



UNDERSTANDING QUIET QUITTING AMONG REMOTE WORKERS: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of quiet quitting has emerged as one of the most consequential yet understudied challenges in contemporary human resource management. Although quantitative attention to the construct has grown rapidly since 2022, qualitative evidence on how remote workers themselves experience quiet quitting remains scarce. This study addresses that gap with a direct objective: to explore how remote knowledge workers interpret, enact, and rationalise quiet quitting in digitally mediated work contexts. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen remote workers spanning six industries, we employed a Gioia-methodology inductive approach to generate a grounded theoretical account of quiet quitting as a situated social phenomenon. Participants were full-time remote employees with a minimum of twelve months' tenure who self-identified as having deliberately reduced discretionary effort, drawn from technology, consulting, financial services, healthcare IT, publishing, and creative industries. Our analysis reveals three aggregate dimensions: (1) resource depletion through technological demands, (2) disrupted reciprocity in distributed employment relationships, and (3) motivational withdrawal as boundary protection. Each articulated through eleven first-order concepts and five second-order themes. We integrate these findings across four established motivational and relational theories to advance a process model we term Remote Quiet Quitting (RQQ). The model theorises RQQ as a staged, adaptive response to chronic need-thwarting and perceived contract breach, culminating in a 'minimal viable presence' strategy. Theoretical contributions, practical implications for HRM practice, and avenues for future research are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic decade has fundamentally reconfigured the spatial, temporal, and relational architecture of knowledge work. Remote and hybrid arrangements, once peripheral to mainstream organisational life, rapidly became the dominant mode of employment across knowledge-intensive industries, with an estimated 25–30% of the global workforce engaged in full-time remote work by 2023 (Gallup, 2023). Against this backdrop, the emergence of 'quiet quitting' as a cultural and organisational phenomenon has captured academic and practitioner attention in equal measure (Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

Conceptually, quiet quitting refers to employees' deliberate decision to restrict their effort to formally contracted duties, withdrawing discretionary contributions such as organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs), spontaneous problem-solving, informal mentoring, and after-hours availability all while remaining formally employed (Hamouche et al., 2023; Atalay & Dağistan, 2024; Serenko, 2024). Crucially, quiet quitting is neither a novel form of absenteeism nor an act of sabotage; it represents, rather, a strategic recalibration of the employment relationship. This is a boundary drawn, often silently, around what workers are willing to give (Harris, 2025).

The scale of this phenomenon demands scholarly attention. Gallup's (2023) State of the Global Workplace report estimated that at least 59% of the global workforce could be classified as 'quiet quitting', representing a profound crisis of employee engagement with implications for individual wellbeing, team

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performance, and organisational competitiveness. In the context of remote work, this crisis appears especially acute: distributed workers face a unique configuration of job demands (techno-overload, boundary collapse, social isolation, and surveillance anxiety) that strains precisely the motivational and relational resources theorised to sustain engagement (Wang et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2023; McPhail et al., 2024). This concern is not merely theoretical: with a substantial share of the global knowledge workforce now operating remotely on a permanent basis (Gallup, 2023), even a modest prevalence of quiet quitting within this population translates into a workforce-scale productivity and engagement concern, one that current HRM systems, largely designed around co-located visibility cues, are poorly equipped to detect or address.

Yet despite the theoretical and practical urgency of this intersection, a critical empirical lacuna persists. The existing quiet-quitting literature is predominantly quantitative, focused on scale development (Galanis et al., 2023; Anand et al., 2024; Talukder & Prieto, 2025), cross-sectional self-report designs (Zhong et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023), and conceptual typologies (Hamouche et al., 2023; Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Only a small number of qualitative studies have been conducted (Harris, 2025; Georgiadou et al., 2025), and none has centred the specific lived experience of remote workers across industries as the primary unit of analysis. This gap is distinct from the related literatures on burnout and general work withdrawal: whereas burnout research centres exhaustion as an involuntary stress response and classical withdrawal research centres absenteeism and turnover, quiet quitting is theorised as a deliberate, bounded reduction in discretionary effort while formal performance and employment continue uninterrupted (Atalay & Dağistan, 2024). The present study treats quiet quitting not as an entirely novel construct but as a contemporary, technology-amplified expression of long-standing disengagement and psychological-contract dynamics, examined here for the first time through the lived accounts of remote workers themselves rather than through scale-based self-report. This is a significant oversight: remote workers inhabit a structurally distinct work context in which digital mediation shapes meaning-making, disrupts relational norms, and transforms the conditions under which employees experience and respond to perceived contract violations.

