

## **Quiet Quitting: The Storm of Bare Minimum**

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**Abstract:** Quiet quitting is a behavior in which employees intentionally do the least required by their job description without formally quitting. This phenomenon has been one of the important workplace trends since 2022. Based on a review of extant literature, this concept paper examines the origin of quiet quitting, its prevalence, and its impacts. Underpinning theories like the JD-R model, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Exchange Theory are used to develop a conceptual framework that links burnout, perceived lack of control, and psychological contract violation as antecedents to quiet quitting behaviors. It also addresses organizational implications such as reduced productivity, innovation, and engagement that silently drain trillions from the global economy. Implications suggest organizations will cut quiet quitting and reach sustainable work environments by engaging employees with appropriate management practices, resource provisions, and fulfilment of promises.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Perceived lack of control, Psychological contract violation, Quiet quitting.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The phrase was coined in 2022 by TikTok creator Zaid Kahn and quickly became a viral sensation. But the behavior behind it-deliberately limiting effort to the bare minimum of contractual requirements-is an age-old response to workplace adversity that was only now being ousted and normalized, particularly among Gen Z and millennial employees.

According to Gallup's estimate (2024), only 23% of employees worldwide are psychologically engaged at work, while about 59% are "not engaged"-that is, quiet quitting-18% being actively disengaged. The dramatic rise in visibility since 2022 is widely attributed to pandemic-induced changes: prolonged remote work, mass layoffs in profitable tech firms, and the mainstreaming of mental-health discourse.

### **Problem statement**

Quiet quitting creates a hidden yet massive economic drain. According to McKinsey, in 2023, low engagement and quiet quitting have cost the global economy up to \$8.8 trillion in lost productivity annually-equivalent to 9% of global GDP. Unlike overt turnover or absenteeism, quiet quitting is hard to measure and manage since employees remain physically present and meet the minimum performance requirements.

### **Research Objective**

This concept paper seeks to:

- Trace the origin and current prevalence of quiet quitting.
- Identify its core antecedents through established theoretical lenses.
- Propose an integrative conceptual framework.

- Highlight individual, organizational, and macroeconomic consequences.
- Offer evidence-based recommendations for prevention and mitigation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Review of key concepts**

#### **Burnout**

Burnout represents one of the most robust and reliable antecedents of quiet quitting, with emotional exhaustion being the critical intermediary between unsustainable working conditions and the conscious limitation of effort in work (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024). Defined as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced accomplishment arising from chronic workplace stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), burnout dissolves the motivational base upon which discretionary effort is based, causing employees to fall back on minimum contractual performance as a form of self-protection (Hassan, Ali & Imran, 2024).

Longitudinal studies confirm that exhaustion and cynicism are strong direct predictors of subsequent quiet quitting behaviors. Indeed, Spurk et al. (2024) reported that burnout mediated the relationship between excessive job demands and reduced organizational citizenship behaviors while in-role performance remained stable-a pattern that perfectly matches quiet quitting. Likewise, Parent-Lamarche and Hamouche (2024) found, in a study of healthcare workers during and after the COVID-19 crisis, that emotional exhaustion explained 42% of the variance in quiet quitting intention, with

burned-out employees deliberately withholding extra-role contributions to avoid further resource depletion.

From the perspective of the Job Demands–Resources model, burnout occurs when prolonged high demands are not balanced by sufficient resources, thus activating a motivational impairment process manifesting in disengagement and withdrawal of effort. The Conservation of Resources theoretical framework further indicates that when exhaustion levels are sufficiently high, employees employ resource protection strategies—of which quiet quitting is a highly preferred low-risk strategy—to prevent continued resource erosion. Recent meta-analytic evidence further supports that burnout is more strongly linked to reduced extra-role performance than to in-role performance deficiencies, further bolstering its relevance in particular to quiet quitting rather than productivity decline in general.

Thus, burnout does not simply co-occur with quiet quitting; instead, it is one of the key causal mechanisms through which chronic stress transforms into intentional bounded disengagement (Harter 2023; Klotz & Bolino 2022).

