



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



QUIET QUITTING AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: A STRATEGIC RE-EVALUATION OF WORKPLACE DISENGAGEMENT AND HUMAN CAPITAL RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The post-pandemic labor landscape has witnessed the rise of "quiet quitting"—a behavioral phenomenon where employees strictly adhere to their contractual job descriptions while withholding discretionary extra-role behaviors, discretionary effort, and voluntary over-time involvement. While often framed by mainstream media as an expression of worker apathy, this study conceptualizes quiet quitting as a structural symptom of workplace burnout, organizational injustice, and systemic psychological contract breach. Through a comprehensive evaluation using Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, this paper examines the cascading operational, psychological, and financial impacts of quiet quitting on long-term organizational sustainability. I argue that relying on short-term extra-role extraction undermines triple-bottom-line organizational health. Ultimately, quiet quitting is not an expression of employee indolence, but a strategic self-preservation mechanism in response to prolonged work stress, unmet organizational expectations, and systemic burnout. Finally, an evidence-based strategic framework is offered to realign managerial practices, work-design architectures, and performance metrics to foster sustainable workforce resilience as well as recommendations are posited.

Keywords: Conservation Of Resources Theory (COR), Social Exchange (SE) Theory, Job Demand Resources (JDR), Organizational Sustainability, Workforce Resilience, Quiet Quitting.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of global disruptions (most notably the COVID-19 pandemic), rapid remote work adoption, and shifting socio-economic paradigms, the international labor force underwent profound values shift regarding employment, personal identity, and well-being. Following the era of the "Great Resignation," a more subtle yet pervasive phenomenon emerged within corporate structures called "quiet quitting" (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Unlike conventional resignation, wherein an employee physically severs their employment relationship, quiet quitting represents a psychological and behavioral recalibration. Employees remain formally employed and fulfill the minimum explicitly stated duties of their

roles, but systematically refuse to engage in Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) such as unpaid overtime, uncompensated emotional labor, or voluntary project management (Serenko, 2024).

From an organizational standpoint, this behavioral shift challenges decades of corporate reliance on voluntary extra-role efforts to maintain operational agility and buffer against administrative inefficiencies. While corporate leaders often view quiet quitting as an ethical lapse or a decline in employee commitment, scholars increasingly analyze it as a rational coping strategy against chronic burnout, toxic productivity cultures, and perceived organizational unfairness (Basha & Pathania, 2025; Kour & Parrey, 2026).

This paper investigates the nexus between quiet quitting and organizational sustainability. Specifically, it explores how silent psychological disengagement influences human capital preservation, institutional innovation, operational efficiency, and overall organizational resilience. By examining the structural drivers of quiet quitting through established psychological and managerial frameworks, we articulate why traditional punitive responses fail and how organizations can construct sustainable, human-centered work environments.

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks

To analyze quiet quitting beyond popular media narratives, scholars draw upon established theoretical frameworks within organizational behavior and industrial psychology. This paper relied on the following three theories which are:

1.2 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory asserts that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster resources that they value including time, energy, psychological well-being, and family stability. When employees experience chronic resource depletion due to unmanaged job demands, uncompensated overtime, or emotional strain, they face resource threats and burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In this context, quiet quitting acts as a defensive resource-preservation mechanism. By scaling back discretionary effort, workers construct a psychological barrier to prevent further resource hemorrhaging and stave off clinical burnout (Basha & Pathania, 2025).

1.3 Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Contracts

Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) posits that organizational relationships are driven by expectations of reciprocity. Employees trade time, skill, and extra-role effort for monetary compensation, career advancement, security, and psychological support. When workers perceive a breach of the psychological contract such as unrewarded extra effort, stagnant wage growth despite inflation, or unfulfilled promises of promotion, they adjust their contributions to re-establish equity. Quiet quitting serves as a behavioral rebalancing of the social exchange equation: employees align their actual input strictly with the tangible outputs provided by the employer (Cropanzano et al., 2002).

1.4 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) conceptualizes workplace health through two parallel processes: a health-impairment process triggered by excessive job demands (e.g., workload pressure, role ambiguity) and a motivational process driven by job resources (e.g., autonomy, supervisory support, performance feedback). Quiet quitting occurs when job demands consistently outweigh job resources without proportional structural support. In response, employees unilaterally lower their personal performance targets to prevent systemic exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2014).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "**quiet quitting**" emerged as a prominent workplace phenomenon in the early 2020s, popularized largely through social media platforms (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Despite its provocative phrasing, the concept does not refer to the actual termination of employment. Rather, quiet quitting describes a workplace behavior wherein employees intentionally perform only the specific tasks outlined in their formal job descriptions, strictly adhering to scheduled work hours and rejecting the implicit expectation to go "above and beyond" without commensurate compensation or recognition (Galanis et al., 2023). In contemporary organizational literature, quiet quitting represents a renegotiation of the workplace dynamic, serving as a protective strategy against occupational burnout and a symptom of shifting psychological contracts.

