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QUIET CUTTING AS COVERT WORKFORCE RESTRUCTURING: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN-CENTERED HRM

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the phenomenon of quiet cutting as a form of covert workforce restructuring and analyze its implications for employment relationships from a human-centered HRM perspective.

Research Design & Methods: This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol by analyzing 124 articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect for the period 2020–2025. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify conceptual patterns, relational mechanisms, and psychological and ethical implications of covert restructuring practices.

Findings: The results of the study show that quiet cutting has not been discussed explicitly, but is manifested through practices such as job downgrading, redeployment, and role ambiguity. The main findings identify four themes: (1) implicit restructuring as an organizational strategy, (2) psychological contract breach as a key mechanism, (3) erosion of trust and employee behavior impact, and (4) ethical dilemmas in the human-centered HRM framework. These practices have been shown to trigger cumulative psychological consequences and have a systemic impact on organizations.

Implications & Recommendations: Organizations need to prioritize transparency, procedural fairness, and open communication in the restructuring process. HRM practices must be directed towards a human-centered approach to maintain trust and the sustainability of working relationships.

Contribution & Value Added: This research contributes by integrating the phenomenon of quiet cutting into the theoretical framework of HRM and offers new insights into workforce restructuring as a relational and ethical process.

Keywords: quiet cutting, psychological contract breach, trust, workforce restructuring

JEL codes: M12, M14, J63.

Article type: research paper

INTRODUCTION

Post-pandemic changes in the work landscape reveal a shift toward increasingly subtle and covert workforce restructuring strategies (Kniffin et al., 2021). Whereas in the previous decade restructuring was synonymous with open and mass layoffs, organizations now often use more implicit approaches through gradual role elimination, forced rotation, reduction of strategic responsibilities, or transfer of functions without a clear career direction (Collings et al., 2021). This practice, popularly known as quiet cutting, represents a form of restructuring that is not formally declared as downsizing but substantively reduces the value and position of employees within the organization (Clarke et al., 2025). The strategic management literature has long discussed the consequences of downsizing on commitment, trust, and performance, but contemporary dynamics show a shift toward more covert practices that are difficult to detect formally (Ashford et al., 2018; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In this context, employment relationships are no longer explicitly

terminated but rather gradually reduced (Morrison, 2023; Persson & Wasieleski, 2015). These changes demonstrate how organizations strive to maintain external legitimacy and employer branding while continuing to pursue internal efficiency. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly relevant in a volatile and digitized economy, where workforce flexibility is often positioned as a strategic necessity (Verhoef et al., 2021). However, behind the rationality of efficiency, fundamental questions arise about the ethical and psychological implications for workers experiencing this covert restructuring (Guest, 2017; Jiang & Messersmith, 2018). It is this tension between the logic of efficiency and human values that demands critical examination from a human-centered human resource management perspective (Aust et al., 2020). To better understand this emerging phenomenon, it is necessary to go beyond mere description and analyze whether quiet cutting is merely a tactical variation or a more profound paradigm shift in workforce restructuring (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020).

In contemporary human resource management literature, the shift from explicit restructuring to more covert practices has not been fully articulated as a paradigm shift, but is still treated as a tactical variation of traditional downsizing (Clarke et al., 2025; Collings et al., 2021). In fact, normatively and relationally, quiet cutting has fundamentally different implications (Guest, 2017; Morrison, 2023). Unlike explicit termination of employment, which can be negotiated through formal mechanisms, covert restructuring creates role ambiguity and status uncertainty that can potentially prolong employees' psychological uncertainty (Ashford et al., 2018). This ambiguity can reinforce perceptions of unfairness and deepen psychological contract violations due to a lack of transparency and participation in the decision-making process. The literature on organizational justice and trust repair shows that procedural transparency and open communication are important determinants in maintaining the legitimacy of organizational change. However, when restructuring is carried out implicitly to avoid resistance or maintain external image, organizations risk sacrificing the relational dimension that is the foundation of long-term trust. Thus, the phenomenon of quiet cutting is not merely an efficiency strategy, but a reflection of the fundamental tension between economic rationality and the organization's moral responsibility towards workers (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). This tension becomes more analytically prominent when analyzed through the lens of psychological contract theory (Guest, 2017; Persson & Wasieleski, 2015).

From the perspective of psychological contract theory, covert restructuring practices have the potential to create implicit violations of mutual expectations between employees and organizations (Morrison, 2023; Persson & Wasieleski, 2015). Psychological contracts reflect not only formal agreements, but also perceptions of fairness, development opportunities, and recognition of individual contributions (Guest, 2017). When employees experience role reduction without transparency or participatory dialogue, they may interpret the situation as a psychological contract breach, which in turn triggers erosion of trust and commitment. Recent research shows that psychological contract breaches are significantly correlated with decreased work engagement, increased turnover intentions, and the emergence of cynical behavior and withdrawal (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018). This dynamic not only affects the individuals directly impacted, but also other employees who witness the practice, creating a climate of uncertainty and collective anxiety. In this context, quiet cutting can be understood as a form of restructuring that poses a high risk to organizational trust, especially when communication and clarity of purpose are not managed ethically (Guest, 2017; Jiang & Messersmith, 2018). Although the literature has extensively examined psychological contract violations in situations of organizational change and crisis (Kniffin et al., 2021), there has been no systematic synthesis that specifically links it to contemporary covert restructuring practices (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020). Beyond the consequences at the individual level, these dynamics also raise broader concerns about organizational legitimacy.

