

Building new constructs - moving beyond construction's workplace challenges

By [Marlize Fourie](#)

20 Mar 2023

Strong-armed by the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a notable ideological shift and reset in the way both employers and employees think about the world of work. Newly coined terms such as 'great resignation', 'great reshuffle' and 'great realignment', while slightly different in their definitions, describe the same phenomena - employees re-evaluating their current roles and employers seeking to review and optimise their traditional workplace organisational structure.

Redefined labour relations

Employees who are contemplating their future are generally those most susceptible to 'quiet quitting', which describes the psychological withdrawal by an employee stemming from their dissatisfaction with their employer, workplace or role.

The disillusionment that triggers such behaviours can be influenced by a myriad of personal and professional reasons, such as experiencing bereavement, fatigue, being overlooked for recognition and enduring a toxic workplace. Whatever the motivation, a lack of employee engagement is at the heart of the issue and, interestingly, research suggests that this is true irrespective of one's work arrangement, be it remote, hybrid or office-based.

While quiet quitting can be harshly considered a dereliction of duty, quiet-firing, on the other hand, is a failure of leadership and threatens a company's reputation as an employer. Quiet-firing can take two extreme forms, the failure to adequately provide performance feedback, coaching, support and career development to an employee due to negligence or, in the worst-case scenario, a deliberate tactic used by managers to squeeze subordinates out of their team or even the company as a whole.

Regardless of intention, these negative behaviours of quiet quitting and quiet firing can be attributed to the swell in employee turnover that the 'great resignation', 'great reshuffle' and 'great realignment' theories attempt to explain.

South Africa's contrasting realities

Domestically, 2021 data from Remchannel, a reward management platform, supports these trends, finding that employee turnover increased by 16% across all sectors in South Africa. Awareness of this dynamic should motivate effective leaders and forward-thinking employers to first secure their organisations' talent and then consider ways to attract talent from outside the organisation.

As we know, South Africa is a country of contrasting realities. Our unemployment rate reached record heights in 2021, largely attributed to pandemic-related job losses, with construction shedding roughly 25,000 jobs.

The result is a growing pool of low and unskilled job seekers feverishly competing against one another for limited entry-level positions. Inversely, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the technical skills shortage in the country has left highly skilled employees spoilt for choice. While free to pick their ideal employer, many of these professionals are opting for employment opportunities beyond the borders of our country.



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Emigration of specialist skills hollowing the industry, economy

The emigration of skilled specialist labour is a persistent trend that continues to destabilise the economy and the construction industry in particular. Rand Merchant Bank estimates that annually an average of 1.7% of civil engineers are leaving the country in search of greener pastures. If South Africa's economic reconstruction and recovery plans are to be infrastructure-led, a concerted effort is needed to reverse this trend.

Sadly, these emigrants are not dissuaded by the costs of permanent relocation or even higher costs of living, as the recent Checkers adverts so aptly captured. Our highly skilled employees are mindful of this and continue to emigrate because their reasons for leaving include non-monetary factors.

An escape from the multitude of challenges faced by South African society, including social unrest, lack of secure water and electricity supply and rolling blackouts to challenging conditions on site caused by vigilante groups who extort companies, disrupt work and damage property.



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Mitigating the milieu

Our strategy in these times is to stay close to our employees. We believe clear and consistent communication is needed both from line managers and executive leadership to remain in touch with our people. Employees want to understand the company's vision and strategic direction, the possible obstacles that could be encountered along the way, as well as the company's plan to deal with adversity.

Construction companies can no longer afford to overlook employee wellness matters, given the demanding nature of the industry. Competitive salaries and health and risk benefits are non-negotiables, which should be supplemented with career guidance, upskilling opportunities, and good service recognition awards. These are just a few of the ways to keep employees engaged while fostering an attractive professional environment.

The industry simply cannot pay lip service to the "new normal" without embracing the evolution that has occurred and coming to terms with the implications it holds for the future of construction. Lamenting the difficult external environment will not resolve any of the conundrums outlined above. Instead, let us ensure we build functional workplaces where employees are content and stimulated within healthy company cultures that support shared values.

To achieve this, we must look internally at ourselves and our employees, identify shortcomings and together plot inclusive futures, all with the inimitable perseverance, tenacity and unshakable resolve that defines South Africans.

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