QUIET QUITTING AS A CHALLENGE FOR HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT – THE RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to identify effective measures to prevent silent departures declared by managers. The following research problems were formulated: what are the causes of the phenomenon of silent departures as perceived by managers? What actions do managers believe are most effective in counteracting silent departures in the organisations they manage?

Design/methodology/approach: The research problems were addressed using a narrative literature review method and a qualitative research study (FGI) conducted with a sample of 10 managers representing the corporate sector.

Findings: The causes of quiet quitting can be psychological, social, economic or managerial. Among the most important psychological causes of quiet quitting are: changes in the individual value system consisting in the lowering of the rank of career as a determinant of success in life, an increase in the intensity of individualistic and narcissistic attitudes, an increase in the intensity of hedonistic needs going hand in hand with a decrease in psychological resilience, a sense of disillusionment with relationships in the work environment. Among the social causes, changes in the social system of values were identified, consisting in an increase in the importance of individualism and a decrease in the ethos of work in favour of individual well-being. Among the economic sources of silent departures, the shortage of employees and the relatively low wages in many organisations and professional groups are mentioned. An important group of causes of the crisis of intrinsic motivation of employees are unprofessional behaviour of managers, especially the deficit of organisational leadership and social competences.

Research limitations/implications: Conclusions need to be confirmed by quantitative research on a representative sample of managers. Further research should also take into account the specificities of the public sector.

Practical implications: On the basis of the theoretical and cognitive analysis and qualitative research carried out, a number of recommendations of a practical nature can be formulated, the implementation of which is part of the prevention of silent departures.

Originality/value: Innovative is the theme of the article. The problem of qq is new and rarely addressed by researchers in Poland.

Keywords: quiet quitting, labour market, crisis of motivation.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges faced by employers on the European labour market is the low level of employee commitment (Moczydłowska, 2021). This is confirmed by the results of the study included in the "State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report" of the Gallup Institute, which states that only 14% of Europeans are engaged in their work and derive satisfaction from it. For comparison, the rate of employees in the United States and Canada who are emotionally involved in the tasks entrusted to them is on average 33%, while in South Asia it is 27% (Harter, 2022). The same result as the European average was recorded in Poland. Compared to other countries in our region, Poland was ranked 25th out of 38 countries. For example, Romanians (33%) and Estonians (25%) are more involved in work. One of the key manifestations of the organizational commitment crisis is the phenomenon of quiet quitting. The term quiet quitting itself was used for the first time in 2009 by an economist Mark Boldger at the Texas A&M Economics Symposium, however, it was promoted in social media relatively recently: first in China in 2021 under the name "Tang Ping" ("lying flat"), and then in the United States, where a tiktoker Zaid Khan from New York posted a video defining this concept (Yikilmaz, 2022). It has been viewed over 3.5 million times. Posts like "work is not your life and your value is not defined by productivity" caused numerous discussions in many social networking sites, and then became an important topic in a scientific discourse (Deter, 2022; Lord, 2022). Currently, quiet quitting is treated as one of the key challenges in the area of human capital management. According to the research by the Gallup Institute, in the United States, almost half of professionally active Americans are affected, mainly from the age group up to 35 years old (Scheyett, 2023; Harter, 2022). It is closely related to the decrease in professional involvement of employees, which in turn translates into the decrease in work efficiency and effectiveness. It must be clearly emphasized that quiet quitting does not mean quitting in the sense of quitting a job, but rather a specific type of emotional withdrawal and renunciation of the cult of work as a key value in the life of an individual (Epperson et al., 2023).