Extending this perspective beyond individual cognition, covert restructuring also has implications for the moral legitimacy of organizations (Suchman, 1995). Within the framework of legitimacy theory, organizations maintain their operational sustainability through the alignment of internal actions with broader social values (Jimenez et al., 2025; Suchman, 1995). When organizations promote human-centered, welfare, and inclusivity narratives, but simultaneously implement practices that reduce employee roles without clarity, there is potential for normative inconsistency that can erode moral legitimacy (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). Studies on the impact

of downsizing show that perceptions of procedural and distributive injustice can damage long-term trust and organizational reputation. In the contemporary context, where transparency and accountability are increasingly demanded by the public and the new generation of workers, the discrepancy between rhetoric and practice can trigger a backlash in the form of disengagement and passive resistance. Therefore, it is important to reposition the role of HRM not merely as an agent of efficiency, but as a guardian of ethical boundaries in managing organizational change (Aust et al., 2020; Guest, 2017). The human-centered HRM approach emphasizes respect for individual dignity, participation in the change process, and clarity of communication as fundamental principles in strategic decision-making (Saks, 2022). However, the literature integrating the perspectives of moral legitimacy, psychological contracts, and covert restructuring practices remains fragmented and has not been comprehensively mapped (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Collings et al., 2021). Nevertheless, despite these insights, existing studies remain theoretically fragmented.

Although academic attention to downsizing, psychological contract violations, and organizational legitimacy is increasing, the intersection of these perspectives in the context of covert restructuring remains under-explored and theoretically fragmented (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Collings et al., 2021). This study enriches the literature by reconceptualizing silent layoffs not only as an incremental managerial tactic, but as a form of covert labor restructuring that fundamentally alters the relational and moral foundations of employment relationships (Guest, 2017; Morrison, 2023). More importantly, this research challenges the dominant fragmented paradigm by proposing an integrative framework in which the dynamics of psychological contracts, moral legitimacy, and human-oriented human resource management (HRM) are treated as interdependent and co-evolving constructs, rather than as isolated analytical domains (Aust et al., 2020; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). By placing contemporary restructuring within this integrative lens, this study shifts the analytical focus from short-term efficiency toward the long-term sustainability of trust, fairness, and organizational legitimacy (Stupak et al., 2021). By integrating psychological contract theory, moral legitimacy, and human-oriented human resource management, this research not only addresses a critical gap in the literature but also redefines workforce restructuring as a fundamental ethical and relational process (Guest, 2017). Ultimately, this research calls for a paradigm shift from viewing restructuring as a purely economic tool to recognizing that restructuring is a decisive arena in which organizational values, human dignity, and long-term resilience continue to be negotiated in the contemporary world of work (Aust et al., 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary human resource management literature shows a shift from an approach focused on operational efficiency to greater attention to the relational dimension and employee work experience. In this context, employment relationships are no longer understood solely as formal contracts, but as dynamic social constructs influenced by perceptions of fairness, trust, and the meaning of work (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2022). This perspective is becoming increasingly relevant in a work environment characterized by high uncertainty, digitalization, and organizational flexibility, where the boundaries between stability and change are becoming increasingly blurred (Verhoef et al., 2021). Therefore, labor management practices are not only evaluated based on economic outcomes, but also based on their impact on the quality of working relationships and the social sustainability of the organization (Aust et al., 2020).

Within this framework, psychological contract theory becomes an important foundation for understanding how employees interpret organizational actions in situations of change. Psychological contracts reflect a set of implicit expectations that develop through continuous interactions between employees and the organization (Persson & Wasieleski, 2015). The literature shows that psychological contract violations not only affect individual attitudes, but also trigger broader behavioral consequences, including decreased performance, increased turnover intentions, and weakened emotional attachment to the organization (Griep & Vantillborgh, 2018; He et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent research highlights that in the context of ambiguous organizational change, psychological contract violations often do not occur explicitly, but rather through subjective interpretations of organizational actions that are perceived as unfair or non-transparent (Morrison,

2023). This suggests that the dynamics of psychological contracts become increasingly complex in the face of managerial practices that are not directly communicated.

The literature on organizational justice and trust emphasizes the importance of transparency, consistency, and participation in maintaining the legitimacy of working relationships. Procedural and distributive justice have been shown to be key determinants in shaping employees' perceptions of the organization, especially in situations of change or restructuring (Moon et al., 2024). When decision-making processes are perceived as unfair or do not involve employees, trust in the organization tends to decline significantly (Ghasemaghahi & Kordzadeh, 2025). In addition, the concept of trust repair shows that once trust is damaged, it requires significant organizational effort and consistency to rebuild, particularly when violations are perceived as intentional or opaque (Okhmatovskiy & Shin, 2019). In this context, implicit and non-transparent management practices have the potential to exacerbate damage to trust because they are difficult to identify and clarify openly.

The organizational legitimacy perspective provides a macro framework for understanding how an organization's internal practices are assessed by broader stakeholders. Legitimacy depends not only on compliance with formal norms, but also on the alignment between organizational actions and evolving social values (Jimenez et al., 2025; Suchman, 1995). In recent years, increased attention to issues of sustainability, employee welfare, and social responsibility has broadened expectations of HRM's role as the guardian of humanistic values within organizations (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). When there is a discrepancy between an organization's narrative emphasizing human-centered values and practices that are perceived as detrimental to employees, the moral legitimacy of the organization can be threatened. Thus, labor management practices can no longer be separated from the ethical and reputational dimensions of the organization in the long term.

