

The "Quiet Quitting" Phenomenon: HR Strategies for Retention in the Post-Pandemic Gig Economy

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Abstract

Corporate labor markets have stabilized statistically, yet they rot from within. The "Great Resignation" of 2021 marked a loud, definitive severance of employment; in contrast, the current landscape is defined by "Quiet Quitting," a silent and arguably more dangerous phenomenon. Employees have ceased leaving in droves. Instead, they remain on the payroll while engaging in a rational recalibration of effort, adhering strictly to written job descriptions while systematically withholding the discretionary "citizenship behaviors" that drive innovation. This psychological detachment is not merely a symptom of burnout. It is a calculated economic response to the post-pandemic Gig Economy.

External freelance platforms now offer skilled professionals precisely what traditional corporate structures deny: radical autonomy and direct effort-to-reward correlation. Consequently, talent increasingly views full-time employment as a stable financial baseline rather than a career destination, reserving their creative energy for side hustles. Human Resource paradigms built on pre-2020 assumptions fail to address this bifurcated focus. Coercive return-to-office mandates only accelerate the withdrawal.

This paper interrogates the shattered psychological contract between firm and worker, proposing a strategic overhaul of retention frameworks tailored for 2025. We argue that to combat the allure of the gig economy, corporations must internalize its mechanics. Strategies detailed herein include the operationalization of internal talent marketplaces that democratize project allocation, the shift from time-based to outcome-verified performance metrics, and the aggressive "re-contracting" of employee expectations to formalize flexibility. Organizations must abandon the expectation of uncompensated loyalty. Retention now requires constructing an ecosystem where the autonomy of gig work coexists with the security of tenure.

Keywords

Quiet Quitting, Gig Economy, Psychological Contract, Employee Retention, Internal Talent Marketplaces, Post-Pandemic HR, Job Crafting.

Introduction

The contemporary corporate labor market is currently witnessing a silent insurrection. It is not marked by picket lines or public manifestos, but by a profound and calculated withdrawal of psychological capital. The term "Quiet Quitting," popularized by social media but rooted in deep organizational fracture, is a misnomer that trivializes a rational economic shift. It implies a passive surrender, a laziness born of entitlement. In reality, this phenomenon represents a sophisticated "work-to-rule" strategy where employees strictly adhere to the explicit terms of their employment contracts while systematically withholding the discretionary effort—the "citizenship behaviors"—that organizations have historically relied upon for innovation and agility (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). The era of getting something for nothing is effectively over.

This behavioral shift signals the mutation of the "Great Resignation" into a more durable and corrosive phase. While the Great Resignation was defined by a physical exodus—a binary decision to leave or stay—the current landscape is defined by employees who have decided to stay physically while leaving emotionally. The data reveals the scale of this detachment: the *State of the Global Workplace* report indicates that a staggering 59% of the global workforce now fits the profile of "quiet quitters," occupying desks but vacating their roles of any passion or initiative (Gallup, 2023). Unlike the turnover crisis of 2021, which forced immediate HR triage, this psychological withdrawal creates a zombie workforce that meets minimum viable performance metrics yet fails to generate the value-add necessary for competitive advantage.

The root of this detachment lies in the shattering of the "Psychological Contract"—the unwritten, implicit agreement of mutual expectation between employer and employee. Historically, this contract exchanged loyalty and extra effort for long-term security and upward mobility. However, the post-pandemic economic volatility has exposed the fragility of this exchange. Rousseau (2023) argues that when organizations violate these implicit terms—through stagnant wages amidst inflation or coercive return-to-office mandates—employees retaliate not with conflict, but with apathy. This breakdown has precipitated a rapid deterioration of workplace culture, where the social fabric that once bound teams together has frayed under the weight of transactional interactions (SHRM, 2022).

Furthermore, this internal withdrawal is exacerbated by an external threat that HR leaders have failed to fully account for: the mature Gig Economy. In previous decades, a dissatisfied employee had limited options; they either endured the dissatisfaction or sought another corporate role. Today, the Gig Economy offers a viable "escape hatch" for talent. High-performing individuals can now monetize their discretionary energy on freelance platforms, meaning the "extra mile" effort that used to belong to the employer is now being sold to the highest bidder on the open market. The corporate job, therefore, is demoted from a primary identity to a financial baseline—a venture capital fund for the employee's personal entrepreneurial ambitions.

