees who demonstrate commitment to the organisation, the culture, and to an organisation's customers should be made to feel valued and adequately rewarded.

Introduction

For the last several years we have had to work through a deadly pandemic, a bad economy, the decimation of our civil liberties, and in many countries, the slow collapse of democracy.
The result is that tired, overworked, burnt-out working-class people are taking back their agency and refusing jobs and working conditions that are unsuitable for them.

The latest of these acts of resistance is so-called "quiet quitting": the newly coined term for when workers only do the job that they are being paid to do, without taking on any extra duties, or participating in extracurriculars at work. Quiet quitting is demonstrated by employees who show up to work with the purpose of doing no more than what is required to stay employed [i].

The term came to prominence earlier this year when a 24-year-old New Yorker by the name of *Zaid Khan* posted a 17-second video that went viral on TikTok which included a brief definition of quiet quitting:

"You're not outright quitting your job, but you're quitting the idea of going above and beyond. You're still performing your duties, but you're no longer subscribing to the hustle-culture mentality that work has to be your life. The reality is it's not, and your worth as a person is not defined by your labour."

The Great Resignation vs. Quiet Quitting

The term "great resignation" was coined in May 2021 by *Anthony Klotz*, an associate professor of management at *University College London*, when he predicted an exodus of workers from their jobs, prompted by burnout, and the taste of freedom while working from home [ii].

Ranjay Gulati of *Harvard Business School* has instead characterised it as a "great rethink", where people evaluate their lives and options. She gives an example of people like Natalie Ormond:
"I left my 14-year social work career last September," she said. "I wasn't driven to climb the ladder and felt that I was coasting – not doing the bare minimum, but just doing my job and not going above and beyond" [iii].

However, quiet quitting is different to resigning or re-thinking their jobs. Quite quitters stay in their jobs without resigning or rethinking priorities.

Examples of Quiet Quitting

An employee who does not interact with aanyone or anything from work before 7:00 or after 4:30, which is the time the office is open, is a good example. Such employees usually works in a corporate setting where the tasks required are not life or death. If someone asks for something – like maybe for a file to be scanned or similar at the end of the day — it can wait until the next day.

Another example is a department manager whose priorities and values have changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. She now leaves her office at the end of the day without thinking about what she needs to work on when she goes home at night. She sets boundaries for checking her emails and reaching out to co-workers during non-office hours. Most importantly, she does not feel any bit of anxiety when it comes to requesting time-off, or taking personal days, or especially taking sick time [iv].

Is Quiet Quitting a Real Trend?

According to a Gallup survey in the USA of workers aged 18 and older taken in June 2022, 'quiet quitters' make up at least 50% of the U.S. workforce — probably more." Gallup arrived at that conclusion using a series of questions related to worker engagement, defined as *"the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work and workplace."* [v].

The percentage is particularly high among workers under age 35, Gallup reported.
In the survey, only 32% of workers came across as engaged, while another 18% were disengaged, meaning that they made no secret of their job dissatisfaction. The remaining 50%, Gallup theorised, could be classified as quiet quitters — people who were not especially engaged in their work but did not broadcast the fact.

If those numbers are accurate, then a stunning 68% of American job holders are unhappy with their work to one degree or another. There is no reason to believe that the numbers will be any different in countries that have similar corporate structures.

In fact, Stephan Meier, a professor at *Columbia Business School*, recently told *Fortune* that quiet quitting is another term for 'disengagement', and that in the past 15 years, 67% of American employees and 86% of workers globally have said they were not engaged at their jobs. According to Meier, COVID-era workplace turmoil may have caused young people to become even more detached from their jobs [vi].

Challenge for Employees

At first glance, this trend may not seem problematic. After all, these employees are not disengaging from their core tasks — they are just refusing to go beyond them. But for many companies, a workforce that is willing to go beyond the call of duty gives them a critical *competitive advantage* [vii].
The reality is that most jobs cannot be fully defined in a formal job description or contract, so organizations must rely on employees to step up to meet extra demands as needed. As such, it is hardly surprising that many business leaders have reacted quite negatively to the quiet quitting trend [viii].