This study addresses that gap directly. We ask: How do remote knowledge workers across industries experience, interpret, and enact quiet quitting in digitally mediated work contexts? To answer this question, we conducted fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with remote workers spanning technology, consulting, financial services, healthcare IT, publishing, and creative industries. Because no prior qualitative account of this phenomenon exists in remote work contexts, no established conceptual categories could be assumed in advance to capture how remote workers themselves make sense of quiet quitting; an epistemology that privileges informants as knowledgeable agents over researcher-imposed constructs was therefore required. The Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) was selected specifically for this reason: unlike confirmatory designs that test pre-existing scales or typologies, it treats first-order, informant-grounded meaning as the legitimate starting point for theory, allowing a genuinely novel phenomenon to surface on its own terms before being abstracted into theoretical categories. Using the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), we generated a grounded, inductively derived account of quiet quitting as a staged adaptive process, one we theorise as Remote Quiet Quitting (RQQ), and integrated this account with four established theoretical frameworks.

This paper makes three distinct contributions. First, it provides the first systematic qualitative account of quiet quitting situated specifically in remote work contexts, drawing on the voices of workers across multiple industries. Second, it advances a multi-theoretical integrative process model that extends and synthesises prior theorising beyond single-framework accounts. Third, it generates practical implications for HRM professionals managing distributed workforces, offering insight into how quiet quitting might be identified, understood, and re-engaged in organisationally and ethically sound ways. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and articulates the theoretical frameworks. Section 3 describes the qualitative research design and methodology. Section 4 presents findings organised around the Gioia data structure. Section 5 develops the theoretical model and discusses contributions. Section 6 addresses limitations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'quiet quitting' gained widespread cultural visibility in August 2022, largely through social media discourse and popular commentary (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). While often framed as a generational response to the psychological demands of pandemic-era work, its academic conceptualisation draws on an established vocabulary of disengagement, withdrawal, and reduced citizenship. Scheyett (2023) characterised quiet quitting as employees 'doing the minimum required, no more and no less', distinguishing it from presenteeism (working while unwell) and from active resistance. Hamouche et al. (2023) offered a broader framing, positioning quiet quitting as a response to organisational failure to sustain intrinsic motivation, equitable exchange, and psychological safety.

Atalay and Dağıstan (2024), in a systematic review published in *Personnel Review*, argued that quiet quitting is not a wholly novel phenomenon but rather a contemporary manifestation of earlier constructs, specifically, organisational disengagement (Kahn, 1990), employee withdrawal (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990), and the 'employee engagement–disengagement spectrum' theorised by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004). What distinguishes contemporary quiet quitting, they suggest, is its strategic, self-aware, and often technology-amplified character: workers are not merely disengaged but making deliberate trade-off decisions about what they are willing to contribute under conditions of structural imbalance.

Empirical measurement efforts have proceeded in parallel. Galanis et al. (2023) developed and validated a six-item Quiet Quitting Scale (QQS) using samples of healthcare workers, establishing reliability and construct validity. Anand et al. (2024) extended this with a dual construct capturing both quiet quitting and 'quiet firing' as the symmetric managerial practice. Talukder and Prieto (2025) further refined the measurement framework, while Dilchert et al. (2026) deployed experience-sampling methodology to demonstrate the situational variability of quiet-quitting behaviour across time and context. Cumulatively, these contributions establish a sound psychometric base, but they leave the experiential and interpretive dimensions of quiet quitting largely untheorised.

