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Person First Workplaces: How an Ethic of Care can Help to Improve Workplace Conditions and  
Promote Workplace Relations

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Jacob Ratliff

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## ABSTRACT

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the poor workplace conditions which most people have to deal with every day. In combination with the prolonged unstable economy, working class people are having to deal with stressful conditions at home and work, resulting in a situation where employees are facing workplaces which only seem to get worse and worse, leaving working class people with no choice but to find employment in an adverse environment. This paper offers an ethics of care based approach in which workplace conditions are directly addressed by implementing practices and policies centered around ethical caring, making the workplace somewhere supportive and productive for the corporation and its employees. This ethics of care approach utilizes the preexisting relationships within businesses to make the workplace a caring environment where the employees of the business can better themselves, while not infringing on the profitability of the corporation.

INTRODUCTION .....	4
THE STATE OF LABOR CONDITIONS .....	5
CARE IN BUSINESS.....	10
OPERATIONALIZING CARE .....	15
POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS.....	20
CONCLUSION.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	28
VITA.....	31

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCITON

The COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to it have become a normal part of day to day life. Longstanding workplace and economic trends have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential looming global recession are set to make labor conditions even worse. These factors have caused an economic shock, a prolonged period of inflation, and a deterioration of workplace conditions, leading to frustration, fatigue, and general burn out. This combination of poor workplace environments and an economy which has been in flux for quite some time has led to high turnover and the rise of a trend called “quiet quitting.” If these trends continue, then workplace conditions may worsen, and have ripple effects throughout society. I argue that poor working conditions are caused by a failure to care for employees, and can be solved by implementing practices and principles from an ethic of care in the workplace. By implementing principles and practices of care, businesses will be able to address issues of high turnover and create a better working environment.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STATE OF LABOR CONDITIONS

The impact of the pandemic and state of the economy has forced many working class people to question both the state of labor conditions in their individual workplace, and more largely, whether or not it is worth working in these conditions, all while many who have no choice but to work are finding it not worthwhile to put in more than the bare minimum of what is required. Labor and the workplace in industrialized nations have been troubled long before the COVID-19 pandemic, where Michael Cholbi identifies two particular issues which the pandemic has exacerbated. First, Cholbi highlights how much of human activity has been framed in work terms.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen in how exercising often is referred to as “working out,” and even things as personal as romantic or intimate relationships are “worked on” when going through couple troubles. Secondly, Cholbi explains how the large shift from individuals being proprietors of their own venture to employment is a change brought about by industrialization and not something frequently seen throughout the rest of human history.<sup>2</sup> Cholbi points out how historically most people would move between different professions and careers as happened to be convenient, with few individuals working in a career or profession for a prolonged period of time. The trends Cholbi identifies are not problematic in themselves, but can allow for workplace

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<sup>1</sup> Cholbi 2022

<sup>2</sup> Cholbi 2022

problems to be amplified dramatically. Being an employee, rather than a proprietor, gives workers far less control and bargaining power over their own labor. The domination of work in our lives can cause workers to stick with a job that is not a good fit for them for the sake of having a job or to seek employment when it is not appropriate for them to be working. These two shifts to, first, culture of work and, second, to work for others' ventures on their own can create problematic workplace conditions.

The trends in workplaces combined with the COVID-19 pandemic have created a looming crisis. Kim Parker and Juliana Horowitz with the Pew Research Center surveyed adults who quit in 2021. They discovered that over half of adults cited lack of pay, lack of advancement opportunities, and feeling disrespected in the workplace as reasons for quitting.<sup>3</sup> These problems are especially harmful to workers during a pandemic, when faced with the increased expenses and inflation. Many workers have been unable to meet their basic needs at jobs which they had held and been happy with prior to the pandemic. Parker and Horowitz highlight how about a quarter of young adults and low-income earners quit during the period of the study. These factors all lead to a higher rate of turnover and require businesses to spend more on recruiting, hiring, and training new employees, as explained by Indeed. Indeed explains that this high turnover makes it harder for the employees who chose to stay: they have a less consistent work environment, which leads to overall lower productivity.<sup>4</sup> This can all be understood as a failure to meet the needs of the employees, which will be explored in the next section. There have been long standing problems in the workplace, and the pandemic has pushed this from a less than

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<sup>3</sup> Parker and Horowitz 2022

<sup>4</sup> Indeed Editorial Team 2021



ideal circumstance to something actually threatening to the average worker, even when everyone in the workplace is giving their all.

