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Quiet Quitting: Navigating an Old Phenomenon in the New Normal

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Quiet Quitting: Navigating an Old Phenomenon in the New Normal

Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

By

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June 2, 2023

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DePaul University

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to my thesis chair, Alice

Stuhlmacher, as well as to my reader Shelly Rauvola, for sharing advice, providing support, and

devoting their time in the process of this project. Additionally, I would like to thank my parents,

siblings, partner, and fellow classmates for their support throughout this process.

Biography

The author was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 19, 1993, and was raised in Woodstock, IL, a Northwest suburb of Chicago. She graduated from Marian Central Catholic High School in 2011, received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology, with a minor in Management, from DePaul University in 2022.

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Abstract

Quiet quitting is a recently popularized trend that has taken the workplace by storm following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The term is not clear or easily defined, described by some as an anti-work philosophy and by others as healthy boundary setting. This review explores the evidence that quiet quitting is occurring, similar concepts from the I-O literature that appear highly similar to quiet quitting (i.e., disengagement, work-life balance), how Job Demands-Resources Theory may apply, the potential role of the psychological contract, how the pandemic uniquely contributed to the trend, recommendations for addressing or preventing quiet quitting in the workplace, and a discussion of future research suggestions.

Quiet Quitting: Navigating an Old Phenomenon in the New Normal

Introduction

For several decades, bosses have exasperatedly made the claim that people just don't want to work anymore. It has been especially common for older generations to characterize younger generations negatively in this way, and there are many terms that already exist to describe a poor work ethic, such as slacking off, coasting, or phoning it in (Yang & Ellis, 2022). Quiet quitting is a term not entirely used to describe younger workers, but it is the newest way of explaining this type of poor work ethic or negative attitude toward one's job. Quiet quitting's association with the younger workforce has much to do with its origins on the social media platform Tik Tok, where a Gen Z employee seemingly first introduced the term, leading to an explosion of social media content and business articles across the internet either passionately promoting or vehemently condemning the practice (Yang & Ellis, 2022).

However, considering quiet quitting does not on the surface appear to be a novel concept, it is important to examine whether there is in fact proof to support that this type of behavior is suddenly occurring in today's workplace, or whether it is just a fake trend. Very little research has been done on the specific concept thus far, but data from Gallup and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), as well as governmental productivity data, suggest some support for its occurrence (Rosalsky & Selyukh, 2022). Gallup conducts a regular work engagement survey, identifying the amount of actively engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged workers. While approximately half of the U.S. workforce has consistently reported being disengaged in recent years, according to Gallup, from 2019 to 2022 the percentage of engaged employees 35 years and younger dropped by six percentage points; simultaneously, the percentage of 35 and younger disengaged employees increased by six points, indicating that

there may actually be a shift occurring (Harter, 2022). The SHRM Research Institute polled HR professionals asking whether they were concerned about quiet quitting in their workplace. Only 36% felt quiet quitting was an issue within their own organization, but 51% were still concerned about its potential negative impact on their workforce (SHRM, 2022). Finally, recent U.S. government data from the end of 2022 showed a historic drop in productivity; while there are alternative explanations that could account for this drop in productivity, for example, supply chain issues or the substantial churn in the labor market, it leaves the door open for the possibility that quiet quitting behaviors are impacting output and the bottom line (Harter, 2022).

Given this information, this paper cannot necessarily assume quiet quitting is indeed occurring, but, drawing from past I-O literature, it will provide possible explanations regarding the conditions under which something like it can happen, as well as how leaders, organizations, and individuals can address it.

Related Constructs

One of the primary criticisms of the quiet quitting trend is that the term seems to have too multiple meanings, none of which sound very much like the name. There are two definitions most frequently used, which will be the focus of this thesis; the first can be categorized as reactive in nature and the second as proactive in nature.

Disengagement

The first definition of quiet quitting describes a reactive employee response and is more commonly used to explain the concept in a negative way: a quiet quitter is someone who has given up and refuses to go above and beyond at work anymore, often because they are fed up or burned out (Yang & Ellis, 2022). This sounds very similar to how disengagement is discussed in the I-O literature. Disengagement has been conceptualized in two primary ways, the first by

Kahn's seminal paper discussing personal engagement and personal disengagement in 1990, and the second by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli in relation to burnout and the Job Demands-Resources Model in 2001 (Rastogi et al., 2018).

Kahn (1990) defined disengagement as "the uncoupling of selves from work roles," where workers "withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). The disengaged employee becomes less involved, suppresses thoughts and feelings, and is less connected to their work and coworkers (Kahn, 1990). Conversely, it is helpful to look at Kahn's (1990) definition of what he considered the conceptually opposing construct, engagement: "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles," where "people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). The engaged employee has positive connections to work and coworkers, is productive, and typically performs well. Disengagement and engagement were described as the two behavioral extremes existing on a continuum of psychological absence from work to psychological presence at work. According to Kahn, a person's position along this continuum is influenced by factors at multiple levels, including organizational, intergroup, group, interpersonal, and individual factors. Additionally, it is not static, but rather fluctuates over time for each individual (Kahn, 1990).

When originally conceptualized, Kahn (1990) included three psychological conditions that influence an employee's conscious decision to engage or disengage from work: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness refers to an employee's perception that they are valuable in their role or organization and their contributions are seen as worthwhile. Essentially, they receive a return on their investment of effort in the form of satisfaction of their personal need to derive meaning from work and life (Kahn, 1990). High meaningfulness is

associated with high personal engagement and is impacted by task and role characteristics as well as work interactions (Kahn, 1990).

The second psychological condition Kahn (1990) included was psychological safety, or feeling safe to take the risk of honest self-expression without fearing negative consequence to status, career, or image. It exists in a work environment that is clear, consistent, predictable, and nonthreatening. Safety is associated with higher employee engagement, and it is influenced by four factors: interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style and process, and organizational norms (Kahn, 1990).

