
Mental Health and Well-Being of IT Workers: Analysis of the 'Quiet Quitting' Phenomenon

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Abstract:

Purpose: This article examines the phenomenon of 'quiet quitting' (QQ) in the IT sector in the context of employee well-being. Quiet quitting, as a response to the increasing job demands and pressures of working in the dynamic IT industry, manifests itself by limiting employees' engagement to minimal responsibilities.

Design/Methodology/Approach: An analysis of the literature suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularisation of remote working and the increased interest in work-life balance have contributed to the rise of this phenomenon, particularly among younger generations.

Findings: Based on reports and studies conducted in Poland and abroad, it has been indicated that QQ is often a strategy for maintaining mental health.

Practical Implications: In the context of employee wellbeing, the article refers to Aaron Antonovsky's salutogenesis model, highlighting the importance of generalised resilience resources, stressor reduction and building a sense of coherence. It also presents measures of organisations in Poland, such as the provision of private medical care or flexible working hours, which can support employee wellbeing and counteract QQ.

Originality/Value: The authors emphasise that caring for employee well-being requires a holistic approach, combining physical, psychological and social aspects.

Keywords: Employee well-being, quiet quitting, IT, work-life balance, job burnout.

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1. Introduction

The IT sector has been regarded as one of the most dynamic and attractive career paths for years. It attracts both high salaries and opportunities for technological development in a global working environment. However, behind these advantages lie challenges that are increasingly affecting employee well-being. The intense pace of work, high pressure for results and often unclear work-life boundaries lead to fatigue, burnout and weakened commitment to their duties.

In this context, the phenomenon of 'quiet quitting' (QQ), which has gained popularity as a form of withdrawal from excessive workloads, is growing. "Quiet quitting" does not mean leaving work altogether but rather limiting the commitment to performing only the basic duties specified in the contract. This phenomenon is increasingly evident in high-stress industries such as IT, where younger generations - especially employees belonging to Generation Z and Millennials - are challenging the traditional approach to work by prioritising work-life balance.

This shift is driven by both a redefinition of professional values and the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the need for mental health and flexibility in work organisation, and popularised remote working so-called '*home office*'.

Faced with these changes, employers are increasingly confronted with the question: How do we support employee wellbeing to increase employee engagement and prevent QQ at the same time?

The authors analyse the cause of and strategies to counteract quiet quitting, which can be implemented by companies, managers and individual employees alike to ensure a healthy and sustainable working environment. These considerations are designed to understand how the contemporary labour market and demands on employees are evolving towards greater concern for their well-being.

2. Characteristics of the IT Industry

According to data published by CRN and ISBTECH POLAND, the IT sector will reach a value of \$29.4 billion in 2023, an increase of 12.4% compared to 2022. A value of USD 35.06 billion is forecast for 2024, representing a further growth of around 19%. In addition, they indicate that the IT industry's contribution to Poland's GDP will increase to 4.5% by 2025.

This shows how forward-looking IT work is, and its rapid growth will attract new employees (Figures 1 and 2). However, it is important to remember that IT services are a knowledge-intensive business, where most of the work is intellectual tasks (Krawczyk-Bryłka, 2019). This fact requires employees to develop, update, and acquire new knowledge constantly. This is often associated with irregular working

hours and involvement in multiple projects simultaneously. (Jaskulski, 2021) The high demand for qualified professionals and the changing requirements of the market make it governed by slightly different laws. Non-wage elements of remuneration, such as additional medical insurance or paid sports activities, which in other branches are considered benefits, here are essential (Chmielewska *et al.*, 2017)

Figure 1. Percentage share of the IT sector in Poland's GDP.



Source: Own study.

Figure 2. Value of the IT sector in Poland.



Source: Own study.

Nevertheless, as early as 2010, a CORDIS study conducted by the Dortmund University of Technology sounded the alarm about the high risk of burnout among employees in the IT industry. Respondents indicated musculoskeletal complaints in the physical sphere and feelings of anxiety, exhaustion and negative emotions in the mental sphere (CORDIS, 2010).