Indeed, many business leaders have argued that while losing employees who want to leave is difficult, having them *not quit* is even worse, as their unwillingness to go the extra mile often increases the burden on their colleagues to take on extra work instead [ix]. This is a significant issue for management accountants who are involved in performance evaluation.

Clearly, quiet quitting is gaining attention lately as a workplace strategy for some employees and a challenge for some organisations. It also is a significant challenge in managing costs in organisations.

The concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in workplace performance need to recognise this phenomenon.

There are two main reasons that individuals quietly quit. For some, it is a strategy for creating work-life balance and avoiding burnout. For others, it is a solution to the financial challenges of poor compensation.

In both these scenarios, assigning challenging KPIs, even when linked to rewards may not be enough to motivate these quiet quitters, as they are experts in doing the minimum requirements of their job and putting in no more time, effort, or enthusiasm than absolutely necessary. However, 'quiet quitting' is a misnomer since the worker does not actually leave their position (i.e. actually quit) and continues to collect a salary [x].

Employee Responsibility

While quiet quitting is a response to ineffective execution, teamwork or change implementation caused by the organisation — employees must also take responsibility for their own burnout. While employees can leave the organisation to go home after work, they cannot leave their 'feelings' back at the office — which means any negative mindset or poor attitude goes home with them.

Employees must recognise that some amount of job creep — that is, the gradual expansion of their core duties over time — is only natural. But especially after more than two years of pandemic-fuelled firefighting, during which more and more activities that might once have been considered "above and beyond" have become expected parts of workers' jobs, the benefits of good-citizenship behaviour may increasingly feel outweighed by the costs.

Forcing employees to do this extra, unpaid work is wrong, but the debate around "quiet quitting" also raises important questions about who is actually doing much of this unpaid labour. Women, for example, are disproportionately asked and expected to take on work that no one else wants to do, like planning the office party, attending to that time-consuming client, keeping track of employee birthdays and so on.

Thus, the present environment may be the opportune moment for managers to recalibrate employees' core job responsibilities to more accurately reflect what work is actually necessary, and what should really qualify as extra tasks. Managers can then focus on motivating workers to perform their most essential job tasks at a high level while giving them space to take care of themselves outside of work [xi].

Work-Life Balance

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic threw our working and home lives into disarray. Almost overnight, our homes became offices, school yards, shopping centres and cinemas. Lines blurred and the mental health of many suffered.

A major upside for some workers, however, was the elimination of the daily commute. A study by the *NSW Innovation and Productivity Council* found the average daily commute for a New South Wales worker had blown out to 77 minutes immediately prior to the pandemic.

However, this saving of the daily commute time was often replaced by more work. On average, employees who worked from home during lockdowns reallocated this time towards 19 extra minutes of "caring", 49 extra minutes of "personal time", and 13 more minutes of "work".

Professional office workers, however, spent a supersized 25 extra minutes a day working [xii]. This was an inevitable acceleration in a long-standing trend among white-collar workers, even before the pandemic, towards longer working hours, thanks to smartphone technology. Our phones were supposed to make us more productive. But this technology has also encouraged us to spend more time working — whether it is checking work messages or reading work-related materials or posts in our "off" time.

At some point, however, we must reach our limits as human beings who require a certain number of hours each day to allocate to sleep, exercise, time with loved ones, and preparing nutritious food for optimal health, both physical and mental [xiii].

The French Connection

The French — well known for their marathon holidays, long lunches and 35-hour working week — have basked in the image of enjoying life's pleasures while somehow managing to get the job done. But the pandemic appears to have taken the French view of a proper work-life balance to new extremes.

Research undertaken by the *French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP)* and the *Jean-Jaurès foundation* shows that the country is stuck in a post-Covid "laziness epidemic" after swathes of the country said they had lost the will to work hard [xiv].

