

Why people quiet quit

*There has been a surge in interest in quiet quitting, when employees put in only the minimum effort needed to keep their jobs, not showing interest in much more than that. **Odessa S Hamilton, Daniel Jolles and Grace Lordan** explore the motivations behind this type of behaviour and list ways in which organisations can revert the situation and turn back the hands of time on people's intention to quiet quit.*

The interest in *quiet quitting* has been predominantly shaped by its nature – be it anecdotal or real, a fad or a long-term phenomenon. This interest has extended to understanding the types of people who engage in *quiet quitting*, along with its effects on organisations and the economy at large. But it seems we continue to ignore the elephant in the room... why do people *quiet quit*? What is driving this phenomenon and can organisations *turn back the hands of time* to restore workforce fidelity.

Within major global economies, occupational stress has risen to six in 10 (GOS,2019). A state of wellbeing in occupational settings is largely predicated on a balance between efforts and reward (Siegrist, 1996), demands and control (Karasek, 1979). But idiosyncrasies in how stress is received, and how differently people respond to it at work, is far less understood.

For instance, people of diverse ages tend to cope differently with stressful working experiences. Older employees are more inclined to seek alternative occupational environments. It may even provoke them into retirement, or spur labour market exiting entirely. This has been attributed to a "*healthy worker survivor bias*" (Chandola et al., 2008, pg. 643). However, we (Hamilton, Jolles and Lordan 2023) found that younger workers have a greater proclivity towards *quiet quitting*. This could be attributable to generational differences in attitudes that reflect expectations, priorities, flexibility and tolerance. That is, what they want from work, what is important to them, what compromises they are prepared to make, and what they are willing to accept from employers. However, it could equally be because younger workers feel like they have fewer options to choose, given the primary status of their careers and typically modest

financial standing, which is set against the rise in costs, wage stagnation, job precarity and labour market instability. Choice, or lack thereof, could certainly provide an idyllic platform for *quiet quitting*. Such that having a job – irrespective of the harm that it creates – becomes ‘better’ than no job at all.

Broadly, motivations to work (or not to work) can be hedonistic (meaning pleasurable) or utilitarian (meaning functional; Maslow 1943). For instance, we may be motivated to work more hours than is contracted because we love the work that we do. Perhaps we have great working relationships or we are empowered by the impact that we are making in the world through our work. Strip these away and you create a space for *quiet quitting*. Equally, we may be primed to work diligently because of a need to put food on the table or perhaps we are driven by a specific purchase; a holiday, a car or a step on and up the property ladder. In this way work serves as a means to an end, where paid overtime is a welcomed bonus. Then there are more intrinsic concerns. Perhaps work has health benefits, or serves our ego, such that we insentiently delve into a working regime that has no bounds on time. Understanding these different motivations can help leaders tailor their working environment to enhance commitment and foster loyalty in a way that becomes mutually advantageous to employers and employees alike. After all, if the reward does outweigh the effort, we are motivated towards *quiet quitting*, more so when exiting is not an option.

First there are physiological needs that need to be met by our work. That is, does our work sufficiently allow us to eat, drink, and sleep? Then follow safety needs. That is, is our work conducive to our physical and mental health? This is followed by the need to belong; do we feel wanted, are we a valued member of the team and are all our working relationships positive? Once those basic needs are met, we seek to fulfil our needs of the ego. That is, are we held as an important contributor to the success of the team and growth of the organisation? Is our work affiliated with quality and distinctiveness and is our absence felt? Finally, self-actualisation is met when we feel fully rewarded for our skills, knowledge and efforts. An actualisation of striving that has paid off, which typically occurs at the peak of our careers, where those around us hold us in high regard and we seek to give back and mentor others – at least that is the dream.

Changing the way that people think about work is possible – in effect, turning back the hands of time on people’s intention to *quiet quit* – here we share five ways in which to change the *status quo*:

1. **Ensure psychological safety.** Determine what a psychologically safe work environment means for your team and work toward shaping it in a way that works for them and the company. Often, offering a platform for employees to be frank and authentic without fear of reproach fosters trust, commitment, creativity and collaboration.
2. **Consider motivators.** Consider the idiosyncratic nature of motivation and what drives a person to be engaged and productive. Although motivations will differ by person, and can change overtime in many ways, motivational strength can be prejudiced and uniformly shaped by team dynamics, management and the working environment.
3. **Treat employees with respect.** Respect means different things to different people, but everyone wants it. Respect weighs heavily on having (or showing) due regard for people, irrespective of differences in values, opinion, or characteristics. You may disagree with a member of staff, you may even dislike them, but professionalism calls for feelings to be put aside for sake of team collegiality and effectiveness. Respect also involves valuing people, as individuals, for their efforts, and for the work that they do. Acknowledging and rewarding team and individual efforts encourages people to continue or increase their trajectory. It is again a matter of effort and reward. Ignoring efforts, in contrast, leaves people questioning their priorities and it can create a turning point in behaviours that were formally beneficial to the individual, the team and the organisation overall.
4. **Notice changes in behaviour.** Be aware of behavioural changes in your team. Was any member or collectively as a team formally vibrant, engaged, productive and passionate about their work? Has enthusiasm waned? Discretely address this, in a way that puts them at the centre of your concern, to see whether you can remedy the issue(s) and move forward in a mutually beneficial way. Often it is a relational issue, but it could be work overload or even boredom, both well-known stressors. Perhaps it ties into a feeling of hopelessness – feeling stuck, instability, or uncertainty. Sometimes people will not recognise these for themselves and need the space to explore why they feel the way that they do. What frequently happens is we ignore the signs or *pretend it away*. It feeds into why people *quiet quit*!
5. **Offer working-time autonomy.** Ultimately, a happy workforce is a productive workforce. People want to *work to live*. You will be hard pressed to find people who aspire to *live to work*. People inherently like choice and fight against force. Work-

life balance is a fundamental need. Granted, this looks different for everyone. Some need to clock-off at 5pm and reset their day at 9am but work longer weeks. Others may be happy to work evenings or weekends to get ahead of the game but take extended lunches. Flexibility is key here. That does not mean you forsake structure entirely. Set times for staff to operate in unison – perhaps to brainstorm on a project or to team-build. But forcing people into the office will not prevent *quiet quitting*, it may encourage it!

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