

From Quiet Quitting to Hushed Hybrid: Decoding HR Buzzwords in the Evolving Workplace

Dr. Ranjana Mary Varghese

Associate Professor

Xavier Institute of Management & Entrepreneurship, Kochi

ranjana@xime.org

Prof. Alok K

Associate Professor

Xavier Institute of Management & Entrepreneurship, Kochi

alok@xime.org

Dr. Amitabh Satapathy

Associate Professor

Xavier Institute of Management & Entrepreneurship, Kochi

amitabh@xime.org

ABSTRACT

The evolving workplace has introduced new HR buzzwords like "quiet quitting" and "hushed hybrid," reflecting shifts in employee preferences and corporate strategies post-pandemic. With hybrid work becoming more common, tensions arise between employee desires for flexibility and employer mandates for office presence. Trends like "office peacocking" and the "hushed hybrid" highlight attempts to entice employees back or quietly maintain remote work. While hybrid work boosts morale and reduces turnover, inconsistencies in policy can lead to challenges. Organizations must reassess return-to-office policies, fostering flexibility and fairness to meet the needs of both employees and business goals.

In the ever-evolving landscape of human resources, new buzzwords continue to emerge, reflecting the dynamic shifts in workplace practices. From "quiet quitting" to "hushed hybrid," these terms capture the tension between employee preferences and corporate mandates in the post-pandemic era. As companies navigate this complex terrain, understanding and addressing these trends is crucial to fostering a productive and equitable work environment.

From great resignation to quiet quitting to moonlighting to quiet firing to quick quitting there was never a dearth of new buzzwords. There was an acceleration in the adoption of technologies, due to the pandemic and many organizations which weren't adopting work from home (WFH), started adopting the same. And post pandemic, WFH turned out to be several times higher post pandemic than pre-pandemic. The pandemic-mandatory WFH has exposed the hypothesis that productivity of the employees will decrease when they don't work from office. Employee likings on hybrid work plans display they are tough to bring about, with around 7%–10% wants WFH only, around 10% favouring a full return to the office, and a major chunk preferring just two or three days of work from office. (Barrero et al., 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2021). A 2021 Grant Thornton study proposes most companies assume to continue hybrid work schedules, although to a lesser degree than employee imagines, demonstrating a mismatch between staff-management hybrid work preferences. Hybrid work requires the deployment of a different check mechanisms by organization when staff attendance goes absent or becomes less visible.

While the market changes from being an 'employee' to an 'employer's type, return to office calls have been getting louder, with some companies even punitive measures for employees who don't follow the rule. For many, the days when remote work was the norm feel like a distant memory—back when working from home wasn't just encouraged but was the safest option. As the world emerged from pandemic lockdowns, employees have been gradually ushered back into the office—though not always willingly.

And there are many reasons why companies are calling employees back to office

- (a) Team collaboration and cohesion is less
- (b) Productivity and accountability problems
- (c) Erosion of culture
- (d) Security of technology
- (e) Mental Health and well-being

Though going back to work in the office settings may look like going back to normal, it is important to understand that it is highly stressful for some employees and it may affect the productivity at work. Companies have diverse talent and hence a complete work from office may not be possible. Increased work-family conflicts, emotional exhaustion and the

increasing tendency of presenteeism have appeared as protruding factors in the light of back to office stress. (Pandita, D.,*et.al.*,2024)

While the return to office was mandatory for many of the companies, there came office peacocking which was a mechanism to lure employees back to office. Office peacocking refers to the intentional transformation of office spaces into inviting environments designed to entice employees to spend more time at work. This might include adding plush sofas, cosy nooks, abundant natural light, and plenty of plants, turning the traditional cubicle layout into a vibrant, lounge-like setting. Additionally, some companies are investing in stylish decor and well-stocked kitchens.

Some advantages of Office Peacocking are

- (a) High workplace appeal
- (b) High Collaboration
- (c) Improved creativity and morale
- (d) Attract and retain top talent
- (e) Enhance company culture

Having mentioned the above, there are also some disadvantages

- (a) More importance to visibility than productivity
- (b) Increased costs
- (c) Exclusivity and division
- (d) Sustainability concerns
- (e) Short term excitement
- (f) Pressure to conform

While the Work From Home model presents significant benefits, it's evident that a universal approach isn't suitable for everyone. Some companies are giving WFH based on need, especially for caregiving, disability, inability to relocate etc. As businesses transition into the post-pandemic era, many are finding that a balanced hybrid model could be the optimal path forward. This strategy combines the flexibility of remote work with the collaborative advantages of a traditional office. Moving forward, adaptability and a deep understanding of both business and employee needs will be essential.

