

Quiet Quitting – Implications for Asian Businesses

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Abstract

Quiet quitting has emerged as an area of concern for businesses and societies in the wake of the ‘Great Resignation’ following COVID-19. While there is an emerging body of work surrounding the motivations of quiet quitting as a rejection of being enslaved to one’s work, little is known as to the implications of this phenomenon on Asian businesses. This viewpoint provides an overview of the literature to date and explores the steps Asian businesses should take to address potential quiet quitting proclivities among the existing and future workforce. In particular, businesses need to consider how COVID-19 has changed the landscape of work and generated psychological stresses among employees working from home, who have had to deal with their professional and private lives concurrently (Liu 2023). To combat quiet quitting in this new era, it is imperative to rethink work cultures, with an emphasis on facilitating greater autonomy in how work is performed (where applicable) and accordingly re-evaluating employment contracts.

Keywords: Quiet quitting, Burnout, Employee disengagement, Mass resignation, Staff turnover, Employee morale

Introduction

A recent phenomenon called “quiet quitting” has been gaining attention in Western news media, social media, and academic research. There are two contrasting viewpoints surrounding “quiet quitting,” leading to confusion in understanding its meaning and the employee behaviours it entails. The first viewpoint is that quiet quitters are doing the bare minimum at work and not going above and beyond, which has earned quiet quitting the moniker “acting your wage” (Hamouche, Koritos & Papastathopoulos 2023). It is proposed that workers who engage in this activity are disengaged, problematic in teams, and perform poorly (Dill & Yang 2022; Formica & Sfodera 2022; Taylor 2022). From this perspective, quiet quitters are a considerable problem for management, as they reduce productivity and impact overall performance (Anand, Doll, & Ray 2023). Further, it is believed that quiet quitters can influence the wider team environment and reduce the morale of co-workers (Anand et al. 2023; Hiltunen 2023). Therefore, from this first viewpoint, managers and supervisors should be concerned if employees are engaging in this behaviour.

Contrary to the first, the second viewpoint posits that quiet quitting can help an individual regain work-life balance and improve mental health. It is often referred to as a rejection of “hustle culture” (Mahand & Caldwell 2023; Serenko 2023), a popular concept in Western society that started with the technological revolution and the rise of entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley (Carnegie 2023). Despite most people having heard of hustle culture, there is limited academic research on this concept (Balkeran 2020). Hustle culture is a glorified version of workaholism, where an individual is encouraged to be “entrepreneurial” and sacrifice their sleep, life, and family to work (Carnegie 2023). However, workers are now rejecting the idea of devoting their entire life subservient to their job. Consequently, quiet quitting is considered the antithesis of hustle culture, as it embodies the idea that work should not dominate an individual’s life.

According to the second viewpoint, the central idea behind quiet quitting is for workers to have boundaries when it comes to their job role. This does not mean that workers will not go above and beyond at work; rather, they are merely asking for recognition or compensation when they do (Kaplan 2022). From this perspective, workers complete their job to the best of their ability but do not work extra hours or take on tasks outside their job role without adequate compensation (Kaplan 2022; Serenko 2023). Boundary expression is not only crucial to work-life balance, but also helps to maintain overall happiness and good mental health (Arar et al. 2023). As quiet quitting is often said to occur in response to heavy workloads, long working hours, unreasonable performance measures, high workplace stress, and burnout (Anand et al. 2023; Arar, Çetiner & Yurdakul 2023), the second viewpoint suggests that it is an important signal of something being wrong with the organisational culture, especially concerning unrealistic work expectations.

Overall, regardless of which viewpoint is taken on quiet quitting, it is an indication that management needs to communicate openly with their workers about workplace stress, burnout, performance measures, and role expectations.

Literature Review

The rejection of hustle culture and overwork in other cultures

The pandemic has prompted individuals worldwide to reconsider the role of work in their life. Prolonged lockdowns, changes in work patterns, and mounting stress levels have led many to experience burnout and exhaustion (Anand et al. 2023; Formica & Sfodera 2022). Additionally, the management of pandemic restrictions varied significantly across countries and societies (FT Visual & Data Journalism Team 2022). According to a 2022 Gallup report, Asian countries reported the highest levels of daily stress during the pandemic, with East Asia at 55%, followed by the USA and Canada at 50%, and Australia and New Zealand at 47% (Gallup 2022). However, by 2023, there was a slight improvement in daily stress levels, with East Asia at 52%, the USA and Canada at 52%, and Australia and New Zealand at 47%. Europe reported 39% daily stress, while South Asia and Southeast Asia reported 35% and 26% respectively (Gallup 2023). Furthermore, in 2023, work engagement was notably low across the globe, with South Asia at 33%, the USA and Canada at 31%, Southeast Asia at 26%, Australia and New Zealand at 23%, East Asia at 17%, and Europe at 13% (Gallup 2023). Evidently, the pandemic has affected stress and work-related engagement levels worldwide, which has made individuals reflect on how to alleviate these issues.

Due to worldwide stressors and periods of lockdowns, media and social platforms began discussing the role of work in people's lives. It has been asserted that quiet quitting is a result of workers re-evaluating the meaning of life and work during those lockdowns (Ito, Jordan & Turner 2022; Ward 2022). Additionally, a trend dubbed the "Great Resignation" emerged in Western countries after the lockdowns were lifted, with many workers quitting their jobs in pursuit of better opportunities (Formica & Sfodera 2022). The concept of quiet quitting was thus born from the pandemic as a reaction to a culture of overwork, with workers seeking better work-life balance.

