



# The Risks of Quiet Quitting: Exploring the Impact of Telework on Employee Psychological Departure

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Received: August 4, 2023  
Accepted: November 23, 2023  
Published: March 16, 2024

## Keywords:

Quiet quitting;  
Telework;  
Teleworker;  
Disengagement



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**Abstract:** *The rise of teleworking has revolutionized the way of working, allowing employees to carry out their duties remotely and offering newfound flexibility. The long-term impact of teleworking has fully developed many negative factors that were already present in traditional work settings. One concern that has been raised is whether telework can lead to quiet quitting. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in remote work have highlighted the phenomenon of quiet quitting, it is essential to examine the pre-pandemic context to develop a comprehensive understanding of teleworkers' potential to silently disengage from work. Drawing on existing literature, this paper aims to analyze the risks of quiet quitting and investigate whether teleworkers are susceptible to engaging in quiet quitting by examining the potential factors before the pandemic. This can help organizations to identify and address potential challenges, and foster an environment that promotes employee engagement, and long-term commitment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, telework has gained substantial popularity offering employees the flexibility to work from different locations other than the office and enabling organizations to tap into a broader talent pool. Telework is a subset of remote work practices that grant employees more autonomy to work outside of the traditional workplace (office) by utilizing information technology (Athanasidou & Theriou, 2021). While the adoption of remote work on a global scale has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has drawn attention to the concept of quiet quitting. Quiet quitting refers to a behavioral pattern exhibited by employees wherein they mentally disengage or disconnect from their work with minimum or no visible signs of intentions to quit. It is employees' strategy to prevent psychological issues like burnout and social concerns such as unemployment by focusing on and performing the minimum required as outlined in their job description (Yıldız, 2023). As telework has become more prevalent, it is crucial to identify whether teleworkers are prone to quiet quitting by providing a pre-pandemic outlook. Examining telework in the pre-pandemic era can uncover valuable insights into the specific factors that may influence teleworkers' intentions to quietly quit, independent of the pandemic-related disruptions. Hence, the paper aims to answer the research question: "Are teleworkers prone to quiet quitting?" This study seeks to unravel the intentions of teleworkers to quietly quit their jobs by offering a pre-pandemic perspective that highlights the specific factors that may contribute to their decisions. Focusing on the pre-pandemic period enables a distinction to be made between factors that were prominent in telecommuting contexts before the global health crisis. Understanding the latter can provide valuable insights into designing effective policies that address teleworkers' concerns, and foster an environment that promotes employee retention, engagement, and overall well-being.

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The paper starts with an introduction, followed by a methodology section. Section two investigates the concept of quiet quitting, providing an in-depth exploration of its characteristics and risk factors discussed from various theoretical perspectives. Section three focuses specifically on the risks of quiet quitting in the context of telework. Section four presents a discussion of the findings and offers directions for future research. Finally, the paper concludes with section five.

### 1.1. Methodology

The study employed a systematic literature review methodology. The review process was guided by the research question, which aimed to synthesize the current knowledge related to two main aspects: quiet quitting and telework (Snyder, 2019). Various databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar were used to conduct a literature search. Due to limited literature on quiet quitting, other relevant sources of information were also considered. Articles related to the concept of telework included in the review were only limited to a specific time frame, from 2010 (aligned with the enactment of the US Telework Enhancement Act of 2010) to 2019 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread implementation of enforced telework measures). This time frame allowed for a focused examination of the literature on telework practices before the pandemic. The synthesized findings were interpreted and discussed considering the research question and objectives.

## 2. QUIET QUITTING: UNDERSTANDING A SUBTLE FORM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WITHDRAWAL BEHAVIOR

Quiet quitting is a form of organizational behavior characterized by a lack of visible signs of dissatisfaction or clear intentions to leave. It typically involves a psychological distance or detachment from the work and the organization (Anand et al., 2023). As explained by Yildiz (2023), it represents a passive form of resistance towards active involvement in work potentially used as a coping strategy to prevent burnout. Mahand and Caldwell (2023) recently described quiet quitting as the condition where individuals' commitment and loyalty to their jobs have diminished, leading them to focus solely on meeting the minimum requirements.