The costs of ignoring this paradigm shift are not merely cultural; they are quantifiable and severe. Disengagement is an active drain on the balance sheet. McKinsey & Company (2023) estimates that the "hidden costs" of this lost productivity—manifesting as missed deadlines, lack of innovation, and bare-minimum service delivery—are creating a drag on the global economy measured in the trillions. This paper posits that traditional retention strategies, designed for a pre-pandemic world of captive talent, are woefully inadequate. To retain the modern worker, HR must move beyond superficial wellness perks and reconstruct the employment value proposition to compete directly with the autonomy and transactional clarity of the gig economy.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of "Quiet Quitting" cannot be adequately understood through the simplistic lens of employee dissatisfaction; rather, it represents the convergence of three distinct theoretical streams: the collapse of the traditional psychological contract, the physiological imperative of resource conservation amidst burnout, and the seductive, albeit precarious, autonomy of the Gig Economy. This review synthesizes these domains to argue that the current crisis in retention is less about physical attrition and more about a fundamental renegotiation of the exchange relationship between labor and capital.

The Erosion of the Psychological Contract

At the core of the employee-employer relationship lies the "Psychological Contract," a construct seminalized by Rousseau (1989), which delineates the unwritten, reciprocal expectations that bind an individual to an organization. Historically, this contract was relational: employees offered loyalty and discretionary effort—"citizenship behaviors"—in exchange for job security and internal advancement (Rousseau, 2004). However, the post-pandemic era has witnessed a widespread "contract breach," where organizations, driven by economic volatility, have violated these implicit terms through stagnation in real wages and the imposition of rigid surveillance mechanisms. When the relational contract is breached, the relationship regresses into a purely transactional state. The employee no longer views their labor as an investment in a shared future but as a commodity to be traded for a paycheck, and nothing more. This shift explains the precise mechanics of quiet quitting: it is the strict enforcement of a transactional contract by the weaker party.

Burnout and Conservation of Resources (COR)

While contract theory explains the *why*, burnout theory explains the *how*. Maslach and Leiter (2016) identify "depersonalization"—a cynical detachment from one's job and colleagues—as a critical dimension of burnout, distinct from mere exhaustion. Quiet quitting functions as a manifestation of this depersonalization, a defensive wall erected to protect the self from further depletion. This aligns with Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which posits that when individuals are threatened with the net loss of resources (energy, emotional resilience, time), they will aggressively strive to retain what remains. In the high-stress crucible of the post-pandemic workplace, employees are not "slacking"; they are engaging in a rational act of resource hoarding. By capping their effort at the minimum viable threshold, they are preventing the total bankruptcy of their psychological reserves.

The Gig Economy Paradox

Complicating this internal dynamic is the external pull of the Gig Economy, which has fundamentally altered the opportunity costs of full-time employment. Ashford et al. (2018) argue that the gig economy offers a "plurality of meanings," allowing workers to construct identities separate from a single employer. While traditional employment offers security, it often demands conformity. In contrast, Petriglieri et al. (2019) describe the "holding environment" of independent work, where despite the precariousness of income, workers find a profound sense of agency and "precarious autonomy." For the talented knowledge worker, this creates a paradox: the "risky" gig economy offers the psychological safety of autonomy, while the "safe" corporate job offers the risk of burnout and loss of self. Consequently, many employees treat their corporate roles as venture capital for their freelance ambitions, extracting financial stability from the firm while investing their creative capital elsewhere.

Synthesis

The intersection of these factors creates a retention landscape that is structurally hostile to pre-pandemic HR strategies. The breach of the psychological contract has severed the bond of loyalty; COR theory explains the subsequent withdrawal of effort; and the Gig Economy provides a viable alternative for self-actualization. Thus, the challenge for HR is no longer preventing exit—which is visible and measurable—but preventing the invisible, necrotic spread of disengagement where the body remains in the chair, but the mind has long since departed.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

Given the emergent and multifaceted nature of "Quiet Quitting," which sits at the intersection of macroeconomic shifts and individual psychological withdrawal, a traditional single-organization case study would yield insufficient generalizability. Therefore, this research adopts a **Qualitative Meta-Synthesis (QMS)** architecture, integrated with a **Strategic HR Analytics** framework. This methodological choice is predicated on the work of Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), who argue that meta-synthesis allows for the integration of findings across diverse qualitative studies to create a higher-order interpretation of a phenomenon. By eschewing primary data collection in favor of a rigorous synthesis of existing high-volume industry datasets and peer-reviewed theoretical constructs, this paper achieves a holistic view of the post-pandemic labor landscape.

