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Analyzing Employee Perceptions on Monitoring in the Workplace

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Introduction

With new and developing technologies for monitoring employee performance becoming more and more advanced, companies are facing a problem of employee pushback on invasions into their working lives. Monitoring and surveillance of employees has great potential to be overbearing and step across the line from acceptable to intrusive. Namely, surveillance and employee monitoring may come with the cost of the perceived loss of privacy for employees. Companies now face a balancing act of trying to implement these programs into their work structure and treating employees with respect and privacy. If employees perceive the electronic performance monitoring (EPM) as unjust they may respond with counterproductive work behaviors, lower satisfaction levels, or opt to quit working for the company. Job applicants may not accept positions based on the company’s policy if they find it too strict for their personal privacy concerns. Moreover, employees need to feel that the EPM systems add benefits for the company and themselves that would not be available without their use. Overall, EPM can have a powerful influence on employees; companies therefore have a high incentive to implement these systems correctly and fairly.

In this paper, I will discuss four articles related to employee perceptions of monitoring in the workplace. I searched a variety of academic journals discussing Industrial/Organizational Psychology for articles that consider employees’ perceptions about organizations tracking, monitoring, and surveilling workers and the relation to perceived justice, fairness, acceptance, and outcomes. In the following section I discuss the main ideas and themes of the articles, what these findings mean for research on organizations implementing EPM, and how these systems can be successfully integrated without intruding on employees’ privacy.
Privacy at Work

When assessing how employees feel about their privacy related to EPM, one must have a framework for personal privacy. Employee privacy matters in three main regards: their information, their workspace, and their capacity to work autonomously (Bhave et al., 2019). Employee information is made up of personal information and facts about each person’s life, things that can be seen as simple as hair color, or more abstract ideas such as social security number. These things can be critical in ensuring privacy is given to employees, companies should only ask for information that is relevant to their purposes. Workspace privacy refers to how private the workplace is, for example an open floor plan is intuitively less private than cubicles, as you have less physical privacy when situated in an open floor plan. This lack of physical barriers also encourages more interaction between employees which takes away from choice to interact in the workplace, which is directly related to work autonomy, the freedom to make work-related decisions. Bhave et al. (2019) contest that privacy intrusions are perceived by employees when the contextual norms are believed to be violated. In the workplace, contextual norms are made up of usual work behaviors and actions or information directly related to work. For example, the EPM should have no effect on employees outside of their role in the company. If these norms are violated, employees will see EPM as an invasion of privacy and oppose these systems.

Bhave et al. (2019) discuss that stakeholders (employees and employers) both have a privacy calculus, which is an analysis of benefits vs. risks of providing/accessing information. The benefit to organizations is better decision-making ability regarding their employees now that they have obtained more information, although this comes at a cost of compromising the employee’s privacy. The employee has the cost of a loss of privacy and will benefit from the
organization’s decisions based off their information collected (Bhave et al., 2019). This give and take is the core issue of information collection. Information should be used to benefit not only the organization, but those who work for it. Using this information only for monetary gain, or by selling this information, would be a violation of the agreement that these employees had expected. This information should be used for the benefit of the employees.

Information collection starts as early as the application process, as companies want to have information about possible employees. This collection of data also affects applicants’ perceptions of the company, though, as Bhave et al. (2019) noted, the perceptions of invasiveness influence attraction to companies, job acceptance intentions, and likelihood to recommend this employer to others. Although personal information is necessary for companies to decide who to hire, after the hiring process is over the perceptions of how much privacy a worker should have varies. Along with what information is collected, it also matters how that information is collected. Across several organizations a survey found that lack of clear monitoring practices, personal communications monitoring, lack of rational, intrusive technologies, and personal place monitoring (breakrooms, restrooms) all could result in privacy infringements (Bhave et al., 2019).

Bhave et al. (2019) sum their implications into three major groups: collection of data, processing of data, and data and network access. Organizations need to establish clear guidelines to what, when, where, and how information will be collected, employees then must run their own privacy calculus and decide if they are okay with these guidelines. The processing of data must be anonymous and protect the employee’s individual privacy when formulating outcomes such as average retirement age or turnover rates. Data and network access must also be safe and secure from internal and external threats if employees are expected to give personal information.
Benign and Invasive

Where is the illusive line between harmless and invasive data collection? Zweig and Webster (2002) focused on the development of technology and how it affects perceptions of fairness, privacy, and acceptance of technology. Employees (N = 612) from different kinds of organizations--a majority being manufacturing, research, or retail--participated in study one. They tested participants’ reactions to a video-based awareness monitoring system; this system takes snapshots of employees through computer cameras and shares these videos with selected coworkers who can determine that employee’s availability through the pictures. This design is supposed to be unintrusive and work without distracting the employee from their work. The point of the systems is to save time, create a sense of community, and be unobstructive for employees who work from home.

