

Is it quiet quitting or is it boundary setting? How to re-engage employees

By [Sarah Rice](#)

24 Nov 2022

Looking back on 2022, it's clear that while the world slowly found its feet after Covid-19, people are still grappling with the repercussions of trauma, stress and burnout, on both a personal and professional level.



Image source: Andriy Popov – [123RF.com](#)

Since 2020, we've had to work harder than ever before. When we worked from home, we worked 14 hours a day and our boundaries between work and home were blurred. We were isolated from our colleagues, and our managers had to figure out a new way of working. Today, we're coming back into the office, and although we haven't recovered or acclimatised from the pandemic, even more is expected of us.

Added to this, in South Africa we are burdened by load shedding, the struggling economy, the weak rand to dollar exchange rate, and the rising cost of living. We are under a huge amount of pressure, and I think people are overwhelmed at a level that we haven't seen for the longest time. Plus, we're not setting healthy boundaries or getting the necessary work-life balance.

Global work trends hit local shores

At the beginning of the year, the world was in the midst of the Great Resignation, which has now led to the trend of quiet quitting. But quiet quitting is a new name for an old thing: disengagement. The challenge with the name 'quiet quitting' is that it places the reason and responsibility on the employee. It's their action and therefore their responsibility to sort themselves out.

It's also not a helpful term because it validates the idea that people are essentially lazy and don't want to work – which we know is fundamentally untrue. It takes the responsibility away from the manager or company to create an environment where healthy engagement with work is possible. Moreover, it means businesses don't have to answer the really hard questions like whether hybrid, remote or in-office is working for us or what needs to change for the company to operate more effectively. Instead, it puts the whole burden on employees, which isn't fair.



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The core of these trends are people trying to make their voices heard and communicate that the way we're currently working is not working for them. It's not helping with the current level of exhaustion and burnout we are experiencing. This is the same for the request of a four-day work week.

Coming out of the pandemic, we are looking for better boundaries between work and the rest of our lives. The pandemic and working from home have made the lines between work time, workplace, and work really porous and its hurting people. Putting better boundaries in place isn't 'quiet quitting', it's just being a grown up and looking after yourself. It's possible to hold a boundary with work and still be a contributing, engaged, productive member of your team.

Similarly, people are 'quiet quitting' their lives for the same reasons. We have limited energy and need to make choices about where to expend it. Is it quitting, or just aggressively prioritising how and where to spend our time? There is a lot of pressure from the outside right now and we have to be more attentive to what we need to be okay, or we will fall into a cycle of hopelessness. Ensuring our energy is going in the right direction is critical.

So, we need to find a balance, we don't want hustle culture where people get burnt out, but we don't want disengagement either. The age of hustle culture is hopefully over, and I hope that we aren't entering a period of lethargy, but rather one of balance.

Let's try this one more time with meaning

Poet David Whyte says:

“ You know that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest? ... The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness. ”

This is not to say that we shouldn't rest, but the real solve is meaning. When we believe our work is meaningful it can support and nourish us, rather than just deplete and exhaust us.

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We need to be in a meaningful relationship with our work, and I think employers are not respecting that they are in a relationship with every single person who works for their business. And just like in a human-to-human relationship, we have expectations such as the need for care, a need for belonging, a need for recognition, for respect and autonomy.

And unless the business is working on the relationship, people are going to feel like there's nothing meaningful about it. The relationship happens through the managers. So, if you find people are quiet quitting and disengaging from the business, that's because the relationship is lacking. We need to help our managers figure out how to have meaningful conversations. We are yearning for connection and managers are not superhuman - they're just like us and they're having the same experiences.

How we can ensure recovery in 2023

When it comes to re-engaging employees - by meeting their needs and giving them purpose - managers are the magic ingredient. Businesses need to help managers lead in a way that makes people feel cared for and empowered. Start with the basics. After years of focusing on 'leadership', we can forget that much of management is making sure the work happens.

So, start by:

1. Aligning on business goals
2. Translating these into team goals with clear deliverables and measurables
3. Creating a one-on-one structure to guide conversations around the work, career development and personal circumstance and then, make sure they happen (both with their team and with their manager)

Once you have the basics under control, start growing the qualities of empathy, communication skills and coaching by providing external courses, an experienced mentor, and, if possible, a coach. These are the skills that transform a fundamentally good manager into a flippen' great one that can motivate, empower, align and grow their people.

Quiet quitting isn't a trend we need to take into 2023. This will be the year to fully engage with the work and each other. I am not expecting an easy economic year, but that doesn't mean it needs to be an unhappy or disconnected one. Our job, as business leaders and managers, is to create meaningful work environments that make it possible for all of us to do our best work and be fully engaged in it.

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