The concept of quiet quitting can be classified as a form of psychological withdrawal behavior. Psychological withdrawal behavior as a broader concept involves observable behavioral changes or signs of disengagement, decreased effort, and avoidance. It encompasses different actions that provide a mental disengagement or escape from work, such as daydreaming, moonlighting, cyber-loafing, socializing, or engaging in other distractions (Carpenter & Berry, 2017). Psychological withdrawal behavior is often seen as a coping mechanism employed by employees to create psychological distance from stressors, such as negative work events, to normalize their experiences (Jo & Lee, 2022).

Like psychological withdrawal behavior, quiet quitting is a subtle and internal disengagement with minimal or no observable behavioral changes. Employees who exhibit such behavior aim to preserve their current employment status while resetting their work-life balance and maintaining well-being (Serenko, 2023).

According to Christian (2022), Zenger and Folkman (2022), Anand et al., (2023), and Yildiz (2023) the behaviors commonly associated with quiet quitting encompass:

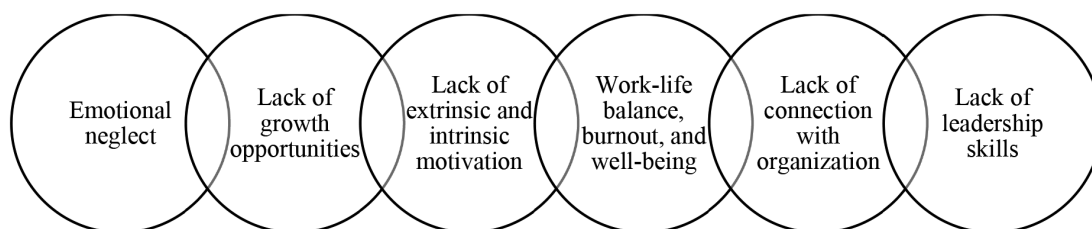
- a. engaging in work strictly within regular working hours, without putting in any overtime,
- b. no response to work-related emails or messages beyond regular working hours,

- c. exhibiting a diminished sense of seriousness and personal investment in work,
- d. minimizing additional work or assignments beyond regular job responsibilities, especially when not paid for it (lack of citizenship behavior).
- e. silence during meetings,
- f. no collaboration on teamwork activities,
- g. late arrival or early departure from work,
- h. an increased number of absences and sick days.

These behaviors can be difficult for managers to detect, as employees may continue to perform adequately in their roles but may not be fully committed to their work or the organization. Both, quiet quitting, and other psychological withdrawal behaviors indicate a lack of engagement, a decline in organizational commitment, and can have negative effects on individual performance and organizational effectiveness.

### 2.1. Exploring Risk Factors of Quiet Quitting

Various authors have identified distinct perspectives that shed light on the underlying causes of quiet quitting summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Quiet quitting – underlying causes

**Source:** Own research

*Emotional neglect:* Harter (2022) and Zenger and Folkman (2022) emphasize emotional neglect as a primary driver of quiet quitting. Failing to provide emotional support has a negative effect on the relationship between managers and employees, characterized by distrust and game-playing. Employees pretend to be committed to the organization and prioritize self-preservation as their top concern. Over time, this can lead to distrust and disengagement (Dash & Jena, 2020).

*Lack of growth opportunities:* Harter (2022) highlights the absence of growth opportunities as a primary driver of quiet quitting. When employers fail to offer clear paths for professional growth, employees perceive limited opportunities for career advancement. This perception results in ambiguity and disengagement (Kelly, 2022; Kruse, 2022).

*Lack of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation:* Serenko (2023) highlights the negative impact of poor extrinsic motivation, such as the absence of rewards, recognition, or incentives, on employees, potentially leading to quiet quitting. On the other hand, Esteveny (2022) emphasizes the significance of fair recognition in driving employee engagement and commitment. When employees feel unappreciated or unrecognized for their efforts and achievements it discourages them from having the enthusiasm to work. As a result, their commitment to the organization may diminish, increasing the likelihood of quiet quitting. Moreover, harboring grudges against managers or organizations is identified as another contributing factor. Harboring grudges in the workplace can trigger negative emotions that hinder intrinsic motivation and decrease interest in work activities (van Monsjou et al., 2023).