More recent data from the report 'The State of Burnout in Tech', which surveyed 32,644 IT professionals, indicates that more than 42% of respondents are at risk of job burnout, 62% feel mentally and emotionally fatigued, 56% are unable to relax after work and 51% feel that they have achieved far less in their position than they should (Satan, 2022). In light of the data presented, the IT sector is proving to be not only a growth area where work is met with high wages and opportunities for development but also an area where employees face challenges that can affect their well-being and mental health.

3. Mental Health and Well-Being of Employees

The reasons for interest in the concept of well-being in the area of human capital management are primarily related to the issue of cost reduction, particularly those related to turnover, sickness absenteeism, excessive control and the individual's commitment to business goals (Tabor-Blazewicz, 2022).

In the salutogenesis model, according to Aaron Antonovsky, health is seen as a dynamic continuum that is stretched over time, with 'full health' and 'illness' at opposite ends. Such a model allows for the determination of the level of health. Four elements determine this state:

- (a) generalised resilience resources, i.e. a base made up of all human characteristics that are shaped by the physical, natural, biological, social and cultural environment,
- (b) stressors, in other words, demands that the individual has to face without prior adaptation and preparation,
- (c) Lifestyle, health behaviour,
- (d) sense of coherence as a person's general orientation towards life and its strong grounding in a sense of intelligibility, resourcefulness and meaningfulness of one's actions. (Doliński and Strelau, 2008)

Full health is, therefore, the result not only of biological and social factors but also of psychological attitudes and actions taken. Indeed, these aspects positively influence the evaluation of possible losses from a cognitive perspective and facilitate adaptation. In addition, it is worth noting that coherence is analogous to the 'positive life attitude', which is at the centre of the Onion theory of happiness (Czapiński, 2017).

Inside we have the 'will to live', another intermediate layer is the 'emotional experiences' or 'cognitive appraisals' expressing satisfaction with life, and the outer layer is the other elements related to the individual's life e.g., satisfaction with work, income, living conditions, health, own achievements, etc. Thus, we can divide human well-being into three categories, physical well-being, relating to the employee's health, including prevention of illness and addictions; psychological well-being, related to the sense of happiness and meaning in life; and social well-being, which can be referred to relationships at work and the organisational climate (Kulig-Moskwa and Nogieć, 2018; Tabor-Blazewicz, 2022).

It was not until the 1940s that the role of physical, social and mental well-being was recognised, not just the absence of disease. The Ottawa Charter goes much further in this premise. Not only does it define health as a tool for achieving the aforementioned values, but the individual must also be able to define his or her expectations and needs reflecting well-being and have the skills and capacity to fulfil them. Health is a determinant of quality of life, framed in terms of needs, aspirations and ambitions (Gromulska, 2010).

It is hardly surprising then that *well-being* issues are attracting so much interest in management practice. Many studies show a direct link between productivity levels and employees' overall health and well-being (Kulig-Moskwa and Nogieć, 2018). It seems extremely important for management practice to obtain answers to the following questions:

- *What contributes to an increased sense of psychological well-being in the workplace?*
- *What are the organisation's tasks in improving employees' mental well-being?*
- *What methods can be used to increase the sense of well-being in employees?*
- *How do other spheres of business management (organisational culture, human resource management, incentive systems, etc.) influence an organisation's well-being level (Wychowaniec, 2022)?*

4. The Phenomenon of "Quiet Quitting"

Quiet Quitting is a new phenomenon that is increasingly prevalent in the labour market, especially in the USA. It has gained its popularity thanks to social media, which means that mainly young people are taking part in the spread of the trend (Lipinski and Koczy, 2023). These are workers born after 1995, belonging to the so-called Generation Z and some workers from the so-called Millenials Generation. Although the phenomenon itself has the word quitting, or resignation, in its name, it does not involve a direct departure but the performance of one's core duties (Zieba, 2023).