However, the Great Resignation is not just a problem of entry-level and young workers facing adverse conditions, but also a problem of many older and end-of-career workers being forced into early retirement. Parker and Horowitz note that most people who quit were able to find a job, but this does not account for the lack of willing workers.<sup>5</sup> If the trends identified in Pew were the only problems, then the economy would only be facing high turnover, not an outright worker shortage. Alyssa Fowers and Andrew Van Dam writing for *The Washington Post* using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics fill in the missing gaps.<sup>6</sup> Fowers and Van Dam identify two related forces leading to the Great Resignation that go beyond expected workplace conditions. First, there is a disconnect in the number of job openings and willing workers. Second, there is a vast number of people being forced into early retirement.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Pew pointed out that young workers remain in the workforce, only ever having left for quarantine, older workers were already eyeing retirement (and may have pre-existing medical conditions). These forces explain the phenomenon of over 1.5 million people retiring who otherwise would have kept working, and the observation of employers who cannot find sufficient numbers of candidates to fill the demand for job openings. Flowers and Van Dam also identify the demographic of older working adults not retired who need to provide childcare, have COVID, or care for someone who has COVID restricting their ability to participate in the labor force, which makes their participation intermittent. So to properly address the Great Resignation, businesses

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<sup>5</sup> Parker and Horowitz 2022

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022

<sup>7</sup> Fowers and Van Dam 2021

will need to both make work more appealing to address the dissonance of willing workers and worker demand, as well as make the workplace caring to address turnover.

In spite of the problems created by the Great Resignation, people are starting to go back to work and unemployment numbers are going down worldwide, as shown by Macrotrends.<sup>8</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that inflation has been going up at a rate of five percent per month since November of 2021.<sup>9</sup> The combination of poor working conditions and being given no choice but to work has made many turn to Quiet Quitting: a form of workplace protest generally characterized by a worker doing the bare minimum to keep the job. These combined factors have put working class people between a rock and a hard place, where the jobs they are able to get do not value them, but they have no choice but to work as inflation has made the cost of living increase beyond what benefits and savings are able to cover, if they even have any. An important aspect of Quiet Quitting is the individualistic nature, without the workplace-wide cooperation seen in something akin to a work-to-rule union protest. However, when considered alongside the rate of inflation and the recent popularization of Quiet Quitting, the conditions the average person faces in both the workplace and at home have actually gotten worse, not better. Consequently, it is something that only serves the quiet quitter, not leading to social or policy changes in the workplace. The individualized benefit of Quiet Quitting can further exacerbate the problems experienced by other people in the workplace, especially for those not engaging in the practice.

Given the state of the economy and the typical workplace, the rest of this paper will try to do three main things. For people who are in businesses and organizations with the authority to

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<sup>8</sup> Macrotrends 2022

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022

change the policies and practices of the organization, it will provide a model in which the workplace conditions can be meaningfully improved without having to compromise the profitability of the business or ability of the organization to use its resources to uphold its function, such as government or non-profit workplaces. For the worker, this paper will show that it is possible for things to get better in ways that will improve their day to day life, as well as showing some of the problems of Quiet Quitting. And for the hardline business-minded person as well as non-ethic of care ethicists, this paper will show that ethics of care based policies and both can and should be integrated into the workplace.

### CHAPTER III

#### CARE IN BUSINESS

Businesses as a basic necessity must turn a profit to survive, where if the business does not profit, it cannot continue to fund itself and operate. At the same time, the employees of businesses need money so they can pay for food, housing, and other basic needs. From these conditions, businesses can seek their own profitability, the wellbeing of their employees, or do some combination of the two. In this way, caring practices and the operation of a business are compatible. Even if it is hard for a business to both be profitable and caring to its employees, this is not a strong enough reason to reject more caring policies in the workplace. Thomas Hawk explains that for any business with more than two employees, focusing on the preexisting relationships already existing between employees and coworkers is actually intuitive. The relationships between employees may or may not have a power relation, but relationships of the employees will have meaningful impacts on the lives of the employees and the performance of the business, both inside and outside of the operating hours.<sup>10</sup> These relationships affect how well particular employees work with each other in both employees of the same level and management/executives, the relationship of the business and their suppliers, and the business and their partners. Relationships which are productive for the individuals and business already play

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<sup>10</sup> Hawk 2013, 15-17

an essential facilitating role in business operations. Businesses then adopting principles and practices of care means reframing these relationships from an incidental and essential quirk of operation, towards an intentional caring perspective.

