

# Assessing the Great Resignation phenomenon: voluntary resignation of young Italian workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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*Parole chiave:* Grandi dimissioni, dimissioni volontarie, medicina del lavoro, giovani lavoratori, COVID-19

## Abstract

**Introduction.** The COVID-19 pandemic has determined a radical change in workplace dynamics, with a reported increase in voluntary resignation from employment at a global level, especially among the youngest workers. The aim of this study is to investigate the social, demographic, and cultural characteristics of young people aged between 25 and 45 years who voluntarily resigned from their previous jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods.** This is a cross-sectional observational study; an ad hoc questionnaire was designed and administered via an online link. Descriptive analyses were performed to describe the sample, and the Pearson analysis was performed to investigate statistically significant correlations;  $p$  values  $\leq 0.05$  were considered statistically significant.

**Results.** A total of 72 valid responses were gathered. Mean age was 32.6 years; 43.1% participants were males, 54.2% were married, and 80.6% had no children; most participants (68.1%) had a college level education. The most reported cause of job resignation was work dissatisfaction (38.9%), followed by inadequate remuneration (27.8%). The most reported perspective for people who had resigned or were planning on resigning, was a better salary (27.8%), followed by the pursuit of a higher work-life balance (25.0%). The perception that having resigned was the right choice was significantly correlated with the timeframe of resignation ( $p < 0.01$ ), with having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and with a close relative having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Conclusion.** This study highlighted that voluntarily resigning was significantly correlated to having suffered from COVID-19, or a close relative having suffered from it; 84.9% of participants who had resigned thought that it had been the right choice. The COVID-19 pandemic could have changed workplace perception, making employees feel more at risk; the indirect impact of the pandemic should be further investigated, and prevention strategies should be implemented to ensure the safety and wellbeing of employees.

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## Introduction

Since December 2019, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the occupational world has undergone rapid as well as radical changes, with preventive measures put in place to avoid the spread of the infection (1, 2). Furthermore, since the beginning of the pandemic, in order to ensure the safety of workers, many companies have given their employees the opportunity to work remotely, allowing them to perform their work tasks from home in order to avoid potential workplace exposures (3). However, remote work has had major consequences on workers' mental and physical health, leading, in many cases, to increased physical and psychological stress due to the sudden change in the way work is performed (4, 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has determined a radical shift in workplace dynamics, not only through remote working. Essential workers continued performing their duties in the workplace during the pandemic, but had to face the risk of being exposed to this illness in order to keep working, as well as an increased workload in many professional categories such as healthcare workers, with a detrimental effect on workers' psychological wellbeing (6, 7). Furthermore, many workers suffered from COVID-19 and had to face physical and mental challenges when returning to work after the acute illness (8, 9).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as new scientific evidence emerged regarding the increase of work-related stress prevalence, an increase in voluntary resignation from their employment has been observed globally, especially in young people. In the United States 3.9 million workers have reportedly resigned in June 2021, the same number in July, and 4.3 million in August (10). An uprising in voluntary resignation has been also reported nationally, although, in Italy, the impact of this specific issue is not yet well documented; however, it is known

that the phenomenon mainly affects young people between 25 and 45 years of age, and mostly employees with seniority in the company of 1 to 5 years (11).

Among the reasons why young people left their jobs, the main ones given were: the change in the labor market, the search for better economic conditions, the search for a better work-life balance, and the hostile work environment (11). However, a more in-depth investigation of this spike in resignations in young people seems necessary, in order to define the causes, patterns and correlation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of this study is to investigate the social, demographic, and cultural characteristics of young people aged between 25 and 45 years who voluntarily resigned from their previous jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, investigating the reasons, as well as the perspectives for the future, leading to this decision.

## Methods

### *Sample*

The present study is a cross-sectional observational study with descriptive purposes. To achieve the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was designed ad hoc and administered via an online link through the Microsoft Forms platform, from April to August 2022. The survey was distributed by the authors by sending the link to people who fit the inclusion criteria, trying to reach a larger population by also posting the link in online social media groups composed by people who could potentially fit the inclusion criteria (for this reason, a few questions were aimed at ensuring that the candidate was part of the target population). Through the link, sent to people that fit the inclusion criteria, participants could access the information page for the study, with the description and aim of the survey, and the informed consent and consent to data processing information.