The rapid normalisation of remote work following the COVID-19 pandemic created what McPhail et al. (2024) term a 'structural shift in the geography of disengagement': the conditions under which employees experience frustration, isolation, and perceived exploitation were not merely transplanted to the home environment but qualitatively transformed by it. Drawing on a scoping review of post-COVID remote-work literature, McPhail et al. identify four clusters of antecedents that bear directly on employee withdrawal: (1) techno-overload and digital exhaustion, (2) blurred work–life boundaries, (3) leadership visibility and proximity deficits, and (4) social isolation and relatedness erosion. All of them resonate with the quiet quitting literature.

Wang et al. (2021) demonstrated, using a work design perspective, that effective remote working requires the active redesign of task autonomy, feedback structures, and social interaction opportunities — precisely the dimensions most eroded under surveillance-oriented remote management practices. Shimura et al. (2021) showed that full-remote conditions were associated with increased presenteeism even as they reduced conventional stress markers, suggesting a paradoxical dynamic in which workers are physically available but motivationally absent, consistent with quiet-quitting behaviour. Kniffin et al. (2021), in a landmark *American Psychologist* synthesis, identified the disruption of social interaction, informal learning, and spontaneous collaboration as among the most consequential costs of remote work. Each of which is a precondition for the discretionary engagement that quiet quitting forecloses.

Critically, Gajendran et al. (2024), in a meta-analysis of remote work intensity, identified a dual-pathway model: remote work simultaneously generates flexibility-related positive outcomes (autonomy, work–life balance) and demand-related negative outcomes (isolation, boundary violations, career invisibility). This dual-path logic provides the structural context for understanding why some remote workers thrive while others quietly quit, and why the experience is likely to be heterogeneous, contextual, and shaped by the perceived adequacy of organisational support.

3. METHODS

Research design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design informed by a constructivist ontological position and an interpretivist epistemology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We proceed from the premise that quiet quitting is not a fixed behavioural variable amenable to measurement alone, but a socially constructed, experientially situated phenomenon whose meaning varies across workers, contexts, and relational configurations. Accordingly, our purpose is not hypothesis-testing but theory-building, specifically, the generation of a grounded, conceptually dense account of how remote workers make sense of and enact quiet quitting in their daily work lives.

We employed the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia, 2021) as our primary analytic framework. The Gioia approach is specifically designed for inductive, theoretically novel phenomena in organisational research: it begins with informant-grounded first-order concepts (staying close to the language and categories used by participants), progressively abstracts to second-order theoretical themes, and culminates in aggregate dimensions that represent the broadest levels of conceptual structure. This approach is particularly well-suited to the current study because quiet quitting in remote work contexts has not previously been examined through qualitative inquiry, precluding the use of pre-specified coding schemes. It also aligns with our commitment to preserving the agentic voice of participants while generating theoretically generalisable insights.

Research participant

Purposive theoretical sampling was employed (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015), targeting individuals who met the following criteria: (1) currently employed on a full-time remote basis for a minimum of twelve months; (2) self-identified as having deliberately reduced their discretionary effort or extra-role contributions at some point during their remote work tenure; and (3) employed in knowledge-intensive, professional, or managerial roles. Participants were recruited through professional networking platforms, including LinkedIn, and via a snowball referral protocol supplemented by purposive outreach to underrepresented industries and demographic groups.

Fifteen participants were recruited across six industries. In line with the Gioia methodology and the principle of theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018; Guest et al., 2006), sampling continued until no substantially new concepts or dimensions emerged across successive interviews. Industry distribution was as follows: technology/SaaS (n = 4), consulting (n = 2), financial services/InsurTech (n = 2), healthcare IT (n = 1), retail and logistics (n = 2), publishing and creative industries (n = 2), and education technology (n = 2); ages ranged from 26 to 40 years (M = 31.9), and remote tenure ranged from 1 to 6 years (M = 3.3 years), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant profile matrix (N = 15)

