Quiet Quitting and its Link With Knowledge Risks in Organizations – Theoretical Insights

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Abstract:

Purpose: Quiet quitting has become a widely publicized concept, driven by social media in the United States and other countries in 2022. It is a term used to describe the phenomenon by which employees do the least amount of their work, just enough to meet the requirements of one's job description (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). The trend is spreading quickly among young workers. It can potentially harm individuals, job performance, innovativeness, and whole businesses. Moreover, this phenomenon can also pose several knowledge risks. This conceptual paper aims to identify and analyse human knowledge risks resulting from quiet quitting.

Design/methodology/approach: This present study makes an update on the literature linking knowledge risks arising and quiet quitting.

Originality/value: To the best knowledge of the authors, there are no publications that describe the knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting. This paper offers new insights for researchers dealing with the topic of knowledge risks in the context of human behaviours.

Practical implications: The paper provides insight for each practitioner, as the issue addressed concerns the majority of incumbent employees. Especially, employers and managers should become aware of the consequences related to knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting.

Keywords: knowledge risks, quiet quitting, knowledge management, human resource management

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a change in the attitude among many workers. Their views on work life have changed significantly and have been reflected in movements such as "Quiet quitting" (Gallagher, 2023). As the name may erroneously suggest, quiet quitting does not mean quitting the job. Quiet quitting is a term used to describe the phenomenon by which employees decide not to put more time, effort, or emotion into their work than it is absolutely necessary. Quiet quitting is "the new generation employee withdrawal by exhibiting low work engagement and dissatisfaction against workplace issues (stress, anxiety, workload, lack of support, anger, etc.)" (Asst & Yikilmaz, 2022). The most general definition of quiet quitting is "doing only the defined work during the defined business hours." In a sense, the idea of a quiet quitting from the job also encompasses the ideas of "protecting privacy," "doing nothing but what needs to be done at work," and "not taking on additional responsibilities" (Kont, 2022).

Quiet quitting seems to be a new phenomenon gaining a lot of attention, but on the other hand, should we as the society be surprised that people want something more from their lives than work? Should employers be disappointed with employees searching for privacy or the ones who prefer spending time with their kids instead of staying long hours at work? Perhaps it would be worth an effort to clarify better this border between work and private life and make it clear to both employers and employees. Altough quiet quitting might be a challenge and a threat to companies, from the perspective of employees it can help them to keep the work-life balance as well as to some extent, prevent burnout.

The scale of quiet quitting is immense. According to the survey conducted by Gallup (2022), half of the U.S. workforce consists of quiet quitters. The trend is spreading quickly, especially among young workers. Even though there has been a real buzz about this phenomenon, most companies are either unprepared or unable to effectively address the problem of quiet quitting (Hare, 2022). Although the idea of "quiet quitting" involves "silence," the rise of voices connected to the idea, and its possible detrimental impact on people, businesses, and the economy calls for a thorough analysis of the concept (Asst and Yikilmaz, 2022).

In the face of these above, there is a clear need for new insights into the topic of human knowledge risks that could arise from quiet quitting. Knowledge risks are associated with negative consequences for organizations and therefore, it is fundamental to effectively identify and analyze knowledge risks resulting from quiet quitting and find potential ways to minimize their negative consequences.

The paper develops in the following way. The second part presents the concept of human knowledge risks. In the third section, the concept of quiet quitting is described. In the fourth section, the potential human knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting

are presented, jointly with some ideas that can minimize their negative consequecnes for organizations. The last section concludes the paper.

2 Human knowledge risks

The literature on knowledge risk is not yet extensive due to the fact thatthe topic is at the beginning of its development and growth. Knowledge risks are defined as "measures of the probability and severity of adverse effects of any activities engaging or related somehow to knowledge that can affect the functioning of an organization on any level" (Durst and Zieba, 2019, p.2). It is important to emphasize that risks in this context have negative consequences and should be effectively detected in order to be decreased in their severity or entirely eliminated.

The most common taxonomy of knowledge risks proposed by Durst and Zieba (2019) distinguishes three categories of such risks; human, technological; and operational. People and knowledge they possess are key elements of any organization, but they are also a source of risk (Crane, Gantz, Isaacs, Jose, and Sharp, 2013). Human knowledge risks (HKR) are connected with individual´s personal, social, cultural, and psychological factors and thus human resources management (Durst and Zieba, 2019). The HKR category includes risks such as; knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, forgetting, unlearning, and missing/inadequate competencies of organizational members.