Only by confirming to accept to participate in the study and consenting to data processing, access was granted to the participant; people who did not give their consent were excluded from participation.

Inclusion criteria were: aged between 25 and 45 years of age, having been regularly employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, giving free and informed consent to participate in the study. People who did not fit the age group, did not work during the COVID-19 pandemic or were self-employed, or did not give consent to participate, were excluded from the study.

### *Questionnaire*

An ad hoc questionnaire was developed, through multiple revisions rounds, by a focus group including the authors and with the addition of field experts. Furthermore, literature data already available was evaluated, especially concerning causes and perspective for quitting, in order to address the most common answers in the survey.

The ad hoc questionnaire used in this study had 19 items. Before the questionnaire could be filled, an informative section explained the purpose of the questionnaire and gave the participants the necessary information; this was followed by an initial question in which participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and for data processing (1 item).

The questionnaire is structured in three sections: a first section is aimed at establishing that the participant is part of the target population, investigating whether the participant was an employee and whether they recently resigned from that job (2 items).

A second section is dedicated to collecting the participants' socio-demographic information (9 items) such as age, gender, marital status, type of employment held, and so on.

Finally, a third part of the questionnaire is aimed at investigating the participants' motivations for making the decision to resign,

the period in which the resignation occurred, if and how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced this decision, and whether this choice turned out to be appropriate for the participant (7 items).

The study was carried out in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, in line with good clinical practices and with national legislation on safety and health at work. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (ID: 4781).

The flowchart in Figure 1 describes the participation process according to the consent to participate and inclusion criteria.

### *Statistical analyses*

Descriptive analyses were performed to describe the sample, using mean and standard deviation for the quantitative variable (age) and frequencies and percentages for qualitative variables. To investigate statistically significant correlations, the Pearson correlation analysis was performed. P values  $\leq 0.05$  were considered statistically significant. For all statistical analyses the STATA 16 software was used (12).

## **Results**

The sample included 106 participants; one did not consent to data gathering, 12 were not employed during the COVID-19 pandemic and 21 did not resign or were not planning on resigning, and were therefore excluded from the study. A total of 72 valid responses were gathered.

The descriptive analyses performed are reported in Table 1. Mean age was 32.6 years (standard deviation 4.9); 31 participants (43.1%) were males, 39 (54.2%) were married, and 58 (80.6%) had no children. Six participants (8.3%) had a high school level education, 49 (68.1%) had a college level education, while 17 (23.6%) had a master degree or doctorate degree.



Figure 1 - Questionnaire flowchart

Table 1 - Descriptive analyses.

	Mean	Standard deviation
<b>Age</b>	32.6	4.9
	Number (n)	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	31	43.1%
Female	41	56.9%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Unmarried/not living with a partner	39	54.2%
Married or living with a partner	33	45.8%
<b>Children</b>		
No	58	80.6%
1	8	11.1%
More than 1	6	8.3%
<b>Education level</b>		
High school diploma	6	8.3%
College degree	49	68.1%
Master or PhD	17	23.6%
<b>Geographical area (birth)</b>		
North-East	5	6.9%
North-West	5	6.9%
Centre	48	66.7%
South and Islands	12	19.4%
<b>Geographical area (birth)</b>		
North-East	2	2.8%
North-West	8	11.1%
Centre	56	77.8%
South and Islands	6	8.3%
<b>Occupational field<sup>1</sup></b>		
Legislators, entrepreneurs and management	4	5.5%
Intellectual, scientific and highly skilled professions	40	55.5%
Technical professions	6	8.3%
Office workers	9	12.5%
Skilled professions in business and service activities	6	8.3%
Artisans, skilled workers and farmers	1	1.4%
Unskilled professions	4	5.5%
Armed Forces	2	2.8%
<b>Resigned voluntarily</b>		
No, but planned to do so	21	29.2%
Yes, looking for a new job	9	12.5%
Yes, found a new job	42	58.3%
<b>COVID-19 vaccination</b>		
No/1 dose	0	0
2 doses	3	4.2%
3 doses	69	95.8%

