

What can we learn from the Great Resignation?

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Changes in topic prevalence within the work discourse. Topics with increased prevalence are colored blue, while those with decreased prevalence are colored green. Credit: Complexity Science Hub

The Great Resignation appears to be ending, according to economists. But what can companies and leaders learn from the rapid pace of job-

quitting in recent years in order to prevent employees from leaving? A study out of the Complexity Science Hub (CSH), Vienna, pinpoints some of the forces behind the Great Resignation and suggests mental health topics contributed to the wave of quitting in the US.

The researchers analyzed the work discourse on the social media platform Reddit between 2018 and 2021. "We wanted to understand the reasons for the surge in quit rates after the COVID-19 pandemic in the US," says Maria del Rio-Chanona, a CSH research fellow and first author of the study published in [EPJ Data Science](#).

"One thing to note is that after recessions there is always a spike in quits. People switching jobs is not new, but the surge in quits in 2021 was a record high. So that brought the question, what makes this time different?" adds del-Rio Chanona.

Studying the phenomenon in real time

"Reddit offered us the possibility to study this emerging economic phenomenon in real time," explains the researcher. Del Rio-Chanona and her colleagues focused on the forum "r/jobs," where more than a hundred thousand people shared their work-related questions and concerns. Reddit posts are semi-anonymous and unrestricted in length, allowing users to express themselves freely and in detail.

In the study, the team used topic modeling, a machine learning technique that discovers conversation topics from large-scale text data, to identify the most common concerns in the work discourse on Reddit.

"Our main finding is that the pandemic exacerbated the already growing [mental health](#) concerns among workers, and we show that such concerns became disproportionately present in the discourse of quit-related posts since the onset of the pandemic," observe del Rio-Chanona and

colleagues.

New forces at play

The results show that posts about mental health and work-related distress—for instance, expressing feelings of anxiety, stress, and overwhelm at work—were more likely to involve quitting. In other words, when talking about quitting, people discussed [mental health concerns](#) more often than before or than other people discussing work. People's motivation to quit may have been influenced by distressing work experiences and fears about their mental health, suggest del Rio-Chanona and colleagues.

"Our findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed forces that contributed to quit behavior, such as mental health concerns, that were less salient during previous economic recoveries," said Ljubica Nedelkoska, a senior researcher at CSH and co-author of the study. "These new forces could help explain the unusually high rates of quitting in 2021."

In spite of concerns about mental [health](#) and work-related distress at the start of the pandemic, things changed along the Great Resignation—likely due to better employment opportunities, according to the researchers. "With better job opportunities in 2021, posts about salary negotiations, [job offers](#) and promotions increased," said del Rio-Chanona.

"People talked less about quitting because they hated their job, and more about negotiating salaries and discussing job offer issues. Some of the people quitting in 2021 might have strongly disliked their job in 2020, but did not quit until 2021, when there were better employment prospects," explain the researchers.

Tens of millions of Americans quit their jobs during the Great Resignation, but fewer are doing so this year, leading experts to conclude that the phenomenon is over. Now the question is, from this point forward, what can be done? According to Nedelkoska, the Great Resignation provided us with a chance to reflect on how people work, as well as improve company practices. Del Rio-Chanona emphasizes the importance of putting an emphasis on employees' relational and self-fulfillment needs in the future.

"In light of the current debate about how new technologies are reinventing work, it is crucial to use technology to improve working conditions."

More information: R. Maria del Rio-Chanona et al, Mental health concerns precede quits: shifts in the work discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic and great resignation, *EPJ Data Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1140/epjds/s13688-023-00417-2](https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-023-00417-2)

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