2.1 Concept of Quiet Quitting

While the terminology is recent, organizational scholars emphasize that quiet quitting is not a novel psychological behavior. In academic literature, it closely mirrors established concepts such as low organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), discretionary effort withdrawal, and workplace disengagement (Lord et al., 2024). Organizational Citizenship

Behaviors encompass voluntary actions—such as helping colleagues, working late to meet pressing deadlines, or taking on extra projects—that are not formally required but enhance organizational efficiency (Organ, 1988). Quiet quitting can be conceptualized as the systematic reduction of OCBs while maintaining acceptable levels of baseline performance.

This behavior is distinct from "quiet firing", where managers passively induce an employee to leave by withholding resources, recognition, or advancement opportunities, and traditional active disengagement, where employee performance drops below mandatory requirements (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Quiet quitters typically meet their contractual core competencies; they simply refuse to perform uncompensated emotional or physical labor.

2.2 Triggers of Quiet Quitting

The adoption of a quiet quitting mindset is rarely an isolated decision; it stems from intersecting organizational, environmental, and individual antecedents.

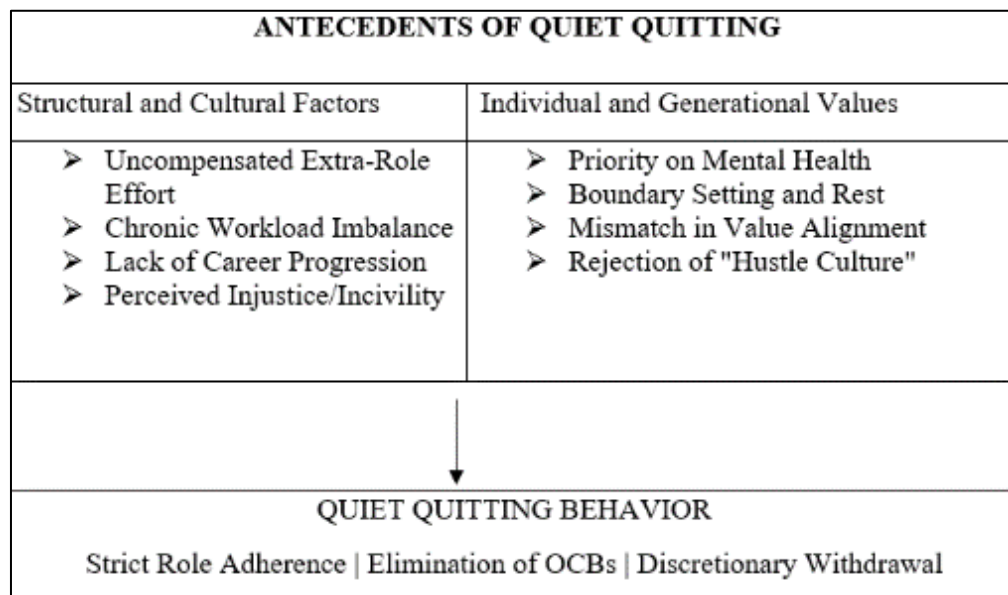


Figure 1: Conceptual/Operational Framework of Triggers of Quiet Quitting (OKEAH, 2026)

2.3 Chronic Burnout and Workplace Overload/ the Fractured Psychological Contract

Occupational stress and chronic overload represent primary catalysts for workplace disengagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2021). When extra-role expectations become normalized obligations, (a phenomenon known as "creeping job scope"), employees experience chronic physical and cognitive fatigue. Reducing activity to core responsibilities serves as a pragmatic self-preservation strategy (Basha & Pathania, 2025).

Also, the rise of quiet quitting is largely attributed to severe employee fatigue, particularly following the global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Zenger & Folkman, 2022). The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life during remote and hybrid work setups accelerated rates of burnout—a state of chronic workplace stress characterized by energy depletion, mental distance from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy (World Health Organization, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, quiet quitting signifies a breach of the **psychological contract**. The psychological contract refers to the unwritten, informal expectations and mutual obligations between an employee and an employer (Rousseau, 1995). Historically, employees often offered uncompensated extra effort in exchange for unwritten promises of job security, career progression, or workplace loyalty. When organizations fail to deliver on these perceived implicit rewards—or when hyper-work culture leads to sustained fatigue—employees recalibrate the contract. They shift from a *relational* psychological contract (based on mutual trust and long-term commitment) to a strictly *transactional* one, exchanging basic work solely for agreed-upon monetary compensation (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

2.4 Perceived Injustice and Managerial Incivility/ Organizational Impact and Managerial Interventions

Distributive, procedural, and interactional injustice significantly heighten intentions to withdraw (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). When employees observe arbitrary reward allocation, unsupportive leadership, or managerial incivility, organizational commitment declines. Employees respond to perceived organizational unfairness by systematically withholding discretionary effort (Ambrose et al., 2002; Barclay et al., 2005).