That is where Hushed Hybrid comes into picture.

This is the newest term around the corner which is more of a shadow policy where managers make their own rules and choosing not to enforce the return to office policy to everyone in the team.

What is Hushed Hybrid

In defiance of strict return-to-office mandates, some managers are quietly allowing certain team members to continue working remotely. This subtle trend, referred to as "hushed hybrid," is creating friction among employees and introducing new challenges for companies.

Although not all organizations require full-time office attendance, it's clear that many employees prefer remote or hybrid work setups over rigid in-office schedules. Unlike upper management, many "rebellious" managers understand these preferences and are determined to maintain flexibility within their teams.

The benefits of hybrid work are well-documented. A study in *Nature* revealed that employees who worked from home two days a week had 30% lower quit rates and reported higher job satisfaction, with no decrease in productivity. Moreover, McKinsey research indicates that 38% of women with young children might have had to quit or reduce their work hours without the option of flexible work arrangements. Some research has also shown that employees who work hybrid has more happiness and reduced turnover . This can also lead to people feeling respected as they are given flexibility for personal reasons, and not being forced into a "one-size-fits-all" model.

What are the risks involved ?

Since these are not with the acceptance of the management, some managers may find it difficult as they are between the devil and deep sea when they need to juggle between the desires of the team members and mandate of the company about back to office. Though it may be justified that it is in favor of team members, this can be treated as a favoritism by some managers if not dealt with properly. Bias may be perceived by employees when they find some of them enjoying the benefits while they are deprived of the same. Major challenges of Hushed Hybrid involves an inconsistent policy of the company, erosion of the company culture and a feeling of inequity among the employees.

It appears that a balance of employee flexibility and fairness needs to be found to make as many people as happy as possible. Hence in order to prevent this new phenomenon, companies can think of the following

- (a) Reassess return-to-office policies
- (b) Establish open communication channels
- (c) Develop clear and consistent policies
- (d) Cultivate a strong company culture

The emergence of the Hushed Hybrid trend indicates that the workplace is still evolving, even as companies strive to return to pre-pandemic routines. Although this approach may maintain flexibility in the short term, it underscores the importance of rethinking hybrid work strategies for the long term.

Conclusion

As the workplace landscape continues to shift, HR buzzwords like "Quiet Quitting" and "Hushed Hybrid" reflect deeper changes in employee expectations and organizational strategies. Adapting to these trends requires businesses to strike a balance between flexibility and consistency, ensuring they meet both company goals and employee needs. In this evolving environment, staying attuned to these developments will be key to fostering a resilient and engaged workforce.

References

- Pandita, D., Gupta, D. & Vapiwala, F. Rewinding Back into the Old Normal: Why is Return-to-Office Stressing Employees Out?. *Employ Respons Rights J* (2024).
- Barrero, J. M., Bloom, N., & Davis, S. J. (2021). Why working from home will stick, NBER working paper series, Discussion Paper No. 1790. National Bureau of Economic Research
- Skountridaki, L., Mallett, O., & Marks, A. (2021). Does your working dream match the reality? (pp. 32–34). *HR Magazine*
- Parker, K., & Horowitz, J. (2022). Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected. *Pew Research Center*, March 9.
- Harter, J. (2022). Is Quiet Quitting Real? *Gallup Inc*, September 6.
- Fuller, J., & Kerr, W. (2022). The Great Resignation Didn't Start with the Pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. Harvard Business Publishing.
- DeSmet, A., Dowling, B., Hancock, B., & Schaninger, B. (2022). The Great Attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools? *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 13, 1-13.
- Cheng, M. (2022). Service industry workers are still quitting at high rates despite recession fears.
- Jooss, S., McDonnell, A., & Burbach, R. (2021). Talent designation in practice: an equation of high potential, performance and mobility. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(21), 4551–4577.
- Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J., & Ying, Z. J. (2015). Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chin