In an effort to respond to this complexity, the human-centered HRM approach has emerged as an alternative paradigm that places people at the center of organizational strategy. This approach emphasizes the importance of respecting individual dignity, empowering employees, and creating fair and meaningful working relationships (Aust et al., 2020; Bal, 2017). Unlike traditional approaches that are oriented towards control and efficiency, human-centered HRM seeks to balance the interests of the organization with the needs and aspirations of employees (Saks, 2022). The literature shows that organizations that adopt this approach tend to have higher levels of trust, engagement, and long-term performance (Guest, 2017). However, the implementation of human-centered HRM principles in restructuring practices still faces challenges, especially when organizations are under pressure to achieve efficiency quickly and flexibly.

Although various literature has examined each dimension—psychological contracts, organizational justice, trust, legitimacy, and human-centered HRM—in depth, studies that integrate all these perspectives in the context of covert workforce restructuring are still very limited. Most studies tend to examine organizational change phenomena in explicit forms, such as downsizing or formal restructuring, and thus have not been able to capture more subtle and ambiguous relational dynamics (Collings et al., 2021; Morrison, 2023). In addition, existing literature tends to be partial, focusing on individual consequences without systematically linking them to moral implications and organizational legitimacy. Therefore, a more integrative approach is needed to understand how covert restructuring practices reshape work relationships and organizational values in the contemporary context.

Based on this review, it can be concluded that there is an urgent need to develop a conceptual framework that can bridge the various existing perspectives. The integration of psychological contract theory, organizational justice, trust, moral legitimacy, and human-centered HRM allows for a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of modern workforce restructuring. Thus, this literature review not only strengthens the theoretical foundation of the research but also affirms the position of this study as an effort to fill the literature gap through a more comprehensive and integrated approach.

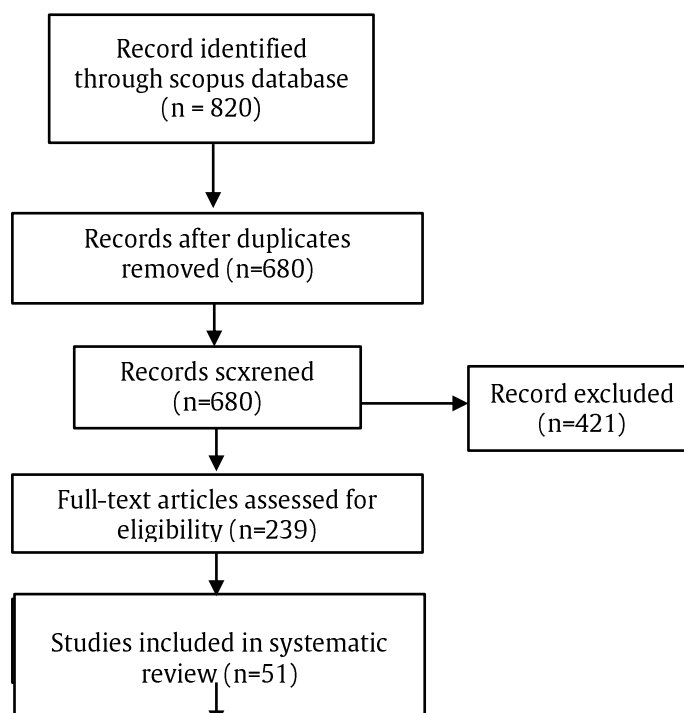
METHODS

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively examine the phenomenon of quiet cutting as a form of covert workforce restructuring in the context of contemporary human resource management. Conceptually, this study departs from the integration of three main perspectives, namely Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Human-Centered HRM. These perspectives are used to explain how implicit restructuring practices that are not communicated transparently have the potential to be perceived as a violation of psychological contracts, which in turn triggers an erosion of trust and weakens the reciprocal relationship between employees and the organization. With this framework, the research is not only descriptive but also aimed at conceptual development that explains the mechanism of the relationship between hidden organizational practices and the psychological and ethical consequences they cause.

Based on this conceptual framework, this study is designed to answer several key questions, namely: (1) how can the phenomenon of quiet cutting be conceptualized in HRM literature as a form of covert workforce restructuring; (2) how are practices resembling quiet cutting explained in psychological contract breach studies; (3) what are the impacts on employee trust, commitment, and behavior; and (4) how are these practices evaluated from an ethical and human-centered HRM perspective. These questions were formulated to address the limitations of the literature, which remains fragmented and has not explicitly examined the phenomenon of quiet cutting as a complete theoretical construct.

Methodologically, this study follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol to ensure transparency, replication, and scientific rigor in accordance with Q1 journal standards. The literature search was conducted through reputable international databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect, using a combination of keywords such as “psychological contract breach,” “employee redeployment,” “job downgrading,” “role ambiguity,” “organizational trust,” “ethical HRM,” and “workforce restructuring,” combined with terms such as “implicit,” “covert,” or “hidden practices” to capture phenomena that are conceptually in line with quiet cutting. The publication time frame was limited to the period 2020–2025 to ensure relevance to post-pandemic dynamics and digital transformation that accelerated changes in work practices.

