

Insights

“QUIET QUITTING” – WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN EMPLOYERS RESPOND?

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SUMMARY

You may have heard the term “quiet quitting”, a practice that has become well-known in the UK through popular TikTok videos and subsequent media publications. This blog takes a closer look at the phenomenon and aims to give employers an overview of the term and what steps can be taken to understand and perhaps counter it.

WHAT IS “QUIET QUITTING” AND HOW PREVALENT IS IT?

Put simply, quiet quitting is carrying out the minimum requirements of one’s job and contributing little or nothing beyond it. The term “quitting” is potentially confusing as the aim is not to quit, but to continue in employment whilst doing the absolute minimum. The first recorded use in the UK of the term quiet quitting was reportedly in March 2022, and it has subsequently gained in traction across both written and social media.

The term has not been given entirely negative connotations. It has been picked up by well-being influencers and brands who promote the practice as a way to boost both mental and physical happiness. For example, it is often argued that by quiet quitting, an employee can devote more time to physical exercise and other non-work activities, improving their overall well-being.

In terms of prevalence, a recent study by Gallup showed that only 9% of workers in the UK were engaged or enthusiastic about their work, with the UK ranking 33 out of 38 European countries in this regard. This certainly reflects a fertile ground in the UK for quiet quitting, as employees are less likely to adopt the behaviour if they are engaged and enthusiastic about their work. The ease with which someone can quiet quit is also enhanced by the increase in remote working, where it is arguably easier to carry out the minimum work required.

Examples of quiet quitting vary across industry sectors, but one can imagine the following scenario in a professional services environment: Julie has worked for a large bank in HR for 18 months. For the first 12 months of her employment, Julie had “gone the extra mile”, often working in excess of her contracted hours, and spending considerable time mentoring junior team members and writing up complex grievance outcomes at the weekend. Julie had also been actively involved in organising and attending team bonding sessions after work. However, and possibly after watching a few TikTok videos, for the next 6 months Julie works her contractual minimum, stops mentoring young workers and stops doing anything work-related outside working hours. Julie also stops organising team bonding sessions and now only attends such events if she absolutely has to.

Such a change in behaviour would likely be noticed and lead to concern, and we address some of the steps employers can take below.

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO ABOUT SUCH A PRACTICE?

This is not straightforward because; (a) there are sectors and roles where quiet quitting would be very difficult and (b) quiet quitting does not on the face of it involve a breach of an employment contract unless the contract (for example) specifically requires the employee to carry out work outside normal working hours without additional remuneration.

The whole point of quiet quitting is to carry out the minimum, not less than the minimum.

An example of a role where quiet quitting would be very difficult would be a mid-level associate in a city law firm or investment bank as they are unlikely to progress in their career if they do not put themselves forward for extra-curricular business development or other activities. These are roles to which career progression is integral, and not suitable for quiet quitters. A lack of engagement in business development might be a performance concern in this example, but for other roles and sectors it may not be.

The other tricky point as mentioned above is whether quiet quitters are breaching their contracts. The trade union phrase “work to rule” comes to mind, where union members only do what they are expressly required to do and no more. However, a work to rule can still be a breach of contract because of the implied duty of fidelity in contracts of employment; employees are expected to act in their employer’s best interests and cannot just rely on the letter of the contract.

Ultimately, and depending on the circumstances, quiet quitting could prompt employers to take action under their performance management processes if it is felt an employee is no longer performing to the level expected. However, employers need to be careful that staff are aware of what “expected levels” are (see below). It might be dangerous to accuse an employee of under-performance when they are still meeting expectations.

Using Julie as an example, if her quiet quitting is causing disruption within her team, or she is no longer meeting deadlines, this would be a valid reason to instigate a performance management

process. The same would also be true if the quality of her work suffered due to her behaviour e.g. the grievance outcomes are now poorly presented and contain spelling mistakes/inaccuracies. Such behaviour may also impact Julie's chances of promotion, as she may be underperforming when compared to her (non-quiet quitting) colleagues who will be undertaking extra responsibilities and working in excess of their contractual hours. It could also lead to her being the first choice if there is a redundancy selection process.

However, employers should assess each situation on a case-by-case basis. This is because; (a) there may be no communicated organisational expectations above a level of quiet quitting and; (b) there may be reasons why the employee is not performing which are unrelated to quiet quitting, for example they may be suffering from a disability. In terms of communicated organisational expectations, employers should be careful in their employment contracts, policies and general culture to ensure that employees are aware that conduct consistent with quiet quitting is not an acceptable level of performance and/or conduct.

As well as ensuring that "anti" quiet quitting conduct is written into employment contracts and policies, employers are also increasingly taking steps to try and minimise such behaviours. For example, empowering employees to undertake their work more flexibly provided specified deliverables are achieved should discourage the behaviour, as employees feel empowered to work in a manner that suits them.

Employers are also taking steps to foster team spirit, for example by setting specific anchor days when employees are required in the office, and incentivising employees to attend by providing free lunch or after work social events. Our experience tells us that such steps are important in fostering a positive work place culture and help reduce the risk of a culture of quiet quitting taking hold.

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MEET THE TEAM



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