In other words, for organizations, widespread quiet quitting presents nuanced challenges. Because employees continue to fulfill their core duties, quiet quitting rarely manifests as immediate operational failure. However, over time, the absence of discretionary effort can stifle innovation, degrade workplace culture, and reduce organizational adaptability during crises (Galanis et al., 2023).

Research indicates that quiet quitting is often a reaction to leadership deficiencies rather than employee apathy. Studies show that managers who fail to foster psychological safety, maintain unmanageable workloads, or fail to recognize individual contributions experience significantly higher rates of quiet quitters within their teams (Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Effective organizational responses require:

- **Re-evaluating Workloads:** Aligning employee responsibilities with reasonable, clear expectations to prevent systemic burnout (Lord et al., 2024).
- **Transparent Compensation:** Ensuring that requests for extra effort or expanded roles are tied to equitable rewards and recognition (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).
- **Empathetic Leadership:** Cultivating open dialogue regarding work-life balance and psychological wellbeing (Zenger & Folkman, 2022).

2.5 Evolving Work Values and Generational Dynamics

The post-pandemic context accelerated a cultural re-evaluation of the role of work in personal identity. Younger cohorts, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, prioritize holistic well-being, work-life integration, and psychological safety over organizational loyalty (Kour & Parrey, 2026). The societal rejection of uncompensated "hustle culture" has reframed strict adherence to contractual duties not as poor performance, but as a healthy boundary-setting practice.

3 IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Organizational sustainability encompasses an enterprise's long-term capability to maintain financial health, social equity, and operational resilience across environmental and internal shifts. Quiet quitting affects these dimensions significantly.

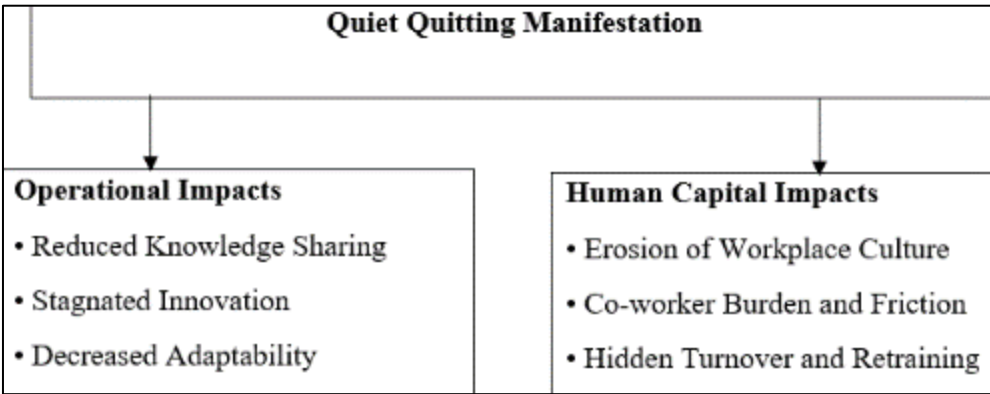


Figure 2: Conceptual/operational Framework of Quiet Quitting Manifestation (OKEAH, 2026)

3.1 Knowledge Sharing and Innovation Dynamics

Discretionary effort is critical for institutional innovation and cross-departmental collaboration. Innovation depends heavily on spontaneous problem-solving, informal knowledge exchange, and voluntary mentoring (Cooper & Maldonado, 2022). When employees transition into quiet quitting, knowledge-sharing behaviors contract. Workers fulfill explicit tasks but rarely volunteer novel ideas or assist colleagues outside their immediate team, weakening long-term competitive advantage (Holt & Barnes, 2022).

3.2 Cultural Degradation and Co-Worker Friction

While quiet quitting protects the individual employee's immediate energy resources, it can introduce friction within team structures. When certain team members scale back to core tasks, the unassigned work often cascades onto highly engaged colleagues or middle managers, creating resentment, team burnout, and reduced workplace morale (Drela, 2024). Left unmanaged, quiet quitting can spread across teams, creating a culture of passive compliance.

3.3 Financial and Hidden Turnover Costs

Unlike explicit turnover, which appears clearly in HR analytics, quiet quitting acts as a form of "hidden turnover." While direct recruitment costs are temporarily deferred, organizations incur ongoing productivity losses, customer service declines, and delayed project execution. Furthermore, employees who quietly quit display significantly higher rates of eventual voluntary departure once alternative opportunities arise, rendering quiet quitting a leading indicator of talent loss (Drela, 2024; Yildiz, 2023).