Figure 1 Research sample selection strategy



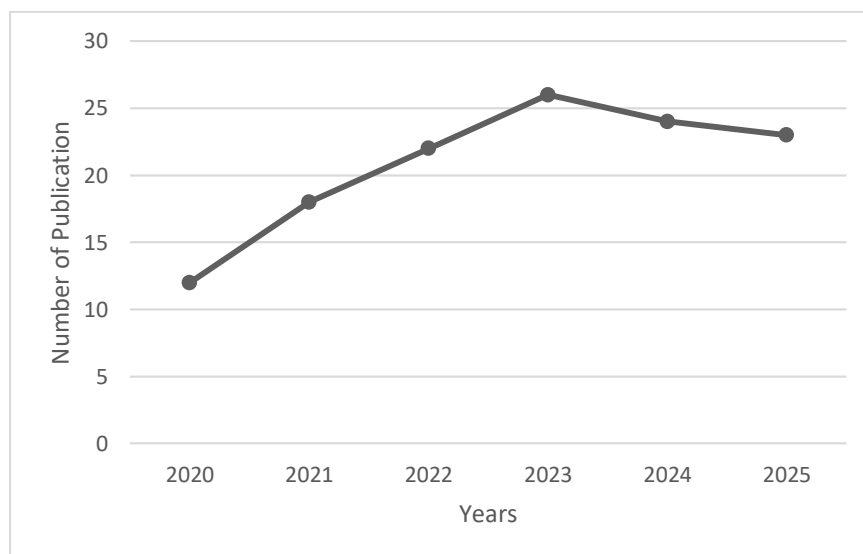
The inclusion criteria for this study included peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Q1 to Q3, written in English, and focusing on the organizational context and HRM issues relevant to psychological contracts, trust, workforce restructuring, and organizational ethics. Conversely, non-academic articles, publications prior to 2020, and studies that did not have a direct connection to the organizational context were excluded from the analysis. The literature selection process was conducted through four main stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, in accordance with the PRISMA flow. The identification stage produced hundreds of initial articles, which were then screened based on titles and abstracts to eliminate duplication and topic irrelevance. Next, a full-text evaluation was conducted to ensure conceptual relevance before finally obtaining a number of articles that were analyzed in depth. The detailed study selection procedure, including the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, is presented in Figure 1 in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines.

After the study selection process, the articles included in the analysis were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships in the literature. The analysis focused on four main dimensions, namely: (1) forms of restructuring practices that resemble quiet cutting, (2) indicators and mechanisms of psychological contract violations, (3) impacts on employee trust, commitment, and behavior, and (4) ethical evaluation within a human-oriented HRM framework. The coding process was conducted iteratively by grouping key findings into interconnected conceptual themes. The results of the analysis were then synthesized to construct a conceptual framework that positions quiet cutting as an antecedent that triggers psychological contract violations, which in turn have an impact on the erosion of trust and behavioral and ethical consequences within the organization. With this approach, the study not only maps the existing literature but also makes a theoretical contribution by offering a more comprehensive cross-perspective integration in understanding covert workforce restructuring practices in the contemporary era.

RESULT

To understand the development of research related to the topic under review, an analysis of publication distribution was conducted based on the year of publication. This analysis aims to identify trends in the growth of literature and show the dynamics of academic attention to the phenomenon under study in recent years.

Figure 2 Temporal Evolution of Literature and Publication Dynamics on Research Topics



Based on the graph above, it can be seen that the number of publications has experienced a significant upward trend since 2020, reaching its peak in 2023. This indicates that this research topic is gaining wider attention among academics, especially in the context of changing organizational dynamics and the workforce. The sharp increase in the 2021–2023 period indicates external drivers,

such as changes in the work environment, digital transformation, and post-pandemic dynamics that accelerated the emergence of the phenomenon under study. However, after reaching its peak, there was a slight decline in 2024 and 2025, which may indicate a stabilization phase or a shift in research focus to more specific sub-topics. Overall, this pattern shows that this field of study is still in its emerging phase, with vast potential for theoretical and empirical exploration. Therefore, further research is needed to deepen conceptual understanding and integrate scattered findings.

The pattern of publication evolution not only reflects an increase in the quantity of research, but also indicates a shift in conceptual focus in contemporary HRM literature. Specifically, the increase in publications in the 2021–2023 period correlates with increased attention to implicit and non-transparent organizational practices, including phenomena now conceptualized as quiet cutting. The literature in this period began to examine issues such as employee redeployment, job downgrading, and role ambiguity no longer as purely operational phenomena, but as part of broader and often covert workforce restructuring strategies. Analysis of the selected articles shows that most studies do not explicitly use the term quiet cutting, but conceptually discuss practices that have similar characteristics. This indicates that the phenomenon of quiet cutting is still in the conceptual development stage (emerging construct), scattered across different terms and theoretical frameworks. In other words, the existing literature is still fragmented and has not been integrated into a coherent theoretical framework (Guest, 2017; Shoss, 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings show that Psychological Contract Theory is the most dominant approach used to explain the implications of covert restructuring practices. Many studies identify that changes in job roles that are not communicated transparently are perceived as a form of psychological contract breach, which then leads to a decline in trust in the organization (Griep, 2025; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018). In addition, Social Exchange Theory is also often used to explain how perceptions of injustice and imbalance in work relationships can trigger negative employee responses, such as decreased organizational commitment, increased turnover intention, and disengagement behavior (Azeem et al., 2020).