The third and final psychological condition Kahn (1990) included as an influence on an employee's decision to engage or disengage from work was psychological availability, or an individual's perception that they possess sufficient physical, emotional, and psychological resources required for their role performance. Nonwork demands may serve as distractions or may reduce the availability of energy employees are able to bring to their role. High availability is associated with high personal engagement, and it is impacted by four types of distractions, including outside lives, depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, and individual insecurity (Kahn, 1990).

While Kahn is known for pioneering the work on disengagement, the second most common conceptualization from Demerouti et al. (2001) alternatively viewed disengagement as one of the two dimensions of burnout, the second dimension being exhaustion (Rastogi et al., 2018). Disengagement here is defined as "distancing oneself from one's work, and experiencing negative attitudes toward the work object, work content, or one's work in general" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Using the Job Demands-Resources theory as a framework, discussed in more detail later, burnout is seen as the result of high job demands, associated with higher levels of

exhaustion, and low job resources, associated with higher levels of disengagement. Some examples of job resources mentioned as possibly leading to disengagement include low supervisor support, low job security, lacking participation in decision-making, and insufficient rewards or feedback (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Overall, Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of disengagement has slightly more complexity than the unidimensional conceptualization offered by Demerouti et al. (2001), but at the core, they both characterize disengagement as an individual withdrawing and distancing themselves from their work role emotionally, cognitively, and/or physically (Rastogi et al., 2018). Disengagement has been discussed in the literature using other theoretical frameworks as well; however, this core definition seems to hold across different theories and applications (Afrahi et al., 2022).

One issue in the literature, however, is that further detailed study of disengagement has been neglected in favor of research on engagement (Afrahi et al., 2022). Considering Kahn's conceptualization of disengagement and engagement as opposite constructs, this should not be an issue; recently, though, the belief that both constructs exist on a continuum has been questioned and calls for more research into disengagement specifically have been made (Afrahi et al., 2022). Instead of continuing to think in terms of a continuum, it is recommended that future research use more accurate distinctions, such as engagement, lack of engagement (i.e., the absence of engagement), and disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022). Furthermore, it has been argued that disengagement should no longer be viewed in a negative light, as has historically been done – instead, it should be viewed as a context-driven, coping response an individual employs when insufficient resources are present (Afrahi et al., 2022). This coping response is self-protective, so remaining resources can be preserved, and does not necessarily mean that the individual is not

performing on the same level or that all aspects of their work are suffering. Making these

distinctions is especially relevant moving forward so HR professionals and managers do not

implement strategies for disengaged employees that are meant to increase engagement for not

engaged employees, as this potentially runs the risk of increasing disengagement even further

(Afrahi et al., 2022).

Disengagement Antecedents

A recent literature review of work disengagement found an extensive list of antecedents,

which cluster into three groups: individual characteristics, job attributes, and organizational and

workplace conditions (Afrahi et al., 2022). Individual characteristics that are antecedents include

demographics such as age (i.e., older individuals may experience higher disengagement in the

face of work changes) and education (i.e., less educated individuals may experience higher

disengagement due to fewer skills and lower self-confidence), as well as negative affectivity

(i.e., negative emotions and negative view of self is associated with higher disengagement) and

self-efficacy (i.e., high self-efficacy results in better coping strategies and lower disengagement).

Greater adaptability and resilience in the face of uncertainties at work are also associated with

lower disengagement levels. A strong career orientation, or drive for career advancement, as

opposed to a more complacent attitude towards development, has also been associated with

lower disengagement (Afrahi et al, 2022).

The second cluster of antecedents includes job attributes or demands that cause stress and

exhaustion by exceeding an individual's available resources; disengagement may then be a

strategy employed in efforts to manage these excessive demands. Examples of specific job

attribute antecedents include a traumatic or negative work event, role overload, role ambiguity,

and having responsibility for others. Additionally, management style, attitude, and quality of

support and feedback given to subordinates impacts disengagement levels. Management style that provides autonomy to employees, is less autocratic or intimidating, and includes humor is associated with lower disengagement because it reduces the threat to an employee's self-identity. Similarly, supervisors who exhibit care, listen, provide useful feedback, and respect work-life balance and employee well-being more frequently have subordinates who are less disengaged. Finally, unchallenging, boring, or low creativity work leaves the human need for meaningful work unmet, and lack of control, job insecurity, and uncertainty about an organization's future damage an employee's trust and lead to disengagement.

The third cluster of antecedents is organizational and workplace conditions, which includes organizational practices, policies, and climate. When employees are recognized, appreciated, feel supported by coworkers, and have opportunities for professional development, disengagement is lower. When there is workplace incivility, betrayal, discrimination, poor communication, strong hierarchy, bureaucracy, or low psychological safety, disengagement is higher. Finally, when organizations facilitate better work-family balance, employees are better able to manage work-family and family-work conflict and disengagement declines (Afrahi et al., 2022).

Disengagement Consequences

The same recent literature review on disengagement also outlined its consequences (Afrahi et al., 2022). Partially due to the lack of research on disengagement, there are far fewer consequences currently understood, and even some mixed results regarding disengagement's relationship to job performance, leading to more calls for future research into this area. The consequences that were found in the literature include: affective commitment (reverse), extra-role performance (reverse), in-role performance, physical pain, psychological unease, and

turnover intentions (Afrahi et al, 2022). Thanacoody et al. (2014) found that disengagement mediated the relationship between emotional exhaustion and affective commitment, as well as the relationship between emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Exploring turnover intentions as an outcome of disengagement was also examined within multiple contexts in the literature, including different industries and using employees with varying tenure lengths (Afrahi et al. 2022). While different antecedents were used in each study, disengagement was found to predict turnover intentions in all contexts and was considered by each set of authors to be a coping strategy for managing stressors (Afrahi et al., 2022; Thanacoody et al., 2014; Azeem et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2013). In several additional studies that examined the outcomes of both positive and negative coping strategies, disengagement was shown to be related to increased job insecurity, reduced employee well-being, self-reported health symptoms, and greater distress in general, which caused an increased occurrence of mental health problems (Cheng et al., 2014; Day & Livingstone, 2001; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014).