Hiding and hoarding of knowledge tend to receive the most attention in the literature on this subject. They bring a number of severe consequences for people and organizations. Both of these phenomena result from the more or less intentional concealment of knowledge by the knowledge holder/hider, not from a lack of knowledge that this person manifests. Knowledge hiding is the "intentional concealing of knowledge after someone has already asked for it (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, and Trougakos, 2012). It takes many forms; sometimes people "play dumb," feigning ignorance about a topic to avoid sharing knowledge about it. It also happens that knowledge hiders share a scrap of knowledge and hide the rest (Connelly et al., 2012). Knowledge hoarding is characterized by accumulating knowledge that another person has not asked about (Webster et al., 2008). Therefore, knowledge hoarding is described as a less intentional behavior than knowledge hiding (Connelly et al., 2012). However, this risk can also significantly jeopardize the success of the organization. Knowledge hoarding is more severe in case when knowledge is tacit, as then it is very difficult to simply ask for it. Unlearning and forgetting are other risks from the HKR category. Forgetting is associated with memory loss, it happens most often when knowledge is used only from time to time, while deliberate forgetting occurs when knowledge is captured only by part of the organization, and due to not being incorporated into a system it becomes forgotten by everybody (De Holan & Phillips, 2004). Although the process of unlearning can occasionally be seen as beneficial, it can also put organization at risk. When talking about the positive sides of unlearning, it can free up space in organizations for routines and new information. As a result, new practices or concepts can be implemented (Klammer & Gueldenberg, 2019). However, there are drawbacks to unlearning, such as the accidental loss of some knowledge that was not intended to be lost (Durst & Zieba, 2019). Since knowledge is highly comprehensive, it is difficult to take

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only a portion of it and unlearn it. Additionally, breaking old habits might impair organizational ability to function and learn. The greatest danger, though, is that essential knowledge can be lost while unlearning. The last risk from the human category - missing/inadequate competencies of organizational members is associated with employees who lack the necessary training, experience, and expertise to fulfill their obligation or complete their tasks, which can lead to makingserious mistakes (Durst & Zieba, 2019).

The authors of this paper believe that those above-mentioned human knowledge risks might be related to quiet quitting of employees. The link between those two concepts will be described in the fourth section. The last section concludes the paper.

3 Quiet Quitting

Quiet quitting is a relatively unexplored concept that gained popularity in 2022. As a result of the broad and loud discussion on the topic that has began just recently, the well-known mainstream media has shown considerable interest in it. Several articles about quiet quitting have been published in journals such as Forbes, Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times. The scientific literature on the subject is still scarce and a limited number of scientific papers on that topic has been published. The fragmented available literature offers valuable insights into the subject matter and provides a foundation for further investigations, but definitely, the concept of quiet quitting is yet to be fully examined and uncovered.

As the name may erroneously suggest, quiet quitting does not mean quitting the job. Quiet quitting is a term used to describe the phenomenon by which employees do the least amount of their work, just enough to meet the requirements of one's job description (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). In other words, quiet quitters decide not to put more time, effort, emotion, or skills into their work than is absolutely necessary. The concept has been also defined by Asst and Yikilmaz (2022) as follows: "Quiet quitting is the new generation employee withdrawal by exhibiting low work engagement and dissatisfaction against workplace issues (stress, anxiety, workload, lack of support, anger, etc.)". This definition reveals partly the cause of the phenomenon, which generally is dissatisfaction with workplace in a variety of ways. According to Formica and Sfodera (2022), the sources of employee dissatisfaction at work revolve around three essential traits: needs, values, and purpose. One of the reasons why employees quietly quit is that their needs are not met, their values do not match with those of the organization, or they do not share a common purpose with the organization. Some researchers also state that quiet quitting is a response to hustle culture (Asst and Yikilmaz, 2022; Aydın & Azizoglu, 2022; Kont, 2022). Hustle culture describes a work environment that glorifies excessive work, focuses on productivity, and considers extra hours as the key to success. Hustle culture does not actually improve productivity, it harms mental health and contributes to quiet quitting of employees (Molina, 2023). Herway (2023) in Gallup's article goes deeper and highlights strikingly: " there is a root cause to quiet quitting that is not currently in the mainstream conversation: broken brand promises". Quiet quitting can be caused by broken promises and vain rhetoric. Companies have a practice of ensuring workers that their health and well-being are the

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organization's top priority. They frequently make assurances that they will provide employees flexibility and that their work will have an inspiring mission. However, there is a dissonance between the employer's promises and the real corporate culture. Employees become demotivated, and feel helpless as a result, and either quit their jobs in an open way or quit quietly. Many of them take the easier route, which is to do the bare minimum and take the money (Herway, 2023). Therefore, quiet quitting can be also defined as the trend of work attitudes of employees who aim to maintain work-life balance, and preserve their own well-being (Aydın & Azizoglu, 2022).