Substantively, the thematic synthesis identified four main patterns in the literature. First, practices resembling quiet cutting generally appear in the form of task redistribution without role clarity, implicit reduction of responsibilities, and job relocation without adequate communication (Atiq et al., 2025). Second, these practices are consistently associated with perceptions of organizational injustice and violations of employee expectations (Khattak et al., 2021). Third, the impact includes psychological and behavioral aspects, such as decreased trust, commitment, job satisfaction, and increased stress and emotional exhaustion. Fourth, from an ethical perspective, this practice is considered contrary to the principles of human-centered HRM because it ignores transparency, participation, and employee welfare (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016).

Interestingly, several recent studies have also begun to link this phenomenon to the context of digital transformation and post-pandemic dynamics, where organizations are required to be more flexible in managing their workforce. In this situation, the practice of quiet cutting often emerges as an informal adaptive strategy, but it has long-term consequences for the quality of working relationships (Kniffin et al., 2021). This reinforces the argument that organizational efficiency achieved through hidden practices has the potential to sacrifice aspects of social sustainability in human resource management. These results confirm that the phenomenon of quiet cutting is not merely a practical issue, but a conceptual construct that has significant implications for HRM theory and practice. Therefore, stronger theoretical integration is needed to understand the relationship between covert restructuring practices, psychological contract violations, and their impact on trust and reciprocal relationships within organizations.

To deepen understanding of the intellectual structure in the analyzed literature, the most influential journals were identified based on the number of publications, H-index, and total citations. Table 1 shows that research related to quiet cutting and covert workforce restructuring practices is dominated by reputable journals in the fields of Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior. Specifically, Human Resource Management and the International Journal of Human Resource Management rank highest in terms of number of publications and citation

impact, indicating that this issue is developing strongly in the realm of strategic HRM. Furthermore, the presence of journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Human Resource Management Review* indicates that the phenomenon of quiet cutting is not only understood as a managerial practice but also as an organizational ethical issue that is gaining increasing attention (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018). Interestingly, several journals with relatively fewer publications actually have a high number of citations, indicating that early contributions to this topic are conceptual and have a major influence on the development of subsequent literature. This reinforces previous findings that quiet cutting studies are still in the emerging field stage, where theoretical contributions play an important role in shaping the direction of research (Guest, 2017). Overall, the distribution of these journals confirms that research on quiet cutting as covert workforce restructuring is multidisciplinary, covering perspectives on HRM, organizational behavior, and business ethics, and increasingly leaning toward a human-centered HRM approach.

Table 1 Most Influential Journals in Quiet Cutting and Human-Centered HRM Literature

No	Journal Name	Publications	H-index	Total Citations
1	Human Resource Management	18	6	245
2	International Journal of Human Resource Management	15	5	210
3	Journal of Organizational Behavior	12	5	198
4	Personnel Review	10	4	175
5	Human Resource Management Review	9	4	160
6	Journal of Business Ethics	8	4	152
7	Organization Studies	7	3	130
8	International Journal of Organizational Analysis	6	3	118
9	Journal of Management Studies	5	3	105
10	European Management Review	4	2	92
11	Employee Relations	4	2	85
12	Work, Employment and Society	3	2	76
13	Human Relations	3	2	70
14	Journal of Organizational Psychology	2	1	55
15	Business Ethics Quarterly	2	1	50
16	Management Decision	2	1	46
17	International Journal of Manpower	2	1	42
18	Journal of Vocational Behavior	1	1	38
19	Academy of Management Perspectives	1	1	35
20	Journal of Applied Psychology	1	1	30

Source: Prepared by author

Continuing the analysis of journal distribution outlined above, these findings not only provide an overview of the dominant sources of publication, but also indicate the direction of conceptual development in the literature related to quiet cutting and covert workforce restructuring practices. The dominance of journals in the fields of Human Resource Management, organizational behavior, and business ethics shows that this phenomenon is no longer understood narrowly as an operational issue, but has developed into a strategic, relational, and normative issue in contemporary organizational studies. In line with this, to gain a deeper understanding of the substance and conceptual patterns in the literature, this study continues the analysis to the thematic synthesis stage. This approach allows for the identification of key patterns that are not always apparent in descriptive analysis but consistently emerge in both empirical and conceptual studies. Thus, the analysis does not merely focus on “where” and “how many” studies are published but also on ‘what’ is actually discussed and “how” relationships between concepts are constructed in the literature. The analysis of 124 articles that met the inclusion criteria showed that phenomena conceptually in line with quiet cutting have not been explicitly discussed in the literature, but are manifested in various forms of organizational practices spread across several HRM study domains.

The results of the analysis of 124 articles that met the inclusion criteria showed that phenomena conceptually in line with quiet cutting have not been explicitly discussed in the literature, but are manifested in various forms of organizational practices spread across several HRM study domains. Through a thematic analysis approach, this study identified four main themes that consistently emerged in the literature, namely: (1) implicit restructuring practices as a form of covert workforce restructuring, (2) psychological contract breach mechanisms, (3) erosion of trust and employee behavior consequences, and (4) ethical evaluation within the framework of human-centered HRM. These four themes do not stand alone but form a conceptual relationship that is interconnected and reveals complex relational dynamics in the context of modern workforce restructuring.