ID	Role	Age	Industry	Tenure (Remote)	Key QQ Drivers (Emergent)
P01	Software Developer	31	Tech (SaaS)	3.5 yrs	Perceived invisibility; eroded autonomy; techno-overload
P02	Marketing Analyst	27	Media & Advertising	2 yrs	Blurred work-home boundaries; unmet development expectations
P03	UX Researcher	29	E-commerce	1.5 yrs	Chronic isolation; lack of peer recognition; emotional exhaustion
P04	Financial Analyst	34	Banking (FinTech)	4 yrs	Psychological contract breach; workload intensification
P05	Project Manager	38	Consulting	5 yrs	Role ambiguity; diminished sense of belonging; surveillance anxiety
P06	Data Scientist	30	Healthcare IT	2.5 yrs	Over-monitoring; resource depletion; career stagnation

ID	Role	Age	Industry	Tenure (Remote)	Key QQ Drivers (Emergent)
P07	HR Business Partner	33	Retail (HQ)	3 yrs	Reciprocity imbalance; emotional labor burden; disengagement spiral
P08	Software Engineer	26	Start-up	1 yr	Autonomy violation; boundary collapse; unmet competence needs
P09	Content Strategist	35	Publishing (Digital)	4.5 yrs	Chronic micromanagement via digital tools; meaning erosion
P10	Operations Analyst	40	Logistics (Global)	6 yrs	Social isolation; contract breach; value misalignment
P11	Graphic Designer	28	Creative Agency	2 yrs	Invisible effort; recognition deprivation; motivational decline
P12	Business Analyst	32	Insurance (InsurTech)	3 yrs	Resource exhaustion; perceived exploitation; boundary transgression
P13	Product Manager	36	Tech (B2B SaaS)	5 yrs	Psychological distance from leadership; unmet relatedness needs
P14	IT Support Specialist	29	Education Technology	2 yrs	Techno-stress; autonomy frustration; disengagement as self-protection
P15	Research Analyst	31	Consulting (Strategy)	3 yrs	Perceived lack of meaning; contract violation; withdrawal as agency

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted via video-conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) between January and March 2026. Each interview lasted between 55 and 80 minutes (mean = 67 minutes). Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and professionally transcribed verbatim, generating approximately 165,000 words of primary data.

The interview guide was developed iteratively, beginning with broad, experience-centred questions ('Can you describe a typical workday and how you feel about your contribution to your role?') before progressing to more specific probes around perceived obligations, reciprocity, boundary management, motivation, and the experience of withdrawal. In line with the phenomenological sensibility of the Gioia approach, interviewers avoided imposing the term 'quiet quitting' in initial questioning, eliciting organic descriptions of experience before introducing the construct as a potential framing in later portions of the interview.

Data analysis

Analysis followed the Gioia methodology's three-stage process. In the first stage, raw interview transcripts were coded inductively, generating 187 first-order codes closely tied to informant language (e.g., 'I just started doing the bare minimum', 'my effort became invisible in Teams meetings', 'I protect my energy now'). In the second stage, conceptually related first-order codes were grouped into second-order themes through theoretical abstraction, guided by the research question and the sensitising concepts provided by our four theoretical frameworks. In the third and final stage, second-order themes were collapsed into aggregate dimensions representing the most encompassing explanatory categories. The full Gioia data structure is presented in Table 2.

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, we followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, supplemented by Tracy's (2010) reflexivity criterion; several concrete verification strategies were employed to satisfy each criterion. First, member-checking was conducted with eight participants, who reviewed preliminary interpretations and confirmed their resonance. Second, following initial first-order and second-order coding by the first author, two independent coders — trained on the emerging coding scheme — separately coded a 20% subsample of transcripts; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and, where needed, minor revision of code

definitions. Inter-rater agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.81$), indicating strong concordance. Third, negative case analysis was conducted, actively seeking participant accounts that challenged or complicated emergent themes. Fourth, the first author maintained an analytic reflexivity journal throughout the analysis process, documenting interpretive decisions and potential biases. Member-checking and negative case analysis primarily addressed credibility; dual independent coding addressed dependability; the reflexivity journal addressed both confirmability and reflexivity; and the rich, verbatim-grounded first-order coding scheme supports transferability by allowing readers to assess the fit of our findings to other remote-work contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Analysis of fifteen in-depth interviews yielded three aggregate dimensions, five second-order themes, and eleven first-order concepts. Table 2 presents the full Gioia data structure, and Figure 1 illustrates the process model generated from the analysis. Each aggregate dimension is elaborated below, illustrated with representative participant excerpts.