### Perceived lack of control

Perceived lack of control—manifested as low job autonomy, rigid policies, micromanagement, and forced return-to-office mandates—has emerged as one of the strongest predictors of quiet quitting since 2022 (Harter, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2024). Employees who feel they have little influence over how, when, or where they work intentionally restrict effort to the contractual minimum as a means to reclaim personal agency.

Within the framework of Job Demands–Resources, autonomy is considered a crucial job resource, whose chronic lack directly impairs the motivational process and stimulates disengagement. Indeed, several longitudinal studies have confirmed that during the post-pandemic transition, declines in perceived control—especially abrupt remote-to-office shifts—significantly increased quiet quitting behaviors even after workload and burnout were controlled (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024). Similarly, low decision latitude explained 38% of extra-role effort withdrawal in Rosado's 2023 study of knowledge workers.

Self-Determination Theory provides the psychological mechanism: when autonomy—one of the three basic psychological needs—is thwarted, intrinsic motivation collapses, and employees shift to controlled or a motivated states (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Quiet quitting becomes an autonomy-restoration strategy: “If the organization controls my time and methods, I will control my effort.” Empirical support is robust; a three-wave study by Spurk *et al.* (2024) showed that perceived loss of control mediated the relationship between restrictive organizational policies and subsequent reduction of organizational citizenship behaviors while in-role compliance remained intact.

Finally, perceived lack of control amplifies feelings of psychological contract breach “I was promised flexibility, but it was taken away”, further justifying effort recalibration under Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017). Collectively, the evidence positions diminished control not merely as a stressor but as a direct trigger that transforms engaged workers into quiet quitters (Harter, 2023; Klotz & Bolino, 2022)

### Psychological Contract Violation

Psychological contract violation, or the powerful emotional feeling that workers experience due to their belief in failed obligations by an employer, is the most powerful and proximal predictor of quiet quitting as identified by Klotz & Bolino (2022) and Spurk *et al.*, (2024). Unlike the feelings arising from unmet expectations, violation generates feelings of injustice and betrayal that directly erode the norm of reciprocity attached to the job relationships in Rousseau (1995) and Zhao *et al.*, (2022).

Post-pandemic research, by and large, reports findings that repeated breaches—such as mass layoffs from profitable companies, withdrawal of remote-work flexibility, cancelled promotions, and frozen salaries in the face of extraordinary employee effort during COVID-19—dramatically increased quiet quitting behaviours (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Rosado, 2023). Using a three-wave longitudinal design, Spurk *et al.* (2024) found that psychological contract violation fully mediated the relationship between organizational injustice and subsequent withdrawal of organizational citizenship behaviours while in-role performance remained unaffected, exactly matching the quiet quitting profile (Hassan, Abdul-Rahman & Basit, 2017). Correspondingly, Parent-Lamarche and Hamouche (2024) reported that healthcare workers who experienced violation

during crisis periods exhibited the highest levels of intentional effort restriction.

Social exchange theory explains the mechanism: violation destroys trust and turns relational contracts ("loyalty and discretionary effort in exchange for security and growth") into purely transactional ones ("I will do only what is explicitly required") (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Confirming its specific relevance for quiet quitting rather than for general withdrawal, meta-analytic evidence shows that psychological contract breach has stronger negative effects on extra-role performance than on in-role performance (Zhao *et al.*, 2022).

Consequently, scholars now frame quiet quitting not as disengagement *per se* but as an active, equity-restoring response to perceived betrayal—an intentional downgrading of the employment relationship to match the organization's reduced contribution (Harter, 2023; Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Tomprou *et al.*, 2021). Restoring trust and fulfilling promises emerge as the most effective antidotes.

### **Underlying Theories**

Quiet quitting is, therefore, a predictable and self-protective response to chronic workplace strain and broken reciprocity, iterated clearly from the integration of the Job Demands-Resources model, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Exchange Theory. The JD-R model suggests that the sustained presence of high job demands-things like workload, emotional labor, role conflict, and forced return-to-office policies-in concert with a lack of job resources (such as autonomy, social support, developmental opportunities, and recovery time)-activates two debilitating processes: an energy depletion pathway linked to burnout, and a motivational pathway generating disengagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). When employees' demands consistently outstrip their resources, they become exhausted and cynical and thus start to withdraw discretionary effort while continuing to perform the minimum in-role requirements, which is the hallmark behavioral pattern of quiet quitting (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024).