Mousa, Massoud, and Ayoubi (2020) confirmed that job satisfaction is directly correlated with managerial behaviour, especially with the degree to which managers show concern for employees on an individual level. Conversely, many employers and managers underestimate the importance of employees' individual feelings and emotional context of the job. They expect employees to be grateful for every opportunity given to them and to put extra effort into doing their job without additional gratifications, both material and emotional. Many organizations believe that employees should arrive early and stay late to demonstrate their commitment to employers and their career advancement. Therefore, the crisis of organizational leadership is rightly mentioned among the causes of quiet quitting (Zenger, Folkman, 2022). This phenomenon indirectly indicates the lack of managers' skills in developing relationships with employees and building healthy emotional involvement based on common goals of

employees and organizations (Alesso-Bendisch, 2020). These are toxic, egocentric, self-centred and ego-feeding leaders who should take responsibility for quiet quitting. They are often promoted to high positions based on their ability to manipulate others as well as on pushy, narcissistic self-promotion (Lipka, Karczewska, 2022). When they reach the status of a team manager, they show no interest in the individual needs of employees, but treat them in an instrumental way. From their perspective, the most important thing is to achieve exorbitant results confirming their alleged managerial competences (Moczydłowska, 2016). As a consequence, there is no culture of dialogue and participation, there is no psychological security and "team spirit", which intensifies the tendency of quiet quitting. Therefore, it was accepted as cognitively valuable to diagnose the executive management perception of the quiet quitting phenomenon.

Research on the essence, causes and potential effects of quiet quitting is still fragmentary, not always consistent, which limits its cognitive and application value (Aydin, Azizoğlu, 2022). The purpose of this article is to identify effective actions to prevent quiet quitting declared by executive management. The following research problems were formulated: what are the causes of the phenomenon of quiet quitting in the perception of managers? What actions, in the opinion of executive management, are the most effective in counteracting quiet quitting in organizations they manage? Research problems were solved using the method of a narrative literature review (Orłowska et al., 2017) and qualitative research (Focus Group Interview - FGI) conducted in a group of 10 managers representing the enterprise sector.

2. Quiet quitting – the essence of the phenomenon

In the literature on the subject, there are large discrepancies in defining the essence of the phenomenon of quiet quitting, and especially its emotional context. The discrepancies mainly concern whether quiet quitting is a bellwether of a new trend in attitudes towards work and employers, a sign of a progressing crisis of commitment, or perhaps a chance to build a new quality of work? Some researchers of the labour market and organizational behaviour highlight its negative sides by linking quiet quitting with professional burnout and excessive work-related stress (Morrison-Beed, 2022; Loewy, Spintge 2022). In this perspective, quiet quitting may be a side effect of the coronavirus pandemic (Formica, Sfodera, 2022). Many people were made redundant then, while others had to perform their duties without receiving additional remuneration. The transition to a remote or hybrid work model was also important, as for many people it resulted in an increase in the number of hours spent on fulfilling professional tasks, which subsequently translated into an increased risk of developing professional burnout (Schaffner, 2022). Quiet quitting is treated as the evidence that an employee has lost job satisfaction and joy. In other words, quiet quitting is identified with a kind of "disease" of

motivation (Lee, Park, Shin, 2023). It is also a new type of "a protest action" that does not consist in refusing to work at all but in the fact that emotional involvement is replaced by a cold calculation: "I only do what I have to – the minimum and nothing more" (Bell, Kennebrew, 2023). In practice, this means that employees resign from achieving additional or more ambitious goals. They do not get emotionally involved in tasks and relationships. They only deal with those duties that are directly assigned to them or indicated in the job description. They do not help with projects that are not of their concern. They do not take responsibility for tasks that go beyond their core responsibilities (Ellis, Yang, 2022). Quiet quitting can also significantly reduce the willingness to develop professionally and learn new things. It weakens organizational ties and the sense of loyalty to employers (Ng, Stanton, 2023). Such an attitude is also at odds with the idea of treating an organization or a team in terms of the common good or a community based on mutual support and deep cooperation. It results in specific losses due to lower productivity: according to the research by Mahand and Caldwel (2023), these are losses of USD 7.8 trillion per year. There are voices that this is the attitude that degenerates the team (Bell, Kennebrew, 2023).