Table 2. Gioia data structure: Quiet quitting among remote workers

1st-Order Concepts (Informant Language)	2nd-Order Themes (Theoretical Abstraction)	Aggregate Dimensions
Perceived invisibility of effort in digital spaces	Resource depletion through technological demands	Motivational withdrawal as boundary protection
Erosion of autonomy under surveillance-driven remote management	Disrupted reciprocity in distributed employment relationships	Reframing quiet quitting as agentic self-care
Collapse of work-home boundaries and energy depletion	Psychological contract breach amplified by mediated communication	Quiet quitting as negotiated disengagement—not exit
Social isolation and relatedness needs frustration	Career invisibility and stunted growth perception	Emergence of a 'minimal viable presence' strategy
Techno-overload and always-on expectations	Value misalignment in post-pandemic work cultures	

Note: First-order concepts reflect informant-grounded language; second-order themes represent theoretical abstraction; aggregate dimensions capture the broadest explanatory categories.

Resource depletion through technological demands

The most pervasive theme across all fifteen participants was the experience of resource depletion mediated by the technological infrastructure of remote work. Participants consistently described a progressive erosion of energy, attention, and motivational reserves through what they characterised as the 'always-on' digital environment.

All fifteen participants described the experience of digital communication demands that extended well beyond formal working hours, generating persistent cognitive load and emotional exhaustion. Crucially, participants did not experience this as an explicit managerial imposition but as an ambient cultural expectation. One that, over time, proved unsustainable.

"The Slack notifications never stopped. It was like a tap left running. Eventually you just... stop caring about each drip. I realised I was just managing the appearance of availability, not actually working. That was my quiet quitting moment". (P01, Software Developer)

"I was on six different video calls some days. By the afternoon, I was just... present. I was there but I wasn't contributing. And after a while, I stopped feeling bad about that". (P09, Content Strategist)

These accounts resonate strongly with Bakker and Demerouti's (2017) dual-process model within JD-R theory: digital demands constitute a chronic job demand activating the health-impairment pathway, progressively depleting the psychological resources that ordinarily motivate discretionary contribution.

A second prominent theme was the experience of effort invisibility — the sense that contributions made within digital work environments were structurally less visible, less acknowledged, and less rewarded than equivalent contributions in physical workplaces. This dimension emerged across roles and industries, suggesting a structural feature of remote work rather than an industry-specific or managerial idiosyncrasy.

"In an office, you're seen. Someone sees you staying late. Your manager walks past your desk and notices. Remote work made all of that disappear. So gradually I just thought, why bother going beyond? Nobody will see it anyway". (P10, Operations Analyst)

"I started making a mental calculation. If I do extra, nothing changes. If I do exactly my job description, nothing changes. So I stopped doing the extra". (P04, Financial Analyst)

The invisibility theme intersects with both COR theory. Discretionary effort becomes a resource that yields insufficient return, triggering conservation (Hobfoll, 1989), and Social Exchange Theory, the collapse of visible reciprocity disrupts the norm of balanced exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Disrupted reciprocity in distributed employment relationships

The second aggregate dimension concerns the perceived erosion of the reciprocal employment relationship under remote conditions. Participants across all industries described a progressive deterioration in their sense of being fairly treated, invested in, and valued, a deterioration they attributed, specifically, to the structural features of distributed work rather than to individual manager behaviour alone. Ten of fifteen participants described experiences that correspond closely to psychological contract breach: perceptions that organisational obligations (particularly development, recognition, and transparent communication) had been violated in ways that were structurally enabled by remote work arrangements.