Axios' survey offers striking results that shed light and focus on Generation Z. In their report, they stated that 82% of Gen Z admits to having a job-oriented perspective to work with minimum performance and fulfill the minimum job requirements. The results of the survey also confirm that the job is "just a job" for young people, nothing more. Spending time with family or friends is at the top of their list of priorities, but wellness or hobbies have also been ranked above work. Young workers, through a culture of remote or hybrid work, value work-life balance and well-being much more than the generations before them (Pandey,2022).

The question of the severity of this problem raises. It might seem that this is not a huge problem, after all, employees are still doing their minimum, fulfilling the duties defined in the job description. In reality, formal job descriptions or contracts are often not fully defined, organizations rely on employees and their ability to meet additional expectations, often not formally written down. For many companies, motivated employees willing to go beyond their standard job requirements constitute a competitive advantage and bring the additional value for the organization. For the majority of business leaders, managing quiet quitting is also significantly complicated. Due to the fact that quiet quitters divert the manager's attention, it depletes his energy to continuously improve the situation, ultimately increase the burden on other team members and weaken the team's motivation to push the limits. The majority of occupations today need additional effort to communicate with co-workers and meet client expectations, thus quiet resignation and working only within the minimal requirements is an important problem for organizations (Kont, 2022).

Quiet quitting is possible and also difficult to be examined or identified due to the character of work that quiet quitters are performing, which is often knowledge work. Knowledge work can be perceived from a variety of perspectives, namely as a profession, as an individual characteristic and as an individual activity (Barling & Kelloway, 2000). In general, it is quite difficult to define this type of work, however, many attempts have been made. For example, according to Pyöriä (2005), knowledge work requires extensive formal education and continuous on-the-job training and demands transferable skills. It is also based on working with abstract knowledge and symbols and is difficult to be standardized. This type of work also is based on knowledge as a primary production factor. Taking all that into account, it is clear that this type of job depends to high extent on tacit knowledge of workers and this kind of knowledge is difficult to be transferred or codified. Also, this kind of knowledge can be used for the advantage of an organization if the employee is willing to do that. In case when an employee prefers not to use this knowledge and his or her brain for the benefit of the organization, it is very

often not possible to force this employee to do so. In other words, in case of blue collar workers it is much easier to check the progress and contribution to work than in case of knowledge workers. If an employee works in a factory and produces some material goods, the outcome of his or her work is clear and visible. In case of knowedge workers, the manager or supervisor is not able to evaluate the contribution so easily. In case of project work, there could be some milestones or deliverables that can be checked or evaluates, however, it is often difficult to evaluate the quality of the results of knowledge work. In case of such work, it is the employee who can decide how and when to perform his or her work – it can be done with the use of all his or her abilities and skills, devoting fully or it can be done fulfilling the minimal requirements. Taking that into account, it is not surprising that the phenomenon of quiet quitting has appeared and started being a problem for a growing number of organizations. It can bring negative, measurable consequences for organizations especially because a single knowledge worker may contribute three times more to the profit of an organization than other type of worker (El-farr, 2009). If knowledge workers start working only to a limited level of their possibilities and skills, this profit for organizations will simply decrease.

Quiet quitting generates many risks and problems for organizations. Among them there are human knowledge risks that can be casued by quiet quitting. They are going to be discussed in the following section.

4. Human knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting

In the face of these above, there is a clear need for new insights into the topic of human knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting. To the best knowledge of the authors, there are no publications that describe any knowledge risks related to this phenomenon.

The authors of this paper list a variety of knowledge risks arising from quiet quitting that may potentially hinder the operations of an organization. The first potential knowledge risk resulting from quiet quitting is related to **knowledge hoarding.** When a quiet quitter performs only his duties at a basic level he or she may be reluctant to take part in the freshman training of a new employee. Also, this person will not take part in or initiate activities related to free knowledge sharing, for example taking part in organizational meetings or integrative events. Even if this person is obliged to take part in some events like that, he or she will be reluctant to use the energy for sharing knowledge voluntarily. Furthermore, he or she will not pass on knowledge unless somebody asks for it. When a quiet quitter possesses critical knowledge and is not eager to share it with someone, it threatens the organization's knowledge base (Bilginoğlu, 2019). It even threatens a **loss of organizational knowledge** when a quiet quitter for some reasons beyond his or her control such, as health issues, is unable to work and perform his duties. It can also happen in the situation of a job change, when an employee leaves for another organization or simply retires and takes the knowledge with him- or herself (Delong, 2004).