Some researchers go even further and identify quiet quitting with the phenomenon of social idleness (a term used in psychology) or the so-called free rider problem (a term used by economists) (Bell, Kennebrew, 2023). In their estimation, it is in fact a new name for an old, well-documented social mechanism. Experiments conducted by social psychologists in the 1970s and 1980s confirmed that a person working in a team puts in less effort than when working individually, because responsibility for achieving the goal is shared by all members of the group (Harkins, Petty, Williams, 1980). For example, the famous rope-pulling experiment showed that in larger teams, individual participants performed less than in smaller ones, and that the greatest effort was expended when there was only one person on each side of the rope being pulled (Ingham et al., 1974). On the other hand, in economic theory, the free rider metaphor reflects the situation of people who contribute nothing to the production of goods and services, but demand the right to use these products or services (Kim, Walker, 1984).

The supporters of such an attitude take an extremely different position on the causes and effects of quiet quitting. They present both psychological arguments and those formulated on the basis of economic theories. Psychologists emphasize that the new trend in the labour market is about counteracting professional burnout and taking care of one's mental health (Zhang, Rodrique, 2023). Thus, quiet quitting is treated as a kind of prevention of pathological phenomena and as a manifestation of the assertiveness of employees who consistently set boundaries for employers, and who take care of a healthy balance between work and other areas of their lives (Serenko, 2022). They work honestly, but only during the designated working hours and within the scope of their duties. In other words, it is a "normal job", and the real problem is not quiet quitting, but the horizon of unrealistic expectations of employers referring to the scale of employee involvement. According to many psychologists, quiet quitting understood in such a way can help employees set professional boundaries, give them a sense of

control, help avoid professional burnout and allow them to prioritize what is really important (Zhang, Rodrigue, 2023). In this perspective, quiet quitting means that employees avoid pressure and growing diverse expectations in the work environment. It is also a change in people's value systems, in which work falls further down in relation to private life, family, passion or leisure. It is no longer perceived as an activity that gives meaning to life, which is a common ground for self-realization or a foundation for shaping human identity. It is also pointed out that better well-being and health of an employee resulting from quiet quitting may paradoxically also be beneficial for employers, as it may result in their greater efficiency or higher creativity (Zengler, Folkman, 2022).

Economists explain the reasons for quiet quitting by referring to traditional utility theory. In this approach, an employee's effort is a resource and has a material dimension (Heipern, 2004). If workers' income is fixed, they maximize their utility by making the least effort that can be accepted by an employer to obtain the salary which they spend to buy other material resources. Harder work is irrational in this context, because it means the expenditure of a material resource - the potential supply of the worker's productive effort - without a compensating material profit (Akerlof, Kranton, 2010). This means that workers would not maximize their utility. Thus, paradoxically, from the point of view of classical economics, those who do not engage in work meet the criteria of rationality (Johnson, 2023). If we assume that employees are rational in their behaviour, then from the management perspective it is reasonable to pose the question of how to persuade employees to consider that it is rational to be more than less involved in work. The answer can be found, among others, in the works of the Nobel laureate Williamson (1986). He claims that from the employee's perspective, greater effort is rational when the lower limit of the safety zone, for example related to employment stability, rises. However, it is currently difficult to achieve this effect. Researchers of trends in the labour market emphasize that the phenomenon of quiet quitting is favoured by the characteristics of the labour market, specifically the low level of unemployment and greater employment opportunities than before (Cai, Rowley, Xu, 2022). This means that the threshold of effort necessary to maintain employment decreases (Rosalsky, Selyukh, 2022).

