

Are you defined by the success you find at work?

The phenomenon of quiet quitting shows that many people are not too invested in their jobs. The writer is grateful for his.



Chong Siow Ann

A short while ago, I was the recipient of a “lifetime achievement award” from the healthcare group that I worked in, and it was meant to recognise a corpus of successful things that I had done in my professional career.

The award also came with a weighty crystal trophy. Hefting it in my hand, I thought – somewhat grandiosely perhaps – of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias*, of the once-great, ancient Egyptian pharaoh whose monumental statue had been reduced by the passage of time to a crumbling heap, with its visible inscription ironically proclaiming his greatness as the “King of Kings”.

The poem, which was intended as a moral cautionary tale about the impermanence and conceit of our earthly achievements, ended with these sobering lines: Nothing beside remains./Round the

decay/Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Don’t get me wrong, and I’m not humblebragging here. It was very nice to receive that award, but my feelings were rather mixed and ambiguous: partly because – as clichéd as it sounds – those things I had been credited for were the combined work of others as well, and partly because I found that epithet of “lifetime achievement” discomfiting with its hint of finality. It was as if I’d already done what I could and maybe there weren’t more significant things I could aspire to achieve.

THE HEDONIC TREADMILL

Most people (including myself) would like to be successful and happy in our jobs and careers. We have those quotidian desires of doing well financially, getting our well-deserved promotions and receiving those due accolades (more trophies!). We presume that these would all make us a happier person at work. While this seems reasonable, social and psychological studies have shown that it is more of a fallacy because most people never feel “successful enough”. That exhilarating lift of success lasts but a while and, as

the warm glow evaporates and clears, we ready ourselves to scale that next, higher peak. As a wit once said, “Nothing recedes like success.”

Psychologists call this angsty wheel-spinning the hedonic treadmill where the incessant quest for more and more success (as gauged by the worldly rewards of money, power, status and prestige) can leave people perpetually unsatisfied and incapable of happiness. It is very much like an addiction, with that intense focus on oneself to the exclusion of most other things. There are studies which also show other insalubrious effects: Outwardly successful people are prone to experience pangs of jealousy when someone else is doing well, and surges of secret pleasure when others fail. And each failure is cause for berating themselves for not being more determined or hard-working.

That said, many are still willing to work long and hard to be successful in that conventional and material sense. Truth be told, that is what has made Singapore so economically prosperous. But over the past few years, postings on social media suggest this hard-driving and high-achieving attitude seems to be undergoing a change. Until recently, there was that phenomenon of quiet



Many workers in general do not appear to be too enthusiastic about their work, says the writer. According to a recent poll by human resources agency Randstad of 1,000 respondents in Singapore, 35 per cent have quiet quit their jobs. ST FILE PHOTO

quitting. “Your worth as a person is not defined by your labour,” a young engineer called Zaid Khan narrated in the original quiet-quitting TikTok video. Elaborating on quiet quitting, he went on: “You are still performing your duties, but you are no longer subscribing to the hustle culture mentality that work has to be our life.”

So quiet quitting is not actually quitting. The quiet quitters – who were in the main from Generation Z – are avoiding “the above and beyond”. Instead, they are doing just enough at their work, flying below the radar without being picked on and not over-exerting themselves.

WORK AND GEN Z

Some might view this desire and intent to separate the economic and personal as due to a generational change. There is a school of thought that each successive generation will bring with them new ways of thinking and doing, and that they would also jettison those beliefs and practices of the previous generation that they feel are no longer relevant, and go on to develop their own values, tastes and culture.

This present Generation Z has grown up online, with its blurring

of the physical and digital worlds.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Cal Newport, an associate professor of computer science at Georgetown University, said “Generation Z is waking up to the fact that the unnatural melding of self and work induced by an adolescence lived within online spaces isn’t sustainable”, and quiet quitting is their attempt to figure “how work fits into a life well lived”.

That said, many workers in general do not appear to be too enthusiastic about their work. According to a recent survey by human resources agency Randstad of 1,000 respondents in Singapore, 35 per cent have quiet quit their jobs: 41 per cent said they did so to improve work-life balance, while 38 per cent said it was because of low compensation and the rising cost of living, and about 33 per cent cited a lack of career growth opportunities. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 67 – encompassing Generation Z, millennials, Generation X and baby boomers.

The issue, then, is perhaps less generational than discontent with work or the workplace itself.

In his book, *The Importance Of Work In An Age Of Uncertainty*, Boston College’s Professor David Blustein reports that for the past decades, “people were already

experiencing a sense of uncertainty about work, a sense that the institution of work was eroding”, largely because workers have “lost more and more autonomy and protection and have been treated like commodities”.

Prof Blustein added:

“Organisations have really put profits and productivity at the forefront, and I think people really feel it... Quiet quitting is part of a larger picture of this being a period of rethinking the institution of work.”

But there are still plenty of people who still find some meaning and purpose in their work, which comes with the friendship and companionship they find in the workplace. This gives them a reason to get out of the house, the satisfaction of feeling of doing something, and a sort of useful life. And I’m one of these people.

On most days, I am grateful for my job. It seems clear to me now that my first job would also be my last job. This choice was already long made when I entered medical school, and the only other career choice that I’d made was the sort of medical specialist I would want to be for the rest of my working life. This is who I am now – a psychiatrist whose personal identity is very much bound up in that vocation.

I like to think that I am intrinsically motivated and have a sense of purpose, but the truth is that I was also partly driven by the need for external validation and assurances – a need that was more urgent when I was younger and less secure about myself. And gratefully, very much less now – salvaged somewhat by those successes and recognition that came along with huge unwarranted luck.

I have worked long enough to come to a more grounded and nuanced view of what success means – something that is more personal, and which is about doing things well because of their intrinsic value and not for their material rewards. I have learnt, too, that no matter how ego-assuaging successes and awards are, the gratifying feelings are always fleeting, and they matter little to others. And the years of practising medicine – and through those harrowing times of Sars and Covid-19 – have given me a life-and-death appreciation of what truly matters.

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