In any given business, if care is valued, then there should be some means for employees to express these needs and have them recognized by their employer, but too often this is not the case. All of the issues identified by the Pew and The Bureau of Labor Statistics data are a need being present but not met. Lack of adequate pay is the most obvious one, where the employees need to pay rent, buy food, and cover other necessary expenses. This is a twofold failure of the business; not only is the business (or the individuals in control of it) failing to recognize and meet these needs, but they are also perpetuating a dynamic network of relationships that are not sufficiently responsive to the importance of needs. Nel Noddings particularly highlights the importance of needs, to the degree where she argues for a needs-based conception of rights.<sup>11</sup> A needs-based approach differs from traditional conceptions of rights, because rather than relying on a legal system of strangers instituting and following laws which might not be aligned with individuals' needs, individual caring people can recognize what each other needs, and act from what Noddings refers to as a “moral obligation of common humanity.” A needs-based rights conception then takes individual needs recognition and makes it a duty of every individual to uphold, rather than a traditional conception of rights giving you the negative duty to not interfere with the attainment of the rights or needs. Noddings comes to this conclusion because in practice this needs-based conception will achieve all the same protections a traditional rights based approach does, while not falling victim to the fallibility and problems that bureaucracy in

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<sup>11</sup> Noddings 2002, 35-36

government causes, and making sure that the things any given person needs to live a good life will be fulfilled far better. The needs-based approach is also better because it avoids the problem of not having a duty to rescue, where Noddings identifies that there are situations in which someone may recognize a need, maybe even on the level of life and death, but not have a legal obligation to meet the need. Businesses more formally recognizing needs of employees in the way Noddings outlines would allow for employees to have their needs met more consistently and strengthen the networks of relationships and care where they would otherwise be neglected, because it would be the duty of people working together to care for each other. For example, even though the federal government has recognized that when left to the free market, businesses will not pay people enough and have instituted a minimum wage. However, because the needs of people can change faster than laws can, many people are being paid the minimum wage but still not having their needs for housing and food met, so a needs-based approach would lead employees to getting paid enough, rather than getting paid the amount the government says they cannot be paid less than.

The need for businesses to turn a profit and the needs of the employees are different in kind from each other. Businesses' only real need is to profit, but this is not strictly necessary, as there are many multi-billion dollar corporations which do not report profits and still continue operations.<sup>12</sup> This is distinguished from human needs, where not meeting them results in adverse suffering or even death, which a business physically cannot experience. This difference in kind between the types of needs then creates differing obligations between the two, which can be understood as different caring roles. Daniel Engster develops these intuitions when explaining

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<sup>12</sup> Levy 2019

that managers in most contexts will be in the role of caring-for, while the employees they oversee will be in the role of cared-for.<sup>13</sup> Engster makes this argument by offering a version of stakeholder theory centered around care, as the principles for the distribution of resources (whether it be physical or human), where a stakeholder is anyone whose ability to care for themselves or others is dependent on the firm.<sup>14</sup> Engster explains that when managers are confronted with a problem, instead of just worrying about the bottom line and interests of the proprietor or investors, they also ought to consider the needs of others as would be proximate, relational, and urgent to the actual people experiencing these needs and the manager as collective stakeholders. This makes businesses useful in practices of caregiving and puts an incentive for the interests of the business to be aligned with helping those connected to it achieve higher levels of care. Engster's conception of caring stakeholder theory mandates that managers give priority to those whose capacity for care is tied up in the business in some way, which would give preference to proprietors/investors, as it already does, and a new and increased emphasis on the employees which is not present in other versions of stakeholder theory. This change in both who counts as a stakeholder, and the prioritization of their needs and wants is where Engster's care based stakeholder theory differs from more traditional versions of stakeholder theory in business ethics. Where not only are employees considered as stakeholders in the same way that the proprietors and owners of the business would be, but the needs-based analysis from the ethics of care basis also prioritizes employees as their needs would prioritize their role as a stakeholder. Employees' obligations would shift from the business entity itself to the actual people with whom they have relationships within the business. Even though they would have less

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<sup>13</sup> Engster 2013, 98-101

<sup>14</sup> Engster 2013, 101

commitment to the business itself, this would not be to the detriment of the business because of the greater integration of care by implementing support for a network of relationships throughout the business's practices.

