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PUSHED, PULLED, AND JOLTED:
UNDERSTANDING THE REAL REASONS WE QUIT

Anthony Klotz

For a multitude of reasons, the bar for quitting has been lowered.

Researchers have largely focused on two reasons we quit our jobs: how satisfied we are with our current job, and what alternatives we have to that job. This very sensible approach provides really good insight into why and when we leave our jobs. If your job satisfaction declines, you increasingly feel *pushed* by growing unhappiness to consider leaving your job, right? At the same time, if attractive alternatives to your job become available, you feel *pulled* away by better opportunities, toward greener grass. These two forces work in tandem. If you're very content with your job, even highly attractive alternatives may fail to pull you toward resigning. On the flip side, if you're highly dissatisfied at work but have no other options for making a living, you won't feel much of an inner push toward the exit door.

This push-pull perspective has a great deal of intuitive appeal, and for good reason. It does explain why people quit their jobs in many cases. It's so intuitive and powerful that it remained the primary perspective in academic turnover literature for most of the twentieth century. And in the minds of many leaders and pundits, this push-pull type of thinking still holds—that employees quit in a rational and calculated fashion, when the toxic parts of their job outweigh the good and/or when they become aware of better alternatives.

As one *Forbes* piece entitled "Why the 'Great Resignation' Is Greatly Exaggerated" questioned: "Will they quit en masse to spite their employers? No, they won't. In surveys, respondents can be brave and talk tough. When asked if people will quit their jobs if they're forced to go back to the office, they may honestly say 'yes' at that time. Given a little room to think about the reality of this decision, they'll quickly realize it's not such a smart decision to depart without another job offer in hand." This quote perfectly illustrates push-pull thinking—that people won't quit a job unless things get really bad at work or unless they have a good alternative.

But push-pull thinking doesn't tell the whole story. As reflected in a recent trend first observed in China and dubbed "naked resignations," people with no good alternatives frequently quit. On the opposite end of the spectrum, people who love their jobs regularly leave for other jobs. People who can't stand their work and have good alternatives sometimes stay. And in the worker-friendly job market following the pandemic, more of us than ever reported that we wanted to walk away from work altogether. Such "irrational" behavior flies in the face of push-pull thinking. It can leave leaders scratching their heads, and it did the same to academics for a long time. However, this started to change as researchers began to unearth the impact that *one-off events* have on us and our relationships with work and our jobs.

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This unearthing began when researchers started examining how companies deal with unexpected events, such as crises. In 1982, management professor Alan Meyer observed that just as earthquakes disrupt the structures of buildings, external events shake companies. He used the term *environmental jolts* to describe them. Studying the real-world case of an unexpected doctors' strike and its effect on hospitals, Meyer explained different ways that companies respond to jolts and showed that those responses impact how they perform in the future. As we'll see, the same is true for the jolts in our lives. There are different ways to respond to them, each with different implications for our future well-being and success.

Around this same time, the academic study of entrepreneurship was born, and there was a race to explain what leads people to make the leap from traditional jobs into entrepreneurial ventures. Many of us dream of being our own boss, but due to how risky it is, relatively few are willing to make that dream a reality. In 1975, management professor Albert Shapero wrote an informative and entertaining article in *Psychology Today* based on his study of hundreds of new ventures. He offered an insight that, to him, explained why so many of the entrepreneurs he studied entered self-employment in the first place. "The simplest route [to entrepreneurship]," he said, "is falling on hard times." That's it. He called entrepreneurs "displaced persons" because he saw most of them as people who had entered self-employment reluctantly. He went on to list all sorts of events that jolted the entrepreneurs in his study from their "nice, familiar niche" in their former jobs into launching a new venture: being fired, being passed over for a promotion, experiencing an organizational change, or (in a positive twist) being pitched a business idea by a friend. A few years later, Shapero and colleague Lisa Sokol expanded this explanation by discussing why actual refugees seemed particularly likely to become entrepreneurs.

They explained that most of us are pinned into our current life trajectory by pressures from family obligations, financial responsibilities, and *plain old inertia*. Breaking out of this autopilot and charting a new course rarely happens purely as a result of our initiative; there has to be a "powerful force" that jolts us into switching life paths. For the refugees they studied, these inertia-breaking events tended to stem from religious persecution or political oppression. Similarly, for the nonrefugee entrepreneurs that Shapero and Sokol studied, it was a displacing event, most commonly a single negative occurrence, that jarred them loose from their traditional careers and opened their eyes to an unrealized desire to start their own businesses.