Importantly, it should be emphasized that, even though the literature has applied different theoretical frameworks, they seem to describe similar mechanisms for how the antecedents impact disengagement: those mechanisms include an employee's desire to derive meaning from and have psychological safety at work, to minimize negative emotions and feelings of exhaustion, and to protect their image and self-identity from threats (Afrahi et al., 2022). These common mechanisms point to the possible heavy influence of context, which likely determines whether specific antecedents actually result in disengagement. The context-driven nature of disengagement should be considered in future research, along with possible real-world interventions specifically designed to tackle disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022). Furthermore,

these factors and how they may have led to increased disengagement will be more directly tied to the recent pandemic work environment in a later section.

Work-Life Balance

The second definition of quiet quitting, which describes a more proactive response, is more common for those celebrating the trend: a quiet quitter is someone who is setting boundaries at work for the purpose of creating and maintaining a healthier and more balanced life (Yang & Ellis, 2022). This definition instead sounds like the concept of work-life balance, which has been explored in great detail in the I-O literature. Due to recent changes in technology, family structure, and women becoming more involved in the workplace, there has been a growing issue of blurred lines between employees' work and personal lives (Wood et al., 2020). This shifting environment has led many employees to place greater value on free time and relationships outside of work (Wood et al., 2020).

Similar to research regarding disengagement, the definition used for work-life balance has evolved over time, but a literature review by Kalliath and Brough (2008) integrated the many conceptualizations into a single holistic definition: "Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (p. 326). Importantly, this definition acknowledges that work and life may not receive equal time, involvement, or satisfaction in order to be in balance, and that variability exists across individuals regarding what an ideal balance is between the two domains (Kalliath & Brough, 2008; Greenhaus et al., 2003). So, if a quiet quitter is someone who has set certain boundaries at work in order to still be able to attend to their non-work priorities, they are likely motivated to prevent or correct a work-life imbalance.

Interest in the interaction of work and life started around the same time that women began entering the workforce following World War I, and research into the concept of work-life balance followed in the 1960s and 70s as dual-earner households became more commonplace (Kelliher et al., 2018). From the start, the focus of research tended to be on how women specifically juggle caring for their family and household while working outside the home as well. This narrow focus was reflected in original conceptualizations of work-life balance, making later revisions necessary in order to accommodate changing family structures, gender role expectations, and the nature of work (Kelliher et al., 2018; Thilagavathy, 2021). Modifications were also essential to integrate non-work life elements other than family responsibilities (Kelliher et al., 2018; Thilagavathy, 2021).

The work-life balance literature differentiates four sub-categories, split according to the direction and the positive or negative nature of the relationship, including work-life conflict, life-work conflict, work-life enrichment, and life-work enrichment; however, for the sake of conciseness, this discussion will focus on the concept of work-life balance at the broader level (Gragnano et al., 2020). The "work" part of work-life is more clearly defined, considered to be employment; importantly, the definition should incorporate all variations of work, not just permanent, full-time employment in a conventional job (Kelliher et al., 2018). The "life" part of work-life is not limited to family; while typically neglected in past work-life balance literature, other important domains of life include friendships, romantic relationships, community involvement, education, leisure time, household management, and health (Gragnano et al., 2020). Not only is there between-person variability when it comes to the ideal balance between work and life priorities, there is also within-person variability over the course of each individual's lifespan as their roles, responsibilities, and perspectives change (Gragnano et al., 2020).

Work-Life Balance Antecedents

Antecedents of work-life balance fall into one of two categories: personal or organizational (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Personal predictors consist of both individual traits as well as cultural values, including job involvement, job importance, family involvement, conscientiousness, neuroticism, coping style, individualism, power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Organizational predictors consist of both job characteristics as well as aspects of the support system, including job demand, time pressure at work, job autonomy, role ambiguity, scheduling flexibility, flexible work arrangement, part-time work, assistance with childcare, parenting resources/lactation support, elder care resources, employee health and wellness programs, family-leave policies, social support at work, and other services meant to help employees navigate their multiple roles (Sirgy & Lee, 2018).

Work-Life Balance Consequences

Similarly, the consequences of a good work-life balance fall into one of three categories: work-related outcomes, non-work-related outcomes, and stress-related outcomes (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Work-related outcomes include high job performance, high job satisfaction, high organizational commitment, and high career development and success, as well as low job malfunction, low job burnout, low job alienation, low absenteeism, and low turnover intention (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Non-work-related outcomes of a healthy work-life balance include high life satisfaction, high marital satisfaction, high family performance, high family satisfaction, high parental satisfaction, high leisure satisfaction, reduced poor health condition, and low conflicts with family members (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Lastly, strain-related outcomes of work-life balance include low emotional exhaustion, low psychological distress, low anxiety, low irritability, low hostility, low hypertension, low depression, low affective parental distress, low marital distress,

low illness symptoms, low somatic complaints, low blood pressure and cholesterol, low alcohol abuse, and low cigarette consumption (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). This long list of consequences clearly demonstrates the widespread impact work-life balance, or imbalance for that matter, has on an individual's work attitudes and performance, health and well-being, as well as an organization's key performance indicators. As with disengagement, the antecedents and consequences of work-life balance will be examined in more detail within the specific context of the pandemic workplace and quiet quitting in a later section.