<b>Prevention measures put in place by the company</b>		
No	6	8.3%
Yes	66	91.7%
<b>Main cause of resignation</b>		
Fear of COVID-19 infection and inability to work remotely	6	8.3%
Fear of infecting a fragile cohabitant	1	1.4%
Job dissatisfaction	28	38.9%
Inadequate remuneration	20	27.8%
Psychological distress	10	13.9%
Hostile work environment	6	8.3%
Increase in workload due to human resources shortage	1	1.4%
<b>Work perspectives that influenced resignations</b>		
Better salary	20	27.8%
Higher safety and health security for employees	3	4.2%
Possibility to work remotely	6	8.3%
Higher career advancement possibilities	13	18.1%
Family reunification	3	4.2%
Less hostile work environment	7	9.7%
Higher work-life balance	18	25.0%
Better work hours	2	2.8%
<b>Time period of resignation</b>		
Not resigned yet	21	29.2%
January-June 2020	7	9.7%
July-December 2020	13	18.1%
January-June 2021	12	16.7%
July-December 2021	7	9.7%
January-June 2022	12	16.7%
<b>COVID-19 illness</b>		
No	36	50.0%
Yes, before resigning, and it contributed to this choice	3	4.2%
Yes, before resigning, and it did NOT contribute to this choice	11	15.3%
Yes, after resigning	13	18.1%
Yes, and not resigned yet	9	12.5%
<b>COVID-19 illness in a close relative</b>		
No	17	23.6%
Yes, before resigning, and it contributed to this choice	4	5.6%
Yes, before resigning, and it did NOT contribute to this choice	15	20.8%
Yes, after resigning	21	29.2%
Yes, and not resigned yet	15	20.8%
<b>Perception on having resigned</b>		
It was the wrong choice	1	1.4%
It was the right choice	45	62.5%
Unsure	7	9.7%
Not resigned yet	19	26.4%

<sup>1</sup> This classification was used in the questionnaire in accordance with the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) classification of professional categories.

Concerning intent to resign, 21 (29.2%) workers planned to leave their job, 42 (58.3%) had already resigned and found another job, and 9 (12.5%) had resigned and were looking for a new employment. The most frequent cause of job resignation, reported by 28 (38.9%) workers, was work dissatisfaction, followed by inadequate remuneration reported by 20 workers (27.8%). Twenty participants reported better salary (27.8%) as their main perspective for resigning or wanting to resign, followed by the pursuit of a higher work-life balance reported by 18 workers (25.0%).

In regards to the COVID-19 pandemic's role in the resignation or intent to resign, 36 (50.0%) workers did not suffer from COVID-19 at the time of the survey, and among those who had suffered, 3 (4.2%) reported that suffering from COVID-19 influenced their decision to resign, while 4 (5.6%) reported that a close relative suffering from COVID-19 influenced their decision to resign from their previous job. Almost all of the participants had received three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine (95.8%), meaning they received all booster doses available at the time.

Concerning the decision to quit their job, 45 participants (62.5%) reported that resignation was the right choice for them, while only one participant (1.4%) reported that resigning had not been the right choice; the remaining participants had not resigned yet or were still unsure whether it had been the right choice for them to resign.

Correlation analyses for all variables were performed using Pearson correlation analyses (Table 2).

