Chapter VI

Beyond Privacy and Fairness Concerns: Examining Psychological Boundary Violations as a Consequence of Electronic Performance Monitoring

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Abstract

This chapter explores the possibility that electronic performance monitoring violates the basic psychological boundary between the employer and employee. Once this boundary has been violated, a host of negative implications are likely, ranging from dissatisfaction and stress to resistance and deviance. This chapter outlines research investigating the implications of electronic performance monitoring and discusses the potential consequences if organizations continue to opt for electronic methods of monitoring to maximize employee performance. Furthermore, it offers suggestions for future research and the practice of electronic performance monitoring in an effort to define the boundaries around its use and limit the negative consequences experienced by electronically monitored employees in organizations.
Introduction

Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. (Rousseau, 1762)

Two hundred and forty-two years after Rousseau’s metaphorical allusion to man’s bounded role in society, an increasing number of employees find themselves literally shackled by electronic monitoring technologies. It is estimated that over 40 million employees in the U.S. alone are subjected to some form of electronic performance monitoring (EPM) such as counting keystrokes, listening in on phone calls, tracking e-mail, and even video-based monitoring of availability (Botan, 1996). Furthermore, a recent survey by the American Management Association (2001) suggests that 78% of surveyed firms engage in electronic monitoring activities.

The last century held out the promise of technology as a tool to free us from the mundane and routine realities of work. At the beginning of a new century, we are witnessing the use of technology to aid in the simplification of tasks, the standardization of behaviour, and the stratification of the workplace along the lines of those being monitored and those free from the constant electronic gaze. How did we get here? And, more importantly, do we want to continue along this path? This chapter outlines the research documenting the implications of electronic performance monitoring for employees and explores the potential consequences if organizations continue to opt for electronic methods of monitoring as a way to maximize employee performance.

For more than two decades, organizational researchers have been asking whether EPM enhances employee performance (Aiello & Kolb, 1995), whereas sociologists have been questioning the sanitizing role of surveillance in shaping social behaviours (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000). Both proponents and detractors recognize that some form of monitoring is necessary to prevent deviant behaviours at work and in society. Yet, given the rapid increase in the use of monitoring technologies in organizations, one very important question emerges. Is there a line between benign and invasive monitoring technologies? In other words, can EPM systems be designed to respect privacy and ensure that employees are being treated fairly? Examining this question will address some of the issues surrounding the use of EPM systems that are garnering substantial public, media, and academic interest.

This chapter will explore the possibility that, despite years of research outlining system design, implementation factors, and the interpersonal characteristics of those who are monitoring and those being monitored, EPM continues to violate the basic psychological boundaries between the employer and employee — one that is predicated on some minimal level of privacy, autonomy, and respect. Once
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