The next potential risk connected with quiet quitting is the loss of reputation due to **missing/inadequate competencies**. Customers and partners may recognize that the quiet quitters are not fully engaged in operations or common tasks. Quiet quitters might not be eager to gain new competencies and they might manifest inadequate ones for a

given task. As they perform their tasks only to fulfil the minimal requirements, they might not be interested in taking part in training or increasing their competencies for the sake of the organization and better job fulfilment. If clients or other organizations need to cooperate with such employees, they may consider the company unprofessional or untrustworthy, leading to a loss of reputation.

The next risk is using **obsolete/unreliable knowledge**. Knowledge should be constantly checked and updated as it can quickly lose its reliability and usefulness. If a quiet quitter does not take care of constant refreshing of their knowledge, there is a high risk that this person will use obsolete and unreliable knowledge, which may lead to the deterioration of the company's good name. Again, knowledge can be gained in a variety of ways and especially important is tacit knowledge, which can be obtained during interactions with other employees, customers, suppliers, etc. If a quiet quitter is not interested in putting additional effort in knowledge gain and and knowledge refreshing, the obsolete or unreliable knowledge will be used by this person and it might lead to severe consequences for the organization (e.g. customer loss, profit loss, loss of new business opportunities, etc.).

Another potential risk is **the decreased morale of employees**. Quiet quitters may adversely affect other individuals' morale, who may feel abandoned or betrayed. Demoralizing the rest of the team may harm the overall performance of the organization or even lead to **knowledge loss/unlearning**. Moreover, employees with decreased morale may have problems with motivation to work, take sick leaves more often, and manifest some negative phenomena related to knowledge, such as **knowledge hiding** or **knowledge hoarding.** As quiet quitters might set bad example to the rest of the team (especially if they take the managerial positions), the rest of the team might also become quiet quitters or they may look for another workplace, where people stay motivated and do not perform only the minimum of their tasks.

Last but not least risk is related to **knowledge gaps**. The workload of quiet quitters may not be adequately covered. Other employees may need to take on additional responsibilities, which may reveal knowledge gaps and in consequence, lead to poorer quality of work and reduced efficiency. Lack of available knowledge might cause the delays in tasks realization and also bring poorer effects than expected.

As it can be seen, quiet quitting can bring many negative consequences to the organization, including the appearance of human knowledge risks. Therefore, the question appears: What can organizations do to minimize the phenomenon of quiet quitting? First of all, organizations can try to implement knowledge management concept at various levels. This can help in gaining tacit knowledge from employees, also identifying at this stage their problems and challenges they have to face. If those problems are detected early enough, they might not become very severe and result in quiet quitting. Second, organizations should create the supportive culture, where mistakes are tolerated and where there is field for new ideas and innovations. Knowledge workers often search for new inspirations and ideas and if they cannot implement them at their organization, they might decide to quit quietly. Third, it is important to take a critical look at working conditions, elasticity of working

arrangements (e.g. possibility to work from home, linking work and life duties, etc.) and well-being of employees at work. To some extent, organizations might support their employees in creating a balanced lives, helping them to stay motivated and effective at work. All those steps might potentially help organizations to reduce the risk of quiet quitting phenomenon. To deliver more insight and tested solutions, the phenomenon of quiet quitting should be further examined in empirical studies, together with the ways of overcoming it in organizations.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, quiet quitting is an important factor in the analysis of human knowledge risks that can be faced by an organization. Until now, there are no studies in the literature presenting the potential link between human knowledge risks and quiet quitting. This paper offers a significant step in understanding the link between them. The contribution made in this paper can be appreciated by practitioners, who are dealing with human resources management, as well as team and project managers who suffer from the consequences of employees quiet quitting. The paper can also be of use to all those analysing knowledge threats in their organizations. Additionally, the paper provides insights that scholars interested in knowledge management, knowledge risks, and human resources management, in general, should consider in their studies.

As this area is still in its infancy, this study has only laid theoretical grounds for future analysis. Being of a theoretical character, this paper has its limitations. First of all, it is not based on a systematic literature review, as to the best knowledge of the authors, there are no studies so far examining quiet quitting and its influence on various knowledge risks. Moreover, because it is theoretical research, it cannot offer businesses ready-made solutions, but it can give managers and business owners some inspirations and insights to think about.

Future research could concentrate on the following aspects to examine. First of all, it would be interesting to examine how quiet quitting manifests itself in the context of knowledge risks in general. Second, future studies could examine what is the influence of quiet quitting on knowledge risks and how knowledge risks are linked with quiet quitting. Finally, it would be worth to examine how quiet quitting depends on nationality and sector where employees work. It could be tested to which extent the sector of business influences the phenomenon of quiet quitting and whether some sectors are more affected by this phenomenon or not.

Acknowledgments

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