

Balancing Flexibility and Accountability: A Case of Employee Burnout and Quiet Quitting in an Indian Startup

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.11050147>

Received: 05 May 2026; Accepted: 10 May 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

ABSTRACT

The rapid adoption of flexible work arrangements has transformed organizational structures, particularly in startups. While remote work offers autonomy and cost advantages, it also presents challenges related to employee engagement, accountability, and well-being. This case study examines an Indian ed-tech startup, EduNext Solutions, which experienced declining productivity, rising employee burnout, and the emergence of quiet quitting following a transition to a fully remote work model. Using an exploratory case study approach supported by employee survey data and managerial insights, the study highlights the gaps in strategic human resource management. The findings are analyzed through the lens of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Maslach’s Burnout Theory. The case provides actionable HR strategies to balance flexibility with accountability while enhancing employee engagement and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Employee Burnout, Quiet Quitting, Remote Work, HR Strategy, Employee Engagement, Startups

INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic era has accelerated the adoption of remote work across industries. Startups, in particular, have embraced fully remote models to reduce operational costs and provide employees with greater flexibility. While such arrangements offer several benefits, they also create challenges in maintaining productivity, engagement, and organizational commitment.

This case study explores the experience of EduNext Solutions, an Indian ed-tech startup that transitioned to a fully remote work model. Within months, the organization began experiencing issues related to employee burnout, disengagement, and quiet quitting. The case highlights the need for integrating strategic HR practices with flexible work arrangements.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model posits that employee well-being is influenced by the balance between job demands (e.g., workload, time pressure) and job resources (e.g., support, autonomy, feedback). In remote work settings, increased demands combined with reduced resources often lead to burnout.

Maslach Burnout Theory

Burnout is characterized by:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Reduced personal accomplishment

These dimensions are particularly relevant in remote work environments where boundaries are blurred.

Social Exchange Theory

Employees reciprocate organizational support with engagement and commitment. When perceived support declines, employees withdraw effort, leading to phenomena such as quiet quitting.

Company Background

EduNext Solutions, established in 2018, is a Bengaluru-based ed-tech startup providing affordable online learning solutions. By 2023, the company had grown to over 150 employees across content development, technology, and marketing functions.

Initially operating under a hybrid work model, the organization transitioned to a fully remote structure in early 2024 to reduce operational costs and enhance flexibility.

Case Narrative

Riya, a content developer at EduNext Solutions, initially welcomed the flexibility of remote work. However, over time, she found herself working extended hours, often exceeding 10 hours per day. The absence of clear boundaries between work and personal life led to increased stress. Virtual meetings became frequent but lacked structure, leaving employees confused about expectations. Riya gradually reduced her involvement, contributing only to assigned tasks without proactive engagement—a classic case of quiet quitting.

Similar experiences were reported across teams, indicating a systemic issue.

Problem Statement

Within six months of adopting a fully remote work model, EduNext Solutions observed:

- A 22% decline in overall productivity
- Increased delays in task completion
- Reduced collaboration among teams
- Communication inefficiencies
- Declining employee engagement

An internal survey (n = 80 employees) revealed:

- 68% reported increased stress levels
- 55% experienced longer working hours
- 47% felt disconnected from their teams
- 42% admitted to doing only minimum required work

Key HR Issues

Employee Burnout

Employees experienced emotional exhaustion due to increased workload and lack of boundaries, aligning with Maslach's burnout dimensions.

Lack of Accountability

Managers struggled to track performance due to absence of structured monitoring systems.

Communication Gaps

Unstructured virtual communication resulted in ambiguity, delays, and misalignment.

Declining Motivation

Reduced recognition and limited interaction weakened employees' emotional connection with the organization.

HR Interventions Undertaken

The HR department initiated:

- Employee feedback surveys
- Weekly virtual meetings
- Online engagement activities

However, these interventions failed to produce significant improvements due to:

- Lack of strategic alignment
- Absence of measurable KPIs
- Generic, one-size-fits-all approach
- Limited managerial accountability

Analysis

The challenges at EduNext Solutions reflect a misalignment between remote work strategy and HR practices.

From the JD-R perspective, employees faced **high job demands** (extended working hours, unclear expectations) with **low job resources** (limited support, weak communication), leading to burnout.

The lack of organizational support weakened the psychological contract, as explained by Social Exchange Theory, resulting in disengagement and quiet quitting.

Additionally, the absence of structured performance management systems reduced accountability and productivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Performance Management System

- Implement OKRs (Objectives and Key Results)
- Use digital dashboards for tracking performance
- Conduct weekly performance reviews

Employee Engagement Strategies

- Introduce structured recognition programs

- Conduct monthly feedback sessions
- Organize virtual and in-person team-building activities

Work-Life Balance Policies

- Define fixed working hours
- Introduce “no meeting” time blocks
- Conduct periodic burnout assessments

Leadership Development

- Train managers in remote team management
- Enhance communication and emotional intelligence skills

Hybrid Work Model

- Adopt a 3:2 hybrid model (3 days remote, 2 days in-office)
- Encourage periodic face-to-face collaboration

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory case study approach based on:

- Internal HR reports
- Employee survey data (n = 80)
- Informal managerial insights

The objective is to analyze real-world organizational challenges and propose strategic HR interventions.

Teaching Objectives

This case study aims to:

- Understand challenges of remote work
- Analyze employee burnout and disengagement
- Apply HR theories in practical contexts
- Develop strategic HR solutions

Discussion Questions

1. What are the primary causes of employee burnout in this case?
2. How does remote work contribute to disengagement and quiet quitting?
3. What strategic mistakes were made by management?
4. How can HR align remote work with performance management?

5. Should EduNext adopt a hybrid model? Justify your answer.

Contribution of the Study

This case contributes by:

- Providing insights into quiet quitting in Indian startups
- Bridging the gap between remote work and HR strategy
- Offering practical solutions for employee engagement and well-being

CONCLUSION

The case of EduNext Solutions demonstrates that while remote work offers flexibility, it also requires robust HR frameworks to sustain productivity and engagement. Organizations must balance flexibility with accountability through strategic HR practices, effective leadership, and employee-centric policies. A hybrid approach, supported by structured systems, can help organizations achieve long-term sustainability.

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