While businesses do have an overall need to turn a profit to survive, this need is not a justifiable reason to undermine the needs of the human employees or their care, nor is it overriding. Businesses only valuing the profit they can extract from employees is a failure on the business to recognize and value the relationship they hold with their employees and their employees hold with each other, and this practice is one of the ways in which employees "rights" may be upheld while failing to meet their needs. Business practices and an ethic of care are compatible with each other, and share a lot of common features. Noddings' needs-based conception of rights then works well here, because by fulfilling the needs of employees, it makes the business internally stronger by capitalizing on the relationships which are incidental to the day to day operations of a business. This can be as simple as trying to look at your coworkers as people first, instead of as the person who does a particular task. This person-first approach humanizes those in the workplace, and makes things like "workplace synergy" much easier to achieve, as it is a manifestation of a caring work environment. The only meaningful tension is how to implement caring practices for employees while attending to the comparatively minimal profit needs of businesses.



## CHAPTER IV

### OPERATIONALIZING CARE

Having established the compatibility of business and an ethic of care, this section will explain two methods in which care can be operationalized in businesses. The first method is to implement practices of care by changing how internal human resources issues as well as complaints from employees are handled. The second method to operationalize care is to adopt care as a corporate virtue as a means of public accountability. These two methods individually would help address the GR, and together would be able to fully do so while also creating a more caring working environment overall.

Most businesses already have a system of handling disputes, but they tend to prioritize the interests and protection of the business, rather than assuring that the employee's concern is actually handled, regardless of who may be at fault. To prioritize care in disputes raised by employees, businesses should adopt a model of dispute resolution similar to that of Noddings' conception of coercive care.<sup>15</sup> Noddings describes that in an instance of coercion<sup>16</sup>, when a grievance is made, it should be respectfully listened to, followed by a process of negotiation and remediation. What needs to be done to fix these pre-existing HR dispute resolution systems is

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<sup>15</sup> Noddings 2002, 252

<sup>16</sup> The conception of coercion Noddings uses differs from the colloquial or traditional uses of the term, as the use of or threat of force for the sake of persuasion would be neither ethical nor caring

simple, where HR departments need to look at the workplace from the perspective of Engster's caring stakeholder theory, and make their policies align with Noddings' conception of coercive care. Adopting a caring mindset in dispute resolution then shifts every HR complaint from being a potential threat to the business by default, to an opportunity to achieve care and better the company. For example, when a complaint is raised, (eg., feeling disrespected in the office), this would be raised to the attention of HR (or whomever happens to oversee these issues). After having dutifully listened to the issue at hand, HR will then present an option, or set of options, which serve as a starting point of discussion. For feeling disrespected in the workplace, this can vary from rearranging positions in the company, sensitivity training for the offending party, or possibly involving people further up the organizational hierarchy or involving external arbitration if the issue is serious enough. Remediation then is the implementation of whatever was mutually agreed on, where the solution needs to take into account the concerns and needs of the transgressed employee and the basic needs of the business, and carries a great deal of significance, as the employees having trust that the dispute resolution process works for them--and not against them--is critically important to it functioning properly in accordance with care.

Determining the effectiveness of a caring dispute resolution system in a business can be done by looking at three metrics. The first metric is the overall success of the business. This one is the most disconnected from any particular event that would cause someone to report a grievance, but is an essential general metric for the health of the business, as one with a lot of disputes or which solves them ineffectively can be expected to flounder if not addressed. The second metric is the number and frequency of disputes that the business has to resolve. This measure is essential to look at, but only becomes accurate with long-term data. If a business has

a poor dispute resolution system or one the employees do not trust, implementing one that the employees feel serves them and are able to trust may lead to a short-term increase in overall reports, but in time it would be expected to drop off as the company becomes more caring. The third and most useful metric is the magnitude and severity of the claims. This measure would give a good indicator of the health of the workplace environment, assuming that the system is liked and trusted by the employees. Looking at the type of offense brought to the dispute resolvers will inform the business what problems their employees have, and how serious they are (as receiving complaints of “off color” jokes pales compared to reports of sexual assault). Looking at the three of these together would tell the office or person handling these disputes what types of issues the company is having, how often they are happening, and how they are impacting the business as a whole.