"I was promised a development plan when I went remote. That conversation never happened again. Twelve months later, nothing. I stopped volunteering for projects that would have helped the team but done nothing for me". (P02, Marketing Analyst)

"The thing about remote work is that the informal conversations don't happen. In an office, you'd address things before they became grievances. Here, grievances just... accumulate. And eventually you adjust your behaviour accordingly". (P07, HR Business Partner)

These accounts align precisely with Gray et al.'s (2025) finding in Human Resource Management that psychological contract breach is a primary driver of quiet-quitting behaviour, and with Rousseau et al.'s (2018) dynamic phase model, in which the absence of renegotiation mechanisms, themselves attenuated in remote environments, allows breach responses to solidify into sustained behavioural withdrawal. A closely related theme was the perception that remote work had made participants structurally invisible to career advancement systems. Participants described this not merely as disappointment but as a rational recalibration: if organisational investment in their development had effectively ceased, they saw no logical basis for continued discretionary investment in organisational goals.

"I looked at the promotions that happened over two years of remote work. Every single person who got promoted was someone who was either in the office part-time or who had visibility with senior leadership. So I started thinking differently about what I owe this place". (P13, Product Manager)

Motivational withdrawal as boundary protection

The third aggregate dimension reframes quiet quitting as an agentic, self-protective act — not merely a passive response to adverse conditions but a deliberate strategy for preserving psychological integrity and personal identity in the face of structural imbalance. Across the sample, participants consistently distinguished their behaviour from both active resistance (sabotage, open confrontation) and resignation. They described quiet quitting as a middle path, a negotiated adjustment of the terms of their engagement, that allowed them to preserve the income security of employment while reclaiming personal resources that excessive organisational demands had eroded.

"I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and do my actual job. Quiet quitting isn't about not caring. I still care about my work. It's about refusing to subsidise a system that doesn't care about me". (P15, Research Analyst)

"I stopped performing enthusiasm I didn't feel. That's all it was. I did my work. I did it well. But I stopped the extra. That's not quitting. That's just honesty". (P11, Graphic Designer)

Across multiple participants, a consistent strategic logic emerged: the calibration of visibility, responsiveness, and effort to a threshold sufficient to maintain formal employment and avoid negative performance assessment, while minimising the discretionary expenditure of personal resources. We term this the 'minimal viable presence' (MVP) strategy. We define minimal viable presence as a stable, self-regulated equilibrium in which an employee calibrates effort, responsiveness, and visibility to the minimum level sufficient to meet formal role requirements and avoid negative performance consequences, while deliberately withholding discretionary contribution as a means of resource and identity protection. It is a term that emerged organically in the language of P08 and was subsequently recognised by multiple other participants as accurately describing their approach.

"I figured out the minimum viable level of presence. Show up to meetings, deliver what's contractually required, respond to messages within a reasonable window. Stay under the radar. That's it. I protect everything else". (P08, Software Engineer)

The MVP strategy represents a sophisticated, self-aware form of engagement management that is poorly captured by existing quantitative instruments, which tend to treat disengagement as a unidimensional, deficit-oriented phenomenon. Our data suggest that quiet quitting among remote workers is better understood as a complex, rational, and strategically calibrated response to structural conditions, one that demands richer conceptual tools than scale-based measurement can provide.

Discussion

Drawing on the three aggregate dimensions and the multi-theoretical framework, we propose the Remote Quiet Quitting (RQQ) process model. The model theorises quiet quitting among remote workers as a staged, adaptive process unfolding across three phases.

In Phase 1 (Resource Erosion), chronic technological demands, boundary collapse, and social isolation begin to deplete the motivational, energy, and social resources that ordinarily sustain engagement. This phase is theorised through the convergent logics of JD-R theory's health-impairment pathway (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and COR theory's loss-spiral mechanism (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The experience is not yet characterised by deliberate withdrawal; it is characterised by depletion.