Related Constructs' Connection to Quiet Quitting

Disengagement and work-life balance as reactive and proactive responses establishes just one possible framework for understanding the phenomenon known as quiet quitting. Other constructs within the I-O literature can easily be tied in to this discussion because quiet quitting's occurrence is seemingly the result of a constellation of multiple factors, factors which are likely to vary from one quiet quitter to the next. However, this framework, along with the theoretical perspectives to be explored next, may help provide organizations, managers, and employees a solid starting point for dealing with the phenomenon in lieu of a meaningful amount of research specifically on quiet quitting.

If we replace either the reactive quiet quitting definition with disengagement or replace the proactive definition with work-life balance, not only does quiet quitting sound less inflammatory, but it also allows us to understand that quiet quitting is perhaps a necessary behavioral shift that an individual employs to better manage their responsibilities and their health in light of contextual demands or changing priorities. Furthermore, in addition to the fundamental importance of the care and consideration of employees, it is in an organization's

best interest to prioritize the health and well-being of its employees and to respect their non-work priorities, as both lead to stronger organizational performance (Sirgy & Lee, 2018).

It is unsurprising that quiet quitting came to the forefront following the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the massive shift to remote work, widespread layoffs, unavailable child or elder care, and existential threat, stress, and grief related to the virus, among many other things – the nature of work changed, the nature of life changed, priorities were altered, and fatigue quickly set in for many, making quiet quitting a reasonable response to the situation at hand. Challenges such as forced remote work or unavailable child or elder care would present new issues for employees seeking to maintain work-life balance in the pandemic. Additionally, considering the previous discussion of disengagement, struggles with increased stress, negative emotions, and fatigue during the pandemic understandably may have led to greater utilization of negative coping strategies and a disconnection from work.

While perhaps not ideal for the individual or for the organization, it is unproductive for organizations to shame or ostracize employees for a functional and adaptive response to their current circumstances. Moreover, because the cause of quiet quitting is not one size fits all, the solution also will not be one size fits all; when this behavioral response takes on counterproductive tendencies, it is equally the individual's and the organization's/leaders' responsibility to restore a healthier relationship with work by addressing the unique needs or challenges of that employee and their current situation in a personalized way.

Theoretical Perspectives

This next section will describe Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory and discuss the way JD-R informs how and why quiet quitting may be occurring, setting the stage for

intervention recommendations later in the paper. Further, the role of the psychological contract will also be considered through the lens of JD-R theory.

Job Demands-Resources Theory

A vast amount of literature regarding the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory has been generated since the burnout model was first introduced by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli in 2001, and thousands of citations having accumulated on the most seminal papers on the topic since (Bakker et al., 2023a). Demerouti and Bakker, as well as a handful of other researchers, have periodically reviewed JD-R theory to incorporate new empirical findings into the theory, with the aim to create a highly comprehensive yet parsimonious model with the strongest predictive ability for employee well-being and job performance (Bakker et al., 2023). The resulting integration of this incredibly dense body of literature is an expansive theory that could probably fill an entire thesis alone; discussion of JD-R here will not be exhaustive, but rather will cover the most important elements and will connect the theory to quiet quitting.

JD-R theory was originally created as a model to explain burnout, a growing issue at the time within Western countries in particular (Demerouti et al., 2001). Its basic premise was that imbalanced job demands and job resources result in burnout. Definitions used for burnout have varied over the years, but as previously mentioned, the conceptualization Demerouti et al. (2001) used in their original discussion included two dimensions, exhaustion and disengagement, which allowed for burnout syndrome and the JD-R model to be applicable across all occupations. While specific job demands and job resources may vary across different occupational settings, all jobs possess both general categories (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are defined as: "physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs"

(Demerouti et al., 2001, p.501). Job resources are defined as: "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p.501). Excessive job demands were found to predict exhaustion, and a shortage of job resources were found to predict disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Research published after the seminal 2001 article helped mature the model into a theory. While still a core element, the sole focus of predicting burnout is no longer; the theory instead is best used to describe two independent pathways: a health impairment pathway, the burnout aspect predicted by job demands, and a motivational pathway, the work engagement aspect predicted by job resources (Bakker et al., 2023a). There is also less of a focus on disengagement as a dimension of burnout, with Maslach's similar but different burnout conceptualization seemingly being substituted for the Demerouti et al.'s 2001 conceptualization (Bakker et al., 2023a). As previously mentioned, the work engagement literature and the interventions suggested via empirical findings may not always be ideal or applicable for disengaged employees, which makes JD-R theory and its intervention recommendations not entirely perfect for application to quiet quitters. But considering the current lack of evidence for interventions specifically designed for disengagement, the JD-R literature is one of the better sources of guidance we have.

Through JD-R theory's evolution over time, nine propositions were crafted that help present the synthesized empirical findings; they each will briefly be touched upon here to establish a comprehensive theoretical foundation before moving forward (Bakker et al., 2023a). Proposition one has already been mentioned and defined: all occupations have the job

characteristics of both job demands and job resources (Bakker et al., 2023a). Proposition two describes the two different pathways or processes included in the model: the health impairment process, and the motivational process (Bakker et al., 2023a). The health impairment process occurs through excessive, severe, or high frequency job demands which require increased employee effort, leading to physical, emotional, and cognitive resource depletion, exhaustion, and health problems (Bakker et al., 2023a). The motivational process, on the other hand, occurs through the satisfaction of employees' basic psychological needs, resulting in work engagement. According to the theory, when engagement is high, it leads to increased creativity and enhanced job performance (Bakker et al., 2023a).

Proposition three refers to the buffer hypothesis, in which the presence of job resources can reduce the strain that job demands create, as well as the boost hypothesis, in which job demands intensify the positive effect job resources have on engagement and motivation (Bakker et al., 2023a). Proposition four describes how personal resources, an employee's perception that they are able to control and positively impact their work environment (i.e., self-efficacy, optimism), have a reciprocal relationship with job resources (Bakker et al., 2023a). Additionally, proposition five states that personal resources also moderate the relationship between job demands and well-being (Bakker et al., 2023a).