The second method to implement care in business would be for businesses to adopt principles of care as a corporate virtue. Maureen Sander-Staudt outlines that those with governing power over the business (executives and proprietors) ought to start implementing policies and practices of care.<sup>17</sup> This is a top-down approach that is much more public-facing than the previous recommendation. Sander-Staudt explains that this allows the business to create caring conditions in the particular methods and practices that work best for it and its employees. Similarly to the points made by Engster and Hawk, she argues that corporations are already networks of interdependent individuals meeting each other's needs as the business goes about its purpose. However, despite describing this as a corporate virtue, Sander-Staudt describes this as actually affecting the internal policies and practices of the corporation (like the ones described

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<sup>17</sup> Sander-Staudt 2013, 274

previously), leading to meaningful change beyond just virtue signaling. This same intuition is most clearly stated by Noddings, who claims that even though the virtue and disposition aspects of care are important, care is best understood as a measurable outcome (in a consequentialist theory).<sup>18</sup> Understanding corporate virtues in this sense then makes them a guiding principle from the top level of the business and as a public check of their stated and actual values and practices. Upholding care as a virtue would allow the business to demonstrate to both the public and their employees that the business is committed to care, both as a goal and concrete outcome.

Implementing care as a corporate virtue could be seen to affect a company in two main ways. First, the company would be passing policies from the top down with care in mind, as Sander-Staudt outlines. This is probably how most businesses would end up adopting these policies, as more companies openly value care, it would lead others to bandwagon and follow suit. Second, adopting care as a corporate virtue could affect public branding. This is primarily for the public image of the business, where caring businesses can be expected to attract more caring consumers, attract more caring employees, and retain more caring employees. On the other hand, uncaring businesses would be expected to push these consumers and employees away. The importance of branding is something businesses have been acutely aware of for some time, as brand image, values, competitiveness, and consumer knowledge of all of this have huge impacts on the performance of the business as a whole as discussed by Kevin Keller.<sup>19</sup> Keller explains that an important part of branding is consumers' understanding and caring about what one business can offer as opposed to another. Businesses that adopt care as a corporate virtue and implement the practices of caring, and which communicate both the virtue and the practices to

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<sup>18</sup> Noddings 2002, 30

<sup>19</sup> Keller 2000

consumers in a way that is understood by them, can be expected to outperform businesses which do not. Further, because this would be as much an exercise of public branding as it would be of actual caring practices, if the business claims it values care but does not actually implement caring practices, it can be expected to harm the business for misleading consumers (ultimately pushing the business to actually implement practices of care, leading to the failure of a uncaring business). By adopting a corporate virtue of caring and implementing caring practices, businesses will be held publicly accountable by their consumers if they fail to do so.

Supporting both caring practices of conflict resolution and adopting a corporate virtue of care will lead businesses to be more caring and more successful. This is done by prioritizing the relationships and networks of care and relationships that already exist within businesses, and shifting the corporate power to be in line with the support of the employees working for the business, and not just the business itself. Because all of the major problems identified in Pew and *The Washington Post* for the Great Resignation are all failures of care, the policies outlined supporting care and the conditions of care would help address these issues. Practices of care in the workplace would help ease the issues of high turnover by making the jobs themselves more appealing and likable, then by having made the jobs more appealing, working at a caring company would be more appealing than working elsewhere. Caring principles and practices will both be able to retain existing employees for longer, and be able to attract more interest in working at the business than those who do not.

## CHAPTER V

### POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS

Despite the case for care which has been made, there are three objections which need to be addressed. The first is that businesses have no obligation to care, and their only obligation lies with achieving profit for the shareholders or proprietor. The second is that businesses should try to improve the workplace conditions by improving workplace happiness, and there is no greater obligation to care as a concept itself. Third and last, quiet quitting is a sufficient and effective measure for employees to make their experience at work better and not hinder the profitability currently experienced by businesses. This section will explain these three arguments and show why businesses' duty to care is still going to be the best choice for businesses.