In Phase 2 (Reciprocity Disruption) the perception of inequitable exchange crystallises. Employees begin to notice the asymmetry between their contributions and organisational returns, and to attribute this asymmetry (correctly or not) to the structural conditions of remote work. Psychological contract breach (amplified by the absence of informal renegotiation) consolidates this perception. SET and PCT theorise this phase jointly: the worker begins to recalibrate the terms of exchange.

In Phase 3 (Adaptive Withdrawal) the worker enacts a deliberate, bounded strategy of motivational withdrawal. This is not amotivation but a calculated response: the withdrawal is strategic (targeting discretionary effort above the formal contract), self-protective (framed as preservation of resources and identity), and stable (maintained as a 'minimal viable presence' equilibrium). Each framework contributes a distinct, non-overlapping explanatory layer to this phase: SDT explains the motivational mechanism (a shift from intrinsic to purely extrinsically regulated engagement as autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs go unmet), while COR explains the behavioural mechanism (proactive conservation of remaining resources to halt further loss). Where SDT and COR jointly account for the within-person process of Phase 3, SET and PCT (introduced in Phase 2) account for the relational and contractual triggers that set this process in motion — together forming a layered, rather than redundant, theoretical account.

It is worth distinguishing RQQ from related but conceptually separate constructs. Unlike burnout, which centres involuntary exhaustion and depersonalisation arising from chronic stress, RQQ in our data was experienced as a deliberate, agentic choice rather than a breakdown of coping capacity. Unlike generalised disengagement, which implies a diffuse withdrawal of psychological investment across all aspects of work, RQQ was bounded and selective: participants continued to meet formal contractual obligations while specifically withdrawing discretionary, extra-role contribution. Unlike presenteeism, in which workers are physically or virtually present despite illness or reduced capacity, RQQ involves full

capacity that is intentionally redirected away from the organisation rather than diminished. Finally, unlike turnover intention, RQQ was explicitly framed by participants as a strategy for remaining in the role on different terms, not a precursor to exit; several participants described it as an alternative to resignation rather than a step toward it

Table 3 summarises the theoretical integration, mapping each framework's contribution to the empirical dimensions and the process model.

Table 3. Theoretical integration: Frameworks, mechanisms, and implications

Framework	Core Proposition Applied	Remote-Work Antecedents (Emergent)	Theoretical Implication for QQ
Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in digitally mediated work	Perceived invisibility; surveillance-driven management; social isolation	Quiet quitting as motivational withdrawal to protect the self from chronic need thwarting
Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989)	Defensive resource conservation under conditions of sustained loss	Techno-overload; energy depletion; boundary collapse	QQ as adaptive disengagement to halt resource loss spirals
Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)	Calibrated withdrawal of OCBs when perceived reciprocity breaks down	Contract breach; career invisibility; recognition deprivation	QQ as deliberate recalibration of input–outcome ratios
Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989)	Perceived breach of relational obligations in distributed contexts	Broken development promises; leader inaccessibility; value misalignment	QQ as a silent renegotiation strategy absent formal breach-repair mechanisms

Note: *Remote Quiet Quitting*; OCBs = *Organisational Citizenship Behaviours*; QQ = *Quiet Quitting*

This study makes three contributions to the HRM and organisational behaviour literatures. First, we provide the first grounded theoretical account of quiet quitting as a phenomenologically distinct experience among remote workers, extending Harris's (2025) commitment-based qualitative framework into a structurally differentiated context. Second, we advance the concept of 'minimal viable presence' as a mid-range theoretical construct that captures the strategic character of remote-worker quiet quitting more precisely than existing disengagement or withdrawal frameworks. Third, we demonstrate the theoretical fertility of multi-framework integration: by drawing simultaneously on SDT, COR, SET, and PCT, the RQQ model accounts for motivational, resource-based, relational, and cognitive dimensions of quiet quitting that no single framework can encompass.