These early studies laid the groundwork for a breakthrough in our understanding of quitting, in 1994. Thomas Lee and Terence Mitchell, two researchers at the University of Washington, published a paper that directly challenged the push-pull perspective. Importantly, their theory included push-pull turnover causes, wherein people slowly become dissatisfied at work, eventually reaching a point that leads them to start a job search or to quit without another job in hand.

But the basis for their "Unfolding Model of Turnover" is that the road to quitting often begins with a jarring event, "any expected or unexpected change . . . that shakes an employee out of a steady state or challenges the status quo with respect to his or her thinking about the job." These events—which they referred to as *shocks*—can be positive, negative, or neutral. The key element is that, they snap us out of our usual mode of thinking about our relationship with work. Anyone who has experienced or witnessed a midlife (or quarter-life) crisis has seen or felt what happens when someone living life in autopilot is suddenly jolted out of it.

Over the past three decades, researchers have found support for the predictions of the Unfolding Model. In one study of nurses who had recently quit their jobs, half the cases involved a jolt. In a subsequent study of around 200 people who recently left accounting firms, researchers found that just over 40 percent of jolts came from events at work, 40 percent came from opportunities outside of work (e.g., an unexpected job offer), and 20 percent came from jolts in workers' personal lives. Such findings, that at least half of quitters report that a specific event jump-started their quitting process, have been replicated in studies around the globe. In one example from Australia, management researchers studied exit interview transcripts of over 200 people who voluntarily left an Australian marketing firm. In over two-thirds of cases, it was a jolt that triggered the turnover process. Even among those who didn't experience a jolt, many reported there being a "final straw" that pushed them over the edge to quit.

The road to quitting often begins with a jarring event.

The takeaway from the Unfolding Model and subsequent tests of it are clear. As stated by management professor Brooks Holtom (who studied turnover alongside Lee and Mitchell for decades), "precipitating events, or shocks, cause voluntary turnover more often than accumulated job dissatisfaction." Put another way, when employees are asked whether there was a specific event that caused them to start thinking about leaving, the answer is often yes.

I first came across the Unfolding Model in my doctoral studies. At the time, I had worked as a manager for the prior decade, in a large organization and then in an entrepreneurial venture, and also gotten my MBA. I thought I had a pretty good grasp on what motivates employees to stay or go. My thinking was firmly rooted in the idea that the negative parts of our jobs, like low pay or an incompetent boss, are what push us to quit, along with the appeal of better alternatives that pull us away. End of story. But as I learned about the Unfolding Model and reflected on the times I had quit jobs, my employees quit jobs, and my peers quit jobs, I realized that in many cases, a specific event had kicked off the process. All this time, I had understood only half of the story.

After learning about it, I kept thinking about the Unfolding Model and my own resignation stories, those of my friends, family, and former colleagues, and of my former employees. In many of these stories, a pebble-size event had started the eventual avalanche of reflection leading to a person's resignation. And moreover, the avalanche could have been avoided or made less disruptive if it had been recognized by the person experiencing it and by those around them.

Take a moment now to reflect on your own life and the lives of those around you, and think of the jolts you've experienced. Those events, big and small, that have knocked you and others out of autopilot. Once you shift your mindset to looking for these specific events, you'll start seeing jolts and their most dramatic effect—quitting—everywhere. A legendary football coach has a revelation that leads him to announce his resignation in the middle of a winning season. The deaths of a family member and a close friend cause a future first lady to walk away from a lucrative career in corporate law. The most famous voice in television quits a new show after a producer tells her to tone down the emotion when she says her name. A terrorist attack thousands of miles away spurs a star athlete to leave sports behind and join the military. A milestone birthday causes an actor to reassess life and walk away from show business.

These are some of the stories that I share in my new book, *Jolted*, the types of stories that, along with the Unfolding Model, inspired me to study resignations. I'm not interested only in why employees quit, though; I'm enthusiastically curious about how people quit their jobs. This curiosity stems from my own work experience. To me, deciding whether to quit a job was often tough, but equally difficult was figuring out the best way to do it. And I could tell I wasn't alone because I observed people resigning in ways that unintentionally burned bridges or that added unnecessary rockiness to their career transition. Adding to my interest is the fact that poorly executed resignations are harmful to the employees left behind and impactful to firms. And finally, quitting is more common than most of us realize. In the US, the generation currently exiting the workforce switched jobs, on average, 12.7 times between the ages of eighteen and fifty-six. While promotions and terminations account for some of these switches, there's a whole lot of quitting going on as well.

For the sake of your own career and those of the people close to you, your ability to respond to jolts in constructive ways is critical.