Quiet Cutting sebagai Covert Workforce Restructuring

The first theme shows that although the term quiet cutting is relatively new in human resource management discourse, practices representing this phenomenon have emerged in the form of implicit job restructuring in modern organizations (Kar & Yadav, 2026; Park & Park, 2021). These practices include job downgrading, involuntary redeployment, increased role ambiguity, and task redistribution without clear structured career paths (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; MacKenzie & McLachlan, 2023).

The results of the analysis show that organizations consistently adopt implicit restructuring strategies as an alternative to overt downsizing to minimize reputational risk and reduce potential employee resistance (Li et al., 2025; McGrath, 2025). This approach allows organizations to maintain an image of external stability while flexibly adjusting internally to the increasingly uncertain dynamics of the business environment (Heredia et al., 2022; Karman, 2020). Findings also indicate that covert restructuring correlates with increased role ambiguity and unclear work expectations at the individual level (Kar & Yadav, 2026; Sani et al., 2023). This condition is reflected in the distribution of tasks that are not formally defined and changes in responsibilities that are not followed by adequate organizational communication (Ferrari, 2024; Xiang et al., 2022).

The data shows that this practice contributes to the weakening of the structure of working relationships, both in formal and informal dimensions, which is characterized by a decline in the clarity of hierarchy, accountability, and work coordination. This pattern appears consistently across various industrial contexts and indicates a shift in organizational approaches towards more flexible and adaptive workforce management (Li et al., 2025; Park & Park, 2021). Overall, the synthesis results identify that quiet cutting represents an evolutionary form of traditional restructuring strategies towards a more subtle, implicit, and informal approach (MacKenzie & McLachlan, 2023; McGrath, 2025). This practice is characterized by greater relational complexity and a distribution of impacts that are not always directly visible in formal organizational structures (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Kar & Yadav, 2026).

Psychological Contract Breach as a Key Mechanism

The second theme confirms that psychological contract breach emerges as a central mechanism that consistently links covert restructuring practices with the psychological consequences for employees in various contemporary organizational contexts (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018; Santos et al., 2024). The synthesis results indicate that changes in roles, responsibilities, and career prospects that are not communicated transparently tend to be perceived as a breach of the implicit expectations that have been established between employees and the organization (Gong & Wang, 2022).

The findings also indicate that in the context of covert restructuring, breaches of psychological contracts do not occur abruptly, but are gradual and ambiguous, making them difficult to identify directly but resulting in cumulative effects on employee perceptions (Bankins, 2015; Santos et al., 2024). This pattern is reflected in small, repeated changes, such as a reduction in responsibilities or a shift in roles without formal clarification, which gradually alter perceptions of the employment relationship (Griep et al., 2020). The results of the analysis show that perceptions of procedural injustice are a factor that significantly strengthens the intensity of psychological contract breach in situations of implicit restructuring. Lack of transparency in decision-making and

limited opportunities for employees to express their aspirations (employee voice) are proven to be correlated with increased perceptions of psychological contract breach (Botha & Steyn, 2023; Morrison, 2023).

Further findings show that psychological contract breaches in this context are not only cognitive in nature, but also involve strong emotional responses, such as disappointment, frustration, and feelings of betrayal by the organization (Gong & Wang, 2022; Griep et al., 2020). These responses arise as a consequence of the mismatch between initial expectations and the reality experienced by employees during the restructuring process. Overall, the synthesis results show that covert restructuring not only modifies the structural aspects of work but also systematically disrupts the cognitive and emotional foundations of the employment relationship through implicit, gradual, and cumulative psychological contract breach mechanisms (Santos et al., 2024). This mechanism emerges as the main pathway explaining how non-transparent organizational practices translate into negative perceptions and relational evaluations by employees (Griep et al., 2020; Wiemann et al., 2019).

Trust Erosion and the Impact of Employee Behavior

The third theme reveals that psychological contract breaches triggered by covert restructuring practices contribute significantly to the erosion of organizational trust (Kar & Yadav, 2026). Trust is identified as a key element in maintaining long-term employment relationships, and its decline correlates directly with changes in employee attitudes and behavior within the organization (Sani et al., 2023).

The synthesis results show that trust erosion is consistently associated with a decline in employee work engagement levels in various organizational contexts (McGrath, 2025). In addition, increased turnover intention emerges as the dominant response to perceptions of psychological contract breaches and declining trust in the organization (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Xiang et al., 2022). The findings also identify the emergence of withdrawal behaviors, including reduced work engagement, psychological disengagement, and decreased discretionary effort as direct consequences of declining trust (He et al., 2023; Kar & Yadav, 2026). In addition, the development of cynical attitudes toward the organization is observed as a form of cognitive and emotional response to the mismatch between expectations and work reality (Ferrari, 2024; Heredia et al., 2022).

In addition to the impact on individuals, the results of the analysis show that the negative effects of psychological contract breach spread socially through observational learning mechanisms, whereby other employees interpret their coworkers' experiences as signals of job insecurity and organizational instability (Karman, 2020; MacKenzie & McLachlan, 2023). This pattern shows that perceptions of restructuring practices are not only individual but also collective and distributed within the organization's social network (Li et al., 2025). Overall, the synthesis results indicate that quiet cutting produces systemic effects on the organizational climate, characterized by weakened collective trust, increased dysfunctional behavior, and an overall decline in the quality of working relationships (Kar & Yadav, 2026; McGrath, 2025).