Resigning from work was significantly correlated with being influenced by a close relative having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.01$ ); the correlation between resigning and the perception that this was the right choice for the participant was also statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Perception of resignation was significantly correlated with the timeframe of resignation

( $p < 0.01$ ), with having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and with a close relative having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.01$ ). Education level was significantly correlated with having received all booster doses available of COVID-19 vaccine ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## Discussion

This cross-sectional study investigated voluntary resignations of young people aged 25 to 45 years during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results from this study highlighted that resigning was perceived as having done the right choice for 45 out of the 53 participants who had already resigned (84.9%). Furthermore, feeling that having resigned was the right choice was significantly correlated with the timeframe of resignation ( $p < 0.01$ ), with having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and with a close relative having suffered from COVID-19 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound psychological impact on workers worldwide, contributing to an increase in the prevalence of burnout and poor mental health in many occupational fields, putting a strain especially on frontline workers (13). At the same time, despite the mitigation and containment measures put in place to counteract COVID-19 in the occupational settings, the pandemic has led to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover (14). This is in line with results highlighted in this study, as job dissatisfaction was the most reported cause for resignation by participants (38.9%). The psychological effect of living and working during a pandemic may have affected workers indirectly as well: according to recent findings, and in line with behavioral theories, the increase in voluntary resignation may have taken place just to seek for an employment leading to better job satisfaction, with a higher perceived impact (i.e.: workers sought jobs with greater meaning) (14).

Table 2 - Pearson correlation analyses (\*p&lt;0.05, \*\*p&lt;0.01).

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)
(1) Resigning	1.000																
(2) Age	0.131	1.000															
(3) Gender	0.001	-0.056	1.000														
(4) Marital status	0.137	0.376**	-0.101	1.000													
(5) Children	-0.228	0.593**	-0.064	0.360**	1.000												
(6) Education level	0.023	0.235*	-0.014	0.203	0.082	1.000											
(7) Geographical area (birth)	-0.015	-0.021	-0.055	0.093	0.102	-0.099	1.000										
(8) Geographical area (work)	0.136	-0.108	-0.184	-0.013	-0.098	-0.191	0.308**	1.000									
(9) Profession	-0.106	-0.176	0.014	-0.129	-0.021	-0.287*	-0.121	-0.072	1.000								
(10) COVID-19 vaccination	0.068	0.138	-0.041	0.052	0.096	0.314**	-0.004	-0.032	-0.037	1.000							
(11) Perspectives after resigning	-0.045	0.090	0.151	0.182	-0.037	0.073	-0.093	-0.120	-0.101	0.181	1.000						
(12) Causes of resignation	0.225	0.085	0.088	-0.096	-0.011	0.128	-0.193	-0.174	-0.015	0.323**	0.319**	1.000					
(13) Timeframe of resignation	0.665**	-0.055	-0.006	0.062	-0.134	-0.098	-0.040	0.183	-0.033	0.021	0.024	0.036	1.000				
(14) COVID19 illness	-0.216	-0.094	-0.090	0.185	0.272*	0.079	0.091	-0.160	0.170	-0.038	-0.029	-0.314**	-0.230	1.000			
(15) COVID-19 in relative	-0.408**	-0.150	0.070	-0.038	0.085	0.036	0.107	-0.104	0.149	0.170	0.062	0.075	-0.394**	0.394**	1.000		
(16) Perception of resignation	-0.787**	0.229	0.030	-0.037	0.226	0.180	0.161	-0.124	0.034	0.143	0.005	-0.203	-0.567**	0.243*	0.453**	1.000	
(17) Prevention measures in workplace	0.099	0.262*	-0.059	0.176	0.138	0.085	0.063	-0.046	0.034	0.189	-0.133	-0.113	-0.053	0.077	0.038	0.094	1.000

When discussing resignation during the pandemic, however, the physical consequences of the COVID-19 illness cannot be overlooked: asthenia, fatigue, and respiratory symptoms, as well as the less common Post COVID-19 symptoms have forced many workers to undergo long work absences, with a negative impact on their economic conditions and, in some cases, leading to job loss (8, 9, 15). This is consistent with results from this study, as inadequate remuneration was one of the most reported resignation causes (27.8%) and the perspective of a better salary was the most frequently reported perspective for resigning (27.8%).

Another important perspective for people who resigned was to seek better work-life balance. The increasing imbalance between family and work-life during the COVID-19 pandemic has been highlighted as an important cause of job turnover, especially in frontline workers, due to its important psychological impact (16). The importance of granting workers time to disconnect from their job is becoming increasingly important in the context of remote working, as employees can access their work at any moment from home and are often considered always available, even outside of traditional office hours (17). An improvement of work-life balance, by implementing policies that ensure workers to have the right to disconnect from work after their workday, may be useful to improve employees' psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction, thus reducing turnover intention.