Research Design and Data Triangulation

The study employs a "triangulation" approach (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) to validity, cross-referencing three distinct data streams:

1. **Macro-Level Quantitative Data:** Longitudinal workforce engagement metrics from Gallup's *State of the Global Workplace* reports (2022–2024) and McKinsey's *Future of Work* analyses. These sources provide the statistical magnitude of the disengagement crisis.
2. **Meso-Level Organizational Policy:** Analysis of HR policy documents and return-to-office (RTO) mandates from Fortune 500 entities, correlated with subsequent retention rates.
3. **Micro-Level Qualitative Theory:** Academic literature regarding the "Psychological Contract" and "Burnout," utilized to interpret the *why* behind the quantitative trends.

This design aligns with the principles of Evidence-Based Management (EBMgt) as defined by Rousseau (2006), which mandates the systematic use of the best available evidence—rather than intuition—to inform management practice. We treat industry reports not merely as context, but as empirical artifacts subject to critical appraisal regarding their sampling methods and validity.

Conceptual Framework: The Autonomy-Engagement Matrix

To analyze the drivers of Quiet Quitting, we constructed a comparative framework termed the "Autonomy-Engagement Matrix." This framework treats the **Gig Economy** not as a separate labor market, but as a control variable for "Autonomy."

- **Hypothesis of the Framework:** We posit that the Gig Economy acts as a "structural counter-factual" to traditional corporate employment. Gig workers possess high autonomy but low security, while corporate workers possess high security but low autonomy.
- **Analytical Logic:** By comparing engagement scores between these two groups, we isolate "Autonomy" and "Perceived Fairness" as the primary variables influencing the decision to "quiet quit." This comparative approach draws on Marler and Boudreau's (2017) standards for HR Analytics, moving beyond descriptive metrics (e.g., turnover rates) to predictive modeling of human behavior.

Data Analysis: Thematic Pattern Matching

Data analysis was conducted using a deductive "pattern matching" technique. We coded the text of HR policy announcements (specifically those enforcing rigid 9-to-5 structures) and looked for temporal correlations with spikes in "Quiet Quitting" sentiment as measured by social listening data and engagement surveys. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocols, we identified latent themes such as "Agency," "Reciprocity," and "Transactionalism."

The synthesis revealed a critical disconnect: while corporate retention strategies largely focused on *financial* retention (bonuses, raises), the drivers of Quiet Quitting were almost exclusively *structural* (lack of flexibility, micromanagement). This disconnect forms the basis of the strategic interventions proposed in the subsequent sections. By analyzing the "Gig" worker's high engagement despite low security, we derived the core insight that the *feeling* of being an independent contractor—even within a firm—is a stronger retention mechanism than security alone.

Limitations

It must be acknowledged that this methodology relies on secondary data, which limits our ability to control for specific organizational cultures. However, the high volume of aggregated data (N > 100,000 across combined reports) mitigates the risk of outlier bias, providing a robust foundation for the proposed strategic framework.

Analysis: Drivers of Quiet Quitting in a Gig-Oriented World

To characterize "Quiet Quitting" as a sudden decay in professional morality is to fundamentally misunderstand the labor market. It is not a crisis of work ethic; it is a crisis of mathematics. Employees are not retreating because they have become lazy; they are retreating because the equation of effort-to-reward has broken. Through the lens of the post-pandemic Gig Economy, we analyze three distinct drivers that have forced this rational withdrawal: the erosion of real wages, the autonomy deficit in traditional employment, and the generational rejection of "hustle culture."

The Economic Calculation: Wage Stagnation in an Inflationary Era

The most immediate driver is a brutal economic reality: for a significant portion of the workforce, working harder no longer yields upward mobility. It merely maintains a depreciating baseline. Data from the **Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023)** reveals that while nominal wages rose following the pandemic, "real" average hourly earnings—adjusted for the

Consumer Price Index—fell consecutively for nearly two years. When inflation outpaces compensation, the employee effectively takes a pay cut for performing the same duties. In this context, "acting your wage"—a colloquialism for quiet quitting—is not rebellion; it is fiscal responsibility.

The Economic Policy Institute (2022)

highlights a decoupling of productivity and pay that has persisted for decades but accelerated violently post-2020. Workers see record corporate profits and C-suite compensation growth while their purchasing power evaporates. Consequently, the "Quiet Quitter" performs a simple cost-benefit analysis. If the marginal utility of an extra hour of work is zero (or negative, considering the cost of stress), the rational economic actor withdraws that labor. They revert to the strict letter of the contract because the "bonus" of future stability they were promised has been rendered insolvent by market conditions.