Proposition six discusses how employees are able to proactively manage their job demands by using job crafting, which increases both job and personal resources, leading to improved engagement, employee well-being, and positive job performance (Bakker et al., 2023a). Job crafting can be defined as "employees' personal initiative to change their job demands and job resources in order to better align the design of the job with their own abilities and preferences" (Bakker et al. 2023, Tims et al., 2013). On the flip side, proposition eight

discusses how self-undermining employee behaviors may eventually develop as a response to excessive job demands and strain (e.g., exhaustion, anxiety, depression) (Bakker et al., 2023a). Self-undermining is maladaptive self-regulation which results in dysfunctional employee cognitions and behaviors that generate problems and sabotage performance (Bakker et al., 2023a). These proactive and self-undermining behaviors seem like useful elements of the JD-R theory when considering its application to quiet quitting and will be discussed further later.

The last two propositions refer to reinforcing cycles. Proposition seven describes a gain cycle, where employees who are already engaged enter a positive job crafting cycle where they employ more proactive behaviors, gain more personal and job resources, and optimize their job demands (e.g., increasing efficiency) (Bakker et al., 2023a). This gain cycle helps engaged employees stay engaged. Alternatively, proposition nine describes a loss cycle, where high job strain leads to self-undermining behaviors that increase already challenging job demands. This loss cycle unfortunately causes even greater job strain as time goes on (Bakker et al., 2023a).

The two primary definitions of quiet quitting described at the start each have their own way of possibly fitting into the JD-R theory. The proactive definition which sounded very similar to the concept work-life balance (where healthy boundary setting between work and non-work is emphasized to maintain optimal health) seems to fit into the proactive behaviors category of job crafting. If an employee feels that the demands of their job are frustrating the balance between their work and non-work life domains, as is the case with many self-described quiet quitters, they may make attempts to job craft by decreasing those hindering demands. Hindering demands are described as stressful (as opposed to demands that present a positive, motivational challenge), and impede personal growth, goal attainment, and optimal functioning. If

experienced for an extended period of time, these hindering job demands may lead to poor health and work withdrawal behaviors (Tims et al., 2013).

Proactively managing hindering job demands is a prevention focused form of job crafting, and it may look like reducing workload to focus on only core work tasks, or perhaps revising processes and interactions in order to reduce physical, cognitive, and emotional energy expenditures (Tims et al., 2013). A recent meta-analysis found that while job crafting that focused on decreasing hindering job demands did not meaningfully improve engagement or performance, it was associated with reduced turnover intentions and reduced job strain (Rudolph et al., 2017). Noting the importance of individual differences, it was also found that decreasing hindering job demands had a positive relationship with neuroticism (i.e., less emotionally stable employees utilized this method more frequently than more emotionally stable employees), positively with agreeableness, negatively with openness, and positively with prevention focus (Rudolph et al., 2017).

The more reactive and negative definition of quiet quitting which sounded very similar to the concept disengagement (when an employee is fed up or burned out and refuses to go above and beyond at work) could also possibly be considered a form of hindering demand reduction job crafting; however, it sounds slightly too maladaptive in nature to be considered a proactive behavior. Instead, it may fit better into the self-undermining behavioral category, which includes making careless mistakes, communicating poorly, and experiencing interpersonal conflicts, or may even be considered a spiraling loss cycle in the worst-case scenario (Bakker et al., 2023). One study found that employees who had existing chronic burnout experienced even greater levels of health impairment and self-undermining behaviors during the week in response to their weekly job demands (Bakker et al., 2023b). Quiet quitting became a hot topic when the

pandemic started winding down, so it is possible the burnout that employees began experiencing at the onset and over the duration of the pandemic may have set them up for poorer health and more dysfunctional coping in response to job demands later down the road – in other words, burnout may have been compounded, resulting in a move to quiet quit as a way to cope.

JD-R Theory and The Psychological Contract

As mentioned, JD-R theory is flexible in that it allows for a plethora of job characteristics to be incorporated into the theory, making it possible to apply it to a variety of occupations (Demerouti et al., 2001). One job characteristic that could possibly be integrated into JD-R, particularly when we consider it within the context of the pandemic and the quiet quitting phenomenon, is that of psychological contracts. Psychological contracts refer to "individuals' unwritten and often unspoken expectations about the terms and conditions of the exchange relationship between themselves and another party, that is, their employer" (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021, p. 45). For example, employees often expect certain compensation, benefits, organizational or supervisor support, development, and job security in exchange for their time, knowledge and skills, personality, high quality performance, and loyalty (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). While this contract may be based on written and verbal agreements, it is mainly evaluated according to one's perception of contract satisfaction (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). When a violation is perceived, feelings of distrust and anger often ensue, and other negative consequences often result, including reduced organizational identification and commitment, reduced organizational citizenship behaviors, reduced job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021, p. 45).

Psychological contracts are more of a concept than it a clear theory, but it feels like a relevant topic to include in this discussion considering a common complaint from the quiet

quitting crowd – employees are partially fed up due to feelings of unfairness, a sense of imbalance between their efforts/productivity and rewards, or in some cases even feeling mistreated (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). While psychological contracts are frequently discussed in conjunction with social exchange theory, it is possible to integrate it with JD-R theory by considering psychological contract fulfillment as a job resource and psychological contract breach as causing additional job strain (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Parzefall & Hakanen, 2010).