In 1990, some 60 percent of French people said work was "very important" in their life, compared with 31 per cent for leisure. Today, the above study found that now the number of those who view work as a high priority has plummeted to 24 per cent while 41 per cent view leisure as very important. Since the pandemic subsided, 37 per cent of French say they are less motivated to work.

In fact, many people in France are happy to work fewer hours even if that means earning less. This unwillingness to work at all costs has led to a huge shortage of labour in sectors such as hospitality, haulage, teaching, and nursing [xv]. The labour shortages in Australia are very similar to the French experience.

The China Syndrome

In China, quiet quitting is called '*lying flat*'. The term is credited to *Luo Huazhong*, who in 2016 came to his own realization that a job would not fulfill him. Luo had been working in a factory in China's central Sichuan province, which made him feel *"numb, like a machine"* [xvi]. Luo quit his job and spent the next five years biking around China, doing odd jobs, and reading philosophy. He later called his lifestyle "lying flat," and posted a *"lying flat is justice"* manifesto online in April 2021.

The post, which authorities have since scrubbed from China's internet, went viral and inspired hundreds if not thousands of others to post lying flat memes and pursue lying flat lifestyles; where they put in less effort at work or quit altogether. They bucked societal expectations to get married and have kids; and refused to buy homes or consume other material goods [xvii].

A main driver for "lying flat" is the perceived lack of opportunity to progress in one's career. Many young Chinese believe their efforts to advance personal career would be futile due to inequalities in the workplace and the society. As such, they decide to give up. While this is somewhat different from the perceived motivations of "quiet quitting", the two lifestyle philosophies have sprouted parallel

passive resistance movements among young people in the world's top two economies, flouting assumptions that Gen Z will work just as hard as previous generations [xviii].

The Greatest Cost of Quiet Quitting is to Employees Themselves

Quiet quitting is viewed as a solution to an imbalance in priorities in which employees let their personal life fall to the wayside for the benefit of their job. It might seem like a good solution, but there is a major error in this approach because when a person takes a job, they are committing to perform and achieve desired outcomes. When a person puts in the least amount of effort to "get by," they are in fact sacrificing their integrity by not honouring their commitments. This creates a new habit of "not showing up mentally" when the going gets tough — both at work and also in their personal life.

When employees put minimal effort into what they are doing, they are self-teaching themselves that they do not have what it takes to fully engage with life's circumstances — which can lead to a lack of confidence and self-trust. This mindset, mixed with some amount of guilt, results in a great personal cost to the employee's self-worth.

Creating Work-Life Balance Without Quietly Quitting

Quiet quitting does not serve anyone, even the person who thinks they are creating a work-life balance through not going above and beyond on the job. Organisations and its management need to be part of the process in healing burnout-related mindsets, attitudes and behaviours to create an inspired, dedicated and supportive environment where people thrive at work and thrive in their personal lives at the same time.

On a personal note, my granddaughter taught me a great lesson in time management and work-life balance recently. She is four and asked me to stop spending so much time on the phone when I was with her, as it was supposed to be her grand-father time. Not only was splitting my time between my grand-daughter and taking phone calls annoying to her, but it was also very stressful to me.

I made a deal with my granddaughter that we would have one hour of uninterrupted time, and then I would make phone calls for an hour or so, but when complete, she would again get my full attention. Our time together is very enjoyable, and I know all the characters in all the Disney movies!

Performance Managing Employees to Avoid Quiet Quitting

The question that must be first asked is: *"What motivated the move to quietly quit?"* A lot of it could be traced to the new *work-from-home* (WFH) regime brought about by the pandemic. Humans are social animals thirsty for interaction with others. We are not meant to be isolated.

Obviously, returning to the office on a full-time basis is not the answer to reaccumulating social capital. Organisations should however, whenever possible, facilitate rebuilding social capital in a *hybrid context.* Organisations should think of getting together in person more like a dimmer switch, rather than an on/off switch.