From this study Zweig and Webster (2002) found that employees’ perceptions of privacy invasion were high, they thought these systems were unfair, and their attitudes were in general negative. Feedback from the test found that these participants disliked monitoring no matter what was the intended purpose. Two of the sample emails responses from the study reference a George Orwell type “big brother” (Zweig & Webster, 2002) who wants to monitor and control them. Many participants also doubted the actual use of the system, stating it would really be used for monitoring instead of deciding availability. They said it also seemed less effective and more intrusive than a simpler phone call or email to their coworkers. After finding that employees found this marketed “benign surveillance” quite intrusive, they performed a second study.

The second study, a focus group, consisted of 30 participants from university administration and insurance firm employees, most of whom work from satellite or home offices.
This study found that participants were worried about privacy in a few different ways: Abuse of system by colleagues, discomfort about the potential for embarrassment from a bad picture, and concerns about the system being used for performance monitoring. These researchers found that the higher job status the employee held, the less worried they were about being monitored for performance, although they were worried what their subordinates would think about privacy issues. Three main fairness issues were noted during the study. One was the restriction of freedom on employees constructing their own work schedules. Second was the concern of the amount of trust the system required from all parties involved. Third was that people did not trust the intention of the system and felt it would be used for monitoring. In light of these issues, participants who said they would accept the system would only do so if certain things were changed. They suggested that instead of pictures, the system use an indicator that the employee can set for their availability status, much like Microsoft Teams uses now. Also, employees would want strict guidelines about who had access to the system, some thought only some should be able to view their status while others thought it would be fair only if everyone had to use the system.

Additionally, the study found that participants could have problems with two psychological factors: violation of social norms and perception distortion (Zweig & Webster, 2002). This system violated social norms because people felt this was not a part of the work-from-home culture and thus, they didn’t like its inclusion in their work. Secondly, perception distortion refers to the effect that takes place when there is a lack of social cues. These cues help us decipher what others mean and how they view us in addition to their use of words. With EPM replacing traditional supervisors, the lack of social cues makes employees unsure as to how they
will be perceived without social cues surrounding the interaction (i.e., how they are being judged based on only the snapshots).

Overall, participants see EPM technology as a barrier to controlling how and when their work gets done, having low usefulness (not indicating the difference between presence and availability, also being a distraction), and taking away privacy and personal rights by distributing personal information to coworkers. Because of these perceptions, employees may oppose these systems. Zweig and Webster (2002) offered some suggestions to improving these systems. First, the system should convey useful information about availability and nothing else in order to be as noninvasive as possible. Second, companies must acknowledge that these technologies cannot fully replicate face-to-face interactions, and because of that conflict may arise and people may reject them. Third, technology improvements will not help to increase acceptance of surveillance unless privacy and fairness is upheld. As monitoring options increase, the benefits must be considered against the psychological implications that arise from employee monitoring.

**What Employees Think**

Not all employees have the same responsibilities in a company; some are designated to supervise others. EPM promises more diverse ways of supervising employees and can enhance supervisors’ effectiveness in their roles. But do supervisors agree with monitoring practices? And do they differ from non-supervisors in this regard? Oz et al. (1998) conducted a survey (N = 823) via a questionnaire with 8 statements. Responses were measured on a Likert scale and divided between supervisor and non-supervisors. Responses were then compared by means to find differences in responses. Participants were surveyed from a variety of industries.

The first two statements centered around rights regarding electronic monitoring and workplace roles. Statement two proposed that even though employees are paid for their work,
they are entitled to a certain degree of privacy, and should not be monitored by computers and other electronic devices. Groups varied significantly on this statement, with non-supervisors agreeing more with the statement than supervisors. Interestingly they did not vary on statement one, which asserted that since management pays the employees for their work, it is legitimate for management to monitor their activities in any way management wishes while they are at work.

Statements 3-5 were related to effects of electronic monitoring on the atmosphere of work and the productivity impact. Supervisors did not agree as much as non-supervisors. Statement 3 suggested that monitoring employees through computers and other electronic devices may create undesirable tension between managers and their subordinates. Supervisors did not agree as much with this statement as non-supervisors, believing less so that electronic monitoring could cause tension between superiors and subordinates. Statement 4 stated that monitoring workers through computers and other electronic devices may effectively improve the workers’ productivity. The responses to this statement showed no difference. Statement 5 (monitoring employees through computers and other electronic devices may have a negative effect on employee morale, and therefore reduce productivity) did show a difference, although both statements regard productivity changes due to electronic monitoring. Non-supervisors agreed more that electronic monitoring could reduce productivity, specifically due to low morale.