Psychological contract fulfillment is something that employees expect employers to provide, and it can be considered a resource because it helps them achieve job-related goals and encourages personal growth, clearly influencing motivation (Parzefall & Hakanen, 2010). Using JD-R theory as a theoretical foundation, one study found that work engagement fully mediated the positive relationships between psychological contract fulfillment and affective commitment (i.e., emotional attachment to organization), and that affective commitment mediated the negative relationship between engagement and turnover intentions (Parzefall & Hakanen, 2010). These relationships indicate that psychological contract fulfillment could qualify as a resource that contributes to the motivational pathway of JD-R theory (Parzefall & Hakanen, 2010).

On the flip side is psychological contract breach, defined as "the cognition that one's organization has failed to meet one or more obligations within one's psychological contract in a manner commensurate with one's contributions" (Morrison & Robinson 1997, p. 230). Findings from a different study suggested that psychological contract breach is a unique contributor to job strain because it was found to increase emotional exhaustion and decrease job satisfaction (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). Additionally, the job resources of supervisory support and control were unable to predict emotional exhaustion or job satisfaction, when job demands were

controlled, without the inclusion of psychological contract breach (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). The article suggests that the breach of a psychological contract causes stress to employees because it reduces their ability to predict and control (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). Unfortunately, in highly uncertain times or periods of change, research has shown that psychological contracts not only get modified more frequently by both employees and employers, but also that there is a higher incidence of perceived breach (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). If psychological contracts and quiet quitting are indeed connected, it is unsurprising to see that COVID-19 spurred this trend because there was an enormous amount of uncertainty and constant, rapid changes that organizations had to make in response to shifts in the socioeconomic, medical, and political landscape (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). Moreover, it is highly possible that our "new normal" demands a new psychological contract.

The Pandemic and Quiet Quitting

It is difficult to say whether quiet quitting would have emerged as a trend at all had the COVID-19 pandemic not happened. So many unique challenges from this period have caused not just the workplace but also life in general to be drastically altered, possibly in permanent ways. If we consider the additional job demands that were placed on workers, all while under very uncertain and troubling conditions, fatigue, frustration, and withdrawal start to seem like very human responses to the context. Essential workers having to deal with the health risk of virus exposure; workers navigating new technological demands and developing new, innovative ways to do the same work from home; working parents juggling job and childcare responsibilities or employees managing job and eldercare responsibilities simultaneously; remote employees coping with loneliness and disconnection; even employer demands for all employees to return to the office – these are just some of the many examples of how demands around our

work lives increased during the pandemic (Demerouti & Bakker, 2022, Johar et al., 2023).

Challenges such as these happened concurrently with the removal of access to many resources,

both at work and outside of work. As was discussed in reference to JD-R theory, resources are

useful for buffering job demands, so it should not be too surprising to organizations that this shift

involving increased demands and decreased resources, drawn out for several years, has led to

employee health issues and calls for change (Bakker et al., 2023). Some researchers have even

called for a renaming of quiet quitting to a term that sounds more accurate, for example

"calibrated contributing," as this more accurately speaks to employees' attempts to address

unfairness and the imbalance between what they are giving to their employer versus what they

are getting back in return (Detert, 2023).

An important development, Demerouti and Bakker (2022) recently published an article

integrating JD-R theory and the crisis management literature; while JD-R traditionally only

considered job demands and job resources, Demerouti and Bakker (2022) argue that the demands

and resources from other domains of the employee's life interact and contribute to work

motivation and well-being. Additional research still needs to be done to further define these

interactions, but a move in this direction is promising in terms of helping to address quiet

quitting more holistically.

Many organizations and leaders have expressed concern, even outrage or disgust, about

how quiet quitting is irresponsible, how it shows an employee is a poor worker, and how it is

most problematic because of the negative consequences it has for the organization and its bottom

line (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023). One response to this viewpoint is meant to help flip this

perspective: instead of concentrating on how unfair it is that quiet quitters are cheating

employers out of their maximum productivity, consider how unfair it is that employees are being

cheated out of a healthy work environment (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023). The organization must remember their responsibility to employees in creating an environment that helps instead of impedes the satisfaction of their basic needs (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023). In many ways, quiet quitting feels like a call for help – a way for employees to raise the alarm to their employers that the way this relationship is set up is no longer serving them adequately. Blaming, judging, or firing those who show quiet quitting tendencies without understanding why or how to fix the issue is not only cruel, it shows that the employer has missed the point. Organizations should view the explosion of the quiet quitting trend as an opportunity to start a conversation with employees about what needs to change to improve their organization's culture and human resource management system; organizations that neglect to do this are almost guaranteed to be stuck with issues of high disengagement and turnover and low commitment well into the post-pandemic future (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023).

In looking at some of the research coming out about quiet quitting, disengagement, work-life balance, and the impact of the pandemic, there are some helpful answers regarding how to manage these problems, but many of the questions still are yet to be answered. Recent research has shown that some of the main causes of declining work engagement in today's workforce are due to employees feeling disrespected, organizations failing to recognize employee performance, employees lacking professional fulfillment or the feeling that their work is meaningful, unclear expectations from organizations and inadequate opportunities to develop, employees not feeling like the organization care about them, and employees feeling less and less connected to the values and mission of their organization (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023). From this list, a general conclusion can be drawn that quiet quitting employees are disconnecting because their basic, vital, human-centric needs are not being met, in the case of a reactive response, or that their

needs are better met by prioritizing life domains other than work, in the case of a proactive response (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023).

Recommendations to Address Quiet Quitting

Recent publications discussing ways to specifically address quiet quitting provide some useful recommendations, many of which focus on the adjustments that leaders and managers need to make. Mahand and Caldwell (2023) discussed how many of the root causes of low employee commitment and work withdrawal, conditions related more to disengagement rather than work-life balance, are a result of well-established and fundamental leadership responsibilities not being properly implemented; therefore, five leadership behaviors were discussed as possible helpful solutions to quiet quitting. The first is that it is imperative for leaders to deliver on their promises (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). As one example, during the pandemic in particular, many leaders and organizations publicly recognized the need to prioritize and implement interventions or work modifications designed to tackle employee mental and physical health problems; however, many of these commitments went unmet, a detail that did not go unnoticed by employees (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). Furthermore, this recommendation speaks directly to the previous discussion regarding psychological contract breach and the importance of following through on promises to maintain trust and credibility.

