



# Quiet Quitting: A New Challenge for Employee Retention

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## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of quiet quitting has rapidly emerged as one of the most pressing challenges confronting organizations in the post-pandemic era. Unlike conventional resignation, quiet quitting describes a workplace behavior in which employees remain employed but deliberately restrict their effort and contribution to the bare minimum outlined in their job descriptions. This paper explores the conceptual origins of quiet quitting, examines its root causes including poor management, inadequate compensation, lack of growth opportunities, and work-life imbalance and analyses its impact on organizational productivity, culture, and retention. Drawing from recent surveys, management literature, and organizational behavior theories such as Social Exchange Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the paper argues that quiet quitting is not merely a behavioral trend but a systemic symptom of structural failures in workplace design. The study concludes that addressing quiet quitting requires a fundamental rethinking of how organizations design work, value employees, and build cultures of trust and mutual respect.

**KEYWORDS:** Quiet Quitting, Employee Retention, Employee Engagement, Organizational Behavior, Human Resource Management, Work-Life Balance.



## Introduction

The concept of quiet quitting gained significant mainstream attention in mid-2022, following a viral social media video that resonated deeply with employees worldwide. The phrase, while modern in terminology, encapsulates a workplace behavior that has existed in various forms under different labels such as organizational withdrawal, work-to-rule, or simply employee disengagement. What distinguishes the current wave is the sheer scale and the socio-economic context in which it is unfolding.

Quiet quitting does not refer to employees physically leaving their organizations. Rather, it describes a deliberate choice to mentally and emotionally withdraw from work to do what is required and nothing more. Employees who quietly quit stop volunteering for additional responsibilities, avoid working beyond contracted hours, and withdraw from discretionary organizational activities. They are not disloyal in a traditional sense; they simply refuse to allow work to dominate their identity and personal life.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful catalyst for this shift in employee mindset. Remote and hybrid work arrangements dissolved the boundaries between professional and personal life, accelerating burnout and dissatisfaction on a global scale. The Great Resignation of 2021-2022, during which millions of workers voluntarily left their positions, further signaled a fundamental reassessment of the employee-employer contract. For those who chose not to resign, quiet quitting became an alternative form of resistance, a way to reclaim personal time and well-being without incurring the financial risk of unemployment.

A landmark 2022 Gallup survey estimated that at least 50% of the American workforce could be classified as quiet quitters, costing the global economy approximately \$8.8 trillion in lost productivity annually. These figures underscore the magnitude of the challenge and the urgency with which organizations must respond.

## What is Quiet Quitting?

Quiet quitting does not mean an employee has actually quit their job. The term refers to employees who fulfill only the explicit, written requirements of their role, attending scheduled meetings, completing assigned tasks, and clocking in and out on time, while refusing to go any further. They stop volunteering for new projects, decline to respond to emails outside working hours, and avoid any activity that falls outside their formal job description.

The quiet in the phrase reflects the invisible, gradual nature of this disengagement. Unlike a formal resignation, quiet quitting leaves no paper trail. Managers often struggle to identify it because the employee continues to appear present and technically compliant. The disengagement is psychological and internal, making it far more difficult to detect and address than conventional turnover.

It is important to distinguish quiet quitting from related but distinct phenomena. Employee burnout involves emotional and physical exhaustion from overwork and can lead to quiet quitting, but the two are not the same. A burned-out employee may desperately want to engage but lacks the energy to do so. A quiet quitter has made a conscious, rational choice to disengage and set firm personal boundaries around work.

## Conceptual Framework

Several established theoretical frameworks help explain the phenomenon of quiet quitting and its rise in contemporary workplaces.

**Social Exchange Theory** (Blau, 1964) posits that employment is a reciprocal relationship: employees contribute effort and loyalty in exchange for organizational rewards such as compensation, recognition, and growth opportunities. When employees perceive this exchange to be unfair, they rationally reduce their contributions to restore equilibrium. Quiet quitting, in this framework, is a rational economic response to perceived inequity.

**Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory** (1968) distinguishes between hygiene factors such as salary and job security, and motivators such as recognition, achievement, and personal growth. Quiet quitting is most likely to emerge in environments



where hygiene factors are barely adequate and motivators are entirely absent, leaving employees no compelling reason to exceed minimum expectations.

**The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model** (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) proposes that burnout and disengagement occur when job demands consistently outstrip available job resources. Organizations that pile demands onto employees without providing corresponding support, autonomy, or recognition create the precise conditions that lead to quiet quitting.

### Root Causes of Quiet Quitting

Quiet quitting rarely emerges from a single cause; it is typically the cumulative result of multiple unmet needs and organizational failures. Research consistently identifies the following as primary drivers:

**Poor Management and Leadership:** A Gallup study found that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement levels. Supervisors whomi manage, fail to recognize contributions, or do not support employees well- being are among the most powerful drivers of disengagement.

**Inadequate Compensation and Recognition:** When employees perceive that their pay does not reflect their effort, or when their contributions go consistently unacknowledged, motivation erodes. In an era of rising inflation and cost-of- living pressures, stagnant wages serve as a significant trigger for disengagement.

**Lack of Career Growth Opportunities:** Employees who perceive no clear pathway for advancement or skill development within their organization have little incentive to invest discretionary effort. LinkedIn's 2023 Workforce Learning Report found that 94% of employees would remain longer with employers that actively invest in their professional development.

