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“Quiet Quitting” and Psychosocial Hazards

Although some scholars attribute the first use of the term “quiet quitting” to the 1999 movie *Office Space* the term itself has only very recently come into widespread use in popular culture.

“Quiet quitting” means

“Quiet quitting” is described as either doing the bare minimum in your job, or just not striving to overachieve. It’s quitting the idea of “going above and beyond.” It is not about actually physically quitting your job or trying to get fired, it is when a worker has *deliberately reduced their engagement in their job to what is minimally expected of them and no more*. We are not talking about the happy worker who every day clocks in at exactly 9am and clocks out at exactly 5pm and whose personal work ethic is to do just what their job description states and no more. We are talking about the staff member who is no longer “gung-ho” about their job or the company and is now disengaged due to accumulated upset about the way they have been treated.

Psychosocial hazards & risks

‘Quiet quitting’ can be the outcome of many causes and influences some of which may be attributable to psychosocial hazards and risks in the workplace. If this is the case, it becomes a WHS issue.

Non-physical workplace hazards and risks include situations where a person faces risk to their mental wellbeing from violent or abusive customers or co-workers, to subtle or not-so-subtle bullying, and other types of psychosocial influences. Workplaces where these risks are known yet unacknowledged or unmanaged may suggest a poor workplace culture and a need for more leadership.

Workers who feel they can’t speak up about organisational problems, unethical behaviour, or even just to contribute their knowledge and creative ideas, may either leave or decrease their effort while suffering in silence. Those that stay may resort to just doing their jobs to the bare minimum. This is not anything new, but it has a new angle and a new name: “quiet quitting.”

What the PCBU must do

From the work health and safety angle every business must provide for its workers a workplace safe from hazards and risks. The workplace WHS management system is meant to embrace all workplace risks and hazards.

In keeping with the overarching responsibility of a PCBU to provide a workplace free of potential harm to its people, leaders could do more to encourage workers to raise their voices by consistently soliciting their input and celebrating them for offering it. It is already a legal requirement that a PCBU must consult with the people in its workforce on matters of health and safety. That begins with extending the topics for consultation to include psychosocial risks and hazards and encouraging discussion about them.

And the PCBU will need to be sure that the workforce fully understands what a psychosocial hazard is, how and why they must be eliminated or controlled from the workplace, and the risks that they pose to the wellbeing of the workforce (WHS Act section 19(3)(f)).

Note

Directions and advice on how to resolve issues arising from psychosocial hazards and risks may be found in the revised WHS Regulation which came into effect on 1 October 2022 and the Code of Practice on Psychosocial Hazards published 21 May 2021 by SafeWork NSW.

1st November 2022