The details of the first objection can be filled out as follows. Expecting businesses to care for their employees may be expecting too much of them, as the only real obligation they have is to assure their own profitability. By arguing that businesses ought to seek to retain employees, rather than hiring and firing as they see fit, this makes increasing pay and benefits something which is expected, rather than earned. This is then further confounded if anyone is engaging in Quiet Quitting, as these would be employees who are potentially being rewarded for not doing what they can to push the workplace and overall business forward. The business ought to determine when an employee is loyal, valuable, or ready for a raise on their own time and not

when the employee threatens to leave. Anything beyond the wages and benefits the employee originally signed on without a change in position should be a pleasant surprise, rather than an expectation.

There are many aspects of this argument which hold true, but which miss the point of why businesses ought to be caring. Even if businesses have no further obligation than their own profitability, there exist obligations between the people in the business, and by pursuing caring practices and policies, the business can actually achieve lower its cost of operation. There are relationships and networks of care which already exist in businesses as an essential part of their operation, and this paper seeks to empower those for the betterment of businesses as a whole and to address the specific issues presented by the Great Resignation. The obligation for businesses to care is from the people who make up the business itself, who all do have obligations to care for others, and not from the strictly legal entity of the business which has no obligation beyond generating profit. It may even be the case that the legal business entity itself does not have obligations beyond mere profitability, but even if this were the case it does not negate the obligations of care the individuals who are inside of the business have to each other. Further, retaining employees ends up also being cheaper for the business after all other expenses are considered as explained by Indeed and Keller. The process of creating a job listing, posting the listing, collecting and sorting applications, interviewing candidates, and hiring and training the new employee becomes way more expensive than increasing the pay and/or benefits of existing employees, making having caring policies and practices the cheaper alternative. Valuing the employees of the business will prove to be a beneficial practice of the business, and actually be

able to solve the problems of the Great Resignation in ways that simply seeking the bottom line continually demonstrates itself to be unable to.

The second potential objection seeks to replace the good of caring with happiness, by arguing that happiness is a much more effective way to attract new employees and retain existing ones than prioritizing care. No matter how high the level of care provided in the business, happiness and care are not one and the same. At best, high levels and conditions of care would permit for workplace happiness to be achieved, but care is a practice while happiness is a feeling or state of mind. If an employee is unhappy with their job, they will actively want to find somewhere else to work the longer they are there. In this way, increasing the benefits and pay of the employee to get them to stay longer would make them more unhappy over the length of employment. By pursuing happiness rather than care, you make people more willing to work and decrease turnover by making the workplace a happier place than the world outside of work.

This objection captures some important distinctions, but fails to fully engage with the reasons for upholding care over happiness. Even if happiness were effective and easier to implement, this still does not undermine the benefits and importance of implementing care into the workplace. An unhappy workplace environment and an uncaring workplace environment are fundamentally different places. The unhappy workplace environment is less than ideal, but not actively harmful to the workers, even if it does lead to higher turnover and less people interested in working. An uncaring workplace is actively harmful to the person, because if their needs are not being met then they are going to be actively harmed. For example, somebody can be in the happiest workplace imaginable, but if they are not being paid enough to make rent, then it does not matter how happy the workplace is. Further, the work done by Andre Spicer and Carl



Cederstrom shows many ways in which policies promoting happiness in the workplace can break down the relationships you do have in the workplace and isolate you emotionally and socially, such as requirements that customer-facing employees must always present a happy face, or when management insists that everyone act like they are having a fun time at company parties.<sup>20</sup> Because happiness cannot be defined in a way that is consistent across employees, and can lead to performative happiness, it leads to inconsistent implementation of policy that mirrors many of the workplace issues previously identified as leading to the Great Resignation. This is not only an overt breakdown of caring, but it also can lead to further unhappiness and an overall decrease of productivity. In this way, by seeking out happiness as a way to improve businesses, not only has the employee been made worse off emotionally and socially, but the business is made worse off by lower productivity levels. This feeds the problems of the Great Resignation of higher turnover and making employment unappealing.