Despite the complexity, stakes, and prevalence of jolts, pretty much no prior research had studied what happens *after* you make the decision to quit. How do you go about resigning? Who do you tell? How much notice should you give?

So, I began studying resignations—what happens after a jolt leads you to make the decision to quit. Whenever people ask what I study, I tell them, and then we're off, talking through the twists and turns of different stories of quitting. It turns out, people generally love telling their quitting stories. Better still, these events are memorable, so the stories they tell tend to be reliable and accurate. And finally, because resigning is such an unusual process, with few rules or precedents, the stories are usually pretty juicy.

I found that what drove people to quit their jobs in positive ways (e.g., giving lots of notice, training their replacement) versus negative ways (e.g., badmouthing the company on the way out, giving little notice) often related to the jolt that triggered the turnover process in the first place. Whether someone is a bridge burner versus a courteous leaver isn't caused by whether they're a bad or good person but by the events that happen to them inside and outside of work.

Pretty early on in my studies, something started nagging at me. I was largely ignoring those who had experienced jolts and yet did *not* quit. These stories never make headlines. Yet they're just as important. People who wanted to leave but decided to stay loyal. People who simply couldn't quit for one reason or another and, having been jolted out of autopilot, had to figure out how to preserve their well-being while continuing to work in a deficient job. Those who decided to stay and work to fix the relationship and the problems with it, rather than starting over. And those who stayed and ultimately regretted doing so.

The lower bar for quitting has a lot of benefits for workers. Those who are in toxic situations are better able to extract themselves, and people are better able to craft careers that fit their needs at different life stages. But alongside those benefits are dangers. Quitting, of course, is risky. For every person who is glad they resigned, there's another who regrets doing so.

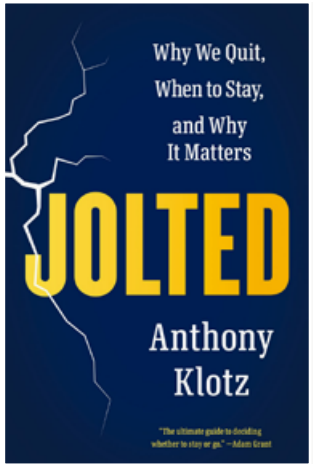
The availability of alternatives and their ease of access makes it easier to experience a jolt and resign in response to it rather than taking time to consider your options and the short- and long-term consequences of each one. If you want to have a satisfying career, you must be able to recognize when you experience a jolt and then process it in a manner that best serves your long-term well-being (even though it may require short-term sacrifices). Quitting is just one option when jolts occur, and it's often not the best one. In those post-jolt moments, it's critical to understand all your options and how to choose the best one. This is especially true given that jolts aren't only common and impactful, but they're becoming more so.

And many of you aren't only workers but also leaders. Failing to recognize when your employees experience jolts, help them make sense of these events, and navigate their effects represents missed opportunities to more deeply engage workers, reduce regrettable turnover, and buffer your business against external events. Employees enter into cycles of job searching more commonly than most managers realize. In any given month, greater than 20 percent of all employed workers actively search for other jobs. While this could be viewed as a threat, the reality is that when employees are in this search process, there's also an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with their current jobs. The reason that many people experience regret after they quit is that they misjudge some element as they calculate the trade-offs between their current job and another opportunity (or they skip this calculus altogether). If leaders recognize these crucial moments, they can react in ways that create wins for workers and for the organization. As it stands, all too often, leaders miss or ignore signs that their employees have been jolted and are in the midst of rethinking their relationship with their job. They only learn about the seriousness of the situation in the resignation meeting, at which point it is almost always too late.

For the sake of your own career and those of the people close to you, your ability to respond to jolts in constructive ways is critical. But doing so isn't simple, and in some ways, it's getting tougher. Gone are the days when we spend months, years, and decades in autopilot, dutifully going to work and not questioning our relationship with it or exploring something better. Or go years without experiencing jolts that cause us to rethink our jobs, who we are, and what our priorities in life are. Instead, we're bombarded with events inside and outside of work that have the potential to jolt us.

Push-pull thinking will get you only so far. You have to broaden your mindset to consider the sometimes dramatic effects that jolts can have on our relationships with work.

Info



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Anthony Klotz is a professor of organizational behavior at UCL School of Management in London. He is best known for predicting a global pandemic–related labor shift and dubbing it the Great Resignation. A leading scholar on the psychology of work, he has written for *Harvard Business Review* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and his research is regularly published in the leading academic journals in management. He has discussed the current and future of work with media outlets, including NBC News, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, CNN, CNBC, *Today*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, BBC, and NPR, and with executive teams at numerous Fortune 100 firms.

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