Research shows that the key variable influencing the phenomenon of quiet quitting is the age of employees. Evidence for this thesis is provided, among others, by the results of the Axios/Generation Lab research, which analysed Generation Z (people aged 18-29) attitudes towards work (Pandey, 2022; Szydło, 2017). The research results show that as many as 82% of employees representing this generation are work-oriented in a manner typical of quiet quitting, i.e., they are focused on minimum results and meeting the minimum requirements of the workplace. This is due to the fact that work occupies a lower place in the hierarchy of values of generation Z (Moczydłowska, 2018). Representatives of this age group to a greater extent emphasize the importance of values such as family, friends, passions and health. Young people have a very weak sense of belonging to their workplace. Time for privacy is a key value for them. Deloitte Global's "2022 Gen Z and Millennial" study found that both Millennials and

Generation Z, the two youngest generations on the labour market, strive to maintain work-life balance. What is more, representatives of these generations are ready to change jobs frequently so as not to disturb their work-life balance. Employment is to provide them with money so that they can develop outside working hours, e.g., by expanding their competences. Metaphorically speaking, for them it is not so much "no pain no gain" as "no pain no chance for self-development" (Rosiński, 2023; Kukla, Nowacka, 2019).

3. Research methodology

In order to solve the research problems presented in the introduction, the Focus Group Interview – FGI was used. It is a research technique based on a discussion of people with similar experiences important in the context of the research topic. It is relatively often used in researching problems in the area of human resource management (Samul, 2017). According to this methodology, a group of respondents is selected according to such criteria as age, gender or other important characteristics, for example seniority in a managerial position (Samul, 2020). 10 representatives of top management (6 men and 4 women) from the enterprise sector participated in the FGI. They represented various business entities, including those from the manufacturing, finance, real estate, transport, legal services for business, and consulting and training sectors. All were directors or board members at the time of the study. Their average seniority in a managerial position was 11 years. The discussion was moderated by the author of the article. Moderation was based on an experimental convention, according to which the moderator does not encourage discussion by calling individual participants to respond, but addresses the group as a whole (Lisek-Michalska, Lipiec, Olczyk, 2012). The correct group dynamics were provided, assuming that it should have the following properties:

- an appropriate level of activity of individual debaters - not too high to avoid monopolizing the discussion by individual people and not too low to prevent the loss of information as a result of their withdrawal,
- dominance of the interviewee-group relationship over the interviewee-moderator relationship, so as not to lose the character of the focus group interview in favour of individual interviews,
- participants' initiative in starting a polemic with other people or an initiative consisting in supporting interlocutors' opinions with additional arguments,
- free expression of emotions,
- friendly attitude of participants towards other respondents, encouraging them to take part in the discussion (Samul, 2017).

The respondents' statements were recorded with their consent. The basis for drawing conclusions was the content analysis. The analysis of the message content is understood as "decomposing it into simpler elements (units of analysis) or extracting its features, properties and elements and then classifying them in accordance with the adopted system of categories" (Worek, 2001). Following Worek (2001), it was assumed that the correct content analysis should have the following characteristics: it should take into account only the syntactic and semantic elements of the message, it must be objective and systematic which means that a partial, biased analysis including only those content elements which confirm the researcher's thesis is unacceptable.

4. Managers on the causes and prevention of quiet quitting – results of qualitative research

In the opinion of executive managers, the phenomenon of quiet quitting is a real problem and its clear intensification has been observed in recent years, when representatives of Generation Z began to enter the labour market. Although employees have always displayed diverse attitudes towards work, including behaviour typical of silent quitting, in the opinion of managers, the scale of the phenomenon clearly increases with the growing number of employees representing Generation Z.

> "The youngest employees have a different approach to work than their parents' generation. What is important to them is fun, computer games, being in social media, joyful doing nothing. On the other hand, such living in the moment often masks fear of the future and lack of ideas for oneself. They live day by day not really knowing what they really want to do in life. You know what they don't want - they don't want to work hard".
>
> (male, 51, board member, medium-sized chemical company)

> "(...) young people are aware of the approaching climate crisis, and the war in Ukraine only intensified the feeling that maybe there is no future for them at all, so why try and struggle at work?"
>
> (male, 54, board member, legal services for business)

In some opposition to the content contained in the literature on the problem, managers to a small extent associate quiet quitting with remote work common during the COVID-19 pandemic. When diagnosing the reasons for quiet quitting, they rather indicate the situation on the labour market. The shortage of employees results in lowering the requirements and far-reaching acceptance of the management staff for the behaviours typical of quiet quitting. On the other hand, despite intensified competition for employees, the level of remuneration and other benefits is often unsatisfactory, which allows employees to rationalize their lack of commitment to professional duties.