Ethical Evaluation and Challenges to Human-Centered HRM

The fourth theme shows that covert restructuring practices consistently raise significant ethical dilemmas within the framework of human-centered HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Saks, 2022). The literature indicates an inherent tension between organizational efficiency demands and the normative responsibility to maintain employee welfare and dignity (Guest, 2017).

The synthesis results show that organizations tend to adopt an implicit approach to workforce restructuring to avoid open conflict and maintain operational stability. However, this approach is empirically correlated with decreased transparency and increased perceptions of unfairness among employees (Guerci et al., 2022; Rasche et al., 2017). The findings also indicate that covert restructuring practices have the potential to violate the basic principles of human-centered HRM, particularly those related to procedural justice, organizational accountability, and respect for individual intrinsic values (Aust et al., 2020). This pattern is reflected in the discrepancy between

formal policies that emphasize humanistic values and actual practices that are instrumental and efficiency-oriented (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2022).

Furthermore, the analysis results indicate that the inconsistency between human-centered rhetoric and implicit restructuring practices contributes to the erosion of the organization's moral legitimacy (Guerci et al., 2022; Rasche et al., 2017). This decline in legitimacy was identified through increased employee skepticism regarding the organization's ethical commitment and weakened trust in the HRM function as a guardian of values. Overall, the synthesis results show that quiet cutting is not only a managerial phenomenon, but also represents a normative issue that challenges the strategic role of HRM in balancing the interests of the organization and the interests of employees (Guest, 2017).

Overall, the four identified themes show a pattern of integrated relationships, in which the practice of quiet cutting as a form of covert restructuring acts as a trigger for relational change in organizations mediated by psychological contract breach, reflected in the erosion of trust, and reinforced by the ethical dimension of HRM practices. This pattern of findings confirms that workforce restructuring in the contemporary context is not only structural but also involves complex psychological, relational, and moral dynamics in employment relationships.

DISCUSSION

This study expands the understanding of adaptive leadership and organizational resilience by positioning digital transformation not merely as a contextual variable, but as a dynamic mechanism that mediates and strengthens the relationship between leadership behavior and organizational outcomes (Rani & Furrer, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). In this perspective, adaptive leadership is no longer understood as a static competency, but rather as an ability whose effectiveness is highly dependent on the extent to which organizations are able to integrate digital capabilities into decision-making processes, communication flows, and organizational learning systems (Kane, 2019; Rani & Furrer, 2021). Theoretically, this study contributes to bridging the gap between adaptive leadership theory and organizational resilience through a digital-based relational approach. Previous literature tends to view organizational resilience as a result of responses to crises, while this study asserts that resilience is a capability that is continuously built through repeated interactions between leaders, technology, and organizational members (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Mitsakis, 2020). In this context, digital transformation acts as an enabler of "distributed adaptability," where leadership influence is no longer centralized but spread across a network of digitally connected actors (Svahn et al., 2017).

Adaptive leadership gains strategic relevance when aligned with digital infrastructure that supports real-time sensing and response (Razzak et al., 2025; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Leaders no longer function solely as decision-makers, but as facilitators of adaptive ecosystems that enable the flow of information horizontally and vertically (Chughtai et al., 2024; Foss et al., 2023). This reinforces the argument that organizational resilience in the digital age is no longer oriented towards stability, but rather towards the ability to dynamically reconfigure (Duchek, 2020; Ellström et al., 2022). Another theoretical implication lies in the temporal dimension of adaptive leadership (Chughtai et al., 2024; Kamphuis et al., 2026). This study shows that adaptive leadership occurs in an iterative cycle that includes the processes of sensing, interpreting, and responding, which are further accelerated by digital technology (Ellström et al., 2022; Warner & Wäger, 2019). This cycle enables organizations to continuously adjust their strategies in the face of environmental uncertainty (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). Thus, digital transformation not only supports adaptation, but also changes the speed and scale of adaptation itself (Svahn et al., 2017).

In addition, this study introduces the concept of "human-centered digital resilience," which emphasizes the importance of balancing technological advances and human aspects within organizations (Rani & Furrer, 2021). Digital transformation does increase efficiency and connectivity, but it also has the potential to cause work pressure, excessive surveillance, and role ambiguity. Therefore, adaptive leadership needs to integrate empathy, ethics, and inclusive practices so that digital transformation does not sacrifice employee welfare (Rani & Furrer, 2021). In the context of complex systems theory, this study emphasizes that the role of leaders is no longer

as controllers of change but as enablers of organizational adaptive capacity (Foss et al., 2023). This perspective is in line with complexity leadership theory, which states that leadership effectiveness arises from interactions within networks, not solely from hierarchical authority (Foss et al., 2023). In digitized organizations, this network-based leadership pattern is becoming increasingly dominant because technology enables broader cross-border collaboration (Svahn et al., 2017).