The second recommendation from Mahand and Caldwell (2023) was that leaders should prioritize workplace culture. Toxic cultures, characterized by abuse of power/authority, disrespect, unethical practices, non-inclusiveness, and cutthroat competition, have been shown to cause employees significant stress, often resulting in adverse health effects (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Ideally, organizational culture should work to develop psychological safety, and should communicate what is valued, how work is done, and what priorities the organization's leaders

consider most important (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Notable, this recommendation ties back nicely to Kahn's (1990) determination that psychological safety was essential for warding off disengagement in the workplace.

Third, despite a decent body of evidence supporting the notion that employees are in fact more committed, more creative, and more productive when their organization prioritizes employee well-being, few companies are doing so (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). In fact, 28% of employees have reported that the quality of their lives has diminished due to health problems such as burnout, depression, anxiety, and sadness, so it seems logical that a quiet quitter may be someone who steps back from work to address their health problems, especially when their manager or organization is not taking the issue seriously (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Leaders should aim to shift their role from a "boss" to more of a "coach" who is respectful, genuinely empathetic, and concerned about the issues their employees are coping with (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). Regular one-on-one conversations should be held to build and maintain this trusting and open relationship, allowing obstacles for well-being and work to be tackled before they turn into larger problems like quiet quitting (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Fourth, leaders need to ensure they build and reinforce a culture of diversity and inclusion, one that emphasizes mutual trust, learning, care, and collaboration, including the sharing of diverse experiences and perspectives (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). This seems to be an especially valuable consideration for younger and minority employees, who seem to value fair treatment even more than workers previously (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). One way this could be encouraged is through the use of employee resource groups (ERGs) that emphasize these values and encourage their discussion and promotion within the workplace (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Lastly, leaders need to focus on making work more meaningful for employees; the absence of meaningful work has been one of the leading reported reasons for turnover in the past several years (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). What is considered meaningful work will vary person to person, but a common element seems to be that work should satisfy one's desire to grow and "become the best version of oneself" (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023, p. 13). Meaningfulness also ties directly back to one of the psychological conditions that Kahn (1990) described as influencing an employee's level of engagement or disengagement. Overall, it is advised that leaders focus on excellent communication, healthy organizational culture, empathy and understanding, and addressing the unique individual needs of each employee (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Highly similar recommendations were made by Kruse and Tata-Mbeng (2023), in an article in which they emphasized how important it is for organizations to stop demonizing quiet quitters. Instead, organizations should attempt to view the phenomenon as an opportunity to reshape the future of their post-pandemic workplace. With an overall focus on facilitating ways to meet employees' basic needs in work and non-work domains, an approach more in line with the proactive work-life balance definition of quiet quitting, Kruse and Tata-Mbeng (2023) encouraged managers to focus on building trust to create a greater sense of belonging, provide more visible leadership and justice, create institutional support that permits employees to lead a healthy life outside of work, and foster purpose and meaning at work. These suggestions very strongly emphasize personalized approaches and the importance of respecting employee boundaries and need for a life beyond their job, speaking directly to the proactive, work-life balance of quiet quitting discussed earlier. It was also mentioned that organizations should work to increase the engagement levels of managers because, according to Gallup, at the end of 2021

managers experienced the greatest drop in engagement, with only one in three reporting they were engaged (Harter, 2022; (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023). The prediction is that a trickle-down effect to employees may occur when manager engagement increases (Kruse & Tata-Mbeng, 2023).

Finally, recommendations stemming specifically from JD-R theory provide some important considerations, namely in relation to the reactive quiet quitting definition similar to the concept disengagement. To avoid overcorrecting the narrative and neglecting the importance of personal accountability and self-regulation, there are a number of suggestions that apply to the individual level that must be discussed. Proactive behavior was mentioned earlier, which is defined as "self-initiated, anticipatory action aimed at changing either the situation or oneself" (Bindl & Parker 2011, p. 567; Bakker et al., 2023). Bakker et al. (2023) proposed three different types of proactive behaviors that employees can utilize to help with reducing burnout and improving engagement: job crafting, proactive vitality management, and playful work design.

Firstly, there are multiple ways job crafting can be accomplished. As discussed earlier, reducing hindering demands (e.g., workload) is one strategy (Bakker et al., 2023); although, some research has indicated that the energy required to decrease hindering job demands may exceed the energy it produces in return (Demerouti & Bakker, 2022). Alternative forms of job crafting involve optimizing demands by simplifying work processes, seeking out challenging job demands, which have been shown to be motivating, and finding ways to increase personal or job resources (Demerouti & Bakker, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023). All of these job crafting strategies led to improved work engagement, job performance, personal and job resources, and meaningfulness of work (Bakker et al., 2023). Interventions that train employees on different ways to job craft may be a helpful tool to combat quiet quitting (Bakker et al., 2023).

Secondly, Bakker et al., (2023) proposed proactive vitality management, which is a behavior intended to alter the self, as opposed to altering the job. Specifically, it helps improve "one's own physical and psychological resources to promote optimal functioning at work" (Bakker et al., 2023, p. 40), and examples include practicing mindfulness, going for a nature walk, or viewing art for inspiration. Proactive vitality management is most helpful for improving employee creativity, a relationship mediated by increased work engagement, and it also has been shown to reduce burnout symptoms (Bakker et al., 2023).

