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# OUTSIDE OFFICE HOURS

How the shift from work-life balance to work-life integration is changing the workday as we know it



As companies grapple with talent challenges in an uncertain economy, the debate over “quiet quitting” continues to take up space in business conversations.

On one side, the trend—popularized by a viral TikTok video—is seen as a sign of generational laziness, disengagement, and entitlement. On the other, it is considered a life raft in the sea of burnout, economic challenges, and social turmoil. But no matter which side you fall on, “quiet quitting” is a ubiquitous term with a long history rooted in resistance—and the ongoing debate has sparked a much-needed conversation around employee well-being.



In simple terms, “quiet quitting” describes performing your duties within an allotted time and setting boundaries beyond that. No early morning meetings, no late-night email exchanges—you start at 9, you end at 5, period. Some claim the pandemic spurred the trend—or at the very least, made it much more common. But “quiet quitting” had been happening well before a severe virus took hold of the world. And by acknowledging its history, “quiet quitting” can be understood as a pattern of resistance—particularly among workers from marginalized communities—after being consistently overworked, undervalued, and underpaid.

Indeed, nearly 60% of Black executives in Korn Ferry’s *The Black P&L Leader* study said they’ve had to work twice as hard and accomplish twice as much to be seen on the same level as their peers. That same study also shows that, unlike their white male peers, marginalized professionals frequently have to overperform, take on extra projects, and go above and beyond to get recognition or affect change, but rarely see the same rewards as their white colleagues. People are in a constant state of trying to regulate and preserve their energy to have the capacity to show up to their work as their best, most effective selves. “Quiet quitting,” therefore, can be a form of self-preservation—a way for people to show up while taking matters into their own hands.

So, if “quiet quitting” isn’t new, then why are we talking about it now? Is it a matter of “again” or “still”?

“Quiet quitting” remains on our radar, experts say, because many leaders have been hesitant to change the way they lead, inspire, and connect with people in the new world of work. Early days of the pandemic saw a shift in focus towards employee engagement and well-being, but that seemed to be only temporary. Now, research suggests that many organizations pay less attention to the wellness of their workers compared to the first year of the pandemic. In 2021, 75% of HR professionals agreed that senior leaders had employee well-being on their agenda; in 2022, that number dropped to 70%, according to a recent International Institute of Risk & Safety management study. But while reluctance to change must be acknowledged and addressed, so must ensuring that leaders have the cognitive and emotional capacity for it. Leaders themselves are struggling. And we know that when people are low on cognitive and emotional resources and self-awareness, their ability to empathize with others can be compromised.

But the problems of today do not have to be the problems of tomorrow. The last three years have empowered professionals to take back their time and protect their personal energy. With that in mind, we unpack strategies to help organizations and leaders support the well-being of their people before problems reach critical levels—thus becoming proactive in building an engaged and enabled workforce.



## The myth of work-life balance

With two years of navigating post-pandemic culture under our belts, employees and employers alike are still negotiating what the new workplace should look like.

Remote and hybrid work arrangements allow employees to reconfigure their days so they can be the most productive at work by following a schedule that's more conducive to their needs. Employers, though, are concerned that this flexibility means employees are working less when they are working from home—despite studies showing otherwise. In fact, new research from Sorbert, a PTO start-up, shows that despite earning more vacation days, employees in the United States are taking less time off today than before the pandemic. In 2022, 55% of paid-time-off went unused; in 2019, that number was 28%. And who's most likely to not take vacation? Remote employees—31% of workers surveyed think it's harder to take paid-time-off when working from home, according to Sorbet's report.

Historically, organizations have taken a work-life balance approach to employee well-being and engagement. However, it seems that employers and employees have mismatched expectations for what that means today, creating escalating tensions between workers who feel they're setting appropriate boundaries and organizations that see them as throwing in the towel. This is because work-life balance often implies hard and fast borders between professional and personal lives—borders that simply don't apply in the remote-hybrid landscape we've been in since the onset of the pandemic.