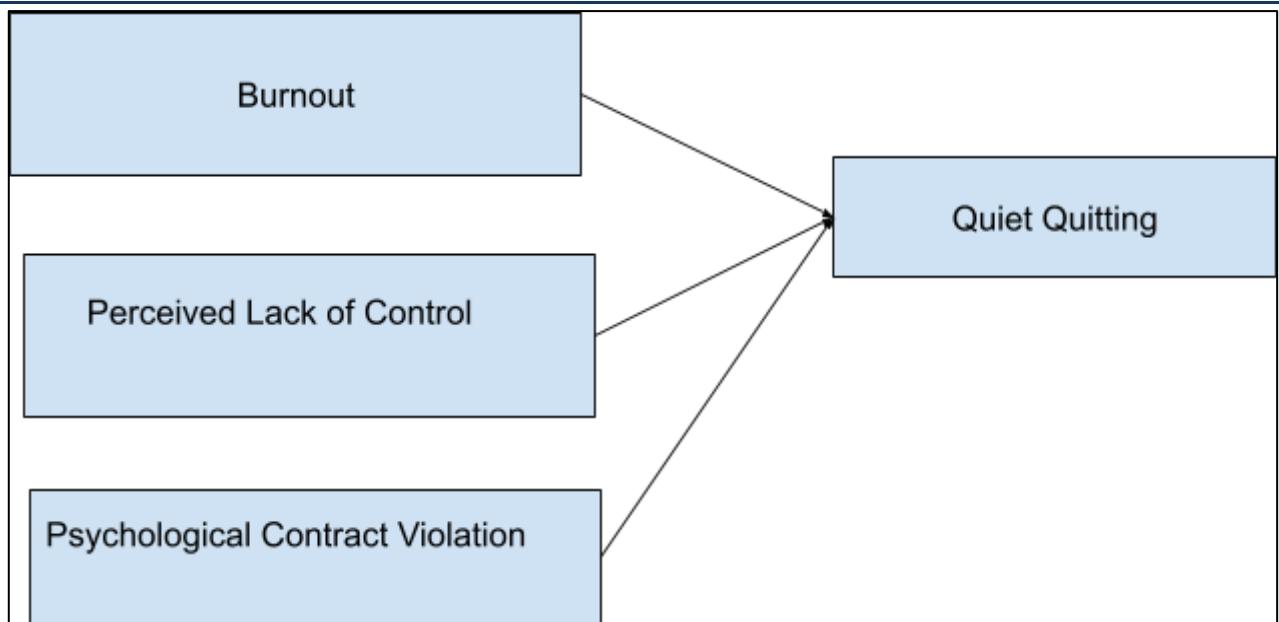
Conservation of Resources theory complements this view by framing quiet quitting as a deliberate resource-protection strategy. Individuals possess finite pools of energetic, emotional, and cognitive

resources; when these are threatened or actually lost without replenishment (e.g., pandemic-era overwork followed by layoffs or frozen salaries), people enter defensive mode to prevent further depletion (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Thus, withholding voluntary contributions-such as extra projects, unpaid overtime, or proactive problem-solving-is a rational, low-risk tactic aimed at conserving remaining resources and halting accelerating loss spirals. Empirical COR-based studies confirm that perceived resource threat strongly predicts effort restriction even when formal job performance is preserved (Spurk *et al.*, 2024).

Social Exchange Theory and psychological contract theory add the relational dimension: employment relationships are governed by the norm of reciprocity. During the COVID-19 crisis, many workers invested extraordinary discretionary effort under the implicit expectation of future security, recognition, or advancement. When organizations subsequently enacted mass layoffs - often at highly profitable firms - cancelled promotions, or imposed rigid policies, employees faced severe psychological contract breach. In response, the exchange quality shifts from relational to strictly economic/transactional. Longitudinal research shows that breach perceptions are the strongest proximal predictor of reduced organizational citizenship behaviors while in-role performance remains stable - precisely the quiet quitting profile.