The phenomenon of quiet quitting bears similarities to the "lying flat" movement that took place in China during the pandemic. For nearly three years, China adopted a zero-COVID strategy, confining millions of Chinese people to their homes through extensive lockdowns and testing (Chitty 2022; Ioannidis, Zonta & Levitt 2023). The economy slowed down during this time, leading to higher youth unemployment (Chitty 2022; Liang, Rozelle & Yi 2022). Due to the culture of overwork, high unemployment, and economic issues, the youth began to feel unable to purchase housing, have families, and compete for jobs (Hsu 2022). These persisting issues gave rise to the phrase "*tang ping*" (躺平), meaning "lying flat" in Mandarin (Bandurski 2021; Chitty 2022). Lying flat is also considered a rejection of relentless work, as some organisations in China implement "996," requiring workers to toil from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week, inevitably leading to heightened stress and exhaustion (Chitty 2022; Yip 2021).

Like quiet quitting, the meaning of *tang ping* is subject to debate, with some viewing it as a morally reprehensible rejection of society and others seeing it as an acceptance of a slower-paced lifestyle (Hsu 2022). However, the key distinction between quiet quitting and *tang ping* is that quiet quitting involves a behaviour exhibited while still maintaining a job, whereas *tang ping* entails a lifestyle change. Both necessitate further academic research, as they point to ongoing issues that workers face due to workplace stress, pandemic-induced burnout, and a culture of overwork.

Japan is also known for its strong societal work ethic, which can lead to a culture of overwork. This is reflected by the phrase “*karoshi*” (過勞死), which means “work to death” or “overworked to death” (Demetriou 2020; Peng 2021). The number of *karoshi*-related deaths is debated; it is said to be from 200 up to thousands of workers each year, often resulting from suicide or natural causes like heart attacks (Demetriou 2020). In 2018, Japan introduced a workstyle reform bill aimed at reducing *karoshi* by mandating employees to use their recreational leave time (Demetriou 2020; Kanai 2009). However, even with the reform bill, many workers still fear harsh judgement and feel guilty about taking time off, as it is not role-modelled by upper management (Demetriou 2020; Kanai 2009). Overall, it appears that most countries experience some form of *karoshi*, *tang ping*, or quiet quitting, with each representing a movement of workers seeking to alleviate overwork and work-related stress.

Currently, academic research on quiet quitting is only just emerging, with early works attempting to conceptualise the term and offer advice to employers. The developing body of research includes several journal articles that have endeavoured to use theory to explain the concept (Arar et al. 2023; Bell & Kennebrew 2023; Brown, McCray, Neal & Caldwell-Serges 2023). From the empirical standpoint, Serenko (2023) sought to define quiet quitting through content analysis of 672 user comments from a TikTok video's comment section. The findings framed quiet quitting as a mindset where employees merely fulfil their job description and refrain from going above and beyond (Serenko 2023). Moreover, Serenko (2023) noted that quiet quitters prioritise their mental well-being over organisational goals, and identified a lack of extrinsic motivation, burnout, and issues with management as the causes of quiet quitting. Other recent research has attempted to develop a scale for measuring quiet quitting in organisations (Anand et al. 2023). However, there are conceptual overlaps in these initial studies, highlighting the need for further research to refine the definition of quiet quitting and explore its impact on organisations.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

For Asian businesses, quiet quitting can no longer be ignored, especially because this phenomenon is largely associated with Generation Z, who will form a significant portion of the future workforce (Serenko 2023). Scholars suggest that Generation Z is more likely to act on their beliefs towards equity, fairness, and social justice, such that they are less hesitant to participate in quiet quitting (Mirvis 2023). Such actions contrast with the high-power distance environment in which Asian businesses generally operate (Le et al. 2020). This significantly increases the likelihood of quiet quitting, as subordinates may dislike perceiving themselves as subservient to the organisation and their superiors.

Moreover, the notion of face (面子) as a sociological construct is less relevant to the Generation Z workforce (Zhuo & Yuan 2022), even though it has been entrenched within Asian cultures for generations. Face value is linked to reputation and goodwill, where traditionally, employees would perform well at work to ensure that the organisation is perceived favourably by internal and external stakeholders (Leung & Barnes 2020). They may even take on additional responsibilities to maintain or enhance this positive image, even though their efforts may not result in equitable financial

remuneration. On the other hand, Generation Z employees in Asian businesses choose to leave the organisation on positive terms and engage in quitting behaviour rather than departing acrimoniously (Kelly 2023). This suggests that Generation Z employees might not resort to quiet quitting before outright quitting their jobs. The implications of such cultural and generational influences require Asian businesses to rethink communication channels and create safe, open forums for work culture discussions.

Therefore, to address quiet quitting tendencies, Asian businesses should conduct periodic staff surveys to measure and collect data on, for example, employee morale, workload, engagement, and organisational loyalty (Anand et al. 2023). Businesses must also consider how COVID-19 has changed the work landscape and inflicted mental and psychological stresses, particularly for employees who have worked from home and had to simultaneously manage their professional and private lives (Liu 2023). This prompts the need for a re-evaluation of work cultures, with an emphasis on fostering greater autonomy in how work is performed (where applicable) and accordingly re-negotiating employment contracts (McPhail et al. 2023; Rowley 2023). Ultimately, organisations need to pivot towards greater flexibility and openness in communication to retain the younger generations coming into the workforce.

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