Work-life integration, on the other hand, may be an approach that creates more synergies between all areas that define life. Where work-life balance can create rigidity, work-life integration allows people to have fluidity between their work and their life, focusing on the outcomes that matter. By shifting the emphasis from *how* and *when* people do their work to *what* kind of work they produce, we can make room for the fact that input will not look the same across the board. We do not, nor can we be expected to, operate on the same cadence, the natural cycles of energy and productivity we experience over the course of the day. And part of being an inclusive organization is acknowledging that people work differently and have different needs. What's more, many kinds of roles do not require standardization for how and when the job gets done (think marketing specialist, career coach, graphic designer, consultant, researcher). When leaders focus more on the results rather than how employees get to the results, they can enable their employees to make work something that works for them.



## *The next generation of talent wants to work for companies where they can be themselves, speak openly, drive change, and help shape the corporate culture.*

The next generation of talent wants to work for companies that embrace flexibility, honor transparency, and welcome honesty—where they can be themselves, speak openly, drive change, and help shape the corporate culture. To that end, work-life integration supports efforts to prioritize well-being, enabling people to make personally optimal decisions based on their capacity to maximize productivity. It underscores that who we are as people and how we show up to work do not fit in neatly separated compartments. Rather, our experience as people informs our experience at work.

Our capacity and cadence impact how we operate daily against what we actually need to be productive. Viewing work-life integration through the lens of

capacity and cadence empowers employees to proactively protect their energy to do, to be, and to show up. Creating fluidity and flexibility around work and life—and focusing on outcomes that matter—enables people to structure their day around activities that they have the personal resources for, rather than being driven strictly by what a calendar says needs to be done. It provides them with clarity around outcomes and takeaways, which means they can work in a way that not only makes them feel engaged, but also supported. And this, in turn, can help buffer against physical, emotional, and cognitive burnout—the very issue at the root of “quiet quitting.” Our capacity and cadence are the two elements that we can control to ensure we are not merely regulating our energy but restoring it throughout the day.



## Moving towards work-life integration

For many, the conversation about “quiet quitting”—about employee engagement and well-being, about remote work versus hybrid environments—may seem stale. And the programs implemented to address these issues are often written off as ineffectual or fluffy.

In fact, past studies have found that despite heavy investment, many wellness programs have low participation rates and lead to lackluster results. Korn Ferry experts have suggested this is because most of these wellness incentives—like free yoga classes or subscriptions to mindfulness apps—are used mostly by employees who are already focused on improving their health. And rather than provide programs based on what workers need, experts say, companies may often choose offerings based on what they *think* their employees want. What’s more, beyond general performance data and some qualitative feedback, many organizations have not established clear metrics around well-being and intervention strategies. The problem with this approach is insufficient information combined with no way to determine success. As a result, well-being programs are defunded or discontinued, creating misalignment between organizations saying they are focused on well-being and actually positively affecting it.

## How organizations can enable work-life integration

There is an opportunity for organizations to invest in structural changes. Instead of aiming at invisible targets, organizations can take some of the following steps to make a real, quantifiable difference.

**Establish concrete metrics that outline what kind of impact organizations want to have on and for their employees and how they intend to measure it.** Defining both the problem and the goal in tangible terms gives employee well-being programs a rudder, defining the direction and creating traction.

**Consider expanding pulse surveys.** Employee commitment to work is a two-way street. If employees aren't feeling engaged, asking questions about how employees do or do not feel supported in their work, and what kind of support they may be looking for, might be a way of incorporating the problem-solving up front. Alternatively, employees who do feel engaged but may not feel supported could be experiencing symptoms of burnout, which may impact their performance. An enablement focus may reveal what to do to support them so that they can feel more empowered and be more productive.

**Supplement surveys with additional strategies to understand how employees are doing.** In a recent survey, roughly 33% of Gen Z and millennial professionals say that, within their organizations, decisions are made from the top down, and feedback from employees is not often pursued by leaders. Running focus groups, exit surveys, and retention interviews are also effective ways of getting critical feedback as well as establishing the causal links between well-being, behavior, culture and performance. Managers should also be adept in having candid and open interpersonal dialogues that are built on empathy and compassion.

**Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.** To truly make a difference, business leaders have to get comfortable hearing the things they may not want to hear, listening with humility, and taking action from feedback. Organizations need to invest in addressing the root causes of the problems. Efforts should be checked against outlined metrics, then adjusted where necessary. But to do so, organizations must view leaders as individuals, supporting them as they manage their own capacity and resources so that they can be human, present, empathetic, and compassionate.

## How leaders can enable work-life integration

One of the challenges is that managers and organizations get stuck in a state of fixing—they are always one step behind because they're busy combating crises rather than preventing problems. Leaders need to establish a mode of operation that takes care of talent today and tomorrow. And the only way to do that is to keep lines of communication open, clear, and candid. Employees have to know that the workplace is a safe place to be honest, and managers need to be able to listen empathetically to what employees are sharing—then act meaningfully on what they're hearing. This will help leaders anticipate what they will come up against in the future rather than solving problems in real time.



**Make sure that work is not only distributed “evenly”, but that it is distributed according to the capacity of team members.** Distributing work “evenly” sounds good in theory, but it doesn’t consider that people’s lives look different from day to day and person to person. Someone may have limited capacity today, both for reasons pertaining to work and not, but have more capacity tomorrow. It’s important to be sure that no one person is getting routinely overburdened—or underutilized—but it’s also critical to acknowledge the natural fluctuations in an employee’s day-to-day experience. Talent experiences different levels of fatigue, so the solution requires a leveled approach.

**Improve the lines of communication.** Because leaders are the link between the enterprise and the employee, organizations need to develop strong communication process to achieve that. Companies need to be a lot more proactive in meeting employee needs, and cascade meaningful changes from top down through leaders. Better communication between leaders and employees is the only way to be sure that everyone is on the same page, and that no one’s plate ends up being too full—or too empty—ensuring employees don’t burn out in the future.

**Model an outcomes-driven approach.** Prioritizing results—rather than when and how people get their work done—will enable employees to achieve more by letting them work in ways that are smarter for them. Shifting perspectives from input to outcomes creates a culture of trust and autonomy that will enable employees to boost their performance.

# Creating harmony

Despite the desire to go back to the pre-pandemic days, the realities of this post-pandemic world are here to stay.

This means leaders and their organizations can expect more and more of their employees to be seeking greater flexibility and work-life integration—or at least, to set boundaries to preserve what they've built over the last three years. But pandemic aside, companies are experiencing quiet quitting because they have yet to adapt their models and structures to the changes of today, and instead, continue to operate in traditional ways. Those that refuse to accept this new normal will only see the trend surge.

Many companies are innovating ad hoc solutions based on outdated principles—ones that focus on work-life balance, the traditional 9-to-5 workday, and in-person work models. Despite a narrative of a new era of purpose-driven future of work, many employees do not see those changes meaningfully reflected in their



day-to-day experience. Although 79% of workers say their work schedule is flexible enough to allow them to meet their family and personal responsibilities, only 64% say their company supports them in achieving work-life balance, according to Korn Ferry global benchmark data. Similarly, the same data found that while 92% of employees say their immediate manager is flexible when they need to take care of personal issues, only 74% report that their manager supports them achieving work-life balance.

In many cases, professionals are still working the same job, they're still accountable by the processes and systems, and they still don't feel valued for what they contribute. Rather than offer programs that put the burden on employees to find the time, energy, and resources to fix the problem, companies should create systems that target the root causes of the issues so that they are not only addressing the symptoms when they become acute. And they need to focus on enabling employees rather than just engaging them. Promoting work-life integration takes a human-centric approach that enables us to shift from the focus from relieving the symptoms of outdated organizational environments, to creating high-trust, high-inclusion, high-innovation, high-performance ecosystems that enable everyone to thrive.

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## About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with organizations to design their organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their workforce. And we help professionals navigate and advance their careers.

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