Lastly, playful work design is when employees do not necessarily alter the job, but rather build healthy competition or challenge, humor, and fun into work conditions and processes (Bakker et al., 2023). This proactive behavioral strategy helps satisfy basic needs, such as the need for relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Bakker et al., 2023). Furthermore, the addition of more fun helps buffer communion hindrance demands (e.g., social isolation, interpersonal conflict), and the addition of more competition helps buffer agency hindrance demands (e.g., simple, repetitive tasks) (Bakker et al., 2023).

Minimal research is currently available showing support for the above recommended strategies within a pandemic or post-pandemic work environment, but several studies provide some evidence these recommendations are a promising path forward. For example, Nagarajan et al. (2022) found that the pandemic had a negative impact on job performance and job satisfaction, but these negative effects were buffered when job crafting was utilized. Another study by Khan et al. (2023) conducted during the pandemic found that proactive vitality management increased positive behaviors such as employee voice and creativity and reduced negative behaviors such as stress, ostracism, and burnout. These relationships were mediated by organizational identification, and the ultimate result of proactive vitality management was a

more innovative workforce and a competitive edge for organizations (Khan et al., 2023). Lastly, Scharp et al. (2022) found evidence that playful work design was uniquely different than job crafting, and that incorporating both fun and competition into work led to increased engagement.

Taking into account the previous discussion of work-life balance challenges and life reprioritization during the pandemic, recent research has shown two ways that individuals can reduce the stress caused by blurred work and life/home boundaries, a more common problem for remote workers (Bakker et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2021). Employees are encouraged to designate and stick to set times for work and non-work activities (Bakker et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2021). It is also beneficial to create physical borders, when possible, that separate work and non-work domains (Bakker et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2021). According to JD-R theory, all of the individual strategies mentioned here will have a beneficial impact on employee motivational processes and employee health and well-being.

Similar to earlier discussed recommendations directed at leaders, Bakker et al. (2023) also had some additional suggestions for leaders based on the JD-R theory and crisis literature. They emphasized the importance of leaders providing vital resources, such as clarity, information and clear communication, direction, task-oriented behaviors like project management, relational or communal behaviors like sensitivity and social support, sufficient rewards, job security, and career and development opportunities. Additionally, leaders should be equally aware of the level of demands being placed on employees, monitoring to ensure job demands do not become overwhelming (Bakker et al., 2023). Overall, a strong emphasis should be placed on talking with and listening to what each individual employee has to say, what they need, what is working, and what is not working. Ideally, this list of recommendations will help both leaders and individuals overcome quiet quitting in today's workplace (Bakker et al., 2023).

Future Research

As far as recommendations for future research, first and foremost, it is imperative that the term quiet quitting be formally conceptualized, or perhaps abandoned, which will help eliminate some of the current confusion around the multiple definitions and interpretation of the concept's meaning. Abandoning the term entirely is not an unreasonable goal, but because the trend has become so well known, it seems important to explicitly address it in some way. If it is eventually integrated into the literature, it should also be determined whether quiet quitting is the same or unique in any way from existing concepts like disengagement, and what its specific antecedents and consequences are.

When we consider the connection between JD-R theory and quiet quitting, research should explore how well it fits into the current model and how well it responds to the interventions JD-R theory proposes as solutions. Considering some of the recent disengagement research has proposed that disengagement is not necessarily conceptually opposite to engagement and most of the interventions described in the literature are aimed at increasing engagement or reducing burnout, it is relevant to ask whether each of these interventions are equally suited to tackle quiet quitting. Perhaps quiet quitting is a response to burnout, as with the negative coping strategy of disengagement, or a way to avoid burnout, as with proactive coping strategies to protect work-life balance. Studies should also work to expand JD-R theory to properly understand and integrate how other non-work demands and resources fit into the current motivational and health impairment pathways, and how these non-work characteristics may interact with job characteristics to create different employee outcomes.

When we consider the psychological contract, future research should explore whether the psychological contract has changed for employees and/or employers since the onset of the

pandemic. Understanding if and how employees' expectations have shifted will be key for organizations to rebuild and maintain trust that may have been lost during COVID. Additionally, it is possible that some industries or occupations may have experienced psychological contract breach at higher rates, for example nurses or the hospitality industry, so identifying any of these differences may be valuable for properly triaging the quiet quitting phenomenon.

Human Resource Management recently put out a call for papers that focus on a wide range of research questions intended for a special issue on quiet quitting (Delery et al., 2023). Some of the more interesting questions they had on their list include the following: how to identify quiet quitters when they are by definition "quiet" and may not want to be noticed; is there a contagion effect in the workplace with quiet quitting; how do remote, hybrid, and in-person work options interact with or impact quiet quitting; are there any positive effects employers experience as a result of quiet quitting; what is the relationship between quiet quitting and the Great Resignation; and why did quiet quitting catch on so fiercely right now, particularly because similar terms already exist and withdrawal behaviors are not in any way new (Delery et al., 2023). The due date for paper submissions is in April 2024, so those interested in acquiring an improved empirical understanding of the quiet quitting phenomenon may want to look out for publication of this special issue.

Conclusion

While it may perhaps be best to abandon the term quiet quitting, the issues that underlie the emergence of this behavioral trend among employees should not be ignored, as that will likely lead to greater problems. While much still needs to be done to better define and understand its causes and impact, organizations, leaders, and individuals can look to the existing body of literature on concepts like disengagement and work-life balance, as well as on the

theoretical framework of Job Demands-Resource theory and psychological safety to glean insights on how to cope with quiet quitting in today's workplaces. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a host of new stressors and forever altered our lives and how work is done. Leaders should do their best to avoid seeing quiet quitters as individual troublemakers, and instead see that quiet quitting is perhaps a reasonable response to the current context, and that it presents an opportunity to shift the pre-pandemic work culture to better satisfy employees' needs inside and outside of work. As more and more research tailored specifically to quiet quitting gets published, more answers will emerge on how best to rebuild employee health and engagement and to successfully move forward.

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