For HRM professionals managing distributed workforces, the findings generate several actionable insights. First, the identification of effort invisibility as a structural driver of quiet quitting underscores the imperative of designing remote recognition systems that surface and reward contributions independent of physical presence. Second, the centrality of psychological contract breach (mediated by attenuated communication channels) suggests the value of regular, structured, one-to-one developmental conversations in remote settings, explicitly designed to renegotiate and reaffirm relational obligations. Third, the emergence of the MVP strategy as a stable equilibrium signals that quietly quitting workers are not necessarily lost to the organisation: they remain formally engaged and potentially reclaimable through targeted investment in their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs.

Finally, the data caution against surveillance-driven management approaches: multiple participants identified monitoring tools as a proximate trigger of autonomy violation and disengagement. HRM practitioners would be well-advised to approach remote oversight with a trust-centred rather than control-centred orientation (Wang et al., 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

This study makes a central contribution: it demonstrates, for the first time through systematic qualitative inquiry, that quiet quitting among remote workers is not passive disengagement but an adaptive strategy for preserving psychological resources and personal boundaries under conditions of chronic need-thwarting and perceived contract breach. Through fifteen in-depth interviews analysed using the Gioia

methodology, we have shown that quiet quitting in remote work contexts is not a simple disengagement reflex but a staged, adaptive, and strategically coherent response to structural conditions (specifically, techno-overload, effort invisibility, disrupted reciprocity, and psychological contract breach) that are amplified by the particular demands of digitally mediated work.

The Remote Quiet Quitting (RQQ) process model we advance positions quiet quitting as a three-phase adaptive process (resource erosion, reciprocity disruption, and adaptive withdrawal) culminating in a 'minimal viable presence' strategy that represents a deliberate re-negotiation of the terms of employment rather than a simple withdrawal of engagement. Integrated across Self-Determination Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory, this model provides a richer explanatory framework for a phenomenon that existing quantitative instruments have begun to measure but not yet adequately explained.

For HR managers, the model translates into five concrete priorities: increasing transparency around workload expectations and how they are set; actively reducing digital overload by establishing norms around after-hours availability; strengthening regular, structured supervisor–employee communication to surface concerns before they harden into withdrawal; designing remote work arrangements that protect rather than erode employee autonomy; and rebuilding trust in the employment relationship through visible, consistent follow-through on development and recognition commitments. These contributions should be read alongside the study's boundaries: the findings are based on a small, purposive sample, a cross-sectional design, and participants' self-reported narratives, and their generalisability across other industries and cultural contexts remains to be tested.

As remote and hybrid work continue to define the landscape of knowledge employment, understanding quiet quitting in distributed contexts becomes one of the most pressing challenges facing human resource management research and practice. We hope this study contributes meaningfully to that conversation.

Limitations and further research

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample of fifteen participants, while appropriate for the Gioia methodology and sufficient to reach theoretical saturation, was drawn predominantly from knowledge-intensive professional roles in relatively affluent, English-speaking contexts. Future research should extend the inquiry to workers in the Global South, blue-collar remote roles (e.g., remote customer service), and non-English-speaking organisational cultures, where the structural antecedents and cultural framing of quiet quitting may differ substantially.

Second, because the study was cross-sectional at the interview level, we cannot fully capture the dynamic, longitudinal character of the RQQ process. Harris's (2025) longitudinal qualitative design offers a methodological template for future work that tracks the full developmental trajectory of quiet quitting, from initial disengagement to stabilisation or resolution. Experience-sampling methodology, as deployed by Dilchert et al. (2026), could complement qualitative approaches by capturing within-person variability across time.

Third, this study focused exclusively on employees' perspectives. A dyadic or triadic design incorporating manager and HR practitioner accounts could illuminate the relational dynamics of quiet quitting from multiple vantage points, potentially identifying discrepancies in perception that themselves constitute a driver of disengagement.

Fourth, the theoretical model proposed here requires external validation. Quantitative testing of the RQQ model (using multi-wave survey designs, structural equation modelling, or computational approaches) would strengthen its generalisability. We also invite researchers to examine whether the MVP strategy constitutes a stable equilibrium or a transitional phase en route to active disengagement or voluntary resignation.

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