**Burnout and Work Overload:** Chronic overwork, particularly in the context of the pandemic-era blurring of work and personal life boundaries, leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. Burnout frequently precedes quiet quitting as employees seek to protect their remaining energy by setting strict limits on work output.

**Generational Value Shifts:** Younger workforce generations, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, increasingly prioritize purpose, flexibility, mental health, and work-life balance. Organizations that cling to hustle culture norms are increasingly likely to encounter disengagement among these cohorts.

**Absence of Psychological Safety:** In environments where employees fear speaking up or challenging the status quo without repercussion, they tend to retreat to the safest possible behavior: fulfilling minimum obligations and nothing more (Edmondson, 1999).

### Impact on Organizations

The organizational consequences of widespread quiet quitting are substantial and multidimensional. At the most immediate level, productivity suffers. When employees withdraw discretionary effort, the innovation, initiative, and service excellence that drive competitive advantage disappears silently. Organizations in knowledge-intensive or service-driven sectors are disproportionately affected.

Quiet quitting also exerts a corrosive effect on workplace culture. It creates a contagion dynamic: when one employee's withdrawal goes unaddressed, others may interpret it as tacit or organizational approval, normalizing disengagement and creating a downward spiral of declining morale and eroding standards.

Furthermore, quiet quitting frequently serves as a precursor to actual voluntary turnover. Employees who have already emotionally disengaged are actively evaluating external opportunities. When they eventually resign, organizations bear replacement costs typically estimated at 50% to 200% of the departing employee's annual salary when recruitment, onboarding, and lost productivity are factored in.

### Strategies to Address Quiet Quitting

**1. Strengthen Manager-Employee Relationships:** Investing in leadership development is paramount. Managers should hold regular one-on-one check-ins, provide meaningful feedback, and recognize contributions consistently. A culture of empathetic, supportive leadership significantly reduces disengagement at the team level.



- 2. Redesign Compensation and Recognition Systems:** Organizations must ensure competitive compensation and recognition systems that reward both outcomes and behaviors. Transparent pay practices and non-financial recognition such as flexible work arrangements and meaningful assignments sustain long-term motivation.
- 3. Invest in Employee Growth and Development:** Providing clear career pathways, mentorship programs, and continuous learning opportunities signals genuine organizational investment in employees' futures. Internal mobility programs and stretch assignments can reignite ambition and discretionary effort.
- 4. Foster Psychological Safety and Inclusion:** Organizations must cultivate environments where employees feel safe to speak up, share ideas, and raise concerns without fear of repercussion. Leaders who model openness and act on employee feedback create the psychological safety that sustains engagement.
- 5. Promote Work-Life Balance and Flexibility:** Flexible work policies, reasonable workloads, and a culture that actively discourages always-on expectations prevent burnout and reduce the likelihood of quiet quitting. Leaders who model healthy boundaries send a powerful message to their teams.
- 6. Conduct Stay Interviews and Engagement Surveys:** Proactive listening mechanisms such as stay interviews and pulse surveys help organizations identify disengagement early. Acting meaningfully on insights gathered is critical; surveys that go unaddressed actively worsen trust and accelerate disengagement.

## Literature Review

Significant research has been conducted on related constructs that provide important context for understanding quiet quitting. Gallup's annual State of the Global Workplace report has consistently highlighted employee engagement as a critical organizational challenge, with global engagement rates rarely exceeding 23% in recent years, establishing the empirical foundation for understanding the scale of the problem.

Maslach and Leiter (2016) examined burnout as a precursor to organizational withdrawal, identifying six key mismatches between employees and their work environment: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Their framework directly maps onto the conditions that drive quiet quitting. Edmondson (1999) demonstrated the critical importance of psychological safety in enabling employee voice and engagement, while its absence produces exactly the silent withdrawal characteristic of quiet quitting.

Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) Job Demands-Resources Model has been extensively validated across industries and cultures, consistently showing that high demands combined with low resources predict disengagement and burnout. More recently, organizational researchers have begun applying this framework directly to the quiet quitting phenomenon, finding strong predictive relationships between resource deficits and disengagement behaviors.

In the Indian context, research on employee engagement has highlighted unique cultural factors including hierarchical workplace norms, collectivist values, and the growing aspirations of a young educated workforce that shape how quiet quitting manifests in domestic organizations. The challenge is particularly acute in sectors such as information technology, banking, and retail, where long working hours and performance pressures have historically been normalized.

## Conclusion

Quiet quitting is not a passing trend; it is a reflection of fundamental tensions in the modern employment relationship. As employees increasingly demand meaningful work, fair compensation, growth opportunities, and respect for their personal lives, organizations that fail to evolve risk maintaining a workforce that is present but not engaged. The economic, cultural, and reputational costs of this disengagement are substantial and demand urgent attention from organizational leaders and human resource professionals.

Addressing quiet quitting requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond surface-level perks or short-term fixes. It demands a genuine commitment to understanding what employees value, removing structural barriers to engagement, and building cultures of trust, recognition, and mutual respect. Organizations that succeed in this endeavor will not only reduce quiet quitting but will create the conditions for discretionary effort, innovation, and long-term retention, the very foundations of competitive advantage in the knowledge economy. In conclusion, quiet quitting challenges organizations to ask a fundamental question:



Are we creating an environment where people genuinely want to give their best? The answer to that question may well determine the future of employee retention and organizational success in the decades ahead.

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