Together, the three frameworks portray quiet quitting not as a matter of laziness or entitlement, but as an adaptive, multi-determined reaction, whereby JD-R explains the motivational and health-impairment triggers, COR explains the defensive conservation motive, and Social Exchange Theory explains the recalibrated reciprocity. Organizations that continue to impose unsustainable demands, fail to replenish resources, and violate implicit promises will inevitably provoke widespread withdrawal of the very discretionary effort needed to drive innovation and competitive advantage (Harter, 2023). Quiet quitting thus requires simultaneous attention to workload balance, resource provision, and the restoration of trust rather than moral condemnation of employees protecting their well-being.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**



### Burnout as a core driver of quiet quitting

Burnout is widely recognized as a core driver of quiet quitting because it directly erodes the psychological and energetic capacity required for discretionary effort while leaving in-role performance largely intact—the exact behavioral signature of the phenomenon.

Burnout is an aversive psychological experience in which emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment are the main symptoms that characterize it. According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), it depletes employees' motivational resources, after which they retreat into defensive coping strategies. Longitudinal research has shown that high levels of exhaustion and cynicism predict the subsequent withdrawal of OCBs and extra-role contributions even when contractual tasks are still performed (Spurk *et al.*, 2024; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024). A study among post-pandemic workers found that emotional exhaustion fully mediated the relationship between excessive job demands and quiet quitting intention, with over 40% of the variance explained (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023).

From the Job Demands–Resources perspective, burnout is the outcome of the health-impairment process: chronically high demands without recovery or resources lead to exhaustion that subsequently manifests as motivational withdrawal—employees "quiet quit" to avoid complete collapse (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This is also conceptually supported by the Conservation of Resources theory: once burnout has taken hold, resource preservation begins by

withholding discretionary investments (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, burnout does not simply correlate with quiet quitting; it causally drives the intentional restraint of effort to the contracted minimum as a self-preserving response to unsustainable stress. Harter (2023); Klotz & Bolino (2022)

### Perceived Lack of Control as a Key Antecedent of Quiet Quitting

Perceived lack of control means low job autonomy, inflexible policies, micromanagement, and loss of flexibility, which is viewed as the main antecedent of quiet quitting, as it fully contradicts the employees' need for agency, after which they try to get control back by putting effort only into what is contractually obliged (Harter 2023; Spurk *et al.* 2024).

Within the Job Demands–Resources model, autonomy is a critical job resource, and chronic absence of it impairs the motivational process and accelerates disengagement, even when the workload is moderate. Abrupt reductions in perceived control—sometimes in the form of forced return-to-office mandates following years of remote-work autonomy—strongly predict subsequent quiet quitting behaviors in several longitudinal studies (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024).

Self-Determination Theory explains the mechanism: when autonomy is blocked, intrinsic motivation collapses and employees shift to controlled or a motivated states (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Quiet quitting becomes an autonomy-

restoration tactic- "If the organization controls my schedule and methods are dictated, I will control my effort level." Spurk et al. (2024) found that perceived loss of control fully mediated the effect of restrictive policies on withdrawal of organizational citizenship behaviors while in-role performance remained stable (Hassan & Basit, 2024).

Moreover, loss of control amplifies psychological contract violation ("flexibility was promised, then taken away"), further justifying effort recalibration under social exchange principles (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Thus, the perceived lack of control is not just a stressor but a direct trigger that turns previously engaged workers into quiet quitters (Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Rosado, 2023).

### **Psychological Contract Violation as the Central Trigger of Quiet Quitting**

Psychological contract violation-the strong sense of betrayal that may emerge when employees feel their organization has breached its promised obligations-represents the pivotal, most immediate cause of quiet quitting for Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Spurk et al., 2024. In contrast to mere unmet expectations, violation evokes anger and distrust that directly break the norm of reciprocity which grounds discretionary effort Rousseau 1995; Zhao et al. 2022.

