



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

Quiet Quitting

A Strategically Silent Saboteur

The modern work environment demands the best-suited talent and assumes that individuals must prove their worth to their employers. Being the preferred choice for the employer entails more than just having experience, skill, education, and good attitude. It may also indicate the ability to bounce back from setbacks and being equipped to adapt to the specific demands of the job position. Sadly, some people only see job suitability through the lens of the job description (JD) requirements. This notion is risky for several reasons. JDs may only underscore the ‘macro criteria’ of the job position and may not reflect elements of institutional culture, emotional requirements or workplace contingencies. Even a JD that is excessively prescriptive may fail to attract the most suitable skillsets.

I argue that a job cannot be fully defined or delineated in any single document. Some management professionals posit that employees are required to ‘go the extra mile,’ well beyond the JD, if they are to be considered as ‘performing effectively.’ One 2022 Forbes article indicated that ‘going the extra mile’ may include ‘giving discretionary effort to identify and solve a problem or take initiative on a new project’. The same article quoted results of a recent workplace study, which noted that 85% of respondents said, ‘they work more than is officially necessary in their job.’ It is noteworthy that these postulations of ‘going the extra mile’ are now outrightly being refuted in a fairly recent phenomenon known as ‘Quiet Quitting (QQ).’

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines QQ, as ‘the subtle but pervasive act of employees disengaging from their work while continuing to maintain their physical presence within an organization.’ This entails a series of actions characterized by a general ‘mental check out’ and deteriorated levels of motivation. QQ is non-confrontational in nature and often occurs for extended periods without detection. As such ‘Quiet Quitters continue to fulfil their primary responsibilities, but are less willing to engage in activities known as citizenship behaviors’. Some managers describe QQ as ‘the usual entitlement expected from millennials.’ They claim that the act is disrespectful and selfish as it does not give management the opportunity to resolve or even address pertinent workplace problems, and as such, some HR practitioners opine that QQ is simply a new age rebranding of ‘work to rule’ and ‘presenteeism.’

QQ should not be ignored, despite differing professional

opinions. Gallup’s State of the Global Workplace report indicated that, internationally, only about 15% of employees were actively engaged in their work. The majority of employees fell into the category of “not engaged” or “actively disengaged,” which could be indicative of quiet quitting behavior. Another study, which was referenced in a 2023 CBS News Article, highlighted that ‘Just 23% of workers were “engaged” at work in 2022. The remainder — 77% — were either doing the bare minimum and “quiet quitting” their jobs, or actively disengaged and “loud quitting” at work.’ These statistics should be cause for genuine concern.

There are arguably several reasons behind QQ, but this writer has noted that the three most prominent reasons included burnout, poor communication, and toxic workplace culture. Employee burnout refers to a unique type of workplace stress, and causes multiple levels of exhaustion, including but not limited to, mental exhaustion. Employees can often find themselves overwhelmed under the stressors of conflicting schedules, long work hours, and unrealistic and unclear performance expectations. A McKinsey Health 2022 survey of 15,000 workers across 15 countries found that a quarter of employees experienced burnout symptoms.

Substandard communication refers to some breakdown or barrier that results from a discrepancy or disconnect between what was said and what was actually understood. When employees experience poor management practices, such as micromanagement, inconsistent feedback, or a lack of transparency, it erodes their trust in management and by extension, the organization. This further contributes to disengagement and quiet quitting. Forbes Advisor indicated that ‘for over 40% of workers, poor communication reduced trust both in leadership and in their team.’

Toxic culture speaks to an unethical atmosphere of non-inclusion, chronic disrespect, siloed thinking and cutthroat behaviour. If employees perceive that they are being constantly subjected and exposed to harassment, mistreatment, bullying and discrimination, they may simply choose to withdraw. According to a recent report from MIT Sloan Management Review, ‘employees are quitting their jobs in droves because of toxic workplace culture and not substandard remuneration.’ The report also indicated that toxic workplace culture ‘was 10.4 times more likely to contribute to an employee quitting.’

Manoeuvring the dynamics of the workplace whilst attempting to build a successful and fulfilling career can be very frustrating. Similarly, managing the performance of people, processes, projects, resources and programmes is not an easy task. They both require foresight, strategy, creativity and situational awareness. It is evident that QQ has far-reaching consequences that can negatively impact both the individual and the institution. Thus, it is fair to deduce that addressing and managing this phenomenon would require a synergistic approach incorporating input and effort, changes, and compromises from both parties.

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