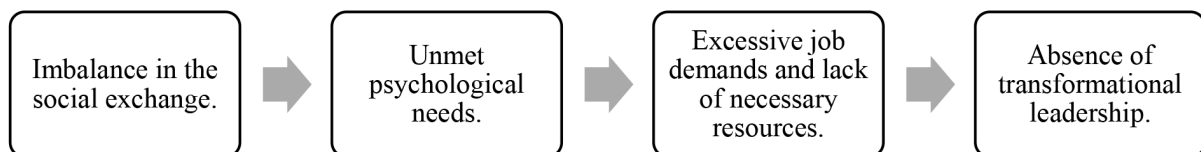
*Work-life balance, burnout, and well-being:* **Esteveny (2022)** emphasizes the importance of employees' desire to prioritize work-life balance, well-being (**Anand et al., 2023**), and prevent burnout (**Serenko, 2023**) as key drivers of quiet quitting. The exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy associated with burnout can lead employees to disengage from their work and exhibit quiet quitting behaviors (**Bakker & Demerouti, 2007**).

*Lack of connection with organization:* **Harter (2022)**, **Zenger and Folkman (2022)** and **Esteveny (2022)** argue that a lack of connection with an organization's purpose can leave employees feeling confused and disengaged, questioning their reasons for being part of that organization. Conversely, when employees perceive their organization is actively caring about issues important to them and contributing to positive change in the world, it imbues their work with meaning and purpose. They find fulfilment in the contributions they make both to the company and society (**DiPietro et al., 2020**). Similarly, employees may lose interest in and dedication to their organizations if they do not believe their jobs are meaningful (**Masterson, 2022**).

*Lack of leadership skills:* According to **Mahand and Caldwell (2023)**, the primary reason behind declining employee commitment is the failure of managers and supervisors to fulfill their essential leadership responsibilities, which involve engaging, empowering, and inspiring employees. In a study by **Princy and Rebeka (2019)**, it is suggested that changes in employee commitment can arise from insufficient job involvement, low self-efficacy, lack of motivation, and low satisfaction. In today's dynamic and highly competitive environment, employees seek a good leadership style as well as a well-structured organizational culture that play vital roles in shaping employee engagement, satisfaction, performance, and organizational success (**Okyere-Kwakye & Otibu, 2016**).

## 2.2. Insights from Theoretical Perspectives

Exploring these risk factors through different theoretical lenses provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of quiet quitting (Figure 2.) and its implications for employee disengagement.



**Figure 2.** Quiet quitting – underlying causes from theoretical perspectives

**Source:** Own research

Emotional neglect, lack of growth opportunities, and lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be explained through social exchange theory and equity theory. Social exchange theory suggests that the action or behavior of an individual is contingent on the reward reaction of others. In other words, the behavior of employees is motivated by expected returns. These could be benefits such as status, information, goods, love, money, and services that a person seeks in social exchange (**Ahmad et al., 2023**). Hence, it can be argued that *quiet quitting is a result of a perceived imbalance in the social exchange where employees no longer feel they receive sufficient rewards, support, or opportunities in return for their effort and contributions.*

Lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, lack of growth opportunities, and lack of connection with organization align with self-determination theory. According to this theory, individuals

aim to satisfy their basic psychological needs for competence (to be capable), autonomy (to make choices), and relatedness (to connect or collaborate) (Ryan & Deci, 2022). While poor extrinsic motivation can undermine employees' sense of competence and autonomy, the absence of recognition and lack of connection with the organization fails to fulfill employees' need for relatedness. Furthermore, lack of growth opportunities disables employees from choosing their career path (autonomy), acquiring new knowledge, skills, and abilities (competence), and building social connections or collaboration (relatedness). Therefore, it can be argued that *quiet quitting is a result of unmet employees' psychological needs*.

Work-life balance, burnout, and well-being support the principle of the job demands-resources model. According to the model, when a job requires employees to put in significant effort without adequate sufficient recovery, job demands can turn into job stressors. Hence, when employees experience a disturbance of the equilibrium between job demands (excessive workload, long working hours) and personal resources (energy), it can lead to burnout and reduced well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Consequently, it can be argued that *quiet quitting is a result of excessive job demands and a lack of necessary resources*.