> "Today, employees have great opportunities to change jobs. If the conditions do not suit them, they can easily find another employer. Managers are well aware of this, which is why they lower their expectations. Employees do only the minimum because more and more often no one demands more. It's a dilemma: to have employees who aren't very engaged or no employees at all".
>
> (female, 48 years old, production director in a large enterprise)

> "I have to be honest about that. My company pays rather poorly. How can you demand commitment from employees if as the old saying goes "if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys"? Almost all employees are in the state of quiet quitting".
>
> (female, 43 years old, director of the human resources department, medium-sized real estate company)

Managers participating in the study strongly emphasized changes in employees' value systems. Professional successes often turn out to be an illusory foundation of life stability, and the prospect of hard and emotionally involved work currently loses to other activities. One of the reasons for this situation is the fact that professional work is most often associated with teamwork, which in the era of the culture of narcissism (Lipka, Karczewska, 2022) seems to be losing to the philosophy of the "I" generation.

> "Young workers look at their parents' generation and what do they see? People who have worked hard all their lives, often at the cost of their family and their own health, and have little of it today. They don't want to live the same way".
>
> (female, 43 years old, director of the human resources department, medium-sized real estate company)

> "Employees today are only involved in being seen and admired. This is their source of energy, not work. The number of views, the number of likes, the number of followers - this builds the feeling of "being someone". And we must learn to build people management on the basis of this. Pamper their narcissism".
>
> (male, 42, board member, financial company)

Managers participating in the study are aware that the emergence of the quiet quitting phenomenon is also caused by unprofessional attitudes of executive management. It is primarily a deficit of interpersonal competences: lack of ability to conduct an honest conversation, listen and observe, adapt the communication style to the individual communication preferences of employees, individual selection of tasks and motivational stimuli.

> "I am aware that in my company, heads of departments are not always sufficiently focused on employees and their issues. Even though we have problems with recruitment all the time, there is still such a perception that it is enough to let people earn money and they will work for us. It is not like this. They leave. They see no prospects for themselves".
>
> (male, 54, board member, large transport company)

The analysis of the content of managers' statements made it possible to distinguish four categories of causes of the quiet quitting phenomenon. These are psychological, social, economic and managerial factors (Table 1).

Table 1.
Causes of the quiet quitting phenomenon

Psychological	Social	Economic	Managerial
Changes in the individual value system - lowering the rank of professional career as a determinant of success in life	Changes in the social value system, individualism increases in the rank	Staff shortage	Lack of ability to recognize individual needs of employees
Increased intensity of individualistic attitudes	Changing cultural norms - lowering the work ethos for individual well-being	Increased social well-being	Organizational leadership deficit
An increase in the intensity of hedonistic needs and mental toughness decrease	The primacy of individual needs over the common good	Relatively low salaries in many organizations and professional groups – perception of salaries as unattractive	Low level of motivation of the management staff
A sense of disappointment with relationships in work environment and the dynamics of career development	The activity of social and political movements promoting nihilistic attitudes and minimalism		Deficit of psychosocial competences of the executive management

Source: own study.

Executive management is aware of the role of managers in preventing quiet quitting. In order to ensure a relative level of objectivity of the statements obtained during the FGI, the managers participating in the study were not asked about their personal experience with actions taken to effectively prevent motivational crises, but they discussed potential managerial actions which may turn out to be effective in this area. The analysis of the content made it possible to identify the keywords most frequently appearing in this part of the discussion (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Keywords in the discussion on effective actions to prevent quiet quitting.

Source: own study based on the results of qualitative research (wordart.com/create program).