According to a report published in the Wall Street Journal, 50 per cent of currently employed workers have chosen to limit their involvement in work (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). The reason for this phenomenon is attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly accelerated the process associated with the popularisation of remote working (Gross-Golacka *et al.*, 2023) and redirected the attention of employed people towards *work-life balance*.

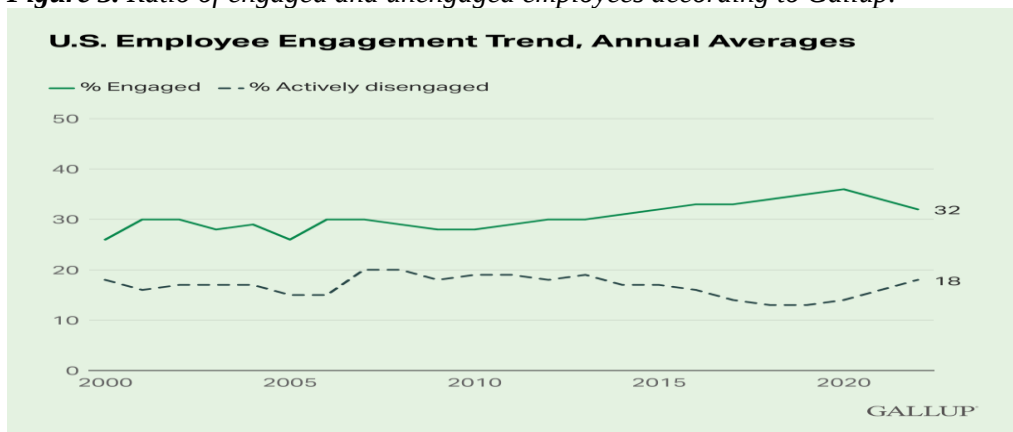
Young people under the age of 35 rate their opportunities for development and learning at work significantly lower (Harter, 2022), indicating a lack of empathy and understanding by their employers, a lack of a sense of belonging, feeling isolated, and their trust in their superiors is declining (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023).

This has resulted in increased interest from management researchers, private companies, and public organisations in employee wellbeing. Business owners and their managers are looking for answers to whether and how to support employees' mental health, especially given such a rapidly changing reality (Wychowc, 2022).

According to data published by the Gallup Institute in the second quarter of 2022, the percentage of engaged employees remained at 32%, but the percentage of actively unengaged employees increased to 18% (Figure 3). The ratio of engaged to actively unengaged employees is now 1.8 to 1, the lowest in almost a decade. Many 'quiet quitters' fit Gallup's definition of 'unengaged' at work - people who do the bare minimum required and are mentally disengaged (Harter, 2022).

It is worth noting that this strategy often relates to the consequences of the so-called 'great resignation', i.e., the mass layoffs that affected the market after the COVID-19 Pandemic. Individuals unable to afford to leave their jobs for various reasons chose to withdraw from additional work activities. (Formica and Sfodera, 2022; Lee *et al.*, 2023; Zieba, 2023)

Figure 3. Ratio of engaged and unengaged employees according to Gallup.



Source: Own study.

A survey on the current situation in the Polish labour market and the QQ phenomenon was commissioned by Blue Colibri. It involved 1,000 people aged between 18 and 65. Based on the survey, it is possible to learn that respondents described not taking on additional duties as a concern for mental health, with around 33% doing the bare minimum.

According to the 2023 survey conducted by the pracuj.pl platform, 79% of Poles are still engaged in their professional tasks, and 63% perform additional tasks beyond the formal ones; a significant majority of respondents feel that above-average engagement at work does not pay off (Lipinski and Koczy, 2023). This attitude may contribute to the spread of the QQ phenomenon in Poland.

