

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

Is the UK undergoing a “quiet quitting” revolution?

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The idea of putting in the minimum amount of effort required for one’s job – and no more – went viral in 2022. But who exactly is doing the “quiet quitting” and how might it impact the UK? **Odessa S Hamilton, Daniel Jolles and Grace Lordan** from The Inclusion Initiative at LSE set out the findings from the first study to show evidence of the “quiet quitting” phenomenon in Britain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the way of work and sparked a “quiet quitting” phenomenon. “Quiet quitting” – when employees continue to work but with the minimum amount of effort – is especially problematic for UK economic growth, where unpaid overtime has been a key contributor to business productivity since the 2008 global financial crisis. Although most similarly advanced economies have experienced poor productivity over this period, UK labour productivity has lagged far behind. For these reasons, among others, the fading commitment to work more hours than contracted poses a further threat to productivity.

What does “quiet quitting” mean for the UK and US?

As a phenomenon popularised by TikTok, much of the discourse around “quiet quitting” is anecdotal. Largely attributed to Generation Z, “quiet quitting” has been defined by younger generations opting to reduce their efforts and working hours, instead of leaving a job.

At the extreme, this elicits imaginings of 20-somethings sitting on the couch bingeing reality TV rather than slaving away at their desks to no end alongside their older peers. It depicts a growing polarisation of values and working practices between the generations, where younger workers are purported to have given up on their teams, abandoned ideals around organisational commitment and ditched their psychological contract with work.

Together, this signals a reduced investment in their future career prospects with employers. However, evidence for this was principally subjective, making it hard to



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understand the reality of the “quiet quitting” phenomenon, or to quantify the impact of it on advanced economies.



The fading commitment to work more hours than contracted poses a ... threat to productivity. ”

To address this lack of evidence, we recently drew on over four million datapoints to map the actual hours worked in the UK labour market, including overtime, over the last 15 years.

Our findings reveal a post-pandemic decline in the UK of 36 working hours (4.5 days) a year, as compared to pre-pandemic levels, with the largest reductions seen in 2022. And it is notable that this post-pandemic decline in working hours was not accompanied by a decline in wages. Although the contexts differ, this aligns with findings from the US, where workers reduced their discretionary annual hours by 18 hours a year post-pandemic.

Overall, the data suggests that “quiet quitting” is more pronounced in the UK than it is in the US, but we find that some groups are more implicated in this trend than others. Striking contradictions were revealed across generations, between genders, by education, and across industries.

“Quiet quitting” is not just a Gen Z issue

Generational differences were marked by cohorts who dominate the current labour market, namely, Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers, all born between 1952 and 2004. These four commonly accepted categories have shaped popular views about generations and, importantly, the discourse around “quiet quitting”.

We found that hours worked consistently declined for three of the four cohorts, explicitly Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X. Baby Boomers were the only cohort to have not followed this trend, with evidence of a rebound to pre-pandemic levels. Consistent with the social media trends, we found Generation Z had the steepest falls in working hours. Meanwhile, Millennials worked the least number of hours overall. The implication is that different generational patterns are directed by value-based behaviours, with younger workers opting to prioritise leisure, work-life balance and wellbeing post-pandemic.



Compared to 2019, those with a degree worked 60 hours less during 2022, whereas those without a degree worked six hours less. These are stunning differences... ”

Clocking the gendered gap

Although men have been purported to work longer hours than women, such reports typically consider all workers, including those in part-time and casual work, which is often imposed by care responsibilities. This did not strictly correspond to our sample of exclusively full-time, full-year workers, where there was an equivalence between the genders in hours worked in the years before the pandemic.

Men, however, showed a stronger inclination toward “quiet quitting” throughout the pandemic. This parallels evidence that recessions have a greater impact on the employment trajectories of men than of women. Specifically, recessions have traditionally left men more susceptible to ‘employment drifts’ where their career journey unintentionally deviates from its initial path.



These findings might not be all bad news for UK productivity...there may not be negative implications for productivity if the hours are coming from unproductive activities like pointless meetings. ”

“Quiet quitting” as a marker of socioeconomic difference

Educational differences also emerged. People with a degree worked more hours than those without a degree pre-pandemic, but there was a steeper decline by those with a degree post-pandemic. Compared to 2019, those with a degree worked 60 hours less during 2022, whereas those without a degree worked six hours less. These are stunning differences that are marked solely by educational difference, a proxy for socioeconomic status. Congruently, workers in the financial, technology, and professional industries had the steepest fall in hours – a signalling of who can afford to “quit quietly”.

However, these findings might not be all bad news for UK productivity. Our work highlights that younger workers in the so-called “laptop class” have the highest tendency to quietly quit. Yet, there may not be negative implications for productivity if the hours are coming from unproductive activities like pointless meetings. It does though highlight a clear preference among these workers for greater work-life balance.

What is the scale and impact of “quiet quitting” on the UK?

Consistent with the US, UK working hours have undeniably reduced following COVID-19, and “quiet quitting” has interrupted the recovery of these hours to pre-pandemic levels among younger generations. Given the 24.5 million UK full-time, full-year workers, “quiet quitting” equates to an estimated 55.1 million discretionary hours lost to the UK labour market each year between 2020 and 2022, 48 per cent of which are accounted for by Millennials.

Reductions in hours do not necessarily equate to a reduction in overall productivity. However, these results show that the “quitting quitting” phenomenon coincides with measurable declines in working hours among younger generations, which can be viewed as part of a broader post-pandemic trend towards flexible working and greater work-life balance. ■

This information has been drawn from Odessa S Hamilton, Dr Daniel Jolles, and Dr Grace Lordan’s (2023) paper *Does the tendency for ‘quiet quitting’ differ across generations? Evidence from the UK.*

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