This study has some strengths: the sample was heterogeneous for many sociodemographic variables (it included people from different geographical areas, both genders were represented, and so on). Furthermore, to the authors' knowledge, the study also had some limitations. The sample was small and a bigger sample size may be needed to compare for sociodemographic

characteristics. Moreover, the questionnaire was only distributed online, therefore people who fit the inclusion criteria but did not have the means or knowledge to complete the survey online, or were not reached by the snowball distribution implemented by the authors, did not participate in the study.

The present research could be a starting point to further investigate the phenomenon of voluntary resignation of young people from work. This study underlines the importance of health and safety in the workplace, since many workers' decision to leave their job was influenced by having suffered from COVID-19 or a close relative having suffered from it. The indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the occupational world still needs to be fully evaluated, and the impact of the pandemic on employees' perception of workplace safety should be investigated in further research.

## Conclusion

This study highlighted that voluntarily resigning was significantly correlated to having suffered from COVID-19, or a close relative having suffered from it; 84.9% of participants who had resigned thought that it had been the right choice.

The COVID-19 pandemic could have had an effect on the perception of the workplace, making employees feel more at risk; the indirect impact of the pandemic should be further investigated, and prevention and health promotion strategies should be planned and implemented to ensure the safety and wellbeing of employees; information and training initiatives regarding health and safety at work should also be carried out.

## Riassunto

### *Valutazione del fenomeno delle Grandi Dimissioni: dimissioni dei giovani lavoratori italiani durante la pandemia di COVID-19*

**Introduzione.** La pandemia da COVID-19 ha determinato un cambiamento radicale nelle dinamiche lavorative, con un aumento delle dimissioni volontarie a livello globale, soprattutto tra i giovani. Lo scopo di questo studio è quello di indagare le caratteristiche sociodemografiche e culturali dei giovani di età compresa tra i 25 e i 45 anni che si sono dimessi volontariamente dal loro precedente lavoro durante la pandemia COVID-19.

**Metodi.** Questo è uno studio osservazionale trasversale; è stato progettato e somministrato un questionario ad hoc tramite un link online. Sono state eseguite analisi descrittive per descrivere il campione e l'analisi di Pearson per indagare le correlazioni statisticamente significative; i valori di  $p \leq 0,05$  sono stati considerati significativi.

**Risultati.** Sono state raccolte 72 risposte al questionario. L'età media era di 32,6 anni; il 43,1% dei partecipanti era di sesso maschile, il 54,2% era sposato e l'80,6% non aveva figli; la maggior parte dei partecipanti (68,1%) aveva un'istruzione universitaria. La causa più frequente di abbandono del lavoro è stata l'insoddisfazione lavorativa (38,9%), seguita da una retribuzione inadeguata (27,8%). La prospettiva più segnalata dalle persone che hanno dato le dimissioni o che avevano intenzione di farlo è stata una retribuzione migliore (27,8%), seguita dalla ricerca di un maggiore equilibrio tra lavoro e vita privata (25,0%). La percezione che le dimissioni fossero la scelta giusta è risultata significativamente correlata con il periodo di dimissioni ( $p < 0,01$ ), con l'aver sofferto di COVID-19 ( $p < 0,05$ ) e con un parente prossimo che ha sofferto di COVID-19 ( $p < 0,01$ ).

**Conclusioni.** Questo studio ha evidenziato che le dimissioni volontarie erano significativamente correlate all'aver sofferto di COVID-19 o che un parente prossimo ne avesse sofferto; l'84,9% dei partecipanti che si erano dimessi riteneva che fosse stata la scelta giusta. La pandemia da COVID-19 potrebbe aver cambiato la percezione del luogo di lavoro, facendo sentire i dipendenti più a rischio; l'impatto indiretto della pandemia dovrebbe essere ulteriormente valutato e dovrebbero essere implementate strategie di prevenzione per garantire la sicurezza ed il benessere dei dipendenti.

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