It is worth noting that the phenomenon of silent resignation has many consequences that can affect a company's operations and efficiency. According to *Gallup's State of the Global Workplace* report, job dissatisfaction is at its highest level ever, and employees' lack of engagement in their work has cost the global economy \$7.8 trillion (Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). The most important factors in these losses are cited as:

- a reduction in business productivity,
- increase in employee absenteeism,
- lower quality of services offered,
- decline in customer satisfaction,
- the risk of losing the knowledge and competence of employees,
- hiding their shortcomings and mistakes,
- Not using their skills to their full potential in the workplace (Gonsiorowska and Zieba, 2023; Yıldız, 2023).

5. Countering 'Quiet Quitting' in the IT Sector

Research on QQ in Poland has shown that young people from Generation Z value work-life balance. The atmosphere at work and comfortable conditions are important to them. They want to have the opportunity for personal as well as professional development and to raise their level of competence (Lipinski and Koczy, 2023).

The literature also highlights management practices such as empowerment and delegation, collaborative orientation, and task variety as positively correlated with employee well-being (Bialas *et al.*, 2023).

Positive effects on employees' moods are also triggered by the employer's interest in the employee's well-being and, if necessary, support in this regard, in addition to promoting mental health care and holding regular meetings with employees where working conditions are discussed on an ongoing basis (Lipinski and Koczy, 2023).

A study on employee well-being as an element of the new HR strategy was conducted in 2021 by the Institute of Management at the Warsaw School of Economics. The study sample comprised 103 purposefully selected organisations. Companies operating in Poland and employing more than 250 people were used as the criterion for selection. As part of physical well-being, the organisations surveyed provide private medical care (54%), organise sports activities after work (40%) and take care of the ergonomics of the workplace (32%).

A quarter of respondents take care to provide healthy meals in employee canteens, and around 20% provide health education and preventive vaccinations. Only 15% provide additional preventive examinations, while 7% organise sports activities during working hours. The main psychosocial wellbeing measures, on the other hand, are the provision of flexible working hours (51%), assistance with childcare (42%), building a climate of trust (20%) and extra days off (19%).

Fewer than 15% of respondents offer employees counselling from a psychologist, stress reduction training and *work-life balance* skills courses. (Tabor-Blazewicz, 2022) Such a strategy keeps the employee engaged in his or her work and counteracts QQ. This is also confirmed by reports that indicate that the phenomenon of tacit resignation in Poland, is still at a lower level in relation to the global trend.

The literature analysis indicates that to counteract the phenomenon of QQ in the IT sector, it is worth focusing on the prevention of professional burnout. Particularly, research conducted on employees in this sector by researchers from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan pointed to a strong correlation between professional burnout and lack of commitment at work (Chmielewska *et al.*, 2017).

Three areas are identified as the most important areas in which actions have measurable effects in counteracting professional burnout. The first is 'mental hygiene', i.e. developing employees' competencies and knowledge on relaxation techniques and encouraging active time outside work in the form of hobbies, sports and socialising.

The second area relates to 'coping', in terms of individual strategies such as trying to find the positive sides of a difficult situation, turning activity in a different direction to push the problem away, treating a difficult situation as a challenge, and prioritising work problems. To this end, employers can organise training for their staff to teach them a positive thinking style.

The last aspect is social support. This type of self-help is where the individual feels part of a larger community. A positive impact will be brought about by proper team integration and building an organisational culture that pays attention to the company's identity and the employees' well-being (Switaj *et al.*, 2005; Szonert-Rzepecka, 2010).

6. Conclusion

Analysis of the literature and data has shown the importance of employee wellbeing and mental health, especially in the IT sector. Associated challenges such as an intense pace of work, high pressure for results, the blurring of boundaries between private and professional life through regular remote working or the risk of burnout may contribute to an increase in employees using a 'quiet quitting' strategy.

Tackling job burnout and the subsequent decline in employee engagement requires a multifaceted approach. The authors emphasise that employers should support employee wellbeing, especially in minimising the negative effects associated with the QQ phenomenon.

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