In the opinion of managers, an effective way to counteract the phenomenon of quiet quitting is, above all, decent and fair, i.e., related to the involvement of employees, remuneration. Close attention should be paid here to the category of honesty related to employee's subjective perception of the fairness of the incentive system (Moczydłowska, 2017). The respondents attributed great importance to individualized communication, including skilful listening to employees. The involvement of employees in shaping organizational plans and enabling them to participate in decision-making process were indicated as key factors. This is the only way to build a sense of employees' identification with their tasks, and indirectly with the team and organization. Although managers are aware of the growing intensity of individualistic attitudes of employees, in their opinion, an important tool to counteract quiet quitting is building a sense of organizational community united around common goals and values. Enabling employees to develop was also indicated as an effective element of quiet quitting prevention, however, it is not about "mechanical" sending them to trainings, but about adjusting the development plan to a clearly outlined career path based on an in-depth diagnosis of talents.

It seems interesting that the surveyed managers, among the factors preventing the crisis of organizational commitment of employees, did not pay attention to some elements strongly exposed in the literature on the subject, e.g., the role of psychological safety or employee autonomy. Determining the reasons for such a situation requires separate research.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Quiet quitting can be a "great liberation" when people reject overwork and professional burnout and choose work-life balance and joy of life. They set boundaries so that their identity and self-esteem are not tied to work performance. At the same time, quiet quitting does not exclude greater commitment and additional time to accomplish tasks in a situation where employees believe in the value of a particular project or the mission of the organization, care about people they work with or provide services to or because they really enjoy solving work-related problems. However, the most important thing is that this kind of involvement is a kind of a "gift" of an employee, and not something that can be taken for granted. It is up to employers and executive management to convince employees that they deserve the "gift" of commitment. It is their task to create systemic solutions which will encourage employees to become emotionally involved.

Quiet quitting can have psychological, social, economic or managerial causes. The most important psychological reasons for quiet quitting are: changes in the individual value system consisting in lowering the rank of professional career as a determinant of success in life, increase in the intensity of individualistic and narcissistic attitudes, increase in the intensity of hedonistic needs often accompanied by a decrease in mental toughness, a sense of disappointment with relationships in work environment. Among the social causes the following factors were indicated: social value system changes consisting in the increase in the importance of individualism and lowering of work ethos for individual well-being. Attention was also paid to the primacy of individual needs over the common good. Phenomena occurring on the labour market, especially the shortage of employees and relatively low salaries in many organizations and professional groups, should be mentioned among the economic sources of quiet quitting. An important group of reasons for the crisis of internal motivation of employees is unprofessional behaviour of executive management, especially the deficit of organizational leadership and social competences.

On the basis of the conducted epistemological analysis and qualitative research, a number of practical recommendations can be formulated, the implementation of which is an element of quiet quitting prevention. The most important actions to prevent the phenomenon of quiet quitting include:

- building a healthy organizational culture based on the culture of dialogue, i.e., interest in the opinions of employees and regular honest conversations between superiors and subordinates;
- building and promoting an attractive mission based on values which employees can and want to identify with;
- activity of motivating managers who give autonomy and space to act and regularly appreciate achievements of employees;

- clear goals and precisely communicated tasks whose content is adequate to competencies, including personality predispositions of employees;
- creating a good atmosphere and promoting teamwork;
- building and promoting psychological safety, which is manifested by the courage to present one's own opinions, even if they are inconsistent with the opinions of majority;
- conscious and true care about well-being of employees - e.g., respect for their rest time, the possibility of being completely offline outside working hours or on holidays or flexibility of working hours giving employees a chance to deal with private matters in the middle of the day without feeling guilty, as long as their goals and tasks are accomplished in a given time.

The level of managers' awareness of possible preventive actions counteracting the quiet quitting phenomenon can be assessed as relatively high. They are aware of the importance of various psychological and economic factors, which - if selected in an individualized way - can build emotional involvement of employees and reverse the trend of increasing minimalism in professional activity. Further research is needed to answer the question to what extent this awareness translates into specific managerial behaviour. In this context, an important direction for further research would be the diagnosis of the phenomenon of quiet quitting among executive management.

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