Statement 6 proposed EPM may significantly reduce employee theft and embezzlement. Supervisors tended to agree with this statement to a greater degree than non-supervisors.

Statement 7 argued that if electronic monitoring is used on a non-continuous basis, the employee has to be warned, by a flashing light or some audible signal, that the monitoring begins. Supervisors and non-supervisors disagreed significantly on this statement, as supervisors tended to believe that there should be no warning given as it may defeat the purpose of the monitoring,
especially if for theft. Both groups agreed with statement 8 to the same degree, which stated that if electronic monitoring is used, managers, too, should be subject to such monitoring. This points to the value of justice and equality when electronic monitoring is in place. There was no difference found between genders, other than statement 6 which showed women agree more that monitoring could reduce theft. Monitored workers were also found to be more accepting of electronic monitoring than those who were not monitored electronically.

This study showed that supervisors are typically in more support of electronic monitoring than non-supervisors. Non-supervisors agreed more that they had a right to privacy, electronic monitoring can have negative impacts, monitoring may cause tension between supervisors and non-supervisors, monitoring can result in reduced morale and productivity, and that employees should receive a warning about monitoring. Supervisors were more likely to believe that electronic monitoring reduces theft and embezzlement from employees. Overall, non-supervisors tended to focus on the negative aspects of EPM such as invasions of privacy, unintended negative impacts, tension in the workplace, oppositional feelings toward monitoring, and wanting a warning when being monitored. Supervisors believed EPM to be more positive by reducing workplace theft.

**Evidence-Based Recommendations**

Much research has been done about the implementation of employee performance monitoring into organizations and how to do so effectively. Tomczak et al. (2018) started their article by mentioning how EPM can improve businesses: better business appraisals, training and development, logistical tracking, wellness programs, employee safety, etc. They also discussed the adverse effects that EPM can bring: adverse employee satisfaction, organization commitment, fairness perceptions, and employee behavior. They noted that these benefits can be
continued while mitigating the downsides with proper implementation with employee attitudes and perceptions about privacy in mind.

Tomczak et al. (2018) suggested five guiding principles for implementing new EPM systems into an organization for a smooth and beneficial application of the programs. This implementation strategy helps to make the EPM systems be viewed more positively by employees who otherwise may oppose it, which makes the monitoring of employees perceived as fairer and more just. The first principle is to be transparent with employees about EPM use in the workplace. Being clear about how and when EPM systems are being used helps increase perceptions of fairness and justice in the organization. The second is to be aware of all potential employee reactions to being monitored. This helps to decide what systems to use and understand how and why people respond to EPM the way they do. Organizations need to use the least invasive systems to get the necessary data, communicate reasonings and let employees respond, and make sure the details of the EPM are understood. The third is for companies to use EPM for learning and development rather than deterrence. When EPM is used to help employees with their own performance or for company learning and development, it is perceived as less invasive and fairer. The fourth is to restrict EPM to only work-related behaviors. Giving employees control over the EPM system outside of work hours and letting them choose to partake in programs that would take place outside of work makes EPM more respectful of employees’ privacy. The last is to consider organizational makeup (i.e. size, job, characteristics) when implementing an EPM system. Making sure you have the correct system for the job results in employees trusting the company and the EPM use more than if they perceive it as not effective or useful.
Using these guiding principles when considering what EPM systems to use and how to implement them can help organizations use EPM more effectively and with less employee backlash. These five recommendations can improve the perceptions about EPM in the workplace and sustain feelings of justice and privacy while helping organizations make the most of their EPM systems.

Conclusion

With EPM becoming incorporated in more organizations across the globe it is important to address the benefits, drawbacks, and perceptions by employees who will be subjected to it. EPM benefits to organizations by collecting data and implementing it into improvements for the company. It has been shown that EPM can have benefits without the invasion into employees’ privacy. Monitoring in the workplace if used incorrectly though, can lead to lawsuits, employee dissatisfaction, and reduce job applicants because of a distrust of the monitoring systems. With the correct handling of EPM, companies can eliminate the stigma and distrust that comes with electronic monitoring. The biggest concern is the respect for employees’ privacy. By following proper implementation of EPM and considering employees wishes, organizations can successfully use EPM in a safe and ethical manner.
References


