

#BackAtMyDesk: The quiet is deafening

Sep 7, 2022, 6:58am EDT

Editor's note: Welcome to #BackAtMyDesk, sequel to the #WFH Chronicles. Join columnist Beth Hunt every other week, as she explores workplace culture, trends and tensions as companies and employees make their way in the "new normal."

When last we spoke, the Great Resignation was all the rage.

People were either leaving the professional workforce to travel the country in a retrofitted van, or bicycle through Thailand, or work behind the counter at a coffee shop, or they were walking out the door and across the street for better pay, benefits and working conditions.

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What a difference a summer makes.

We were definitely beginning to see cracks in the Great Resignation as May ended. Employees who had left toxic employers for "better" places to work were beginning to discover that even better places to work can have big issues.

And employers who were staffing up by luring people away from toxic employers were beginning to discover that part of that toxicity was migrating over right along with them, in the form of bad attitudes and unrealistic expectations.

As summer progressed, the overwrought headlines about a mass exodus softened, then shifted to "Wait. Maybe not."

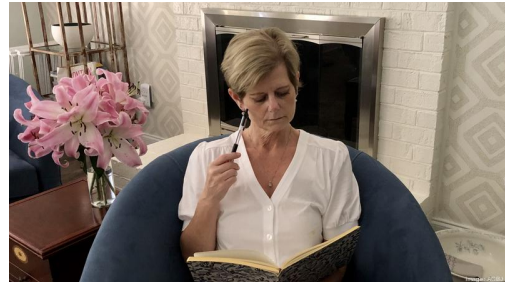
Someone even coined a snappy term for it: the Great Regret.

For me, this change came in the form of candidates with freshly ironed shirts who arrived five minutes early well-prepared to interview with me for a job at my company. Gone was the lackadaisical attitude we had seen for more than a year, replaced by a sincere desire to land an offer.

At first blush, we appear to be living through yet another pandemic-inspired overcorrection. Dig a little deeper, though, and you'll find that the exodus does, in fact, continue. It's happening right under the nose of even well-engaged managers.

And while it's happening on the sly, I think it's the righting of a ship that has dang near capsized in recent decades.

Some call it "quiet quitting," this sneaky cousin to the Great Resignation. It's a clever buzz phrase for the idea that workers aren't quitting their jobs; they're quitting the part of their jobs they don't get paid for, that they've never been paid for.



S. Hunt

Beth Hunt is sharing her #WFH adventures.

They won't commute, and if they do, they figure that time into their workday.

They won't work nights and weekends.

They won't absorb additional work because their employer won't hire enough people to get it all done.

They're signing out of the hustle. They no longer need to advance at all cost. They're balancing their lives with their work and taking back the control that the rat-race culture told them they should be willing to give up in order to get ahead.

Make no mistake: They are willing to give 100% of their brains, expertise, creativity and work ethic for as long as they are paid. But they will no longer volunteer at the expense of work-life balance.

Some call it setting boundaries. Some call it slacking.

I say it's brilliant. And long overdue.

If you're an employer, your next moves are simple:

Stop expecting more than you're willing to pay for. If you routinely want extra work out of your people, increase their wages to more than the going rate. No one is fooled when you hire them at market rate and pile on the work of a job and a half. Overworking your people won't last long in this labor market. Or beyond it.

Stop assuming they are interested in taking on more work, even if you *do* pay for it. Not everyone wants a job and a half. In fact, most people want a job and a life, especially post-pandemic, when so many things have shifted. Don't confuse this, though, with paying less for someone's talents and skills. They still expect to earn the market rate. Or they'll go to work for someone else.

Stop believing this will eventually go back to "normal." This *is* normal. What has passed for normal over the past couple of decades – missing soccer games and dance recitals, meals on the fly, feeling undervalued – was abnormal in the extreme. As horrific as the pandemic has been, it brought back into focus what is important to people. You would be foolish to expect that to disappear again anytime soon.

Quiet quitting is just the latest term for this evolution of worker and workplace expectations we've been watching since early 2020. It's only a matter of time before a quippy new nickname appears to take its place. The gist of the matter won't change, though. People have rediscovered their agency and equilibrium.

And they're not giving it back.

Beth Hunt is senior director of editorial talent development for American City Business Journals. She shares her observations on workplace culture, tensions and post-pandemic trends every other week. Find her at bzhunt@bizjournals.com.



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