3.4 Strategic Management Frameworks for Organizational Resilience

Addressing quiet quitting requires shifting away from punitive monitoring or forced engagement toward sustainable work designs and empathetic leadership models.

Table 1: SUSTAINABLE HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT MODEL

SUSTAINABLE HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT MODEL	
Domain	Action/ Strategy
Work Redesign	Re-align tasks: eliminate scope creep (also called requirement creep or feature creep) refers to the gradual, uncontrolled expansion of a project's scope beyond its original goals, deliverables, or boundaries without corresponding adjustments to time, budget, or resources).
Transparent Reciprocity	Directly tie discretionary extra-role effort to tangible rewards, compensation, or growth paths.
Authentic Leadership	Cultivate psychological safety, transparent communication, and empathetic management.
Health-Centric Culture	Treat rest, health, and boundaries as fundamental prerequisites for high organizational performance.

OKEAH, 2026.

3.5 Work Redesign and Role Clarity

Organizations must re-examine role definitions using Job Demands-Resources principles. Clearly distinguishing core contractual duties from voluntary extra-role behaviors prevents unspoken scope creep (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). When additional responsibilities are required, managers should formally integrate them into compensated roles rather than relying on unwritten expectations.

3.6 Transparent Reciprocity

To rebuild psychological contracts, performance management systems must explicitly reward extra-role contributions through direct compensation, flexible work arrangements, or formal career development opportunities (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Establishing transparent equity restores the perceived balance of social exchange.

4 AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Leadership authenticity characterized by behavioral integrity, transparent communication, and empathy, negatively correlates with employee withdrawal tendencies (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 2022). Managers trained to build psychological safety can discuss workload bounds constructively without invoking fear of punishment, allowing issues to be addressed before disengagement occurs.

4.1 Health-Centric Culture

A **health-centric culture** refers to an organizational environment that strategically prioritizes physical, psychological, and emotional well-being across all operations, norms, and leadership behaviors. Rather than viewing well-being initiatives as peripheral perks or isolated benefits, organizations with health-centric cultures integrate wellness into their core operational strategies to improve employee outcomes and organizational effectiveness (Murphy, 2024).

5 CONCLUSION

Quiet quitting is not an isolated trend or an indication of workforce indolence. Rather, it represents a systemic response to unsustainable work models, chronic resource depletion, and unfulfilled psychological contracts. When organizations

rely on uncompensated extra-role labor to cover operational gaps, they build fragile systems susceptible to widespread silent disengagement.

Achieving genuine organizational sustainability requires shifting from transactional extraction to sustainable human capital management. By addressing the root causes of burnout, restoring organizational justice, and aligning workloads with realistic capacity, enterprises can convert passive compliance into sustainable engagement and long-term organizational health.

Quiet quitting is less an act of workplace rebellion than a diagnostic indicator of organizational dysfunction. By rejecting systemic overwork and upholding strict professional boundaries, employees practicing quiet quitting highlight the limitations of traditional management models that rely on uncompensated discretionary effort. Ultimately, addressing this trend requires organizations to move away from culture frameworks reliant on over-extension and toward sustainable work environments grounded in fair compensation, realistic expectations, and mutual respect.

Recommendations

The phenomenon of "quiet quitting", where employees strictly fulfill their contractual duties without expending discretionary effort, is rarely a reflection of individual laziness. Rather, it is an organizational symptom of systemic burnout, mismatched expectations, and low psychological safety.

Treating quiet quitting as an employee discipline issue fails to address the root cause. True organizational sustainability requires shifting from transactional workforce management to a strategic model that balances productivity, employee well-being, and long-term retention.

Strategic Pillar	Actionable Recommendation	Expected Organizational Impact
Role Clarity and Workload Realism	Audit workload capacity and prioritize core duties. Shift focus from hours worked to outcomes achieved. Define explicit boundaries around after-hours communication.	Mitigates burnout, reduces workplace anxiety, and aligns management expectations with realistic workload limits
Discretionary Effort and Recognition	Incentivize extra-role performance. When employees take on cross-functional initiatives or extra projects, ensure direct compensation, performance recognition, or promotion tracking follows.	Re-establishes trust by eliminating uncompensated labor expectations and signaling that extra contribution is genuinely valued.
Managerial Capability	Train leaders in empathetic and outcome-based management. Shift middle management metrics from activity tracking (e.g., status updates) to team output and retention indicators.	Strengthens psychological safety, encouraging early communication regarding workload strain before silent disengagement occurs.
Sustainable Career Pathways	Structure internal mobility and growth options. Offer clear lateral and vertical development opportunities, upskilling budgets, and career progression frameworks.	Converts disengaged employees into invested partners by demonstrating a clear long-term future within the organization.

OKEAH, 2026

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

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