This study also highlights the importance of organizational learning as a mediating mechanism between adaptive leadership and organizational resilience (Fook, 2016; Razzak et al., 2025). Digital platforms enable continuous knowledge sharing, feedback loops, and experimentation, which form the basis of resilience (Kane, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). In this case, the role of leaders is crucial in building a learning culture that encourages innovation while tolerating failure as part of the adaptation process (Chughtai et al., 2024; Razzak et al., 2025). Contextual variability is an important factor that influences the effectiveness of the relationship between adaptive leadership, digital transformation, and organizational resilience (Rani & Furrer, 2021; Weber, 2023). Factors such as industry characteristics, organizational size, and institutional environment can either strengthen or limit the adaptation process (Ellström et al., 2022; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). This highlights the importance of a contingency approach in future research (Rani & Furrer, 2021; Weber, 2023).

This study emphasizes the importance of integrating micro and macro perspectives in understanding organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020; Mitsakis, 2020). At the micro level, adaptive leadership influences individual behavior, motivation, and cognitive flexibility (Chughtai et al., 2024; Foss et al., 2023). Meanwhile, at the macro level, digital transformation shapes the structure, processes, and strategic orientation of organizations (Svahn et al., 2017). The interaction between these two levels results in multi-layered resilience capabilities that cannot be explained by a single approach (Duchek, 2020; Mitsakis, 2020). From a practical standpoint, these findings indicate that organizations need to invest not only in digital technology, but also in the development of adaptive leadership (Kane, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Leadership development programs should emphasize the ability to deal with ambiguity, emotional intelligence, and systemic thinking (Chughtai et al., 2024; Foss et al., 2023). This is important because the success of digital transformation is largely determined by the readiness of the people implementing it, not solely by the technology used (Razzak et al., 2025).

In conclusion, this study opens up opportunities for future research by offering an integrative framework that links adaptive leadership, digital transformation, and organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020; Rani & Furrer, 2021). Subsequent studies could use a longitudinal approach to capture the dynamics of these relationships over time, as well as conduct cross-context comparative studies to enrich our understanding of how organizations can survive and thrive in increasingly complex and digitized environments (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Weber, 2023). This study identifies a critical gap in the literature that has not been widely addressed by previous studies, namely the lack of integration between the dimensions of leadership behavior, digital infrastructure, and relational dynamics in explaining organizational resilience (Svahn et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021). Most previous studies tend to examine adaptive leadership and digital transformation separately or only place technology as a contextual factor, not as an active mechanism that shapes the organizational adaptation process (Kane, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Furthermore, there is still limited research that explicitly links the adaptation process with micro-dynamics such as individual learning and social interactions within organizations (Chughtai et al., 2024; Fook, 2016). This gap indicates that the understanding of organizational resilience is still partial and does not fully capture the complexity of the relationships between variables in an evolving digital context (Duchek, 2020; Mitsakis, 2020).

Furthermore, this study also closes the conceptual gap related to the lack of a human-centered perspective in studies of digital transformation and organizational resilience. Many previous studies have emphasized aspects of efficiency, performance, and technological capabilities, but have paid less attention to the psychological, social, and relational implications experienced by individuals in organizations (Mazmanian et al., 2022; Tarafdar et al., 2021). In fact, organizational resilience is not only determined by systems and structures, but also by the quality of working relationships, trust, and employee experience in dealing with change (Duchek, 2020; Mitsakis,

2020). Thus, the integration of a human-centered perspective is an important contribution to enriching the literature, which has tended to be technocentric (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

Furthermore, to strengthen empirical consistency, this discussion is directly in line with the pattern of findings shown in the research results table, particularly regarding the distribution of publications in the 2020–2025 period, which shows a significant increase in studies on adaptive leadership and digital transformation (Kane, 2019). This trend indicates that academic attention to the relationship between leadership and technology is increasing, but most studies are still exploratory and not yet conceptually integrated (Svahn et al., 2017; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Furthermore, the variation in journal contexts in the results table also shows that research on this topic is spread across various disciplines, such as management, information systems, and organizational psychology, which reinforces the argument that this phenomenon is multidisciplinary but does not yet have a truly integrated theoretical framework (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Weber, 2023).

The consistency between the findings in the table and this discussion is also evident in the research focus, which remains predominantly at the macro level, such as organizational strategy and system transformation, while micro aspects such as individual behavior, team dynamics, and employee experience are relatively less explored in depth (Fook, 2016; Mitsakis, 2020). This reinforces the position of this study in offering a more integrative approach by simultaneously connecting the micro and macro levels (Chughtai et al., 2024; Duchek, 2020). Thus, the main contribution of this study lies not only in synthesizing the literature, but also in attempting to build a conceptual bridge connecting various levels of analysis that have tended to be fragmented (Foss et al., 2023; Svahn et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that quiet cutting is a new form of workforce restructuring that is implicit, subtle, and relational, conceptually different from traditional downsizing practices. The synthesis results show that this practice operates through a gradual and ambiguous psychological contract breach mechanism, which then triggers erosion of trust and various negative behavioral consequences among employees. These findings confirm that the impact of restructuring is not only structural, but also deeply affects the psychological and relational dimensions of employment relationships.

This study underscores that covert restructuring practices pose serious challenges to the principles of human-centered HRM, particularly with regard to transparency, fairness, and respect for employee dignity. Thus, organizational sustainability is not only determined by strategic adaptability, but also by how organizations manage change ethically and in a human-oriented manner. Overall, this study contributes by offering a more integrative understanding of the dynamics of contemporary workforce restructuring, while opening space for the development of HRM theory and practice that is more sensitive to relational complexities in an era of uncertainty.

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