The Autonomy Deficit: The Corporate Panopticon vs. Gig Freedom

Simultaneously, the psychological value of "employment" has degraded relative to the alternatives. The pandemic exposed the workforce to a level of autonomy previously reserved for freelancers. They managed their own schedules, integrated work with life, and maintained productivity without physical oversight. The subsequent "Return to Office" (RTO) mandates issued by many Fortune 500 companies in 2023 and 2024 were perceived not as a return to normalcy, but as a revocation of trust. **Microsoft's Work Trend Index (2022)** described this as "productivity paranoia," where leaders feared that unseen workers were unsafe bets, despite data proving otherwise.

Here, the Gig Economy acts as a powerful counter-narrative. Platforms like Upwork or Toptal sell the fantasy (and often the reality) of radical ownership over one's time. Even if a corporate employee does not intend to leave for the gig economy, they use it as a benchmark for comparison. A study by the **Pew Research Center (2023)** indicates that "flexibility" now rivals "pay" as a top determinant of job satisfaction. When a corporate role demands rigid adherence to a 9-to-5 clock without the commensurate security or pension that once justified such control, the employee creates their own flexibility by emotionally checking out. They reclaim autonomy by refusing to emotionally inhabit a space that refuses to trust them.

The "Hustle Culture" Backlash: A Generational Reset

Finally, we witness a profound sociological shift in how work is valued, driven largely by Millennials and Gen Z. For two decades, the dominant narrative was "Hustle Culture"—the belief that relentless overwork was a virtue and a guaranteed path to success. The pandemic acted as a mortality salience event, shattering this illusion. The **Deloitte Gen Z and Millennial Survey (2023)** reports a distinct shift in values, where younger cohorts are actively prioritizing mental health over career progression. They witnessed the previous generation burn out, facing layoffs despite years of loyal "citizenship behaviors," and have collectively decided that the promise of the corporate ladder is a lie.

This is not merely fatigue; it is an ideological rejection of the "Ideal Worker" norm. **Gartner (2023)** research suggests that employees now seek a "human-centric" value deal. When the organization demands the "hustle" of a startup founder but offers the bureaucratic rigidity of a legacy firm, the employee disengages. They refuse to internalize the company's anxieties. In a world where gig work allows one to be a mercenary with clear terms, the corporate employee

adopts a mercenary mindset within the firm: they deliver exactly what was ordered, nothing more, and save their passion for the parts of their lives that they actually own.

HR Strategies for Retention

To counteract the structural allure of the gig economy, organizations must cease viewing "retention" as an act of containment and instead approach it as an act of reconstruction. The traditional "golden handcuffs" of deferred compensation are no longer sufficient to bind talent to a firm. Instead, HR must architect an internal ecosystem that mimics the autonomy of the freelance market while retaining the security of the corporate umbrella. This section proposes four prescriptive strategies derived from best practices at leading multinationals, designed to "re-contract" the employee experience.

- **Operationalizing Internal Talent Marketplaces (ITMs)**

The most direct counter-measure to the external gig economy is the creation of an internal one. An Internal Talent Marketplace (ITM) is a digital platform that democratizes the allocation of work, allowing employees to bid on "gigs" or projects across the organization based on their skills and interests, rather than their job title.

- *Mechanism:* Instead of managers hoarding talent, the ITM unbundles jobs into tasks. An employee in finance with data visualization skills can take on a 10% "gig" in marketing. This satisfies the "polygamous" work desire of Gen Z without them leaving the firm.
- *Evidence:* **Unilever** pioneered this approach with their "FLEX Experiences" platform. During the pandemic, they redeployed over 8,000 employees to critical projects via the marketplace, unlocking 300,000 hours of capacity. This not only preserved jobs but significantly boosted engagement scores by offering agency (Gloat, 2021).
- *Strategic Value:* It transforms the employee from a passive asset to an active investor in their own career portfolio, directly competing with the autonomy of Upwork.

- **Job Crafting and the "Portfolio Career" Model**

HR must move beyond static job descriptions, which are often obsolete by the time they are published. "Job Crafting" is the co-creation of a role between manager and employee, tailoring the "what" and "how" of work to the individual's strengths.

- *Mechanism:* This involves a formal "re-contracting" session where 10-20% of a role is redesigned to align with the employee's passion projects. This is not about doing *less* work, but doing *more meaningful* work.
- *Evidence:* **Google's** famous "20% time" policy was an early precursor, but modern iterations at companies like **Microsoft** involve "Job Crafting Workshops" where teams realign roles to personal purpose. Research by **Deloitte Human Capital Trends (2023)** indicates that organizations practicing job design flexibility see a 2.3x increase in innovation retention.

- *Strategic Value:* It acknowledges the "whole person" and reduces the "depersonalization" that drives burnout.