The third potential objection is for employees to individually engage in quiet quitting. Quiet quitting is a practice which claims to allow for work-life separation, and when done in an appropriate manner, allows for the improvement of workplace conditions. Evan Arnet describes a type of quiet quitting where an employee who has no other options to better their working conditions does only the bare minimum amount of work described in their employment contract and nothing more.<sup>21</sup> This means doing nothing beyond what is absolutely required, and can be described as a form of malicious compliance. The quiet quitter does only what is contractually obligated, and nothing else for the workplace, even if it would be easy, within the quiet quitter's power, and improves overall workplace productivity. Quiet Quitting can manifest as

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<sup>20</sup> Spicer and Cederstrom 2015

<sup>21</sup> Arnet, 2022

performative business when in the presence of coworkers while slacking other times, taking unneeded frequent and prolonged bathroom breaks, and pushing off tasks to coworkers whenever possible. This form of workplace protest is then able to challenge the domination of regular life as described previously in the paper. When engaging in Quiet Quitting, the employee does the minimum work possible, bucking the trend Cholbi identifies of work taking over life, and the quiet quitter gives the employer no choice but to respect it or take action against them, which is unlikely given the turnover and retention problems.

Although quiet quitting may improve some superficial aspects of day to day life better, its core problem is that it does not actually fix the underlying issues of the labor market, but coexists with them, as it is reactive to the institutional problems in workplaces. The predominant problem with quiet quitting as a solution to poor working conditions is how it differs from the similar practice of working-to-rule done by unions. This comes in two ways; first, the goal of quiet quitting and working-to-rule are fundamentally different, and second, the individual nature of quiet quitting renders it less effective at generating workplace change, often making things worse. On the first problem, Arnet explains this in detail, where the working-to-rule is an established practice unions implement by following rules of the workplace as a collective so that the collective has bargaining power to improve the workplace. Quiet quitting lacks this organization, and is stochastic by nature, so that every person engaging in quiet quitting has their own individual set of ideals and changes they would want, lacking the institutional power the union has to collectively bargain. Union efforts on the other hand are collectively organized, so that issues faced by the employees in the workplace can be concentrated into one unified voice and force for change, which quiet quitters cannot achieve. This also highlights the second

problem, that because it is individualistic in nature, quiet quitting has less potential solvency in being able to achieve their goals. Because quiet quitting consists of individuals acting on their own, it is something which often, if not always, will not consist of entire workplaces quiet quitting. This then forces the quiet quitter's coworkers to pick up whatever work the quiet quitter is not doing. For example, in a law firm if the secretary/receptionist decides to engage in quiet quitting, this does not negate the need for receiving, printing, and organizing documents, so if the secretary does not do it, then the partners who ought to be working on cases now have to do it themselves. Quiet quitting is then a zero sum game, where any benefit faced by the quiet quitter will be counteracted by harms other employees face.

At best, quiet quitting makes the overall workplace conditions the same on the net, where the workload of quiet quitters goes down while the workload of everyone else goes up, and no meaningful improvement to workplace conditions has been made. At worst, quiet quitting makes the workplace conditions worse, because by focusing on doing the minimum the quiet quitter has made their own work and of their coworkers worse. Focusing on doing the minimum amount of work takes the focus away from the particular task being done and how well it should be done, to the quantity of tasks instead. This focus on the minimum creates more opportunity for error in the work being done, which would then become someone else's problem to fix. This then confounds the work of the coworkers of the quiet quitter, where now they have to pick up the extra work and fix whatever errors caused by the quiet quitter. Further, under all scenarios there is the potential for the increase of workplace animosity. By having the work offloaded onto their coworkers, the quiet quitter has created a set of circumstances to alienate their coworkers, and unpopular in the workplace. Rather than capitalizing on the relationships as a means to improve

the office, the quiet quitter abandons them. This is the inverse of union behavior, where collective suffering is used as a social tool of cohesion that betters the workplace, quiet quitting is an individual taking these poor conditions and focusing only on themselves and no further, limiting their own solvency and potentially making their conditions worse.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Even if it is more expensive for businesses to pursue principles and practices of care, it is still worthwhile for creating a better working environment and retaining employees. These are practices which would actually be able to address the lack of willing workers and higher turnover rates the Great Resignation has caused, and make working through this uncertain economy less of a struggle for the working class. There are preexisting relationships in the workplace, so enabling them to seek care in addition to profit leads to overall better workplace conditions. Any short term problems implementing care in business would cause are far outweighed by the ability to solve the Great Resignation and other abilities to make businesses more prosperous, while also making working a less grueling practice, discouraging quiet quitting.

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## VITA

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