

Quitting quiet quitting - balancing the needs of employers and employees



By [Johan Botes](#)

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An engaged, fulfilled and thriving workforce was a key goal for all progressive businesses in 2022. The challenges faced by both employers and employees in the workplace called for a redesign of workforce policies that were able to balance the financial, employment and logistics challenges faced by post-pandemic employers, with the individual employee's search for meaning, flexibility and well-being.



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The great resignation

According to PwC's *Global Workforce Hopes and Fears* survey, one in five global workers planned to quit in 2022. A fair number of them eventually did, with employers facing fresh challenges to recruit new talent due to employees reassessing their lives and goals during Covid. A general unhappiness with their current workplace environment and a search for more pay or more flexible policies have all been cited as the reasons for the mass migration of employees from one firm to another, or for complete downgrades or downscaling. More than one employee seemed to conclude that living a more spartan life - but with greater peace and tranquillity - was worth ditching some of the accoutrements of high-end jobs.

This great resignation has affected most industries, and companies around the world have been trying to find the most efficient staffing models and flexible arrangements within those models to ensure they are able to meet staff expectations and attract and retain the right talent.

The search for meaning

While workplace flexibility has become a key negotiation point in employment contracts, the modern workforce is also increasingly demanding that their employer's activities match their own personal ideals. This includes that the business operates in a sustainable way and provides benefits for the environment, local economies and the surrounding communities. Employees want to know they are working in a role that provides not only personal meaning, but that the business is fulfilling its responsibilities to society and the environment.

Employees, customers, shareholders and other stakeholders are also demanding that organisations take a stance on important issues such as racism, sexual harassment, unemployment, and income inequality. Leading businesses are turning this challenge into a competitive advantage by creating workplaces with purposeful engagement and ways to accommodate a diverse set of employees with differing workplace needs.

The growing importance of mental well-being

For much of the pre-industrial era, what was going on in the minds of workers was considered to be of no relevance to the quality of their work. Workers were simply required to show up physically at the workplace. Fortunately, businesses and our society have since evolved. In our current economy, the most critical tool for any business is the intellectual property of its employees - the workers' minds.

Working at its best, the human mind is a state-of-the-art piece of machinery, capable of painting the Sistine Chapel, writing the Google algorithm, and calculating precise mathematical trajectories that landed Apollo 11 on the moon. Given its crucial value to the business, it follows that the mental health of a workforce should be a top priority for employers, and employee well-being policies are now an integral part of forward-thinking businesses' human resources strategies. The rise of artificial intelligence, machine learning and automation has not eradicated the need for creative thinking - instead, it has served to emphasise its immense value.

The quiet quitters

While employers grapple with retaining key talent, some employees opt not to vote with their feet when they are disgruntled - they quietly quit. They do not actually resign or leave the service of their employer, but switch gears to "disengage" but continue to work and draw a salary with the same employer. The risk of staff only doing what they are absolutely supposed to (or just enough to not get fired) is often associated with poor workplace culture. Employees who are fearful of repercussions are less likely to raise suggestions, put forward ideas on new ways of doing business, identify outdated practices or drive the business in a new direction.

The rise of quiet quitting in the workplace during 2022 has been attributed to various factors, including long working hours, lack of work/life balance, workplace bullying and being taken for granted by their employers. Employers focussed on making sure their top performers didn't leave came to realise that their next tier of employees were as important, and warranted attention and rewards as well. Whilst key talent is often mobile and such employees are likely to leave when they feel disgruntled, employees who are less likely to readily find meaningful alternative employment may be more inclined to stay and be unhappy. This group of quiet quitters could have a disastrous effect on the business, turning a thriving company into a bureaucracy resembling a poorly run state department.

For employers, the solution lies in getting the balance right. Businesses must ensure that employees who have felt compelled to quietly quit are able to speak up about exhaustion, frustration and grievances, and ask for assistance. Avoiding burnout and risks to their mental health will assist greatly in fulfilling the higher demands we place on employees to remain motivated. The trend to silently slip away from one's workplace responsibilities, literally or figuratively, could place

additional burden on other employees who are dedicated to the cause. Employees who repeatedly experience an unbalanced workload are likely to quit - whether they do so actually or quietly.

Employers should ensure that their retention policies and projects aim to address not only their high-flyers but all groups of employees needed to ensure the smooth running of the business. Retention of staff is no longer enough - retaining the commitment and motivation of all employed by the organisation is critical for business success.

The four-day work week

Like yo-yos and hula hoops, the four-day work week has excited generations, with the notion fading over time and becoming trendy again once those who were infatuated with the idea have long forgotten the frustration of replicating moves made to look so simple by a select few. Two global oil companies were the first documented cases of modern companies adopting the four-day work week, back in 1940. Their drivers worked a schedule that saw them working 40 hours in four days (the 4/40 system).

Research from the 1970s shows that the initial enthusiasm and positive effects of a reduced work week wane over time. Ivancevich & Lyon (1977) noted that employees working on a 4/40 week reported increased satisfaction in respect of job security, autonomy and remuneration when compared to a comparator group, plus reduced anxiety and increased productivity. These results - measured after 13 months from the commencement of the programme - stood in stark contrast to the employee experiences recorded at 25 months. All areas that were measured declined by the second survey - the only aspect that remained positive after two years was the employees' sense of personal worth.

A current trial conducted by 4 Day Week Global, the think tank Autonomy, the 4 Day Week UK Campaign and researchers at Boston College and Cambridge and Oxford universities continues to report success. In late November, it was announced that 100 UK companies employing around 2,600 employees would permanently implement four-day weeks, with employees receiving the same salaries. This is considered to be a positive step for the four-day week campaign.

What these trends make clear is that the working world is ready for greater flexibility in the way, manner and frequency in which we expect employees to show up to a location and perform work tasks. Businesses who think deeply and widely about the impact of such flexibility may be able to sustain gains for longer than counterparts who jump from one fad to the next. Further, employers that are able to correctly identify the right mix of workforce policies available to them and then find ways of accommodating and communicating with their staff to create meaning, purpose and well-being for them, are at a strategic advantage when it comes to attracting and retaining the right talent.

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