- **Outcome-Based Performance Management (OBPM)**

The greatest friction point in the return-to-office debate is the employee's perception that they are being watched rather than measured. To retain high performers, HR must dismantle "presenteeism" and shift to Outcome-Based Performance Management.

- *Mechanism:* This requires a radical shift in KPI design. Instead of measuring "hours logged" or "days in office," the organization measures "outputs delivered." If an employee can complete a 40-hour workload in 30 hours due to high efficiency, the remaining 10 hours are theirs to reclaim, not to be filled with busy work.
- *Evidence:* A study by **Gartner (2022)** found that organizations with outcome-based monitoring saw no decline in productivity but a significant increase in trust. This aligns with the "gig" model where the client pays for the deliverable, not the process.
- *Strategic Value:* It eliminates the "Quiet Quitting" incentive. If efficiency is rewarded with time back rather than more work, the employee is motivated to be productive rather than performative.

- **Mental Health as a Structural Benefit, Not a Perk**

Finally, mental health support must be elevated from a "wellness app" to a core structural benefit comparable to health insurance. Quiet Quitting is often a symptom of unaddressed trauma or chronic stress.

- *Mechanism:* This involves "Right to Disconnect" policies that are technologically enforced (e.g., server-side email shutdowns after hours) and mandatory "resilience leave" that is not deducted from vacation time.
- *Evidence:* **LinkedIn** and **Nike** famously implemented company-wide "shutdown weeks" to forcibly break the cycle of burnout. **Mercer's (2024) Health on Demand** report highlights that 49% of employees would trade a portion of salary for better mental health support.
- *Strategic Value:* It signals that the organization views the employee as a renewable resource that must be protected, rather than a consumable resource to be depleted.

By implementing these strategies, HR does not merely "retain" staff; it re-engages them by offering a value proposition that the external market cannot match: the freedom of a freelancer backed by the capital of a corporation.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research has traversed the landscape of the post-pandemic labor market to argue that "Quiet Quitting" is not a transient trend, but a structural correction in the price of labor. The analysis reveals that the withdrawal of discretionary effort is a rational economic response to a

broken psychological contract, exacerbated by the ready availability of "gig" alternatives that offer superior autonomy. The findings suggest that the traditional "command and control" model of Human Resource Management is effectively obsolete. In a world where talent can seamlessly migrate to freelance platforms, the corporation no longer holds a monopoly on professional security. If organizations persist in offering rigid, low-trust environments, they will not only lose talent to competitors but to the talent's own entrepreneurial ambitions.

Implications for the Future of Work

The trajectory is clear: we are moving toward a "bifurcated" workforce. Without intervention, companies risk retaining only those employees who lack the market value to leave or the drive to innovate—a "sedimentation" of mediocrity. Top-tier talent, possessing the "future-fit" skills identified by the **World Economic Forum (2023)**, will increasingly view full-time employment as a temporary scaffold for their own brands. **Gartner's (2024)** predictions on the "atomization of work" suggest that by 2030, successful firms will operate less like families and more like film production crews—assembling highly autonomous teams for specific projects and then disbanding them. Organizations that fail to internalize this flexibility via mechanisms like Internal Talent Marketplaces will find themselves structurally incapable of agility.

Furthermore, the "Quiet Quitting" phenomenon exposes the limits of resilience. As noted by **Deloitte (2024)** in their *Global Human Capital Trends*, the "sustainability of human performance" is now a critical business metric. The extraction model of management, which relied on burning out employees and replacing them, is mathematically insolvent in a demographic winter where skilled labor is scarce. The discussion must therefore shift from "how do we get them to work harder?" to "how do we create an environment where they *choose* to contribute?"

Call to Action for HR Leaders

HR leaders stand at a precipice. The choice is between enforcing a nostalgic version of 2019 or architecting the workplace of 2030. To choose the latter, leaders must:

1. **Abandon "Hours" as a Metric:** Shift entirely to outcome-based value.
2. **Formalize Flexibility:** Codify autonomy into contracts, making it a right rather than a privilege.
3. **Treat Talent as a Customer:** The employee value proposition must be as compelling as the customer value proposition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Quiet Quitting" is the canary in the coal mine for the corporate model. It signals that the workforce has evolved faster than the workplace. The "Gig Economy" is no longer just a sector; it is a mindset that has infected the entire labor pool. The future belongs to organizations that can offer the best of both worlds: the psychological safety of a firm and the radical autonomy of a freelancer. If companies cannot bridge this gap, they will find that their offices are full, but their businesses are empty.

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