Postpandemic events, such as record layoffs at profitable firms, abrupt withdrawal of remote-work flexibility, and canceled promotions after years of overwork, produced widespread perceptions of breach. These shocks transformed relational psychological contracts into purely transactional ones (Hamouche & Parent-Lamarche, 2023; Rosado, 2023). Evidence at the longitudinal level supports causality: Spurk et al. (2024) demonstrated that psychological contract violation fully mediated the path from perceived organizational injustice to subsequent withdrawal of organizational citizenship behaviors while in-role performance remained stable—precisely the quiet quitting pattern. A meta-analytic finding illustrates that contract breach has its strongest negative effect on extrarole contributions rather than core task performance (Zhao et al., 2022).

Social exchange theory explains why violation is so potent: once trust is broken, employees downgrade the relationship from "I give 110 % because I feel valued" to "I give exactly what is contractually required and nothing more" (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Quiet quitting thereby

becomes an active, equity-restoring retaliation instead of a passive disengagement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Tomprou et al., 2021). Today, scholars agree that unless psychological contract violation is repaired, it will be impossible for organizations to reverse the silent withdrawal of talent and effort (Harter, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Hamouche, 2024).

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Quiet quitting is neither a passing fad nor evidence of employee indolence; instead, it is a rational, multi-determined reaction to unsustainable working conditions and broken trust erosion. The phenomenon emerges at the intersection of three critical workplace failures: first, chronic imbalance between demands of one's job and resources leading to burnout; second, perceived or actual loss of autonomy and control; and most powerfully, third, psychological contract violation following repeated organizational breaches of implicit promises. When employees experience high exhaustion, diminished agency, and feelings of betrayal, they self-protect by curtailing effort to the contractual minimum and withholding the discretionary contributions-organizational citizenship behaviors-that have long been taken for granted by organizations. In so doing, they downgrade the relational employment relationship to a purely transactional one, creating the silent but devastating pattern now labeled quiet quitting (Harter, 2023; Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Spurk et al., 2024).

### **Theoretical Implications**

Integration of theories: The quiet quitting case represents a real-world example that simultaneously validates and extends the Job Demands-Resources model, Conservation of Resources theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Exchange/Psychological Contract Theory. Any future disengagement models should differentiate in-role versus extra-role withdrawal and acknowledge psychological contract violation as the strongest proximal predictor.

Need for a dedicated quiet quitting construct and measure: Current engagement scales, such as the UWES, and OCB measures capture the outcome but not the intentional boundary-setting nature of the behavior. A validated quiet quitting scale is urgently needed. Reciprocity research, instead of engagement: The phenomenon indicates that there is a fragility of engagement over the perception of one-sidedness in reciprocity. Theoretical

advancements now rest on studying "recalibrated reciprocity," not merely maximizing engagement.

### Practical Implications

Treat the cause, not the symptom: branding quiet quitters as "lazy" or threatening performance reviews only alienates them more. Organizations must decrease demands, restore autonomy, and deliver on promises in a real way: transparent rewards, realistic workloads, sustained flexibility.

Rebuild psychological contracts by conducting "stay interviews," explicitly acknowledging pandemic sacrifices, and co-creating new, credible relational contracts. Trust repair is the quickest antidote to effort withdrawal.

Redesign performance systems: Cease rewarding presenteeism and unpaid overtime. Where relevant, measure sustainable outcomes and well-being alongside productivity.

Train leaders in resource provision and early detection: Managers should monitor declines in OCBs and autonomy perceptions as leading indicators of quiet quitting-not wait for turnover.

Normalize boundaries: Publicly endorse healthy work-life separation, rather than hustle culture. When employees feel safe to set boundaries, they are more rather than less likely to volunteer extra effort when needed.

Ultimately, quiet quitting is a warning signal. Organizations that listen and respond by creating equitable, respectful, and sustainable workplaces will regain discretionary effort. Those that do not will continue to pay the hidden multi-trillion-dollar cost of a disengaged, quietly resentful workforce (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

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