Community Building

Companies need to reinvigorate the idea, *"Other people can help me do my job"* versus *"I alone do my job."* This requires a healthy dose of community building. One interesting approach to community building is to recognise that knowledge sharing across different silos is important. Workers do not share knowledge by uploading it to a central digitized system. Instead, they have verbal conversations to work issues out. Thus, to improve connections between discrete teams,

consider creating a training program that enables colleagues to talk to one another, build deeper connectivity, and do something fun together under the auspice of getting work done. If the training was built as a social event only, people would not come.

The Role of Feedback

If managers are not there to help inspire, if managers are not there to help lead, if managers are not there to help follow up, it is a logical extension that an employee might think, *"Is anybody going to notice if I don't do this for a week? Or two weeks? Or, wow, it was three months until somebody had a feedback conversation with me."* At some level that is quiet quitting, but at another level it is just a failure of management [xix].

The problem is that today managers are not thinking about year-end evaluations and feedback, especially when shortages are growing, and the threat of churn is looming.

Further, some jobs require interdependencies — how a person is working across teams and connecting with the sales group, the innovation group, the finance group. For those roles, it is hard to measure what "good" looks like. So, there is a potential trap where managers risk rewarding those subordinates that they see the most and talk to the most, over the ones who are independent.

Therefore, for those interdependent roles, managers should give very specific, actionable feedback, rather than general impressions like, *"Hey, this person looks like a team player."* Instead, focus on more measurable data like specific behaviours.

Having remote workers means that managers must work much harder to get the specific points of reference to make the feedback useful. Often, managers who do not have enough employees and are having a hard time just getting the core work done — especially if such managers are emotionally drained —may just tick the boxes in evaluating their subordinates.

The Role of Compensation

A lot of compensation is in flux in many industries today and if managers put that in the context of a performance review — which some are attempting to do — it could have a potentially devastating effect on morale. Ideally, feedback and compensation should be treated as two separate issues. Managers should think about the feedback they want to give; and especially think about what it takes to really recognise people at the very top and the very bottom. Then, separately, they should think about what pay means in the context of wage inflation and the nationalisation of wages.

Often the impetus for quiet quitting is when *feedback* and *compensation* are mixed together. This can end up with somebody feeling like*, "Hey, that feedback was unfair, and this compensation is really unfair."* If somebody perceives compensation to be unfair, it is a significant demotivator that sticks with people for much longer than if they just thought the feedback was unfair.

Forbes Magazine recommends *Five Steps Leaders Can Use to Help Prevent Quiet Quitting* [xx].

1. Instead of using an activity-focused job description as a basis for hiring, leaders must be clear about expected outcomes and behaviours necessary to fulfill the role and position being hired.
2. Develop a customer service focus that links all outcomes of one's role to the success of the internal or external customer and be clear about the costs of not providing high-quality and timely performance.
3. Build a culture of teamwork that sets expectations and agreements for how team members will support each other's success during normal and challenging times so that peer accountability and assessment for team effectiveness are cultivated.

4. Continually reinforce any employee who demonstrates commitment to the organisation, the culture, and their customers so that people feel valued and rewarded for being a part of the organisation in a full way.

5. Provide workshops that are self-growth-oriented so that people learn the benefits and costs of their behaviours, attitudes, and choices for taking greater ownership of their lives.

Summary

Clearly, quiet quitting is gaining attention lately as a workplace strategy for some employees and a challenge for some organisations. It also is a significant challenge in managing costs in organisations.

The concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in workplace performance need to recognise this phenomenon.

The cost-of-living crisis, and workers ending up feeling short-changed, have heightened the risk of employees quietly quitting. Enlightened companies are designing jobs that give employees control, pride in their work, and a fair wage.

In performance managing employees, feedback and compensation should ideally be treated as two separate issues. By continually reinforcing employees who demonstrate commitment to the organisation, the culture, and their customers — and rewarding them well for being a part of the organisation in a full way — makes them feel valued, and thus less likely to quietly quit.

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