The role of leadership in employee commitment aligns with transformational leadership theory. Transformational leaders engage, encourage, empower, and inspire employees, fostering commitment and dedication. Lack of these leadership competencies can result in decreased employee commitment and engagement (Northouse, 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that *quiet quitting is a result of the absence of transformational leadership in organizations*.

### 3. RISKS OF QUIET QUITTING IN THE CONTEXT OF TELEWORK

Fonner and Roloff (2010) provide evidence that telework has a positive impact on well-being and job satisfaction by mitigating stressors commonly associated with conventional work settings. Considering the job demands-resources model, working outside the traditional office environment diminishes teleworkers' exposure to stress-inducing factors such as interruptions, distractions, and excessive meetings. Consequently, by providing increased autonomy and flexibility in determining work location and schedule, teleworking reduces psychological demands and enhances available resources. This, in turn, allows for more leisure time, recovery, and the alleviation of job demands, such as work pressure. In line with the findings of Kelliher and Anderson (2010), teleworkers who perceive greater autonomy also demonstrate heightened commitment to their employer.

However, there are negative effects associated with telework, including increased role ambiguity and reduced support and feedback from colleagues and supervisors. The study by Davis and Cates (2013) presents evidence indicating that employees working in an external environment may face challenges in experiencing a sense of relatedness due to a lack of human contact and contact with the organization. The lack of social engagement diminishes the level of organizational identification among teleworkers, impeding their ability to align with the values and goals of the organization (Taskin & Bridoux, 2010; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016). The lack of face-to-face interaction can contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection, which can negatively impact teleworkers' motivation, engagement, and emotional well-being. Sardeshmukh et al. (2012) observed that telework is negatively related to both exhaustion and job engagement. This means that teleworking can lead to feelings of exhaustion and reduced engagement in job tasks depending on the level of job demands (such as workload, and time pressures) and availability of job resources (such as support, and feedback).



Moreover, teleworkers may face challenges in terms of career advancement due to reduced visibility and opportunities for professional growth (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). This lack of visibility hinders managers and supervisors from fully recognizing the teleworkers' potential, creating an inequality in career advancement opportunities for teleworkers.

The study by Overbey (2013) found that a transformational leadership style might not be as effective in retaining teleworkers. On the other hand, a laissez-faire leadership style could be more positively associated with their intention to stay with the organization. A significant correlation between transactional leadership and teleworkers' intentions to leave the organization was not discovered.

Overall, research conducted by Caillier (2013) suggests that teleworking does not significantly affect employees' intentions to quit their jobs. Turnover intentions are influenced more by other factors, such as job satisfaction. Furthermore, the study found that social factors, like being denied teleworking privileges, have a greater impact on turnover intentions. Employees who are allowed to telecommute frequently or occasionally, or those who don't telework due to technical or job-related reasons, tend to be more engaged (Masuda et al., 2017) and show lower turnover intentions compared to those who are denied this benefit. Employees in organizations that provide telecommuting options are compared to those in organizations without such options.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The study conducted by Harker Martin and MacDonnell (2012) highlights the positive impact of telework on employee retention and fostering a strong sense of commitment within organizations. However, this research indicates that telework has the potential to reduce work engagement. It becomes evident that addressing well-being, supporting work-life balance, enhancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, promoting fair recognition, and nurturing positive workplace relationships are essential factors in mitigating the occurrence of quiet quitting among teleworkers.

Quiet quitting can have significant consequences for both employees and organizations. Employees who disengage may experience feelings of boredom, frustration, and burnout, leading to a decline in motivation and job satisfaction. This can have adverse effects on their mental and physical well-being, including increased stress and anxiety. For organizations, the consequences of quiet quitting can be even more severe. Disengaged employees are likely to be less productive and may not reach their full potential, resulting in lost revenue, decreased customer satisfaction, and higher turnover rates (Yıldız, 2023). Employee turnover is a costly issue for organizations, leading to reduced productivity, higher recruitment and training expenses, and a negative impact on overall workplace morale.

It is worth noting that the research on this topic is relatively new, and more studies will need to be conducted to further explore the impact of telework on employee engagement and retention.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The risks of quiet quitting among teleworkers are high, and organizations must take steps to address this issue to retain their employees. These findings highlight the complex nature of telework, with both positive and negative effects. It suggests that organizations need to carefully manage the factors that can lead to teleworkers' mental escape.

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